



**SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S DRAMATIC ART OF PRESENTING THE
OUTWARDLY PIOUS AND RIGHTEOUS AS 'HYPOCRITES AND TYRANTS'
AND THE APPARENTLY RAKISH AS 'TRULY GOOD': AN APPRAISAL**

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ABSTRACT

What is commonly understood is that drama is one of the most popular forms of composite art exerting a more direct appeal to different segments of society. Actors and action, stage properties, music and other such elements make it really attractive to many kinds of interest at all levels possible. In the west, drama has had a recorded history from ancient times. The works of atleast a few ancient Greek dramatists which are kept available now, reveal the fact that the concerns of the dramatists of those times are the concerns of the dramatists of today also. No doubt, dramas are supposed to present stories, ideas, rational or philosophical or even mystical. They can also preach, entertain, debate. They can either be representational or symbolic in the rather involved way.

INTRODUCTION

In English, there have been distinct styles of drama. Starting with the early dramatic representations of parts of religious discourses, to the days of miracles and moralities and then increasingly secular themes and increasingly more sophistication, drama has come a long way in England as in other parts of the world. Each new style has had its own way of perceiving the material for drama and the techniques of drama. Every new style has flourished accommodating in the course of its growth and decline very significant and also very insignificant, mindlessly imitative work. Naturally some period were vibrant and productive while some were not equally so. But the important developments in the twentieth century have been rather unique radically moving away from the conventional modes. In the words of Christopher Innes, "The twentieth century is one of the most vital and exciting periods in English drama, rivaling the Elizabethan theatre in thematic scope and stylistic

ambition. It has produced a wider range of plays than any previous era, both developing and cutting across traditional genres, as well as extending the subject matter of the stage” (P 1).

Brecht’s Epic Theatre has of course had a great impact on British drama, influencing the production of earlier drama like Shakespeare’s plays and the works of writers like Osborne, Arden and Bond. Bernard Shaw is said to have transmitted modernism with essential qualifications, thereby giving twentieth century British drama a distinctly British stamp which distinguishes it from drama in Europe, America and even in Ireland. Though Shaw is the major single influence on British drama from the 1890’s to the 1950’s other varieties of drama also have had their say in the British theatre. Brecht and Beckett both have been influential dramatists influencing social realism in their plays.

Having started his dramatic career with *A Man of Honour*, Somerset Maugham (1884-1965) occupied a unique place in the British theatre. He had his definite views on elements of drama like dialogue and on the purpose of drama itself. In his preface to the first volume of his collected plays, Maugham said:

“.... the object of a play was to entertain” (P 14)

Maugham insists that “The aim of the drama is not to instruct but to please. Its object is to delight” (P 17). He does not believe in a grand purpose in writing or in art. Men do not come to art for enlightenment. If the artist has command over a good technique, then he can produce something that satisfies people. His theory is that the artist is one who manipulates himself to satisfy the demands of his “clients”. Maugham does not believe in the artist influencing society idealistically. The artist thus allows himself to be influenced by his society rather than influencing it. His contemporaries were all in praise for his integrity as a writer. In his life as well as in his career, he did not accept idealism of any kind, for he did not believe in people who upheld great ideals, whether they were of religion, political life, social life or personal life. According to Maugham, the real gift is the gift for observation of life and the understanding of it. He writes:

“It is just as much a gift as the sensitive palate of the wine-taster. It has nothing to do with the intellect. You can write a very good play with the mental equipment of a bar-tender and with all the culture of a cabinet minister write a very bad one” (P XVI)

This observation involves the ability to understand human nature, the springs of human action and the expressions of human understanding. If one has all this, then one could write without effort. That means only that the aspiring writer should have put in a lot of effort to master the

craft of writing. One important question relating to drama that Maugham deals with is the question of dialogue in drama. He does not believe in the outward conformity to human speech. He does advocate a dialogue that is decidedly formal on the justification that modern drama today concentrates on mental states more than it did in the past. He was not very much interested in the technical experiments in drama which led to the many ‘-isms’. He was interested in telling a story, sometimes a serious one and sometimes a comic one. With his comments on contemporary society, Maugham had his moralistic ideas. Sometimes he put them into plays which dealt with them seriously or sometimes he turned his back upon a serious presentation of any ideas. In plays like *East of Suez*, *Smith*, *The Land of Promise*, *Caesar’s Wife*, *The Sacred Flame*, *The Unknown*, *For Services Rendered* and *Sheppey*, he ‘no doubt, wrote seriously and commented explicitly on contemporary society, while in other such plays as *Lady Frederick*, *Mrs. Dot*, *Jack Straw* and *Penelope*, he commented on life in a lighter vein. Maugham’s life was marked by paradoxical traits and experiences. Klaus W. Jones sums up these thus:

The master of English prose learned to speak French before he spoke English: the English gentleman who likes no country better than Spain, where he is the most popular English author, has long made his home in southern France: the man who first suffered from tuberculosis, of which his mother died when he was eight and who, in his easily forties, spent two years in a sanatorium in Nordroch-on-Dee in Scotland, was a good tennis player and swimmer until late in his seventies ...” (P 25).

His life in school and even a bit later was made unhappy by a slight deformity, and he stammered badly. His short stints in Heidelberg, Munich and Italy were of great interest to him for here he gained insights into human suffering, brutality and courage. He spent time in Italy, France and Spain and began writing. In the beginning, his income was small, but from the time he became a runaway success as a dramatist, he tasted affluence and he loved affluence and security. He was one of the richest authors of the world in his time and he was a frank hedonist and his tastes were aristocratic. The philosophy that Maugham put into his works is put by him thus:

“All I have done is to bring to prominence Certain traits that many writers shut their eyes to. It has amused me that the most incongruous traits should exist in

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the same person – crooks who are capable of self – sacrifice, harlots for whom it was a point of honour to give good value for money. I can not bring myself to judge my fellows, I am content to observe them ... There is nothing more beautiful than goodness, or loving kindness, and it has pleased me often to show how much of it there is in persons who by common standards would be relentlessly condemned. I have shown it became I have seen it “he does not moralize, he is content to understand and it is true that to understand is to forgive and pity” (PP 35-36).

Somerset Maugham was a writer who consciously dealt with ideas in his imaginative works. He had his own ideas about the genre of writing he used and also ideas that he wanted to convey regarding life in many of its aspects. He was not happy with the formula plays of the time that he pretended to be serious pictures of life and he deliberately turned to comedy. Being young, poor and determined, he thought out for himself the qualities which the manager demanded in a play:

“evidently a comedy, for the public wished to laugh, with as much drama as it would carry, for the public liked a thrill; with a little sentiment, for the public liked to feel good; and a happy ending” (Collected Plays of W.S.Maugham, p.ix).

One of the main purpose of the play is to let people laugh and give the stuff some dramatic moments to give the public the thrill it wanted, with some sentiment thrown into make the public “feel good”. Actually he is not interested in making the play look a moral trait and he wants it to be a comedy and he is not interested in the middle class. That is why he went to the upper classes for his comic inspiration.

Maugham is in all his works very conscious of the social strata manifested through characters. In his play Lady Frederick, he deals with the rich and the subject that readily engages him is the comedy of the tension between outward affluence and actual poverty. This affluence and this poverty have an ironic metaphorical significance in terms of inward goodness and poverty. This tension between the outward, social appearance and inward reality is one of the favourite themes of Maugham in his novels and short-stories also. He does not present formal virtue and self-righteous morality with any sympathy; he is always at

pains to show that the people who appear to the formally-minded people to be bad immoral and reckless are the really good people. He often points to goodness that stands out, beyond the pale of conventional rectitude. Such goodness might be found in the poorest circumstances, and it often might escape popular notice because of its unselfconsciousness and its indifference to the approbation of the world. This patterning gives Maugham the ultimate value of a moralist. His effort is to show true human virtues as being beyond the pale of the ethics of a society of any particular time and place. He finds these virtues in the sympathy for others and the magnanimity to let others have their own ways of life. This attitude at times brings him up against orthodoxy.

Lady Frederick is a comedy in three acts. The scene is the Hotel de Paris at Monte Carlo, the fashionable resort of the aristocracy of Europe. Lady Mereston, a handsome woman of forty, rather magnificently attired, is waiting impatiently for her brother Paradine Fouldes. She asks a servant of the hotel to tell him that she is waiting for him, but the servant replies (in typical faulty English) that the gentleman “say” ‘e was on no account to be disturbed” (Act I). He sends to her Fouldes’s men who tells her, politely but firmly, that he could not disturb his master five minutes in advance of the time he has set himself. Though the man has been with his master for twenty-five years, he says he couldn’t tell what his master should be doing at the moment. Lourdes enters overhearing this conversation, and he tells his sister that when he engaged the fellow, he told him that he should learn to keep his eyes open and shut at once and the same time. This exchange sets this middle-aged man up as a topical top of the affluent class – a busy trifler because he is affluent. Fouldes has had a more than sumptuous dinner but claims that he has not had much of a dinner. He tells his sister with the characteristic nonchalance of a dedicated connoisseur of life:

*“I have reached an age when love, ambition
and wealth pale into insignificance beside
a really well-grilled streak” (31)*

He belongs to the class that deliberately flaunts its trifling way. Lady Mereston has summoned him to her in Monte Carla to get his help in saving her son Charlie from a love affair she does not approve. Her brother’s immediate response is the cynicism of the rich man regarding love. He believes that what young people call or think love has a price of course, she could allow her son to marry the girl if she is respectable and otherwise she could give her five hundred pounds and pack her off. It is not as though the distressed mother has not thought of that expedient. Even this worldly-wise brother is shocked to hear that the lady in question is Lady Frederick Berolles. She is fifteen years Charlie’s senior in age; that is not her only disqualification; she dyes her hair, and she paints. Her brother tells her that she does these things very tastefully. His sister tells him that Lady Frederick is penniless and is crippled with debts and the infatuated Charlie is worth fifty thousand pounds a year. Her brother observes that such penury among the aristocrats is so common now:

*“One has to keep up appearance in this world.
Life nowadays for the woman of fashion is a
dilemma of which one horn is the Bankruptcy
Court and the other – the President of the
Divorce Court” (49).*

And neckless extravagance is the mark of aristocracy in penury:

*“I summarised she was on the verge of bankruptcy
when I heard she’d bought a new brougham...” (68)*

Lady Mereston does not want her son to ruin his prospects – he could become the Prime Minister of England – by marrying a pauper. But the lady is her greatest friend and she does not want to give her the advantage of a quarrel with her. She wants her brother to help her to save her son. She knows that her brother is a reformed rake, and wants him to find out for her the secret in Lady Frederick’s life which she wouldn’t like to be raked up. Lady Mereston tells her brother that she would do anything to save her son, and wants Foulde to find out for her the ensavoury secret in the life of her “greatest friend”. She is sure that he could help her because “A reformed burglar is always the best detective”. She reminds him that her husband had his worst suspicious about Foulde’s relationship with Lady Frederick. Foulde’s reply is a neat commentary on the self-righteous ways of the religiously-inclined people. It is quite in keeping with the view of human nature that Maugham presents consistently that the outwardly pious and righteous are often hypocrites and tyrants who want to force the world into their moral code whereas the apparently rakish are the people who have an instinct for fair play and true goodness. That is the truth that the play also works out: the reformed rake has his heart in the proper place whereas the pious brother-in-law was a sanctimonious fraud. Foulde tells his sister:

*“Your deceased husband, being a strictly
religious man, made a point of believing
the worst about his neighbours
Thank God in my day I’ve been a miserable
sinner (Act I).*

He has just time enough to promise her help though he does not expect to be able to help her much, when the young lover enters the scene with the lady he admires. Lady Frederic gushes over her old friend Paradine, and his nephew welcomes him with banter. Foulde shakes hands with the Lady trying to put her at a disadvantage but effortlessly she thwarts him and his party:

Foulde : (Shaking hands with Lady

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Frederick): I heard you were at the Casino.

Lady Frederick : Charlie lost all his money, so I bought him away.

Lady Mereston: I wish you wouldn't gamble, Charlie, dear.

Mereston : My dear mother, I've only lost ten thousand francs.

To the young man, ten thousand francs is a small sum. And the uncle does not want to appear as a moralist and tells so his young nephew who divided his time between "hanging about generally" and "the tables". He is glad to see that the young man prepares himself properly for his duties as a hereditary legislator. He gives him his counsel so that he would not throw away his great chance:

*"You have a magnificent chance, dear boy,
with all the advantage of wealth and station.
I beseech you not to throw it away by
any exhibition of talent "..... Be
careful that your metaphors show no
imagination and conceal your brains as
you would a discreditable secret. Above all,
If you have a sense of humour, crush it,
Crush it" (P 71)*

And the nephew solemnly promises that he would take this advice to heart most sincerely. This is the fashionable cynicism, the mock-praise of mediocrity characteristic of the tribal that would not exert itself for a common good. The snobbery of blood speaks here, and Maugham seems to lay it thick here so that when the grand gesture of the ex-rake comes, it will have some dramatic weight as the sincerity of the apparently rakish person. Lady Frederick is a very well-made play. For all its intrigues and its suspense, it does follow the classical principle of structure. It almost seems to have been written with the intention of demonstrating the possibilities of classical conventions. It follows the idea of the unities of place, time and action with considerable closeness.

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