

HONOUR " IN SOMERSET MAUGHAM 'S

A MAN OF HONOUR

MAUGHAM AS A DRAMATIST

مفهوم "الشعور بالواجب" في مسرحية الكاتب سومريست موم

الرجل صاحب الواجب :

موم ككاتب مسرحي

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Abstract

Somerset Maugham is known mainly as a novelist . This paper presents Maugham the dramatist . Many critics have found him a promising dramatist . He has written 30 plays , then he turns his back upon the theater and writes his autobiographical and most successful novel **Of Human Bondage** (1915) .

Maugham's writing is clear , precise , and simple . He is described as a realist who is keenly aware of human nature , its concentration and frustration . His only tragedy **A Man of Honour** is a play in 4 acts . This paper concentrates mainly on this play to show Maugham as a dramatist and to show his concept of " honour " .

Jenny is uneducated and jealous , but she is sincere in her love for Basil Kent . She is a barmaid , a baby is expected that is why Basil feels obliged to marry her . Basil is a gentleman and is repelled by Jenny's vulgarity and sponging relatives. He has been already attracted by Hilda Murray , a relative of

Hallowell (Basil's friend) and the same of Basil's class . The baby dies . Jenny becomes desperately jealous of Basil and Hilda and eventually commits suicide by drowning herself in the Thames . Maugham surprises his reader at the end of the play . Basil quickly recovers from his grief and he decides to take life by both hands and enjoy his freedom .

I

The slogan “Drama is good for you, there is nothing it seems so uplifting as drama”¹ comes during Maugham’s lifetime. Maugham has said that he has been never stage – struck, yet in his early youth he has been busier with plays than with novels². He has written 30 plays between 1898 and 1933. In a period of realistic drama, he has composed plays that amuse intelligent audiences³.

Maugham resorts to drama mainly to make money. Nonetheless, he has made a distinctive or a special contribution to 20th century drama⁴. His thinking has been on how best to tell a story, he concentrates on composing professional lines. He does not want to be a saviour of society but mainly to hold an audience and to amuse it with his wit that has a sting and a style. He does not want to contribute to the drama of ideas, and he would not. He maintains that a play of ideas is dead when the ideas become familiar⁵. He believes that the stage should not be used for the purposes of propaganda or dissemination of ideas. He communicates man’s concepts to an audience through the symbols of the modern expressionism⁶.

His writing is clear, precise, and simple. He is described as a realist who is keenly aware of human nature, its contradictions and frustrations⁷. His natural bent toward candor and straightforwardness has limited him to simple methods of realism⁸. He has accepted the traditional dramatic forms and conventions and shaped his plays to conform to their demands.

His sardonic humour and mordant wit are two of his most striking qualities. His novels reveal him as a cynical writer, the same is in his plays. Here it is appropriate to quote Richard A. Cordell:

He certainly does not resemble the ancient cynic philosophers who held pleasure in contempt. He is too urbane and possesses too much of the comic spirit to be churlish or surly, and is so inclined philosophically to accept life and people as they are that he cannot in fairness be considered a sneering fault – finder. There is, nevertheless, a strain of the

misanthrope in his nature. He confesses that he is unable to feel any great affection for his fellow- men.

**He is often disposed to disbelieve in their altruism
and disinterested goodness⁹.**

It is admitted that most of his plays have an ironical theme. What is considered cynical arises from the absence of sweet and romantic. He writes his drama depending on his dramatic instinct which in his opinion, is the base of writing a good play.

His drama is characterized by simplicity: stick to one point. There are no minor characters, no sub- plots nor superfluous dialogue. Every speech and action develop the play. He has obtained truth and integrity by a ruthless suppression of the falsely romantic. He refuses to misrepresent or prettify human nature. He has the rationalist's respect for cause and effect, and scorns the wishful thinking of the conventional moralist¹⁰. Thus, one may say that Maugham has contributed to the new drama in two ways : a simplified technique that entails no sacrifice of dramatic power, and a strong infusion of truth and candor¹¹ .

Sometimes Maugham, as a realist, is called an Ibsenite in approach¹² as the reader finds him in **A Man of Honour**. It is a realistic tragedy published in 1903. After his sole tragedy, he has written a series of comedies among which are **Lady Frederick** (1912) that gains a special fame, **Mrs. Dot** (1912), **Home**

and Beauty (1923), **The Circle** 1921, and others. His comedies follow the Restoration tradition in being dramas of conversation not of action . They ridicule humankind's vices and follies .

II

A Man of Honour is a tragedy in 4 acts, sometimes it is called “a little tragedy”¹³ for it is a tragic love conflict between upper – middle – class man and lower – class woman. It is not really love, but rather a feeling of duty from a man towards a woman. Basil Kent, the barrister, has seduced a barmaid, Jenny Bush and a child is expected. Although beneath him, Basil decides to marry Jenny. His friend, John Halliwell, advises him and urged the common – sense view of the matter that they are completely unsuited. The consequences have been wretched .

Jenny is uneducated and jealous, but she is sincere in her love for Basil. He is a gentleman and is repelled by her vulgarity and sponging relatives especially her brother. Basil has been already attracted by Hilda Murray, a relative of Hallowell and the same of Basil’s class. The baby dies. Jenny becomes desperately jealous of Basil and Hilda and eventually she commits suicide by drowning herself in the Thames.

Basil is portrayed by Maugham as an idealist or the sentimental honorable young man. He is full of high purposes and heroic illusions started from his volunteered spirit as a trooper in south Africa (and he has obtained a medal for his distinguished service) till his determination to marry Jenny as a point of honour, so that the baby would not be born as a thief. But his heroics fades away soon when he becomes face to face with the daily problems of a life he has set himself.

Ultimately, he takes refuge in Hilda’s house and declares his passions to her. Hilda is also a kind of moral idealist. She encourages him to be faithful to his duty. Jenny enters looking even more vulgar

and violent. She tries to defend her love asking Basil to give her a last chance. Mercilessly, he tells her that he has never loved her and leaves her paying no attention to her threats of suicide.

The final act, after Jenny's suicide, shows us the idealist in the depths of remorse. He is shocked by his wife's suicide crying hysterically that he is the murderer of his wife. His friend Hallowell puts the whole situation sensibly in this way:

John: I think I should put it in another way.

One has to be very strong and very sure of

Oneself to go against the ordinary view of things.

And if one isn't, perhaps it's better not to run

any risks but just to walk along the same secure

old road as the common herd. It's not

exhilarating, it's not brave, and it's rather dull.

But it's eminently safe.

(act 4, p.156)¹⁴

It is the obvious morality that if one cannot act wisely, he should not entre upon a path which is not that of ordinary men, unless he is quite sure that he has the ability and strength to walk in it. It is the miserable consequences for an honourable man of insisting on his moral duty by marrying out of his class, by making an honest woman of the barmaid whom he has seduced. They are also the implications of ignoring instinct in a blind adhering to convention, dealing with pressures of society and the struggle for personal integrity¹⁵. As Ted Morgan reports it: "doing the right thing can have calamitous results."¹⁶.

However, Maugham surprises his reader at the end of the play. Basil Kent quickly recovers from his grief and he decides to take life by both hands and enjoy it. Instead of spending a sleepless night with his wife lying dead in their house, he says joyfully to John Halliwell who is there to comfort him:

Basil:..... I can't help thinking that

I'm – free.

John: free?

Basil: It's treachery to her memory. But

you don't know what it is when your prison

door is opened. [As he speaks he grows

more and more excited.] I don't want to die. I want to take life by

both hands and enjoy it . I've got such a desire

for happiness. Let's open the windows, and let

the sunlight in. It's so good just to be alive.

How can I help thinking that now I can start fresh?

The slate is wiped clean, and I can begin again.

will be happy. God forgive me, I can't help the

thought. I'm free.

(act4, pp.154-155)

He becomes conscious, shamefully conscious, of this immense sense of freedom¹⁷. It appears also that he has already sent a telegraph to Hilda to come to his house. Sometimes freedom requires a death, in this case a wife's death.¹⁸

The play ends with the entry of the widow whom he wishes to marry. This is too harsh and too indecent to be real. It is the intense relief and the unlovely joy that Basil's heart gets after the death of

Jenny. The psychoanalytic theory is applicable here. This can be interpreted according to Freud's tripartite model¹⁹.

Basil's reaction after his wife's death and the revelation of his feelings of ecstasy represents Basil's id (the first part of the model) that he has tried to suppress his emotions by his superego (the third part of the model). The morality principles and society's restrictions control Basil secret desires or wishes (id). This control is acted through his superego. Basil's unconscious wishes finally appear as an explosion with the death of the cause of this suppression (his wife). His id expresses itself leaving his friend Halliwell and the reader amazed. It is Basil's fault that he does not let his ego (the second part of the model) mediate between his id's wishes and his superego's fears. The suppressed superego comes out when it finds an outlet.

Basil's behaviour or decision at the end of the play can be seen as evil. Richard A Cordell, however, conceives that "there is no explanation of evil, that man is in part what he must be, not altogether what he would be."²⁰ In fact, it is Maugham who is more concerned with what people do than what they should do, with what happens rather than what should happen²¹.

Maugham offers in this play thrilling emotions that one is unaware of²². Maugham proves to be the shrewd observer of life, he cherishes few illusions and no trace of sentimentality into his drama. His best plays are the ironical comment of a cynically observer, aiming to present life as it really is²³.

III

Mr. Maugham is known mainly as a novelist. This paper deals with Maugham the dramatist. Many critics have found much to praise in his dramas, and they have assured that Maugham has been a promising dramatist²⁴. Maugham is such a writer who depends on his talent when writing. His medical training has taught him to adopt a cool, objective, and clinical point of view. He does not feel surprised

at cruelty and meanness, in his dramas he maintains to fuse feelings and ideas in a way appealing to the average play – goer²⁵.

Writing plays for him is an exciting episode which has given him money and freedom. His genius on the stage is for light- hearted dialogue, enlivened with epigrams and salted with his wit. Maugham has written all the plays that he has felt impelled to write. He believes that his peculiar gift in the composition of drama cannot be further exercised to advantage, and he does not care to go on repeating himself.²⁶

Early criticism has tended to portray Maugham's plays as cynical , shallow, and witty . Appreciation of Maugham's broader and more serious themes has emerged gradually over three- quarter of a century and has established that Maugham the playwright is a thoughtful observer and a critic of life .²⁷

Maugham has grown impatient with the conventions and limitations of drama and enjoyed the comparative freedom of fiction. Writing 30 plays, Maugham has turned his back upon the theater and writes his autobiographical and most successful novel **Of Human Bondage** (1915).

Notes

¹ Ivor Brown, **W. Somerset Maugham** (New York: International Profiles, 1970) ,31 .

² Ibid.

³ Richard A. Cordell, **W. Somerset Maugham** (New York: Thomas Nelson and sons, 1937), 153.

⁴ Brown, 32.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cordell, 148

⁷ “Who Was William Somerset Maugham?”, <http://www.thegeminingeek.com/who-was-william-somerset-maugham> (accessed October 18, 2012), n.p.

⁸ Cordell, 234.

⁹ Ibid., 237.

¹⁰ Ibid., 235-236.

¹¹ Ibid., 253.

¹² Selina Hastings, **The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham** (New York: Random House, 2010), 78.

¹³ Max Beerbohm, “ An Uncommercial Play “, in **Collected Critical Heritage**, ed. Anthony curtis and John whitehead (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1997), 64.

¹⁴ For this and all the subsequent references to the text see W. Somerset Maugham, **A Man of Honour** (London: William Heinemann, 1903).

¹⁵ Hastings, 78.

¹⁶ Ted Morgan, **Maugham** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 100.

¹⁷ E.K. Chambers, “ A Man of Honour”, in **Collected Critical Heritage**, ed. Anthony Curtis and John whitehead (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1997), 61.

¹⁸ Morgan, 100.

¹⁹ The most famous model of the human psyche is Freud's tripartite model. The model divides the psyche into three parts: the id, ego, and superego. The irrational, instinctual, and unconscious part of the psyche Freud calls the id. The second part is the ego which is the rational and logical part of the mind. Whereas the id operates according to the pleasure principle, the ego operates in harmony with the reality principle. It is the ego's job to regulate the instinctual desires of the id and allow these desires to be released in nondestructive ways. The third part of the psyche Freud names the superego. It acts like an internal censor, causing us to make moral judgments in light of social pressures. In contrast to the id, the superego operates according to the morality principle and serves primarily to protect society and us from the id.

Charles E. Bressler, **Literary Criticism : An Introduction to Theory and Practice** (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 146.

²⁰ Cordell, 238.

²¹ Ibid., 236.

²² Joseph Wood Krutch, " Maugham at His Best", **The Nation**, May 3, 1903, 511- 512.

²³ " Who Was William Somerset Maugham?", n.p.

²⁴ Cordell, 157.

²⁵ Brown, 48.

²⁶ Cordell, 145.

²⁷ B.G.Knepper and Mildred C. Kuner , " W. Somerset Maugham " , in **Critical Survey of Drama** (New York : Salem Press, 2003) , n.p.

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الرجل صاحب الواجب :

موم ككاتب مسرحي

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ملخص البحث

يعتبر الكاتب سومريست موم روائياً في المقام الأول . يتناول هذا البحث سومريست موم الكاتب المسرحي . اعتبره العديد من النقاد

كاتب مسرحي ذو مستقبل يبشر بخير . كتب موم 30 مسرحية ثم عاد الى كتابة الرواية حيث كتب روايته المعروفة عن العبودية

الانسانية عام 1915 .

تعتبر كتابات موم واضحة ودقيقة وبسيطة وقد عرف بالواقعية في كتاباته و درايته بالطبيعة البشرية من حيث قوتها واحباطاتها . كتب موم مسرحية مأساوية واحدة بعنوان الرجل صاحب الواجب وهي مسرحية تتكون من 4 فصول . يركز البحث الحالي على هذه المسرحية للتعريف بموم ككاتب مسرحي ومناقشة مفهوم " الشعور بالواجب " لديه .

جيني امرأة غير متعلمة وغيورة ولكنها احبت باسل كينت بأخلاص . كانت جيني تعمل في حانة وتزوجها باسل لان كان هناك طفلا في احشاء جيني وتولدت لدى باسل مشاعر الواجب والالتزام تجاه جيني والطفل . باسل رجل من طبقة اجتماعية عالية وقد كان ينفر من سوقية جيني واقربائها المتطفلون . وقع باسل بحب هيلدا موري وهي امرأة من طبقته وقريبة صديقه هالويل .

توفي الطفل قبل ولادته واصبحت جيني غيورة جدا بسبب هيلدا و في النهاية انتحرت بألقاء نفسها في نهر التايمز . ولقد تفاجأ القارئ في النهاية بسرعة تخلص باسل من حزنه ومن الشعور بالذنب وقرر ان يستمتع بحياته وبحريته .