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Of Human Bondage by W. Somerset Maugham

With an Introduction by Jane Smiley

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Of Human Bondage

W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was born in Paris, the youngest son of wealthy English parents. Orphaned at age ten, he was sent to live in Whitstable, England, with an uncle and aunt, an experience that left him bitter, angry, and unhappy. He trained for a medical career at St. Thomas's Hospital in London, but never practiced medicine. Instead he began writing, publishing his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth,* in 1897. Determined to make a living from his art, Maugham achieved tremendous success with his plays, urbane comedies of manners that made him financially secure and famous. At forty, unable to bear the dark memories of his early life, he wrote *Of Human Bondage,* a tale of obsessive love. He had for many years an unorthodox marriage with Syrie Wellcome, but the most sustaining relationship in his life was with Gerald Haxton, who became his lifelong lover, secretary, and companion. In 1928 Maugham bought a house on the French Riviera that became a meeting place for writers and celebrities. Anthony Burgess wrote, "Maugham had, up to the very end, the satisfaction of knowing that he was read, and read widely. It is likely that he will go on being read, and that his novels and stories—turned into films and television plays—will increasingly find audiences." Besides *Of Human Bondage* (1915), his other popular works include *The Razor's Edge* (1944), *Cakes and Ale* (1930), *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), and the short story "Rain" (1921).

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Introduction by Jane Smiley

In a famous essay that attempted to define the nature of Modernism, Virginia Woolf declared that the new world had begun in the year 1910. Writers of the old world, such as Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells, were content to draw character by piling on details of appearance and sociological circumstances. Writers of the new world, meaning herself, E. M. Forster, James Joyce, and others, desired to look more deeply, to express a character's inner uniqueness, and the result was the breakup of old forms, and, especially, of old prose styles, "the crashing and smashing" that show what "strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, pp. 114, 117).

W. Somerset Maugham, only seven years older than Woolf, was, by virtue of his subject matter, his approach, and his style, a writer of the superseded order, and yet he outlived Woolf by twenty-five years. He outlived Modernism, too. The world's last images of him are not quaint images of the nineteen twenties or austere images of the nineteen thirties, but familiar images of our own era—Maugham also outlived John F. Kennedy.

Somerset Maugham wrote steadily for almost sixty-five

years, producing nineteen novels, six volumes of short stories, thirty-one plays, eight volumes of nonfiction, and four autobiographical works. Maugham was the most successful literary writer of his day, and for the latter half of his life he lived among the wealthy leisured class on the French Riviera. Even after he stopped writing, his works were so popular all over the world that royalties from them continued to support his patrician tastes. Hollywood studios found ample inspiration in his stories and novels, and millions who had never read a word of Maugham's writing know Bette Davis as Mildred Rogers in *Of Human Bondage,* or as Leslie Crosbie in *The Letter.* In fact, a remake of *The Letter* ran on American television as recently as the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, later critical estimation of Maugham and his fellow "Edwardians," as Woolf called them, has by and large supported Woolf's distinctions. If *Of Human Bondage* is still considered a classic, it is in spite of its Edwardian roots, not because of them.

Maugham did not perceive his art as Virginia Woolf perceived hers; his view was rather more simple. He liked to say that he was a storyteller, and in the introduction he wrote to his collected short stories, published in 1934, he remarks, "My prepossessions in the arts are on the side of law and order. I like the story that fits" (p. *xx*). In the same introduction, he contrasts the work of Guy de Maupassant, a famous nineteenth-century French writer of stories, with that of Anton Chekov, an equally famous Russian writer who died in 1902 at the age of thirty-eight. While allowing for de Maupassant's defects ("those keen eyes of his saw keenly, but they did not see profoundly. . . ." [p. *viii*]), Maugham admires his "astonishing capacity for creating living people. He can afford little space, but in a few pages can set before you half a dozen persons so sharply seen and vividly described that you know about them all you need. Their outline is clear; they are distinguishable from one another; and they breathe of life" (ibid.). By contrast, while protesting how

much he admires Chekov, he suggests, "On the face of it, it is easier to write stories like Chekov's than stories like de Maupassant's. To invent a story interesting in itself apart from the telling is a difficult thing, the power to do it is a gift of nature, it cannot be acquired by taking thought, and it is a gift that very few people have" (ibid., p. *ix*). He urges further that Chekov's professed desire to explore everyday life is not an intrinsic merit of his work: "The fact that something happens everyday [sic] does not make it more important. The pleasure of recognition, which is the pleasure thus aimed at, is the lowest of aesthetic pleasures" (ibid., p. *x*).

For Maugham, the distinction was an important one, because it is de Maupassant who, he felt, influenced him, not Chekov. In fact, in the same introduction, Maugham tells a revealing anecdote: "From the age of fifteen whenever I went to Paris I spent most of my afternoons poring over the books in the galleries of the Odeon. I have never passed more enchanted hours. The attendants in their long smocks were indifferent to the people who sauntered about looking at the books, and they would let you read for hours without bothering. There was a shelf filled with the works of Guy de Maupassant, but they cost three francs fifty a volume, and that was not a sum I was prepared to spend. I had to read as best I could standing up and peering between the uncut pages. Sometimes when no attendant was looking I would hastily cut a page and thus read more conveniently . . . In this manner, before I was eighteen, I had read all the best stories" (p. *vii*).

"A story interesting in itself, apart from the telling" was always what attracted Maugham, and he spent a significant portion of his writing life seeking such stories in France, Spain, Germany, Russia, and the South Pacific.

One story, however, was given him as a boy, and that is the story that became *Of Human Bondage*.

William Somerset Maugham was born in France in 1874. He was the fourth son of Robert Ormond Maugham and Edith Mary Snell Maugham. He was born within the grounds of the British Embassy in Paris because of the impending passage of a French law giving every child born on French soil French citizenship, thereby allowing future conscription into the French army. His older brothers were all at boarding school in England by the time he was three, and so "Willie," as he was known throughout his life, gained the sole benefit of his mother's attention and affection. Such attention did not last long. Afflicted with tuberculosis and advised by her doctors that the best cure for it was pregnancy, Edith Maugham gave birth to two more sons. The first was stillborn. The second died the day after he was born, on Willie's eighth birthday. Six days later, Edith died as well, at the age of forty-one. Robert Maugham, fifty-nine and ailing, became Willie's only parent. He died two and a half years later, leaving far less than expected in his estate. Willie went to live with his father's brother, the Vicar of Whitstable, near Canterbury, in Kent, England. He spoke French far better than he spoke English. With details and names somewhat rearranged, Maugham's subsequent adolescence and young manhood formed the story line of *Of Human Bondage*, written after Maugham had established his reputation as a popular playwright.

Maugham himself admitted that literary invention was not his forte. Of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth,* he remarked, "I was forced to stick to the truth by the miserable paucity of my imagination" (quoted in Morgan, p. 53). His technique was to observe carefully, take notes, and reproduce scenes that he had witnessed, even in works not openly autobiographical. *Of Human Bondage* was openly autobiographical. In his own preface to the novel, written many years after it had found success, Maugham wrote, "Fact and fiction are inextricably mingled: the emotions are my own, but not all the incidents are related as they happened, and some of them are

transferred to my hero not from my own life but from that of persons with whom I was intimate" (Penguin, p. 7). The effect of writing *Of Human Bondage* was as Maugham had hoped. Early demons were exorcised, and Maugham's work turned into new and more exotic channels.

Published in the summer of 1915, *Of Human Bondage* did not at first look like a success. Some British reviews were admiring but bemused. One reviewer, unable to actually form a wholehearted judgment of the book, wrote, "I am not sure he has not written a highly original book. I am not even sure he has not written almost a great one." Other reviewers were put off. An unsigned review in *Atheneum* asserted, "The values accorded by the hero to love, realism, and religion are so distorted as to have no interest beyond that which belongs to an essentially morbid personality" (both reviews reprinted in Curtis and Whitehead, *Maugham: The Critical Heritage*). But *Of Human Bondage* got a second chance for commercial success in the United States, with a long and enthusiastic review in *The New Republic*, written by the American realist novelist, Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser could hardly contain his delight: "One feels as though one were sitting before a splendid Shiraz or Daghestan of priceless texture and intricate weave, admiring, feeling, responding sensually to its colors and tones. Or better yet, it is as though a symphony of great beauty by a master, Strauss or Beethoven, has just been completed, and the bud note and flower tones were filling the air with their elusive message, fluttering and dying" (reprinted in Curtis and Whitehead). By 1925, according to the *New York Times*, *Of Human Bondage* was "in permanent demand" (Curtis and Whitehead, p. 136). It has never been out of print.

Maugham's autobiographical novel was followed by many other successes, most particularly *Cakes and Ale*, which satirized the literary world, and *The Moon and Sixpence*, based on the life of Paul Gauguin, but *Of*

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Human Bondage remained his best-loved novel. The critic Malcolm Cowley asked, "Why did he write one book that was full of candor and human warmth?" Maugham's answer, as reported by his friend, the screenwriter Garson Kanin, was "Because I've only lived one life. It took me thirty years of living to possess the material for that one book" (quoted in Morgan, p. 198). Although Maugham wrote two autobiographical works, *The Summing Up* (1938) and *Looking Back* (1962), he was inclined, in them, to defend his work against critics and settle old scores, many of them personal ones; the form of the autobiographical novel demanded that in *Of Human Bondage* he pay attention first and foremost to the literary virtues of character drawing and storytelling. Of his three autobiographical works, only the novel has survived into our time with more than historical interest.

Maugham's middle age (*Of Human Bondage* was published the year he turned forty) and old age (he died at ninety-one) were remarkably active and productive. He traveled widely, and often encountered surprising adventures. He served as a British secret agent in Russia at the time of the Russian Revolution (he later wrote spy stories based on these experiences), he contracted and recovered from tuberculosis, he visited headhunters by paddle boat and pole boat in British North Borneo, and there survived a dangerous shipwreck when he was thrown from the boat he was riding in by a ten-foot tidal wave. He contracted malaria in Bangkok and, once recovered, toured the rest of Southeast Asia. He visited China, and sought stories in Mexico. At the beginning of the Second World War, when Maugham was sixty-six, he survived an arduous and frightening evacuation from the French Riviera to England aboard an English coal barge threatened by Italian submarines. He returned to his home five years later to discover that it had been looted and severely damaged. The carefully landscaped and tended grounds were largely destroyed. At seventy-one,

Maugham rebuilt everything, and lived there for another twenty years. Maugham died in 1965.

Of Human Bondage is a *Bildungsroman,* a novel of a young man's education similar to *David Copperfield,* by Charles Dickens, *The Way of All Flesh,* by Samuel Butler, and, the original example of the form, *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre,* by Johann von Goethe. The subject of the *Bildungsroman* is the formation of a young man's character through education, travels, and early love experiences. Many examples of the form have roots in the lives of their authors. As in *Of Human Bondage,* a young boy is often set apart from his peers by some misfortune, and must undergo a humiliating experience that later proves strengthening. Also, as in *Of Human Bondage,* the young man's first experience with love is an unsuccessful or problematic one that nevertheless paves the way to a happy marriage with a suitable mate. These peripatetic heroes additionally afford the author ample opportunity for exploring, and satirizing, social institutions such as schools, churches, and class divisions. The highly popular form of the *Bildungsroman* reached its fullest development before the theories of Sigmund Freud became widely known, theories that challenged the idea of character as a product of travel, education, and social circumstances and instead proposed that character is fixed, through the inborn process of Oedipal conflict, by the time a boy is six years old.

To the modern reader, therefore, the fact that Philip Carey's fictional life begins when he is nine years old seems dated and a bit odd. In fact, Philip seems considerably younger than nine as the novel opens—he is carried to his dying mother's bed, nestles with her without waking up, and then is carried away. After her death, the games he is playing seem more suitable to a younger child. It is only when Philip arrives at the home of his uncle, the Vicar of Blackstable, that he seems like a recognizable nine-year-old, a child of developed habits, with a mind of his own and a sharp faculty of observation.

Philip's club foot represents the stammer that Maugham suffered from all his life, and that possibly grew out of the combined traumas of losing his mother and having to change his first language from French to English. He certainly felt that the stammer shaped him profoundly by attracting the teasing of other boys in school, by turning his mind toward the solitary pleasures of books and reading, and by preventing him from taking up the traditional family profession of law. Just as the hallmark of Philip's character is prickly sensitivity to any reference to his deformity, the hallmark of Maugham's character was unsociability and later bitterness that stemmed from his anxiety about speaking. Maugham, like Philip, found his experiences at school almost uniformly unpleasant, and, like Philip, chose not to take a degree at a British university even though all of his male relatives had done so.

For all its length, *Of Human Bondage* moves at a smart pace, covering many incidents over many years. While this episodic quality is a characteristic of the *Bildungsroman,* it seems at times exaggerated in Maugham's novel. His style is rarely evocative. There are long passages of plain, almost expository prose, relating rather than demonstrating what Philip felt. Paradoxically, since these expository passages relieve the author of the necessity of selecting the most representative or telling incidents of Philip's life, they lengthen rather than quicken the passage of time in the novel. Much seems to be told "because it happened" rather than because it has meaning. Maugham, intent upon exorcising his childhood, often seems more interested in getting everything in than in shaping his material.

And yet, the novel possesses undeniable power. While some of this power is rooted in the passion Maugham brought to the work (the "warmth" Cowley remarked upon), much of it comes from the accumulation of incident and the reader's long and intimate acquaintance with Philip. Loneliness, isolation, and feeling combine

with Philip's faculty of observation to re-create his experiences straightforwardly and vividly. He is not, at first, an appealing hero—touchy and demanding, without the wit of David Copperfield or the emotional generosity of other heroes of such novels, he improves with acquaintance. He is honest. He sees clearly and clings to decency in the face of various sorts of humiliation. His intentions are honorable and he works hard to fulfill them. Were the prose style that expresses his being less plain, more artful, Philip's substantial virtues might be less fully explored, and less believable.

In addition, the long preamble to Philip's affair with the shopgirl Mildred Rogers readies the reader for the remarkable frankness Maugham brings to his depiction of their mutual degradation.

If in form and style *Of Human Bondage* owes a great deal to Virginia Woolf's outmoded Edwardian writers, in the working out of the central relationship between Philip and Mildred, Maugham displays an interest in and a candor about sexuality that was much ahead of its time.

For one thing, Philip's affair with Mildred is not his first sexual experience. His sojourn at the university in Heidelberg, Germany, at the age of eighteen, has exposed him to a world somewhat less sexually repressed than the English society where he has spent his adolescence, and this new knowledge, in turn, has rendered him vulnerable to the advances of a woman friend of his uncle and aunt, Miss Wilkinson, herself experienced in the ways of the Continent. Though thirty-seven, Miss Wilkinson looks younger, and at first fascinates and attracts Philip, who would like to think that she can't be more than twenty-six, only six or seven years older than he is. As she becomes more importunate, though, Philip begins to feel discomfort and physical revulsion in her presence, and he is only too glad when she departs for a governess position in Berlin.

Later, in Paris, he is subject to the attentions of a fellow art student, Miss Price, for whom he also feels

remarkable physical revulsion: "the way in which Miss Price ate took his appetite away. She ate noisily and greedily, a little like a wild beast in a menagerie, and after she had finished each course rubbed the plate with pieces of bread till it was white and shining, as if she did not wish to lose a single drop of gravy" (p. 202). While he recognizes the beauty of another woman art student, Miss Chalice, rumors of her promiscuity alienate and disgust him. Perhaps the roots of Philip's revulsion are to be found in his creator's discreet but lifelong homosexuality.

It is only Mildred who draws him, and the attraction is immediate. Once she snubs him, he has to elicit some response from her. Maugham writes, "He could not get her out of his mind. He laughed angrily at his own foolishness: it was absurd to care what an anaemic little waitress said to him, but he was strangely humiliated" (p. 275). From there he moves quickly to obsession. This is not to say that he finds her physically attractive: "He did not think her pretty; he hated the thinness of her, only that evening he had noticed how the bones of her chest stood out in evening dress . . . ; he did not like her mouth, and the unhealthiness of her color vaguely repelled him" (p. 283). Through greedy, scheming indifference, Mildred draws Philip from humiliation to humiliation. Even after she has left him and he has gotten over her (with another young woman whom he likes very much but does not find pretty), he cannot resist her reentrance into his life.

Philip's affair with Mildred is full of incident. His obsession manifests itself now as sexual attraction, now as paternal interest, now as fondness for her baby daughter. It seems to thrive on the inappropriateness of the connection, on the way that the connection impoverishes and isolates Philip, on the way that Mildred serves up ever-new versions of humiliation and betrayal. Philip repeatedly asks himself why he has fallen in love with Mildred, of all people. Everything about her directly

contradicts his lifelong fantasy of first love. He can never answer his own question and, overtly, Maugham never does, either. Perhaps, the author seems to imply, there is some link to the death of Philip's mother. But the mother herself, a sacrosanct figure, offers no clue to Philip's choice of object.

The reader must notice, though, that Mildred's most salient quality is shamelessness, which is combined with selfish energy that stands in strong contrast to Philip's sensitive self-consciousness. With Mildred's every entrance into the narrative, the novel perks up. Not only is she powerful in herself, she has the power to engage Philip, to prevent him from taking refuge in his customary supercilious detachment. She draws him kicking and screaming into a world of passionate feeling and profound contradictions. Symbolically, after he has spent all of his money on her, no inherited income insulates him from the workaday world any longer, and he is forced to draw on his strength and his skills, as he never has before, simply to survive.

Although Maugham may not have understood the psychological roots of Philip's obsession and Mildred's indifference, his genius for observation and his relentless belief in literary truth enabled him to portray one of the most compelling and chilling sexual relationships in twentieth-century British literature.

By contrast, his portrayal of the marital refuge Philip takes in Sally Athelney, the daughter of his best friend, strikes the reader as bloodless and static, rather as the contrast between David Copperfield's first marriage to Dora and his second to Agnes does. Sally is young, large, blond, earthy, and silent. Though Philip knows Sally as Athelney's daughter, he doesn't realize he is in love with her until he joins the annual family hop picking, in Mrs. Athelney's native village of Ferne, in Kent. On the evening of the first day, Philip is struck anew by Sally's excellent qualities: "She was like some rural goddess, and you thought of those fresh, strong girls whom old

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