

. Somerset Maugham, in full **William Somerset Maugham**, (born Jan. 25, 1874, Paris, France—died Dec. 16, 1965, Nice), English novelist, playwright, and short-story writer whose work is characterized by a clear unadorned style, cosmopolitan settings, and a shrewd understanding of human nature.

Maugham was orphaned at the age of 10; he was brought up by an uncle and educated at King's School, Canterbury. After a year at Heidelberg, he entered St. Thomas' medical school, London, and qualified as a doctor in 1897. He drew upon his experiences as an obstetrician in his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), and its success, though small, encouraged him to abandon medicine. He traveled in Spain and Italy and in 1908 achieved a theatrical triumph—four plays running in London at once—that brought him financial security. During World War I he worked as a secret agent. After the war he resumed his interrupted travels and, in 1928, bought a villa on Cape Ferrat in the south of France, which became his permanent home.

His reputation as a novelist rests primarily on four books: *Of Human Bondage* (1915), a semi-autobiographical account of a young medical student's painful progress toward maturity; *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), an account of an unconventional artist, suggested by the life of Paul Gauguin; *Cakes and Ale* (1930), the story of a famous novelist, which is thought to contain caricatures of Thomas Hardy and Hugh Walpole; and *The Razor's Edge* (1944), the story of a young American war veteran's quest for a satisfying way of life. Maugham's plays, mainly Edwardian social comedies, soon became dated, but his short stories have increased in popularity. Many portray the conflict of Europeans in alien surroundings that provoke strong emotions, and Maugham's skill in handling plot, in the manner of Guy de Maupassant, is distinguished by economy and suspense. In *The Summing Up* (1938) and *A Writer's Notebook* (1949) Maugham explains his philosophy of life as a resigned atheism and a certain skepticism about the extent of man's innate goodness and intelligence; it is this that gives his work its astringent cynicism.

Childhood and education

Maugham's father was an English lawyer handling the legal affairs of the British embassy in Paris^[2]. Since French law declared that all children born on French soil could be conscripted for military service, Robert Ormond Maugham arranged for William to be born at the embassy, technically on British soil, saving him from conscription into any future French wars^[3]. His grandfather, also Robert, was himself a prominent lawyer and cofounder of the English Law Society,^[4] and it was taken for granted that William would follow in their footsteps. Events were to ensure this was not to be, but his older brother Frederic Herbert Maugham did enjoy a distinguished legal career, becoming Lord Chancellor between 1938-1939.

Maugham's mother Edith Mary (*née* Snell) was consumptive, a condition for which the doctors of the time prescribed childbirth. As a result Maugham had three older brothers, already enrolled in boarding school by the time he was three and Maugham was effectively raised as an only child. Sadly, since childbirth proved no cure for tuberculosis, Edith Mary Maugham died at the age of 41, six days after the stillbirth of her final son. The death of his mother left Maugham traumatized for life, and he kept his mother's photograph by his bedside until his own death^[5] at the age of 91 in Nice, France.

Two years after his mother's death, Maugham's father died of cancer. Willie was sent back to England to be cared for by his uncle, Henry MacDonald Maugham, the Vicar of Whitstable, in Kent. The move was catastrophic. Henry Maugham proved cold and emotionally cruel. The King's School, Canterbury, where Willie was a boarder during school terms, proved an inhospitable place, where he was teased for his bad English (French had been his first language) and his short stature, which he inherited from his father.

It is at this time that Maugham developed the stammer that would stay with him all his life, although it was sporadic and subject to mood and circumstance^[6].

Life at the vicarage was tame, and emotions were tightly circumscribed. Maugham was forbidden to lose his temper, or to make emotional displays of any kind—and he was denied the chance to see others express their own emotions. He was a quiet, private but very curious child. Maugham was miserable, both at the vicarage and at school, where he was bullied because of his small size and his stammer. As a result, he developed a talent for applying a wounding remark to those who displeased him. This ability is sometimes reflected in the characters that populate his writings.

At 16, Maugham refused to continue at The King's School and his uncle allowed him to travel to Germany, where he studied literature, philosophy and German at Heidelberg University. It was during his year in Heidelberg that he met John Ellingham Brooks, an Englishman ten years his senior, and with whom he had his first sexual experience^[7].

On his return to England his uncle found Maugham a position in an accountant's office, but after a month Maugham gave it up and returned to Whitstable. His uncle was not pleased, and set about finding Maugham a new profession. Maugham's father and three older brothers were all distinguished lawyers and Maugham asked to be excused from the duty of following in their footsteps.

A career in the church was rejected because a stammering minister might make the family seem ridiculous. Likewise, the civil service was rejected—not out of consideration for Maugham's own feelings or interests, but because the recent law requiring civil servants to qualify by passing an examination made Maugham's uncle conclude that the civil service was no longer a career for gentlemen.

The local doctor suggested the profession of medicine and Maugham's uncle reluctantly approved this. Maugham had been writing steadily since the age of 15 and fervently intended to become an author, but because Maugham was not of age, he could not confess this to his guardian. So he spent the next five years as a medical student in London^[2].

Career

Early works

Many readers and some critics have assumed that the years Maugham spent studying medicine were a creative dead end, but Maugham himself felt quite the contrary. He was able to live in the lively city of London, to meet people of a "low" sort that he would never have met in one of the other professions, and to see them in a time of heightened anxiety and meaning in their lives. In maturity, he recalled the literary value of what he saw as a medical student: "I saw how men died. I saw how they bore pain. I saw what hope looked like, fear and relief..." Maugham saw how corrosive to human values suffering was, how bitter and hostile sickness made people, and never forgot it.

Maugham kept his own lodgings, took pleasure in furnishing them, filled many notebooks with literary ideas, and continued writing nightly while at the same time studying for his degree in medicine. In 1897, he presented his second book for consideration. (The first was a biography of Meyerbeer written by the 16-year-old Maugham in Heidelberg.)

Liza of Lambeth, a tale of working-class adultery and its consequences, drew its details from Maugham's experiences as a medical student doing midwifery work in the London slum of Lambeth. The novel is of the school of social-realist "slum writers" such as George Gissing and Arthur Morrison. Frank as it is, Maugham still felt obliged to write near the opening of the novel: "...it is impossible always to give the exact unexpurgated words of Liza and the other personages of the story; the reader is therefore entreated with his thoughts to piece out the necessary imperfections of the dialogue."

Liza of Lambeth proved popular with both reviewers and the public, and the first print run sold out in a matter of weeks. This was enough to convince Maugham, who had qualified as a doctor, to drop medicine and embark on his sixty-five year career as a man of letters. Of his entry into the profession of writing he later said, "I took to it as a duck takes to water."

The writer's life allowed Maugham to travel and live in places such as Spain and Capri for the next decade, but his next ten works never came close to rivalling the success of *Liza*. This changed dramatically in 1907 with the phenomenal success of his play *Lady Frederick*; by the next year he had four plays running simultaneously in London, and *Punch* magazine published a cartoon of William Shakespeare biting his fingernails nervously as he looked at the billboards.