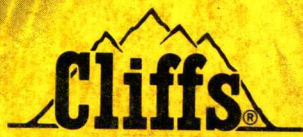


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# OF HUMAN BONDAGE

## NOTES

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- *Introduction to the Novel*
- *Recurrent Themes in the Novel*
- *Style*
- *Character Analyses*
- *Critical Commentaries*
- *Questions for Review*

*by*

*Frank B. Huggins*



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## INTRODUCTION

**I**N SUMMARY *Of Human Bondage* sounds like a story that hardly moves at all. In the sense that a Dumas book or a paperback adventure novel moves, this is true. There is no physical action, and the plot is simply the story of one man's struggle to find himself in a cruel world.

Philip, the protagonist, who we presume is Maugham himself, is an orphan with a club-foot. But he is not badly off financially, and he has a keen mind.

Maugham, so far as is known, has never completely admitted that this book is autobiographical. He says this in the introduction to one of its many editions:

At the time *Of Human Bondage* was written many novelists, possibly incited by the deep impression made on them by Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, were impelled to write semi-autobiographical novels. I say semi-autobiographical because of course they were works of fiction and it was the right of the authors to alter the facts they were dealing with as they chose. Such a book was *Of Human Bondage*. When I made up my mind to write it I was a popular playwright and much in demand; I retired from the theater for a couple of years because I knew that bywriting it I could rid myself of a great number of unhappy recollections that had not ceased to harrow me. This it did.

From what is known of Maugham's life, it appears that the early portions of the book are purely autobiographical, with certain changes of scene. Maugham did not have a club-foot, but he was an orphan. He spent his early years in Paris, and his English was stilted, in addition to which he stammered. Sometime during his medical education, Maugham apparently had an unhappy love affair. It must have been with some girl who resembled Mildred. Mildred is almost frighteningly too real to be a product of any writer's imagination; she must have been drawn from real life.

Maugham admits that there may be passages and episodes in *Of Human Bondage* that are too personal to be of general interest. Depending on how one reacts, this may be true. It is certainly a very long story, and some critics have said that the book could have been half the length. There is a novel within a novel, and when it was adapted for the screen some years ago with Leslie Howard and Bette Davis taking the main parts, the scenario writer discarded the wrapping and kept the core. It was an outstanding motion picture.

This is without doubt the most subjective of Maugham's novels or

short stories. The Old Observer is here involved in the story himself, and while occasionally he manages to look at the passing scene from outside, in this book he is generally inside looking out. However, it should be noted that in building Philip step by step into an observer, Maugham seems to be showing us how he became the reporter he is. For in his later writings, we get the impression that he never injects himself into the story, except possibly in philosophical asides.

It has been said that one of the dangers of becoming acquainted with Maugham is that you will find yourself depicted in one of his stories. How true this is, only those involved can say, but certainly in this one book, Maugham himself is the central character, Philip Carey.

## SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

Philip Carey, the protagonist, is a club-foot orphan. The story is laid in England, Germany, and France in the years between 1885 and around 1905.

The death of his mother, as the story opens, leaves Philip an orphan at the age of nine, and he goes to live with his aunt and uncle, the Vicar of Blackstable. He is then sent to King's School, presumably to study for the clergy. As a cripple he does not have an easy life at school nor in his dealings with people in general. He is a lonely, introverted boy, sensitive and intelligent.

Philip has a little money he inherited from his mother, but it is barely enough to see him through until he masters a profession, which, as a gentleman in England at the time, is the only course left to him.

Philip hates the life at school and when he is 18 he leaves to spend a year in Germany. After he returns to England, he tries to become an accountant but finds he has no head for it. Because he has some talent with drawing, he decides to go to Paris and study art. After two years he discovers his talents are limited.

On returning to England again, he takes up the study of medicine, his father's profession.

He meets Mildred who at the time is a waitress. She becomes the obsession of his life, and the major part of the book is devoted to his relations with her. Mildred is coarse and indifferent to Phillip and not particularly attractive, but Philip falls madly in love with her. The love is not returned, but Philip will do anything for her.

Mildred has a child by another man and she has an affair with one of

Philip's friends, but all through this he is not able to rid her from his heart. This is the bondage of the title, the slave to passion that Philip is. He looks after her even when he discovers she has become a prostitute, but when Mildred turns the tables and tries to seduce him, he spurns her, and she leaves. He feels free at last, but he sees her once more; by now she is dying of a venereal disease.

Philip's fortunes drop and he loses all his money. For a time he works as a shopwalker, but after the death of his uncle he inherits enough to continue his medical education. After graduation he has plans to go abroad, but instead he falls in love with the daughter of his dearest friend, and as the book ends Philip is about to be married.

## RECURRENT THEMES IN THE NOVEL

This is one of the great books written about a man's bondage to love, or passion. It depicts in a clear and unrelenting manner the thralldom of one man to a worthless woman. There are sub-plots, but essentially it is the story of unrequited love, of passion on the part of one that is not returned in kind.

It is, at times, an almost embarrassing book. There are passages and scenes that no thoughtful reader can pass over without mentally writhing. How can a man sink so low in his passion, he may ask? And yet, at the same time, he will probably have an uncomfortable feeling that the same thing could happen to anyone, including himself. A look at newspaper headlines will show that it is happening every day. Only the setting has been changed.

Maugham spares no one, including himself. This is a brutally frank story, and a very moving one. It is not a novel to be casually read and tossed aside. Maugham, the great storyteller, constantly disclaims any intention of writing a novel for anything but entertainment; but in this—probably his greatest work—there is a deep message that the reader can hardly ignore.

The word is ambivalence. The dictionary tells us that this is: "Simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person, or action." This is the recurring theme throughout the book: love and hate, good and bad, happiness and sorrow, prosperity and poverty. There is hardly a chapter where some aspect of this contrast is not brought out.

In essence, what Maugham is telling us here, and in all his works, for that matter, is that no man is all good nor all bad, that there is no such thing as all-love and all-hate in human relationships. That is why we are humans. As Philip, the protagonist, says at one point:

"What a price it was to pay for being other than the beasts!"



## STYLE

Maugham's writing style is essentially a simple one. He does not embellish with sonorous phrases, nor does he lean on the adjective. He is a reporter, and a very good one. He tells a story; he draws no morals, and he leaves it at that. Maugham has said that he is a teller of tales, a professional writer, and that it is his job to entertain the reader. This is exactly what he does, and he has done it so well for over half a century that he is one of the most successful writers in the world.

His style, or perhaps one might say his lack of style, is one of the reasons why, despite his enormous and generally superior output over the years, he has never been recognized as a truly great writer in the sense that a Hemingway or a Joyce or a Gide is accepted. Maugham, the master reporter, will spin for you an entertaining tale, and in many cases it is far more than a simple story. He leaves it to you, however, to read into it whatever you wish. Let the psychologists and the sociologists and others argue about what lies behind the story. All Maugham does is to chronicle what are, in most instances, plain facts. Names and places have been changed and a tight-knit story has been built up from what was possibly an incident he was told about, but only rarely—and perhaps never—does Maugham concoct a plot from whole cloth. He is a chronicler, and his style is that of a crack reporter.

*Of Human Bondage* is plainly autobiographical in nature, but it is not a rambling, disjointed story, as most autobiographies are apt to be. The novel is a masterfully planned, professional piece of work, and plainly that of a writer who has been disciplined by writing for the stage.

While this may be over-simplification, it is said in playwriting that ideally a character should be introduced beforehand, then again be brought to the attention of the audience before his ultimate entrance. (Shakespeare is a master at this technique.) A basic and rather horrible example might go like this:

MARY: When did you say that Ralph, the playboy millionaire, was coming?

JOHN: He should be here shortly. He's driving up from Tuxedo Park in his Jaguar XK140-E.

MARY: Oh, really. (Pause) What's that I hear? Thunder at this time of year?

JOHN: (Cocking an ear) No, that's quadruple pots. It's a Jag.

(Offstage squealing of brakes, then the door bursts open and RALPH enters.)

And so forth.

Maugham is hardly so obvious, but he is a master at setting the scene. Each portion of the novel fits into the next, and nothing is accidental or haphazard. It has all been carefully and skillfully plotted.

Anyone interested in Maugham's style would do well to read the first few chapters of *The Summing Up*, a factual book in which he talks of many things. Of his own writing style he has a great deal to say, but it is perhaps summarized best in a short statement he makes:

I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought with pains I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed. On taking thought it seemed to me that I must aim at lucidity, simplicity and euphony. I have put these three qualities in the order of importance I assigned to them.

Maugham has a great deal more to say about style, but the above are the three qualities he has in all his writings. They are qualities that any city editor would welcome in his reporters. Maugham is a great reporter. What also makes him a great fictioneer is his ability to see drama in everyday life. And finally, Maugham is the old pro, the true writer, who year after year can turn out everything from plays to novels to essays. Writing is his profession and he has mastered it. He is like the pinch hitter who can come off the bench and deliver in the clutch, or the basketball veteran who can dunk that free throw when it is needed the most.

No young writer can go far wrong in studying Maugham's pure style. It does not ring with the magnificent music of Thomas Wolfe, nor does it have the distinctiveness of Ernest Hemingway, but it is clean and direct and honest—lucid, simple, and euphonic.

## CHARACTERS

(There are perhaps 100 characters who appear in this long novel. The ones listed below are those who have any direct or even indirect bearing on the main plot itself.)

### *Philip Carey*

The protagonist. The novel is the story of his life from the age of nine to about 30.

### *William Carey*

Philip's uncle, the Vicar of Blackstable, selfish, hard, but not consciously cruel.

### *Mrs. Carey*

The Vicar's wife, a kind, gentle, and loving woman.

**Mr. Perkins**

Headmaster of King's School, a brilliant scholar, not a "gentleman."

**Rose**

Schoolfriend of Philip, an extroverted, popular, athletic type.

**Hayward**

Amateur art critic, dilettante friend of Philip, first encountered in Heidelberg.

**Emily Wilkinson**

Spinster governess with whom Philip has his first affair.

**Fanny Price**

Completely untalented, incompetent art student in Paris.

**Clutton**

Talented art student in Paris.

**Lawson**

Competent artist, first encountered in Paris. One of Philip's closest acquaintances.

**Cronshaw**

Bohemian British poet type, an amateur philosopher and conversationalist.

**Mildred Rogers**

The female protagonist, common, arrogant, unattractive London slut.

**Miller**

German immigrant in London, a typical, crass traveling salesman type who has an affair with Mildred.

**Norah Nesbit**

Charming young woman who writes pot-boilers for a precarious living. Loves Philip.

**Macalister**

Stockbroker who plays an important part in Philip's financial life.

**Griffiths**

Medical student friend of Philip who has an affair with Mildred.

**Athelny**

Bombastic little journalist who ultimately becomes Philip's dearest friend.

**Mrs. Athelny**

Athelny's wife, a kindly, simple, unassuming woman, the mother of nine.

**Sally**

Oldest of Athelny's brood—sweet, honest, strong, and affectionate.

**Dr. South**

Country doctor who takes a liking to Philip.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND COMMENTS

### CHAPTERS I THROUGH IV

#### SUMMARY

The novel opens in London in 1885 with Philip Carey, a small boy with a club-foot, being summoned to see his mother, who is dying after having given birth to a still-born child. After a brief time with her in bed, he is taken to stay with his godmother, Miss Watkins. A week later, after the death of his mother, he is brought home again by his nurse, Emma, to meet his uncle, the Vicar William Carey, older brother of Philip's father, who had died six months previously. Philip is to go and live with him in Blackstable, some 60 miles from London. The Vicar has been married for 30 years but is childless. Both he and his wife are kindly people, but they do not look forward to having a small boy underfoot. Although Philip's father was a surgeon in good standing, he left very little when he died, and Philip has about 2,000 pounds to last him until he can earn his own living. He journeys with his uncle to the vicarage in Blackstable.

#### COMMENT

In these short opening chapters Maugham sets the scene for the bleak world in which a crippled child of nine finds himself after the death within six months of both his father and mother. From the very first page the reader feels a sense of tragedy. The mother is obviously very ill and is being granted a last wish to see her son. Also, by the act of stroking her son's foot in bed, we learn that he has a club-foot. There is a general sense of hopelessness about the opening, and this is heightened by the doctor in attendance, who, behind a screen in the sickroom, takes a look at the still-born baby who is the cause of Mrs. Carey's condition. As the chapter ends, the final note of tragedy is sounded as the still-sleeping Philip is taken away to stay with his godmother, and the nurse asks the doctor if there is any hope. The answer is negative.

There is never any overt cruelty against the little boy in these opening passages, but the loneliness of his situation is made crystal clear. When he returns from his godmother's with his nurse, Emma, to meet his uncle, the Vicar, with whom he is to stay, he is told that Emma cannot go with him. We are led to understand that this is the final break with his past. He is permitted to take all his toys, and also one thing that belonged to his parents. Philip picks a clock he knew his mother liked, then goes to her room for a last look. He pulls open the drawers of a cabinet and looks at his mother's things, and he throws his arms around her dresses, and lies on her bed.

Except when he is parted from Emma, Maugham never indicates that the newly orphaned boy cried of his own volition, and by underplaying the melodramatic, by showing a well-behaved little Victorian boy reacting in a still-upper-lip manner of the time, conveys more of a deep sense of tragedy than would have been the case otherwise. But the bleak world that lies ahead for Philip is established. We know that he had had luxuries that he will no longer have; we know that he has lost a mother that he loved and who loved him.

The opening chapters are particularly important for a full understanding of the events to come. Maugham is skillfully laying the seeds for the crop that will follow.

Philip Carey is not an orphan in the slums of London. He is not starving, nor is he beaten. He is not an *Oliver Twist*. But we are led to understand that he is a young gentleman in somewhat straitened circumstances and will have to live in a different manner in the future.

By the time Chapter IV ends we find that Philip has gone through his first day at the vicarage. Maugham has succeeded in establishing that the little boy is entering into a very lonely life among adults who, while they do not dislike him, neither want him nor really love him—even though they may wish to. The stage for what is to follow has been masterfully set.

## NOTES

### *Godmother*

A female sponsor at the time of baptism in the Church of England (Episcopal Church in the United States) who guaranteed his or her religious education. This was generally an older friend of the family. There was also a godfather.

### *Red Indian*

This is the British for what we call an [American] Indian. What we call a Hindu is what the British call an Indian.

### *Two Thousand Pounds*

The subject of money will occur time and time again throughout the book and it will be useful to have some idea of the sums referred to in reference to present day values and their buying power. The pound—the top British unit of money—of the period was equivalent to five United States gold dollars. This was a time when laborers in this country received about a dollar for a 12-hour day. Philip's 2,000 pounds was therefore worth \$10,000 in gold. Invested wisely, it was theoretically enough to keep him reasonably comfortable for the rest of his days. It was by no means a large fortune, but at least something that should keep him from starving.

### *Nursery Tea*

Tea is another word that will occur frequently. It has no reference to the beverage, although it was—and is—generally drunk “at tea.” Tea is a meal of sorts and one that does not exist in this country in the sense that Maugham refers to it. In order to understand its significance, one must know that in Victorian days the big meal of the day was taken around midday. Then, at some time around five or six in the afternoon, tea was served—or eaten. Depending on the class of the people involved—and again it should be remembered that this novel is not set in a classless society, but one that still held rigidly to class lines—tea was or was not the final meal of the day. For the laboring man, it definitely was; it was bread and butter and cheese and possibly a bit of meat and a glass of beer that he had on returning from work. For the upper classes—the nobility and the rich—it could be a three o'clock snack of small sandwiches and cakes to be followed at around eight by another meal, to be called either dinner or supper—the former if the midday meal was not the main one of the day. In the upper middle-class society in which Philip was reared, tea was quite likely a substantial meal, and for the young, the last meal of the day before retiring. Adults might or might not have a light supper later. In general it might be said that tea took on more importance the lower you were in the social scale. The term “high tea” always referred to a tea at which meat was served, and was quite definitely a substantial, if simple, meal.

### *Antimacassar*

Dandies of the day daubed their hair with that “greasy kid stuff” that was known as Macassar oil, and ladies draped the backs of chairs and couches with lacy cloth that could be removed and washed. They can still be seen in places.

### *Top of the Egg*

Here again tea is something more substantial than just tea and cakes. In this case the Vicar alone is having a soft-boiled egg, but after he has knocked the top off his egg with his spoon he offers the top—with a slight amount of the white left in it—to Philip. This was common practice in Britain, and while hardly satisfying to the youthful recipient, made him feel he was sharing in an adult treat.

## CHAPTERS V THROUGH IX

### SUMMARY

These chapters tell of life in the vicarage in Blackstable. Philip discovers that he is no more lonesome than he was formerly. He is used to being an only child, and he settles into the routine of the vicarage without rebelling against any of them. The story takes him through the summer and we learn that Philip is quite a reader and that his "brain was precocious." His uncle and aunt, seeing that he is able to busy himself, pay little attention to him. But on a Sunday when he is ordered by his uncle to learn a short prayer, selected for the day, and is unable to do so, he breaks out crying and his aunt hears him. Her heart is touched, for she had never imagined before that he was lonely and unhappy. Through her he is introduced to more books in the Vicar's library—books which the Vicar himself does not read. He gets to read, among other things, a good many novels that he enjoys. He develops the habit of reading.

### COMMENT

The plot is not advanced in these chapters, but Maugham draws a penetrating picture of a country vicarage in Victorian England. What we see is a colorless routine of honest, God-fearing folk, content in the main, to be what they are. There is a brief flashback in which Mrs. Carey, Philip's mother, appears to be an emotional woman who wishes to leave her son some last photographs although she knows she is dying. The contrast between this romantic gesture and the drab life of the vicarage based on pragmatic virtues is clearly evident. The author also shows us how tyrannical, if not self-imposed, the life of a Victorian gentleman of the times was. The Vicar, while not castigated, is depicted as a self-centered, selfish martinet. On the other hand, his wife, Philip's aunt by marriage, is shown to be a typical wife of the times, bowing to her husband in all matters—or seeming to do so—but a woman with a warm heart who would like to have borne children. While she is unable to give Philip the affection she would like because of her reticence, she is fond of the boy—and this becomes clear in later chapters. Philip, on his part, finds affection in Mary Ann, the maid-of-all-work. As the chapters end, the Vicar is thinking of sending Philip off to school.

In Chapter IX, we see Philip break down completely for the first time. Actually, the misery is simply a compounding of all that has gone before, and the incident itself is relatively unimportant. It does bring out, however, that his aunt loves him in her own way, although she is unable to convey it to a small boy as she might wish. Maugham also brings out that while the uncle is not a cruel man he has absolutely no idea of how to deal with his nephew. "What's he got to cry about?" he asks, and this, in a sense, summarizes his feelings. "He felt extraordinarily helpless," we are told.

After Philip learns to find solace in books, Maugham introduces a philosophy that he mentions many times in his other writings. The habit of reading, according to Maugham, is like an addiction to drugs. He says that it is the most delightful of all habits, but at the same time one that takes a person into an unreal world and makes the real world of every day a source of bitter disappointment.

In his later years, in *The Summing Up*, *Teller of Tales*, and other autobiographical writings, Maugham will refer again and again to this reading phobia.

## NOTES

### *Shilling*

There are 20 shillings to the pound. At this time the shilling was worth 25 cents.

### *The Times*

This is *The Times* of London, the venerable "Thunderer" that some still consider the greatest newspaper in the world. It is not to be confused with other *Times*, where the definitive article is not used. There is only one *The Times*.

### *Chapel*

The reference here is to Protestant sects other than the Church of England. The "church" is the Church of England church.

### *Bath*

The story is laid in a period almost a century ago, and sanitary habits were not what they are today. Plumbing was also primitive. In Britain it still is.

### *Fly*

A light carriage for hire. Somewhat like a taxi today.

### *Penny or Pence*

There are 12 pennies to a shilling—and you may recall there are 20 shillings to a pound. So at this period a pence was worth about two cents.

### *Florin*

A silver coin worth two shillings.

### *Harbour*

This is not a typographical error. The British still spell harbour, labour, arbour, humour and so forth with the added "U." But our advertising writers also write "glamour" instead of "glamor" so perhaps it is more glamorous.



### *Licking Into Shape*

Not quite the American meaning of beating into shape, but an indication that discipline is needed.

### *Popish*

Anything that smacked of Roman Catholicism. But note that the Vicar refers to himself as “Catholic” and detests the word “Protestant.” The rituals of the High Church of England are very close to those of the Roman Catholic Church, but with the difference—to put it in a very simple way—that the Church of England does not recognize the Pope as the representative of Christ on Earth.

## CHAPTERS X THROUGH XIV

### SUMMARY

Philip is enrolled in the preparatory school attached to King’s School at Tercanbury, an institution designed to prepare the boys for the clergy. He is subjected to the usual cruelty of the other boys to a newcomer and finds it doubly difficult because of his club-foot. After a time his deformity ceases to interest the others, but Philip becomes very sensitive about it. He is unable to take part in sports, and this further sets him aside from the others. He does well in his studies, however, and is known as a bit of a grind, something which does not sit too well with his fellow students. At one point the school is seized with religious fervor and all the boys, including Philip, become very devout. He reads in the New Testament that: “... whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” He prays that his foot will be healed, and when this does not happen he feels a dull resentment toward people like his uncle, the Vicar, who had told him that mountains could be moved by faith.

### COMMENT

The preparatory school of the King’s School at Tercanbury would seem a terribly harsh place for a boy of nine today, but apparently it was typical of English public (private) schools of the time. The cruelty that Philip was subjected to by older boys is no different from that which others endure, except that with his club-foot he is forever unable to become one of the crowd and remains an outsider.

While Maugham does not tell us the exact dates, it would appear that Philip spends some three and a half years in the preparatory school. The various incidents during his stay are designed to show how, in this growing-up period, Philip is drawing more and more into himself. Life is a misery, and so, sometimes he feels that he is living in a dream and he will awake in the morning to be with his mother again in London. On one occasion this