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Francesca Massarenti

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Women's Experimental Economies in W. Somerset Maugham's Short Fiction: Negotiating Women's Roles in "Daisy", "The Colonel's Lady" and "The Creative Impulse"

Francesca MASSARENTI *

RÉSUMÉ

Dans ses nouvelles, W. Somerset Maugham s'essaie à différents types de narration dont les traits stylistiques saillants peuvent être considérés comme caractéristiques de son écriture. Trois nouvelles en particulier portent sur l'évolution ambiguë du rôle des femmes entre la fin du dix-neuvième siècle et la deuxième guerre mondiale: "Daisy" (1896), "The Creative Impulse" (1926) et "The Colonel's Lady" (1946). Abordant de manière volontairement oblique et partielle les succès et déboires de ses protagonistes, ces nouvelles s'attachent à montrer la difficulté qu'il y a à faire entendre la voix des femmes dans la sphère culturelle—que ces dernières soit créatrices ou consommatrices d'art et de littérature. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser comment la construction des personnages et les techniques narratives habilement mises en œuvre dans ces textes permettent de dépasser les a priori victoriens autour des « New Women », de subvertir le principe de contrôle narratif masculin et de sensibiliser les lecteurs à l'émergence des femmes dans la sphère publique et politique.

Keywords: William Somerset Maugham, short story, New Woman, suffrage, narrative, narrator

· Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

Introduction

Throughout his extremely long and prolific career, British writer W. Somerset Maugham was able to experiment across genres: starting as a playwright in the 1890s, he later went on to produce novels and short stories, as well as cultural criticism. Despite the great acclaim and financial success which he enjoyed in his lifetime, Maugham's legacy has been blemished by his reputation as a second-rate writer determined by the inconsistency of critical evaluation on his work, with responses ranging from the hostile to the supportive, but seldom enthusiastic and hardly ever openly admiring. Maugham has been dismissed, at times convincingly, for the simplicity of his plots and the plainness of his style and dialogues.[1] However, Maugham was perfectly able to operate on both formal and stylistic levels, as his short fiction often features complex narrative devices. For instance, the short stories analysed in this essay display narrating voices who refuse to blend into omniscient mode, framed narratives and witnesses' tales allowing plotlines to twist craftily, narrative focus transferred onto a secondary character, and an unreliable narrator who filters all the available information. Such devices affect Maugham's short stories' subject matter and significance, and narrative omissions regularly hint at a firmly rooted subtext that extends to his entire production.

Instances of Maugham's control of his medium are particularly evident in the three short stories selected as case studies for this essay: "Daisy" (1896), "The Creative Impulse" (1926) and "The Colonel's Lady" (1946). The basic premise of this research is that a formal analysis of narrative structures allows for a basic understanding of Maugham's

[1] Richard Cordell draws up—in *Somerset Maugham: A Biographical and Critical Study*, London: Heinemann, 1961—a chapter-long inventory (207-33) of objections, belittlements, brickbats from critics, reviewers and readers Maugham had to endure throughout his career. Such commentaries, as Cordell remarks, tend to bespeak a widespread disinterest towards him rather than express genuine disparagement (207-9). The adjectives Cordell records as the most frequently used in reviews are "competent", "readable" (212) and "professional" (224). These are, Cordell claims, apparently neutral in tone, but covertly entail sneering connotations (224). In *W. Somerset Maugham. The Critical Heritage*, London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, editors Anthony Curtis and John Whitehead collect a good number of (mostly negative and tepid) reviews of Maugham's works. Katherine Mansfield's bitter treatment of his novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (139-42) and Rebecca West's dismissing remarks on the short story collection *The Trembling of a Leaf* (152-54) are poignant examples of the perceived banality of Maugham's work.

approach to different types of storytelling. Moreover, such a stylistic analysis is instrumental to pointing out possible interpretations of Maugham's attention to the evolving role of women at the turn of the century, and how he projects female characters' attempts to partake in the cycle of production and consumption of the arts. Maugham's short prose seems to build on a repository of ingrained Victorian values merging with cultural trends of the early twentieth century; it is steeped in commonly held historical notions (e.g. novel-writing as an acceptable eighteenth and nineteenth century feminine "breadwinning" activity), but also appears to work on an apparent paradox. In his fiction, wage-earning domestic labour is not menial or family-focussed, it has cultural value: Maugham's women characters, in fact, write experimental poetry or work as stage performers. It is through such characters that Maugham develops themes that are recurring in his fiction: the many ways in which women are socially abused, how gossip and slander are used to control women's bodies and sexuality, how social alienation is a result of the exclusion of women from waged labour and direct management of their finances.

Certainly, the demographic focus is biased: Maugham shows a keen emphasis in unheroic characters living in urban or provincial environments whose preoccupations with income and their attitude to work and time-planning are seemingly regulated by a middle to upper-class background. Nevertheless, they are characters who are strangled by a profit-seeking cultural economy, unsupported or even ostracized by their closest relatives. Unnurtured talent or lack of genius further undermine these characters' struggle for recognition, as any creative practice they choose to engage lingers between the categories of entertainment, private expression, amateurship or craft. Maugham's literary agenda, therefore, overtakes the historical idea of the "separate spheres",[2] transcending the association of women with domesticity and rather ascribing them to new and public responsibilities. Additionally, in much of Maugham's production there

[2] Specifically, Maugham's treatment of women stands in stark contrast to patronising Victorian ideals of womanhood and domesticity such as those promoted in John Ruskin's essays "Of Queens' Gardens", the second part of his 1865 collected lectures *Sesame and Lilies*. Ruskin's proposal casts women as the ideal domestic guardians, while men are depicted as naturally active and more suited to public life. A useful comparison between Ruskin's separatist philosophy and John Stuart Mill's advocacy for women's emancipation, as argued in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), can be found in Diana Cordea, "Two Approaches on the Philosophy of Separate Spheres in Mid-Victorian England: John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill" in *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences* 71, 2013, 115-122.

seems to be a looming fascination with art as a quantifiable experience. Hence his interest in describing the general public's attitudes to artistic fruition, the effects of artistic production on the makers themselves (as in his 1919 novel *The Moon and Sixpence* and 1937 novel *Theatre*), his penchant for deconstructing what possesses—or rather, is conferred—literary charm (as in his 1915 novel *Of Human Bondage*), as well as his concern for what becomes the subject of great art, what inspires the work of artists and amateurs alike (as in his 1930 novel *Cakes and Ale*).[3] Moreover, reading examples of Maugham's prose production published during a time span of over forty years provides a useful vantage point on evolving conceptions of womanhood, respectability, domesticity and acceptable forms of women's public presence in the first half of the twentieth century. Although Maugham never addressed the issue of female suffrage directly in his prose, his compassionate depictions of social conundrums, nevertheless, grant speculative space for characters to negotiate, more or less successfully, satisfactory living arrangements that allow personal forms of expression while taking into account the material cost of autonomy.

"Daisy" (1896): surviving the violence of ostracism

In his 1937 study *Le Théâtre de W. Somerset Maugham*, critic Paul Dottin[4] describes Maugham's stage heroines as "impulsive, superbly

[3] Maugham's novels and short stories share similar concerns for art and its material ramifications. *On Human Bondage* and *The Moon and Sixpence* both centre on their protagonist's quest to become a professional artist, and chronicle the long-term consequences of their unconventional life choices. *Theatre*, on the other hand, retraces the life story of stage actress Julia as a way to understand how artmaking as a profession and private life intersect or clash. *Cakes and Ale* focuses on an elusive muse figure: it tries to reconstruct the life and influence of the first wife and main source of inspiration for a famous writer modelled after Thomas Hardy. Compared to Maugham's most traditional *Bildungsroman* novels, his works featuring women protagonists may appear more openly concerned with imbalances between creative impulses and everyday struggle, however, Maugham's preoccupation with the human cost of artmaking is a consistent theme, which he treats without wishful idealism.

[4] More recent approaches to Maugham's theatre can be found in Michael Woolf's chapter "Theatre: Roots of the New" in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain Volume One: 1900-1929* edited by Clive Bloom, London: Longman, 1993. Woolf's interest in Maugham is historical rather than literary, yet he concedes that Maugham's plays present interesting views on shifting and evolving social norms and mores in 1920s Britain. Woolf also argues that Maugham deftly employs

ignorant of social rules" (256), arguing that their "only, so-called quality is that of wanting something, for better or for worse" (248), while somehow appeasing his charge when stating that it is "blind fate" that moves Maugham's protagonists, who are, "in general, determined like those in Greek theatre" (256). Daisy then, among many other similarly construed female characters, is a perfect mix of strong will, adverse circumstances and wavering fortune. "Daisy" dates back to Maugham's debut years, which incidentally coincide with the launch of his playwriting career: the period ranging from the late 1890s to the mid-1920s. "Daisy" is one of the two short stories rookie Maugham submitted, in 1896, to a cheap fiction series, the Pseudonym Library published by T. Fisher Unwin: it was rejected at first, but was then printed in the collection "Orientations", which came out in 1899 (Whitehead 21). Theatre and the life of performers are key subjects in "Daisy", which is also structured in a seemingly theatrical arrangement, as each of its chapters—*tableaux* of sorts—deals with only one, specific scene. The plot could easily pass as a facile moral fable: Daisy Griffith, the beautiful and cultured daughter of the village carpenter, elopes to London with a married cavalry officer. Her family denies her help when she is in need of support and rejects her as a relation; therefore, Daisy starts working as a prostitute, then moves up to become an actress and singer in a touring troupe. Years later, however, the Griffiths find themselves in desperate need of money and consequently attempt to reconnect with the daughter they had cast out, for in the meantime she has married up to become a wealthy noblewoman.

Daisy, as a character, is shut inside other people's unfavourable narratives of herself. Skimming through layers of gossip and scorn,[5] readers can reconstruct, or rather, imagine, how Daisy, by cutting all claims to

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pressing topics to spin his plays' entertaining edge, but fails to provide any significant perspective on the dilemmas themselves (110-1).

[5] In her essay "'The screaming streets': Voice and the Spaces of Gossip in *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and *Liza of Lambeth* (1897)", Eliza Cubitt discusses the value and function of gossip in fictional communities created by authors, such as Maugham, who work within the realist tradition. Although Cubitt focuses on Maugham's 1897 novel *Liza of Lambeth*, her argument that "hard words and physical violence are mutually reinforcing" (19) is equally valid for "Daisy". Most notably, Cubitt argues that Maugham's privileged perspective, as embodied in the narrator figure, allows him to "access the inaccessible" (21): while describing how forces of social and gender control would turn physical punishment and spatial constriction into "vocal bridles" (20), the realist framework could also allow readers to "uncover the menace in the ordinary" (20).

meaningful relationships, both social and emotional, wins a kind of freedom for herself, a chance to survive, possibly to thrive. A crucial aspect of "Daisy", however, is the persistent impression that focus is off-centre and timing persistently deferred: the discussion of key incidents is disclosed well after their occurrence, their significant, often dramatic effects are tuned down in casual conversation among secondary characters, rather than dealt with directly in the primary narrative line. Daisy, the purported protagonist, is allowed direct coverage only in the final instalment of the story, when her characterization comes across from the reading of her letters, the first time her direct expression is granted space in the narrative. Up to this point, readers could only access information about Daisy through her brother's retelling of the quarrel they have when he visits her in London, other characters' private conversations about her and, most importantly, through the village gossip reported in the narrative. Maugham signals the story's turning point by flipping the villagers' ethical mood—hence neatly reversing the power relations between characters—when the village newsmongers stop discrediting Daisy for her folly, and start blaming Daisy's family's lack of charity towards their daughter. Indeed, the mode of narration is deliberately uninteresting, almost petty, an obvious reinforcement of the rewriting process Daisy undergoes and which bespeaks the story's authentic satirical intent, namely, to reveal the spiteful envy of the pious Blackstable people. Overall, it reads as an engaging storyline sacrificed to an experiment with form by an early crafter of the literary trade.

A reading of "Daisy" as the trials of a nonconforming woman—someone who survives working in the late Victorian sex trade, carves out an acting career and rises as the top performer in her touring company—can take a twofold direction. On the one hand, the "fallen woman" trope is closely knit with the tradition of variably dejected female heroines of the Victorian canon. Structure-wise, Maugham's off-hand treatment of the protagonist can be reminiscent, for instance, of Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories of fallen daughters that focus on the woman's family (barely mentioning the eloped woman), such as "Lizzie Leigh" (1850), or the gothic tale "The Poor Clare" (1856). On the other hand, Daisy's professional career as a performer, leading to personal fulfilment (and financial stability) echoes the pattern highlighted in Gail Marshall's study *Actresses on the Victorian Stage*: the increasing number of identities newly available to women in the 1890s allowed actresses to "create, name and author new theatrical selves" (166). This was a trend, Marshall observes, which caused a growing linkage, during the 1890s, between the actress and the New Woman, a cultural

overlapping which possessed a progressive and transgressive charge, as well as "decadent" connotations (Marshall 167-70).

Despite her patchy characterization, Daisy, unsurprisingly, appears more likely to shock or irk than to inspire sympathy in Maugham's contemporaries. For instance, critic Richard Cordell, in 1961, notes that "the story lacks fairness—the virtuous people have all the disagreeable qualities and the sinners have too much charm and generosity" (144). Moreover, he claims that "'Daisy' has a shocking ending: a former prostitute, unrepentant, is left wealthy and not particularly unhappy. This was a bold ending in nineteenth-century fiction" (144). It is left uncertain whether the shock is due to Daisy's luck despite her wayward past or to the fact that she somehow manages to be "unrepentant" and "not particularly unhappy" at the same time. However, it is useful to note that some of Wilkie Collins' "novels with a purpose"—such as *The Fallen Leaves* (1878) and *The New Magdalen* (1873)—tackle the same concerns, favouring a blatantly sympathetic approach that would highlight their protagonists' struggle to live a good life, generally by means of a respectable marriage, despite the stigma cast upon them by society.

Maugham's reiteration of Victorian sexual scripts, however, coexists with his adoption of a constellation of themes informed by the evolution of reading culture at the turn of the century and subsequent decades: the increasing speed in the production cycle and the supply chain of reading and cultural materials. Maugham takes on as his main subject the life of the artist—within society and in private—and appears to display a vivid concern for the ways artists come to terms with the gap between their preferences and capacities against the public's expectations from their work. Maugham's quest eventually encompasses the continuous evolution of the role of women and their own attempts to partake in the system of production and consumption of art: his female characters become striking interpreters of the pains, failures and achievements, visions, limitations and rejections Maugham eagerly investigates in his fictional prose work.

"The Creative Impulse" (1926): framing creativity as a profitable career

In the 1926 story "The Creative Impulse", Mrs. Albert Forrester's first exterior scene takes place well after two-thirds of the story: in it, she is seen riding buses and trams from Marble Arch across the river Thames, until she reaches Lambeth, the working-class neighbourhood where her husband has resettled with Mrs. Bulfinch, their former cook. "The Creative Impulse"

chronicles a distinguished poet's lucrative experiments with commercial fiction after her wealthy but boring husband leaves her. Mrs. Albert Forrester's mission to get back her husband, or rather, his position and income, results into a specific sort of compromise: her desertion of serious literature in favour of the profitability of novelistic entertainment is not perceived as selling out. Mr. Forrester's teary reminder that she has "a fluent, fertile, and distinguished pen" (146)[6] prompts Mrs. Bulfinch's suggestion that she should write "a good thrilling detective story" (146). Mrs. Albert Forrester is, in fact, a well-known author of poetry and highbrow prose, whose work is repeatedly talked of as being disadvantageous for publishers, since her books are as unprofitable to print as they are critically acclaimed. *The Achilles Statue* is, however, the best-seller she puts out several months after meeting for the last time with her husband and cook. The short story, in fact, opens on the list of lucrative activities connected with the promotion of her detective novel: continuous reprinting in the UK and America, translations, dramatization for the stage and for the screen, raging reviews and skyrocketing sales.[7]

Experience and ease with the handling of one's money link the female characters together: *The Achilles Statue* does solidify Mrs. Albert Forrester's economic situation, and it concludes the process of emancipation she has been obliged to go through, from learning to do the housekeeping herself to becoming aware of her income. Her situation is absolutely opposed to that of Mrs. Bulfinch, who is "very independent-like" (145) and has always been a savvy manager of her money and properties, and even of Miss Warren, a kind of prototype unpaid intern, who pours tea at Mrs. Forrester's parties and types her manuscripts, while somehow managing to scrap up a living. Maugham, therefore, chooses to tell the stories of women whose lives are shaped by vital needs and the force of individual circumstances rather than

[6] All page numbers quoted for "The Creative Impulse" refer to the text in *Collected Short Stories Volume 2*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

[7] "The Creative Impulse" raises though-provoking points with regards to canon formation and the creation of a distinctly "modernist" identity in early twentieth-century Britain. Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace discuss similar themes in *Women Artists and Writers. Modernist (Im)Positionings*, London, New York: Routledge, 1994. Elliott and Wallace's study pursues unusual entry points, such as diversity, self-representation, professionalism, the cultural marketplace, within the porous category of "literary modernism". The networks of working creative women discussed as case studies in *Women Artists and Writers* bear striking similarities to Maugham's female characters portrayed in short stories such as "The Creative Impulse".

by their will or aspirations. Moreover, he alternates between success stories like those of Mrs. Forrester or Mrs. Bulfinch (who manage, through their work, to solidify their independence) and more unsteady situations, such as Miss Warren's, while narrating Mrs. Forrester's economic and social misadventures by means of the short story itself.

Maugham's narratorial intervention shapes the scene crucially: the first-person intradiegetic character, who blends in almost seamlessly into an omniscient voice, is responsible for the deeply sarcastic flavour of the piece. The narrating voice belongs to a member of Mrs. Albert Forrester's close circle of literati friends and is, presumably, a writer himself, a personified "I" who, for instance, admits to being bored by the lady's intellectual tea parties, and is usually tipsy when he attends them. His physical presence at her salons, however, clashes with the total omniscient mode of the second half of the short story. The opening sentence "I suppose that very few people know how Mrs. Albert Forrester came to write *The Achilles Statue*" (121) directly challenges the concluding scene in which Mrs. Albert Forrester unequivocally avoids mentioning her trip to Lambeth and the inspiration behind her best-selling crime novel. The implication of a wider context, the air of affected familiarity, the ease characterizing the almost bodiless, virtually featureless voice of the simulated intradiegetic narrator/character create a jarring effect when juxtaposed to total, undisputed omniscience. The personified speaking voice, the "I" that narrates the story, is a constant reminder that occurrences are being told through a subjective, biased perspective. The overall effect, conversely, implies shaky reliability rather than a faithful testimony. The reader is confronted with a contradictory situation: a speaking "I" that grants accurate accounts of other people's remembrances despite being swallowed by the objective omniscient mode of narration early on in the piece.

It is debatable whether the lack of any attempt to further fabricate a context for the speaking "I" and the switching of narrative modes count as flaws. Maugham never ventures to provide ekphrastic specimens of his artist characters' work, but rather describes their subject matter and their effects, imitating a scholar's or reviewer's vocabulary. Readers have, therefore, no means to judge the character's work by themselves and are, consequently, forced to accept the narrator's description of it as well as, most importantly, the "art" label he has put on it. Whether "telling" really is a weaker, safer narrative technique than "showing" art—which would require a double production of artworks—is questionable, but it is not crucial to the appreciation of this specific short story: the focus shifts away from the work, attention is then granted to its author, the daily life of the artist producing the

artwork (or else, relinquishing their practice), other people's feedback and the production circle it inevitably gets tangled in. "The Creative Impulse" could very well stand for a mockery of readers who seldom venture to express personal, contrary opinions on matters of mainstream cultural production, let alone choose to pick up an unfashionable read. It also gauges the creative process, by framing it as a narrative subject per se. Besides suggesting unreliability in the narrative itself, this recurrent device is likely to underscore how the general reading public unquestionably embraces tastemakers' verdicts and automatically swings along with cultural trends. On the one hand, Maugham ultimately mocks the stale, indoor realm inhabited by the professionals of the artistic and cultural fields—who are revealed, in the end, to be more concerned with cakes and wine than with books—along with the commodification of literature for the masses. However, on the other hand, he appears to claim for his prose the same defining power that is usually entrusted to cultural decision-makers: he asks his readers to believe blindly in his concept of "good art".

When Maugham writes about artists and their work, he always seems to favour the infrastructure of art-making and the material after-effects of aesthetic and commercial judgments, rather than focusing on the titular "artwork". Ironically, intellectual merit is meant to look unimportant in his depiction. Maugham prefers to record the urban development of arts and culture, thus profiling a sort of cultural archipelago: an indoor environment made up of dinner parties, networking and mentorships conveying the mechanisms behind publishing and the cultural industry at large. The undercurrent tension between social classes is constant: the intelligentsia is shown actively setting boundaries against the "man on the street" (130) who, like Mr Forrester and Mrs. Bulfinch, enjoys reading entertaining detective novels. "Give the highbrow the chance of being lowbrow without demeaning himself and he'll be so grateful to you, he won't know what to do" (147) and "If you can give the masses a good thrilling story and let them think at the same time that they are improving their minds you'll make a fortune" (147) are the previsions made by Albert Forrester whose ironic tone barely blunts a disenchanted representation of literature as mere profitable entertainment.

"The Colonel's Lady" (1946): establishing selfhood through authorship

Maugham's curiosity with lady writers leaks over "The Colonel's Lady", in which he tackles a different side of the same theme, developing the story on opposed premises: the sudden rise to fame of an obscure writer

of avant-garde verse. Evie Peregrine is thought of by her husband as a "sad disappointment" (221)[8]: despite being a flawless manager of the house, "a lady" (221), and having dutifully provided good looks and a considerable dowry upon marrying, she has not had any children. Colonel Peregrine interprets the uncommunicativeness between himself and his partner as a natural drifting apart of two people who don't find each other very interesting (222). He praises Evie's temperament, but merely to describe how her particular blend of excellent manners, good education, extreme discretion and deep reticence have spared him from having to deal with scenes and quarrels: the Colonel must "admit that she'd never bothered him" (222).

When Evie receives a galley copy of her debut poetry collection, *When Pyramids Decay*, the Colonel is moderately surprised, but mainly relieved by the fact that she has chosen her maiden name, Eva Katherine Hamilton, to sign her book, so that no "unheard-of penny-a-liner" should make fun of her effort in the papers (223). The Colonel undertakes a shallow and partial reading of *When Pyramids Decay*, which he thoroughly dislikes and quickly forgets. When Evie's book quickly becomes a best-seller, the Colonel finds he has to tackle with increasingly pressing questions concerning his wife, and he is asked to offer opinions about her work, which, to his dismay, is about a past, unhappy love story of hers. Evie's accomplishment is antipodal to Mrs. Albert Forrester's in "The Creative Impulse": she gets immediate and, allegedly unexpected, commercial and critical success for a highbrow work of lyrical content. She and her husband get caught early on in the whirlpool of the publishing industry: glamourous parties in London, meetings with reviewers, outlandish flowers, photo shoots, invitations from neighbouring pseudo-intellectual country gentry, and the sale of rights to foreign publishers.

The narratorial point of view, however, is unflinching. Omniscience is kept up throughout, free indirect speech employed deftly, focus is only fixed on the Colonel's perspective: Evie only appears as a reticent companion seated at the breakfast table (220) or prudishly kissing her husband on the forehead before bedtime (229), never in public as an intellectual figure. During the narrative time frame, Colonel Peregrine navigates life without paying his wife any attention, nor does he ever grasp the overtones of what happens around him. The Colonel links facts and consequences late, he does not understand his work (or her work) and, most importantly, does not wish to, so much so that his lawyer specifies "it'll be all to the good if you can get

[8] All page numbers quoted for "The Colonel's Lady" refer to the text in *Collected Short Stories Volume 2*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

into that thick head of yours that there's a lot more in Evie than you ever had the gumption to see" (235). His indifference, although amusing, screens readers' view over the action: Evie's present experience as a successful writer is, possibly, left even more opaque than her fictionalized (and ultimately unexplained) past illicit love story is.

The drafting of "The Colonel's Lady" was a lengthy one; Maugham's autobiographical *A Writer's Notebook* contains entries which can be connected with subsequently published work, and mentions of "The Colonel's Lady" date back to 1901. The brief note runs:

> They were talking about V.F. whom they'd all known. She published a volume of passionate love poems, obviously not addressed to her husband. It made them laugh to think that she'd carried on a long affair under his nose, and they'd have given anything to know what he felt when at last he read them. (*Writer's Notebook* 80)

The revised short story, however, was first published over forty years later, in 1946, in Maugham's collection *Creatures of Circumstance* (Whitehead 186-7). It contains clear temporal references: the opening line "All this happened two or three years before the outbreak of the war" (220), a brief listing of the titles the Colonel has gained while serving for the Welsh Guards during "the last war" (220); all this contributes to date with considerable precision Mrs. Peregrine's poetic production. It can be tempting to imagine E. K. Hamilton's fictional poetics as analogous to Modernist trends, especially in the light of Maugham's sarcastic treatment of literary experimentalism. Chapter II in Maugham's 1919 novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, for instance, reads like a manifesto of sorts, a bold rebuff of literary fashions. It appealingly voices Maugham's refusal to side with wartime young intellectual cliques through the novel's sketchy narrator figure:

> I have read desultorily the writings of the younger generation. […] they say nothing to me: to my mind they know too much and feel too obviously; I cannot stomach the heartiness with which they slap me on the back or the emotion with which they hurl themselves on my bosom; their passion seems to me a little anaemic and their dreams a trifle dull. I do not like them. I am on the shelf. I will continue to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. But I should be thrice a fool if I did it for aught but my own entertainment. (12-3)

While it is viable to read in Maugham's rant the experimental figures and style of British Modernism, it might be unavailing to force the same

interpretation onto Mrs. Peregrine's parable. Since Maugham does not provide quotes from *When Pyramids Decay*, but only indicates its irregular, unrhymed metre, the assumed lack of political engagement, and, of course, its crucial autobiographical bend, there does not seem to be enough evidence of it being an actual avant-garde imitation, let alone a parody.

Besides, the necessary placement of the events no earlier than the late 1930s, opens up a new perspective on the actual significance and cause for the fictional success of *When Pyramids Decay*. Critics have attempted to link Maugham's writing with the political context of the time, especially with the impact of the suffrage movement in the UK (Treglown 35:32-37:47). Without implying that Maugham's prose presents explicit pro-suffragettes elements, texts such as "The Colonel's Lady" can be considered as showing a picture of paradigmatic feminine inequality and, simultaneously, depicting women characters who are fully and consciously in charge of their actions, both artistic and personal (Treglown 5:56-6:17). However, it is indicative that, within the short story's fictional reality, the discernible contempt towards literary work penned by women is mainly expressed in the mocking tones voiced by the characters, rather than by the omniscient narrator. A similar construction is likely to cast disrupting effects on the plot and on the overall reception of the story's significance, since relationships and individual behaviours tend to be presented through the one-sided perception of specific characters only. The ongoing demarcation between characters' discourse and narratorial presentation, however, helps separate "The Colonel's Lady" from the historical and literary framework that could, perhaps convincingly, frame it as a caricature, or even a counter-narrative, of the intellectual scenes that, at the beginning of the century, were discussing and popularizing cutting-edge ideas about literary experimentalism and women's rights.

Maugham's disinterest in historical verisimilitude, moreover, allows "The Colonel's Lady" to make space for principles of social and cultural equality between the sexes, in virtue of the fact that Colonel Peregrine and Evie work as theoretical case studies, allegorical types rather than full-fledged characters. Through Peregrine's outlook, the cultural industry and its review-based system are ridiculed, while literature and art are seen as failing media, philistine commodities. The focus on Peregrine's skepticism and disregard towards literature transcends the growing irony of his situation when, reflecting on his lover Daphne's lack of interest for his wife's poetry, the Colonel says: "he was amused at the thought of her [Daphne] tackling that book because she had been told it was hot stuff and then finding it just a lot of bosh cut up into unequal lines" (224). The Colonel conveys provoking

concepts—such as his sardonic dismissal of artistic achievement—and adopts disturbing behaviours, as his absent-mindedness towards his wife at times turns into callousness. Nevertheless, Maugham arguably stores up some sympathy for him, in spite of the fact that (or maybe, indeed because) he entirely fails to understand his sensitive wife and their surroundings:

> He drank a good many cocktails. But there was one thing that bothered him. He had a notion that some of the people he was introduced to looked at him in rather a funny sort of way, he quite couldn't make out what it meant […] (227).

Evie's poetry, on the contrary, is successful because it manages to communicate an understandable and embraceable meaning. However, in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham writes:

> The writer should seek his reward in the pleasure of his work and in release from the burden of his thoughts; and, indifferent to aught else, care nothing for praise or censure, failure or success. (11)

If we were to attach to "The Colonel's Lady" the aforementioned considerations, then the therapeutic effect of writing *When Pyramids Decay* on Evie would likely absorb any other merit of the work, despite it being "just a flash in the pan" (229). Entertainment and healing for the writer—Evie is praised for never letting off how unhappy she was and rather choosing to channel her depression into art (232-4)—and for the reader as well finally confirm *The Moon and Sixpence*'s narrator/character's delight in writing "moral stories in rhymed couplets" (13).

Maugham manages to be at once conservative and broadminded with regards to his subject matter and characters. His trademark deadpan ending—the Colonel proves he has failed to develop empathy towards his wife and poses no objections to being called a fool (234)—chops the narrative and leaves many loose ends unaddressed. An evident concern for the feminine identity in the arts and the attempt to feel the pulse of artistic production itself—especially when it is conceived as an industry—is cleverly wrapped in a narrative perspective which, because of its inherent limited scope, is exceptionally unqualified to provide ultimate answers along with sufficient evidence. "We only have men's words for that" (233) replies George's solicitor to his claim that women, unlike men, do not crave companionship, love or sex: the blatant inexperience and irrelevance of the spokesperson's stance exceeds narrative unreliability, rather, it generates an ironic backlash. The effects, for readers, are manifold: the reactionary

notions that its characters voice, on the intradiegetic level, risk permeating the extradiegetic appreciation of the text—what the short story is believed to stand for—therefore enclosing "The Colonel's Lady" (and its author) as an example of outmodedness, rather than as a subtle experiment in dialogical and discursive tone.

Conclusion

Maugham exploits the short story's conciseness to expand, usually, on a single character's unique artistic or existential challenge. Selecting unconventional angles from which to develop his narratives, he often pairs them with shifts of perspective which contribute to regulate the reader's reactions to a provoking subject. By entrusting much of the narrative heavy-lifting to conversations shaped as gossip, sermons, private dialogue the author also accentuates forms of narrative and communication that fall outside literary or institutionary language. Finally, Maugham allows his characters to rehearse and reassess gender and class roles in their autonomous communications, while simultaneously building a narrative framework that grants him (and readers) the space to theoretically explore, in a fictional setting, social issues and historical developments of cultural values.

Although maintaining, overall, a simple and traditionally structured layout, Maugham's short stories still manage to engage, content-wise, with experimentalism in the arts, double standards in a misogynistic society, and the idea of women as fully-fledged artists and legitimate political agents. It might appear counterintuitive to list Maugham as an ally to women's pledges, such as the franchise, since openly feminist readings are jeopardized by the short stories formal format: individual women's subordination (both political and cultural) is, in most cases, confirmed rather than challenged. Characterization suffers from a structural narrative bias: most of the useful information about decision-making choices and their consequential effects is voiced by secondary characters, and the tone of such utterances, therefore, seldom matches their dramatic implications. Male-focused modes of narration, however, allow Maugham to edge past the *fin-de-siècle* distrust for the New Woman while, simultaneously, the male privilege embedded in these narratives helps channel an anti-Victorian streak of sympathetic view of women's rights and capabilities to be a part of public life into the new century. Through a subversive rewriting of traditionally masculine principles of (narrative) control, Maugham produces an encouraging, *parafeminist*, theorisation of a less strictly gendered

organisation of society. Much of Maugham's tentative method, it appears, focuses on the development of a positive approach towards sexual and amorous feelings, and, correspondingly, towards literary descriptions that highlight the ethical debate inherent to such topics, rather than their scandalous nature.

Maugham's masked and deviated narratives might be read as tentative suggestions regarding what could be new, innovative ways to read the world (without overthrowing it). On the whole, the effects of Maugham's stylistic choices are various: they confer a sense of unreliability to the narration and contribute to the texts' undercurrent ironic tone, which can occasionally verge towards the openly sarcastic, but seems generally restricted to the subtly farcical. Maugham's narrators, therefore, appear to be accountable for the misunderstandings of extra-textual implications and references, whereas they also foster questions about Maugham's feminism, his alleged aversion towards experimentalism in the arts, and whether the readability and popularity of his textual production were really a priority for him. Finally, they contribute to sustain an identifiable staple in Maugham's work, that is, his undercurrent attempt to understand where the creative impulse comes from, how it is narrated and normalised, how people (or rather, characters) react to it and, when they can, profit from it. The negotiation of women's roles, women's values and women's creative output in Maugham's prose, despite not reaching the status of overt political demand, is, however, a material concern that plays out in the thematic treatment of economic matters that Maugham explicitly weaves into his narratives. The "experimentalism" that characters like Daisy, Mrs Forrester and Evie Hamilton theorise and apply to their fictional lives evokes the confrontational approach that suffragists, among many other women, adopted to voice their requests. The more nuanced stances Maugham depicts, furthermore, help complement (and complicate) the conventional narratives of women's struggle at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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