

## **A Study of Dramaturgy in the Plays of Somerset Maugham**

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Dramaturgy, as a term was established as a concept of critical and contextual study of dramatic literature by Mary Luckhurst in *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*.

Theorists and practitioners of dramaturgy, however, have long attempted to free the practice from an exclusive concern with the play text, seeking to open dramaturgical perspectives on to works which are not reliant on reference to classical forms, or indeed to text as the principle element. Whilst acknowledging the significance of the literary critical tradition referred to by Luckhurst's historical account, Turner and Behrndt's *Dramaturgy and Performance* incorporates into its overview new forms, processes and questions which, over the course of the twentieth century, have encouraged an emphasis on the live performance and the performance text as opposed to the written play. Expanding the aesthetic parameters of theatre to include works which do not presume the primacy of verbal text, Turner and Behrndt quote Adam Versenyi's proposition that dramaturgy be defined "as the architecture of the theatrical event, involved in the confluence of components in a work and how they are constructed to generate meaning for the audience".

Dramaturgy is a process which is considered as 'processes of analysis' which look at the ways in which levels of meaning are orchestrated in performance, that is to say, processes of analysis which are sensitive to how compositional strategies structure and inform spectators' responses.

Dramaturgy as a technical word did not haunt Maugham yet today the strength of Maugham's ideas are gaining momentum without considering his lack of dramaturgy in some of his dramas. We witness a drama because we want to live the idea propounded by a dramatist through the characters. Moreover, fully evolved characters, with their liveliness create the possibility of linking themselves to the audience. It is the intensity of Maugham's imagination that characters like 'The Constant Wife' still tickles and vivifies audiences as well as the readers.

Jones, author of *The Liars* (1897) and *Mrs. Dane's Defence* (1900), was one of a small group of playwrights whose work monopolised the West End theatre at the turn of the century. The young Bernard Shaw, wielding his critical lash in the *Saturday Review* during the 1890s, and a sworn enemy of these writers nevertheless praised Jones' craftsmanship. Among the dramatists in what was known as the Ring were R.C. Corton, author of the hugely popular *Lord and Lady Algy* (1898), and A.W. Pinero.

Maugham did not underestimate the difficulty of breaking into this group. He had his eyes on a theatrical model temporarily out of service, the work of Oscar Wilde, whose brilliant comedies had been summarily withdrawn after his disgrace at the Old Bailey in 1895. Maugham noted the current drama's obsession with society; so many plays turned on an individual's punitive exclusion from it because of some violation of its moral code.

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Maugham may be seen here as part of an English comic tradition in the theatre that begins with Wilde and ends with Coward, comedies light and silken to the touch but as durable as finely spun steel. *Home and Beauty* echoes *The Importance of Being Ernest* in its symmetry of plot, its hilarious penetrating throw away dialogue, and it looks forward to Coward's disillusioned dissections of modern marriage.

Maugham has shown his mettle not only at the witticism and repartees but also at the silly side of certain characters. Their dialogues bring-forth our subconscious attitude towards someone. The war looms large in the drama, there are punches and hidden innuendos on the govt. policies regarding war as well as how wars change the natural way of thinking and how it creates opportunism, disbelief and prepare masses for tricks in life. At one level *Home and Beauty* presents light humour on the socio-sexual tug-of-war sans moralities but one can read between the lines the needs for survival, as well as open the wounds of materialism, where life has meaning only in the sheen of money.

Maugham has in a manner of an expert on the sociological topics mingled the crisis of war with the crisis of matrimony just to make his audience take part with him in the nexus. The microcosm of marriage can be affected by the macrocosm of war.

*Lady Frederick* was Maugham's first great hit, in 1907, though written five years earlier. It is sub-Wildean of sorts, unlike *Home and Beauty* which is twentieth - century counter part of Wilde. It takes us back to Wilde's period of the 1890s when a group of leisured, languid, titled English people are enjoying a sojourn in the Hotel de Paris at Monte Carlo. Some productions, like the successful 1946 revival at the Savoy Theatre with Coral Browne, have pushed it back to the 1880s at the behest of the costume designer, but a decade or so either way does not make much odds so long as the world of the idle rich with their endemic social snobbery, and their heedless extravagance which has delivered them into the clutches of the money lenders, is fully evoked.

In Maugham's *Lady Frederick* one can see with supple clarity how the dramatist has empowered the protagonist Lady Frederick to reject her suitors and be in the relationship on her own terms. Ragina Barreca, in her important collection of essays on women and comedy, *Last Laughs*, collects several analyses of the power that accrues to women experiencing and writing comedy.

As powerful as inversion is in the shaping of women characters in comedy, comedy's ending has still greater impact, and as inversion works as part of comedy's extensive network of paradox, so too has the happy ending been both a boost and a boon for women. However, it seems far more certain with comic endings than with comic reversals that comedy's women are systematically disadvantaged, though Maugham is a rare case in almost all the women comedies he has written. Women are portrayed as being on the advantaged side. But in most of the findings while women's dominance in the genre is temporary, their final positions are meant to reverberate far into the future. Almost every critic attending to the women of comedy and their ebullient power has downplayed the connection between women's comic reign and the resolutions that follow.

Yet when comedy ends, the role reversals are reversed, the misrule is curtailed, and any social rebellion is tempered by the good feelings presumably attached to the reestablishment of order. For comedy's free wheeling women, the ending usually marks their retreat to more conventional activities, but as we have seen in *Home and Beauty*, Victoria leaves the husbands who try to impose on her domestic chores of cooking. In an overwhelming percentage of cases, the comic ending, for women, is marriage, but we see in Maugham's *Home and Beauty*, the two husbands are alone drinking together and the heroine wife has found herself a third husband.

Maugham attacks idealism not only because as a man of reason he deplores wishful thinking, but also because, like Ibsen and Bernard Shaw, he believes that it is harmful. *The Constant Wife* and *Our Betters* are such plays in which he has attacked idealism.

Dramaturgy serves as a useful tool for the dramatist but as a technical tool it makes a drama quite effective to reach its desired goal. The desired goal is to convey the levels of meaning to the audience. However, it is not so simple that technicalities involved in the analysis are too sensitive and subtle to take out the compositional strategies.

Maugham's plays do not have very elaborate dramaturgy, yet some of his successful plays have a very subtle use of dramaturgy, for instance in *The Constant Wife*. It is said that his interest in dramaturgy revived during the rehearsal of this play. Some touches of Feminist criticism have been unintentionally given to this drama, yet these sporadic references and nuances of feminism and other echoes of unbalanced man-wife relationship have been deeply studied. Maugham is not traditionally viewed as a feminist writer or his writings are not evaluated keeping in mind particular "isms" yet here and there he has shown and explored fully his literary, theatrical, social and political inclinations and his being pro-feminist is visible especially in this play.

The present paper proposes after a deep study of the texts of his dramas, that Maugham is the least puzzling and enigmatic of all writers. To begin with, his prose style, like Bernard Shaw's, is lucid and unequivocal: a reader may not always agree with what he says, but he understands it. He is not a member of the crossword-puzzle school of writers, who receive the attention of little quarterlies and esoteric scholarly journals. There is little excuse for any reader being baffled by Maugham's religious beliefs, literary and aesthetic tastes and theories, attitude towards humanity, ethical judgments, concepts of the good life, attitude towards death, belief in a physical basis of personality and character, or his views on the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life; as well as his cynicism, misogyny, and hedonism. The present study finds that Maugham has made himself clear on all these matters, so much so that in comparison we know for less about Dickens, Kipling and Hawthorne, we know even less about other famous writers.

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