Master’s Degree programme – Second Cycle (D.M. 270/2004)
In European, American and Postcolonial Language and Literature

Final Thesis

The Creative Impulse: Narrator as Device in W. Somerset Maugham’s Short Fiction

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Academic Year
2015 / 2016
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Maugham’s texts are easy reads: they look unpretentious and understandable, they keep the informal reader blandly amused since they appear to prioritize entertainment over edification or critical observation. Nevertheless, Maugham’s texts are deceptively transparent: although their “meaning”, or moral implications are seldom concealed, their naïveté looks feigned, and sarcasm eventually becomes Maugham’s predominant tone. It is debatable whether his fiction expresses authentic disillusionment or purely points out, or rather mocks, bits of reality that are ludicrous, incongruous and ultimately faulty. Maugham notably favours linear, chronological structures, an unadorned syntax and a plain language. However, these features do not imply that his narrative flow is unhindered and crystal-clear. Stories often stop abruptly right after a major plot-twist, the key situation is crafted into an auxiliary tale embedded in a longer, larger narrative, which itself is often dull and risible. Sometimes the storyline is entirely erased, short stories become but journal-like sketches or personalities’ profiles. Maugham frequently focuses on unlikable, unremarkable characters and loves to underscore the corny, the trivial and the vein of anxiety in their behaviours and resolves, as if he were trying to encapsulate some of their most fleeting details, fragilities and frivolities before they get washed away. Hence Maugham’s trademark unfaithful wives, depressed businessmen and exhausted civil servants, failed artists and countless disappointed people. However, Maugham also appears to have a penchant for expanding on the aforesaid petty situations so as to unfold their tragic and catastrophic consequences, only to, in numerous cases, eventually settle the wreckage into a newly-arranged balance.

In spite of the arguably tawdry plots and marginal characters, Maugham’s stylistic lucidity resonated with my own need and ambition to write criticism that shows and enquires how a work of literary art is constructed: the sort of analysis that, because of its roots in the identification of structural and stylistic features, allows the formation of intertextual links and fosters assumptions concerning the meaning and the connotations of literary fiction. The analysis of the act of storytelling appears to me as an effective way to point out how, for instance, some features of reality are filtered into
fiction, how they endure through fictionalization and especially how real-life, historical codes, values and standards can and continue to be endorsed even in the most satirical of texts. The consistent presence of Maugham’s titles on bookshelves, along with the fact that they can be read in translation and their cinematic adaptations enjoyed on the screen, cannot but signal the scarcity of attentive scholarly work about them, the sort of writing, at least, that encompasses the biography or the bibliographical overview. My choice to focus on a very small portion of his massive literary production – a handful of short stories written between 1899 and 1946 – attempts to point out what looked like a gap to me: a specific interest in Maugham’s texts as entities, as worthy of critical perusal as more famous or more highly considered specimens from the English canon. Reading Maugham might appear like a deviation from the saturated Modernist catalogue, and consequently signify a proclivity towards a narrative-centred prose style. Still, my intention is neither that of championing readability over experimentalism, or demonstrate that Maugham’s undemanding texts are as complex as, for instance, James Joyce’s – and accordingly worthy of critical attention – nor denounce Maugham’s secondary state in the history of British letters. A fascinating part of the research was going through the extremely diverse reviews and opinions about Maugham’s work and persona: his subaltern status, or “second-rate” reputation, as a writer has fomented a plethora of responses, many of them off-putting and adverse, and indeed, oftentimes supportive, but seldom enthusiastic and hardly ever openly admiring. The first chapter summarises some of these stances and provides direct quotes from the most assertive and intuitive cases. Enjoying Maugham has certainly more to do with personal taste than with the formal obligation to conform to, and acclaim, a canonical reading list: Maugham may have cut on cross-cultural references and abhorred the impenetrable and the artsy, but that does not entail that his prose is totally sterile, a mere craft only conceived to sell large numbers of copies. On the contrary, what baffles me is how Maugham managed to synchronize outstanding commercial success with themes and narrative structures that, at times, are very likely to strike as irksome, incomplete, even forthright amoral solutions. There seems to be an engrained obscurity in Maugham’s short stories: whether the formulae he selects to express dissatisfaction, and occasionally explore despondency and grief, succeed in coming across as a solid critique, or at least as an attempt to question the conditions that gave rise to the founding malaise. The common thread that links the pieces I have selected for this research is a sense of edgy restlessness in characters
who are striving to make sense of their exterior and carve a space for themselves to be alive in. This is in keeping with Robert Calder’s intuition that:

[...] the central concern of Maugham’s life, and the continuing theme in all his writing, was physical and spiritual independence. He wrote about the importance of money, the dangers of emotion, the snares of passion, the handicaps of heredity and environment, and the narrowness of conformity, but he was really working out his own ideas about individual freedom. His achievement was the success with which this basic concern was adapted for many situations and many ages from the turn of the century to the 1940s. (254-5)

Regardless of the extent and efficacy of his characters’ efforts, however, Maugham’s scope never flinches from a radically pragmatic outlook: fair and happy endings seem to give in to cutting, elusive suspensions of judgement.

Close reading supports the full research: I consistently favour the primary texts over exegesis and, especially during the drafting phase, considered the paucity of critical analysis as an advantage to my own thinking than a deterrent. Once I had determined the scope of the study, I set about to choose the text(s) I intended to analyse in depth: I soon figured short stories would grant me more flexibility in terms of subject matter and structural arrangement than novels, as well as providing quick prospects for comparison and deduction. Furthermore, I maintain that specimens of Maugham’s prose at its most interesting can be found within the hundreds of sketches, novellas and short stories in his opus. I chose to exclude the “exotic” pieces, those set in South East Asia: they are stories in which plot seems to outshine any other feature, and give off the impression that Maugham were relying heavily (and at times exclusively) on shock, suspense and a great deal of stereotypical characterization when configuring the text. Pieces such as “Rain”, “The Letter”, “Mackintosh” and “The Outstation”, I reckoned, although very popular and highly effective, would not provide me with adequate material and proper stimulus for the stylistic enquiry I endeavoured. I did, however, make a geographical distinction when I began focusing on the compact system of the Ashenden anecdotes and, later, on the larger group of what I hereby call “the European stories”. In much of Maugham’s production there seems to lure a fascination with art as a quantifiable experience. Hence, Maugham’s interest in describing the general public’s attitudes to artistic fruition, the effects of artistic production on the makers themselves, and his penchant for deconstructing what
possesses, or rather, is bestowed upon, a literary charm. A concern for what becomes the subject of great art, what inspires the work of artists and amateurs plays a major part in setting the tone and the topics in *Ashenden* – the focus of the first part of this thesis – which is, after all, a catalogue of the people and situations that inspired a writer’s work. Consequently, the inclusion of artist’s tales, a sensibility for literariness and a fondness for metanarratives became the ultimate criterion in the selection of the titles featured in the second part of the research.

My decision to mainly rely on Gérard Genette’s classifications of narrative features is due to the accessibility and universal scope of his critical theories. The tropes he identifies and discusses in *Figures III* – frequency, mode and voice especially – seemed to provide an excellent starting point for independent analysis of prose texts, also outside the French canon. I have also paired Genette’s vocabulary with relatedly designed theories from the Anglophone academia, hence the occasional occurrence of references to Wayne C. Booth, Seymour Chatman and Uri Margolin throughout the text. While I generally employ Genettian definitions to highlight textual specifics in discussions – my aim being the intelligibility of the critical stances I advance – Margolin’s speculations about the nature of characters and the possibility of characterial inferences, Booth’s ethical interpretation of narratorial positioning and Chatman’s insightful distinction between perspective and voice all help implement my arguments. The basic backing principle is that Maugham’s narrators seldom blend in their tale: framed narratives and witnesses’ tales are only two of the most conspicuous, and frequent, forms of storytelling Maugham employs. Along with his propensity to shift focalization multiple times during a single narrative, and an inverse tendency to set a static narrative point of view, his narrators exert a specific influence on each story’s elocution, effect and rationale. Hence, narratorial utterances and attitudes become devices that impact, more or less openly, the articulation and reception of plot and characters, and contribute to challenge the notion of Maugham’s prose as plain and unaffected. The focus of this research is, therefore, strictly formal. It seeks, however, to become a starting point for a retrieval, and a consequential more in-depth analysis, of potential intratextual links between Maugham’s primary sources and recurring motifs and ideas. Although it tries to consistently backtrack to its fundamental concern, my discussion already suggests some of these possible semantizations. The inclusion in the main line of reasoning of conspicuous considerations about, for instance, Roland Barthes, and even Albert Camus, Virginia Woolf and Henrik Ibsen, is to be read as
self-contained promptings for future research rather than proper branches of the main discussion: they all testify how Maugham’s texts grant the possibility to expand their scope beyond their mere subject matter.

The strong authorial presence traceable in Maugham’s prose, however, is allegedly subordinate to Maugham’s own regular warnings that most of his subject matter is inspired by, or even transposed from, real-life experiences and actual meetings. Maugham employs a series of devices to bend and shape what he calls his “raw material” into literary specimens, most of which have to do with the narrative voice and the particular identity and nature of his narratorial figures and forms. In the “European stories” grouped in the latter part of this work, one of the most frequently used devices is the exclusive focalization on a secondary character: Maugham often chooses to restrict the outlet of information (whether it concerns plot, characterization, disclosure of primary and secondary consequences or premises to the main storyline) by aligning its span to that of a secondary character, instead of having point of view and main storyline to coincide through omniscience. That is extremely evident in short stories “Daisy” and “The Colonel’s Lady”, and it is also the case in the majority of the Ashenden stories, in which the supposed protagonist functions as a magnifying lens – although a rather unclear one – to the quirks and catastrophes of a whole set of lightly sketched characters. Ashenden, the undercover agent moving about Europe during First World War, is the only link between these otherwise separate and dissimilar pieces. However, a series of structural and thematic choices alienates this series from the “secret agent” stereotype: Ashenden is not portrayed as a hero, he never engages in adventurous endeavours, and hardly comes through as a fully-fledged character. Incidentally, each short piece focuses on a distinct character – usually somebody Ashenden meets while sojourning in a Swiss hotel, convalescing from TB in a Scottish sanatorium or during a train ride from Vladivostok to Moscow – and the plot circles around Ashenden’s involvement with them. The third-person narrative, therefore, appears deceitfully objective and omniscient: the subtle, but consistent, focalization on Ashenden’s perception and experience radically affects each piece’s structural development and scope. Moreover, the explicitly autobiographical sources of the stories – Maugham worked for British Intelligence all through the 1910s – arguably play a role in determining some main features in this body of work, such as the reticence to supply a full record of information about title characters and a tendency to truncate the narrative without providing a clear ending the moment Ashenden stops being a witness
or admits a limit to his knowledge. Hence, the unreliability of Maugham's narrators supersedes the basic friction between voice and recounted actions, because his narrators do not wink at their audiences: they do whatever they can to conceal the bias in their narratives and the fallacies in their grasps of the events and their implications, and at times they also appear completely unaware of the very process.

On the whole, the effects of Maugham's stylistic choice are various, for example, they confer a sense of unreliability to the narration and contribute to the texts' undercurrent ironic tone, which can occasionally verge towards the openly sarcastic, but seems generally restricted to the subtly farcical. Maugham's narrators, therefore, appear to be accountable for the misunderstandings of extra-textual implications and references, whereas they also foster questions about Maugham's feminism, his alleged aversion towards experimentalism in the arts, and whether readability and popularity of his textual production were really a priority for him. Finally, they contribute to sustain an identifiable staple in Maugham's work, that is, his undercurrent attempt to understand where the creative impulse comes from, how it is narrated and normalised, how people (or rather, characters) react to it and, most interestingly, what they set up to do when they cannot seem to grasp it in any way.
The middlebrow vein in Maugham’s work has a particularly fitting synonym in Vladimir Nabokov’s *poshism*, a concept he introduces in *Lectures on Russian Literature* as “philistinism” (193). The philistine’s need to act as everybody else, while at the same time wishing they were part of an exclusive set, lead them to, in Nabokov’s own words:

[…] belong to a book club and choose beautiful, beautiful books, a jumble of Simone de Beauvoir, Dostoyevsky, Marquand, Somerset Maugham, *Dr Zhivago*, and *Masters of the Renaissance*. (192)

Nabokovian philistinism is exemplified in the “love for the useful” shown by conformist, adult member of society (192), who shape their cultural interests according to mainstream trends, reading classic French novels for instance, and favouring certain media over other, such as magazine subscriptions. Nabokov’s negative judgement of Maugham is consistent. When wishing to disengage his prose from “realism” as a literary genre, he provides a list of the eminent performers of the craft he does not want to be associated with:

Now if you mean by "old reality" the so-called "realism" of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D. H. Lawrence - to take some especially depressing examples - then you are right in suggesting that the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring, and that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. (*Strong Opinions* 116)

Somerset Maugham’s work has, nonetheless, counted up a long-established history of unimpressed reviews and general disregard, starting far before Nabokov’s casual mentioning of his particular poor consideration of Maugham. This chapter will endeavour to provide an overview of the most common views held with regards to Maugham, his career and specific titles of his oeuvre, and try to strike a balance between the encouraging and the negative. It will then proceed on to outline more
recent views on Maugham, with examples from the academia and the general readership alike. However, since even his most adamant supporters seem to have always refrained from openly praising his work, the majority of traditional criticism – consisting mostly of newspaper and magazine reviews than of academic studies – is inevitably concerned with either scorning the author’s lifestyle or explaining how his embedded cynicism is but a cover for intellectual superficiality. The enthusiastic tones, then, are virtually inexistent, but can be inferred from Maugham’s devoted readers’ letters, the enduring popularity of his catalogue in print, as well as from a newly found interest signalled by recent publishing of new biographies and inclusion of his work in university syllabi. My purpose is to chart the existing critical stances and question Maugham’s fickle reputation so as to point out their inevitable influence before moving on to the in-depth, specific analyses of his prose.

1.1. The Critics and the Readers

There are, of course, reviewers who have attempted a reasoned criticism of Maugham’s books. Katherine Mansfield’s 1919 appraisal of The Moon and Sixpence (139-42) is a patent example of the sort of rebuffs Maugham would usually receive: an initial moderate appreciation of his subject matter, or of his keen eye for detail, followed by an unforgiving reproach to, for instance, his articulation of plot (too direct) or his language (too plain). Although on the whole disapproving of the novel, Mansfield carefully details her philosophical response to the development of the novel’s key figure, rebellious artist Charles Strickland. Inspired by Gauguin, the protagonist of the novel is an Englishmen who unexpectedly quits his bourgeois existence, deserts his family and career, and, with no prior training or experience, starts painting artistic works of genius, in Paris first, then in the islands of Martinique. Mansfield claims that the workings of his creative mind are not at all explored or deciphered, despite Maugham’s taking “extraordinary pains in explaining to us that Strickland is no imaginary character” (140). Since The Moon and Sixpence is a work of literature – and arguably one with a visible fictional edge – the paucity of explicit interpretation of Strickland’s odd behaviour and alleged artistic genius is what justifies Mansfield’s rejection:
If Strickland is a real man and this book a sort of guide to his works, it has its value; but if Mr. Maugham is merely pulling our critical leg it will not do. Then we are not told enough. (140)

It looks as if, however, Mansfield presupposes that the stylistic outline of a single novel can sufficiently condense its author’s personal approach to artistic creation. Nevertheless, she touches upon a tendency spotted elsewhere in Maugham’s prose by critics: an apparently listless detachment resulting from his, supposed, screening off of all expected moral and social beliefs. Mansfield assumes her own idea of artistic practice and philosophical credo to be utterly opposed to Maugham’s, whom she appears to scold for confusing “push[ing] over everything that comes one’s way” (142) with art:

   But contempt for life is not to be confused with liberty, nor can the man whose weapon it is to fight a tragic battle or die a tragic death. [...] great artists are not drunken men, they are men who are divinely sober. They know that the moon can never be bought for sixpence, and that liberty is only a profound realization of greatness of doughs in their midst. (142)

Still, not every commentator managed – or attempted – to bestow on Maugham’s work attention and carefulness comparable to Mansfield’s critical keenness, so much so that most literature concerned with Maugham’s critical heritage seems to constantly revert around the profile of a writer who was mocked during his lifetime and overlooked posthumously despite, or because of, his commercial success.

Richard Cordell draws up in his *Biographical and Critical Study* (1961) a chapter-long inventory (207-33) of objections, belittlements, brickbats Maugham had to stomach which, as Cordell quickly remarks, tend to bespeak more a widespread disinterest towards him rather than result into genuine disparagement (207-9). The adjectives which Cordell records as the most frequently used in reviews are “competent”, “readable” (212) and “professional” (224), all of them are, he claims, apparently neutral in tone, but covertly entail a sneering connotation. Maugham’s persistent use of arguably outmoded narrative forms – informative dialogues, the assured presence of a beginning, a development and an end in the story, and an inclination to favour linguistic clarity over virtuosity – allegedly led reviewers to discard
him as “a rewriter of the Victorian novel” (213) and scholars to classify him among the bland, easy “novelists of the centre” (215). Maugham’s trademark indifference to innovation, Cordell reckons, is probably rooted in his conviction that “fiction is no place for propaganda, either political or philosophical” (213). This might also effectively explain what appears, at first sight, to be a deliberate exclusion from his prose of anything directly concerned with the social, historical or economic context of the time, let alone including whimsical ideas drawn out of the imagination (210). Likewise, Maugham’s neat prose style – deemed to be commonplace, lacking in rhythm, unable to summon up a “poetic world” (217) – has been repeatedly interpreted as a direct expression of its authors’ unconditioned cynicism. Cordell records how Maugham’s name is only mentioned in a footnote of a rather majestic history of English literature¹ and soon dismissed because “like all materialists he finds no significance in life” (215). He is similarly despised elsewhere for his “unchivalrous view of women, his lack of lyricism and ecstasy, and his ‘frigid indifference’” (Cordell 215). Although some scholars have rebuffed Maugham’s glaring portrayals of disgraceful human behaviours as “radicalism and realism carried to the nth degree” (qtd. in Cordell 219), others have delved into Maugham’s professed pessimism as a stylistic streak within the prose, instead of considering it a full-fledged philosophical declaration.

The section dedicated to Somerset Maugham in Frank Swinnerton’s The Georgian Literary Scene (1951) opens with an epigraphic quote from Maugham himself. In it, Maugham discusses his awareness of how an effective fruition of the arts needs to acknowledge their differing cultural layers, a process he believes is essential in order to appreciate any creative work, his own included:

> Et in Arcadia vixi: I too have been a highbrow…I could not help noticing that a play produced by the Stage Society did not lead to very much. […] I felt a trifle flat after the production of A Man of Honour. I looked reflectively at the Thames and was conscious that I had not set it on fire. I badly wanted to write plays that would be seen not only by a handful of people. I wanted money and I wanted fame. (208)

In the biographical profile, Swinnerton immediately stresses the fact that Maugham managed his writing activity so well that it coincided with his main source of income as

¹ Cordell hints at Edward Wagenknecht’s Cavalcade of the English Novel (1942).
of the year 1897. However, he quickly passes on to emphasise some overlooked aspects of Maugham’s personality which could have influenced his work. For instance, he praises Maugham’s brevity and pairs it with a “ruthlessness of perception” (209) which he senses it derives from the sharpness of his mind. The intrinsic pessimism other critics deemed inexcusable is here read as an unusual willingness, on Maugham’s behalf, to tackle the displeasing and the unlikeable, and (debatably) the uninteresting as well, as topics of his narratives (212). “The disagreeable” – Swinnerton quotes from Maugham – “has slightly more tang than the agreeable” (212). Furthermore, Swinnerton validates the inclusion of Maugham’s prose within the realm of literary “realism”, but cleverly flips the concept itself in order to redeem Maugham from the theoretical burden of French naturalism: it pertains to realist fiction whatever case can become sensational once disconnected from its repetitive context (210-1). Interesting points are then raised concerning ideas of commonplaceness and frivolity detected in Maugham’s themes and tone:

One cannot imagine Maugham writing a romance. Melodrama is possible to him; the flippant is often upon the tongues of his characters. But besides being vulgar, as Maugham says it is, the life known to all except those who dwell in literary selectness is apt – once it leaves the humdrum – to be slightly sensational. Melodrama is quite proper, therefore, in the work of a realistic writer. But romance calls for a different temperament, a love of coloured raiment and display. It also calls for a little glad self-deception. Now Maugham could not possibly deceive himself with that kind of gladness. (211)

Overviews of Maugham’s early education and his creative routine are used along the main critical line to make a case for Maugham’s alleged filtering of stately style and bookish matter from his prose. Incidentally, Swinnerton reports fact-based material which might be more suited to a biography, rather than to serve as evidence in a critical overview. Swinnerton evokes a young Maugham caught in the act of copying out, in their entirety, texts by Dryden, Taylor and Swift’s A Tale of a Tub, not because of the worth of their content, but as a self-taught method to “learn English” (209). Apparently, this is the training Maugham recommends to the aspiring author: “besides the ease it gives him in writing, an acquaintance with literature is perhaps chiefly useful in helping him to avoid the literary” (209).
As if in an attempt to find the origin of the critical disregard Maugham had to withstand, or at least to spot the reason behind it, John Raymond, in 1954, heads on a quasi-anthropological analysis of British readers’ character:

As a race, we are inclined to take our literary pleasures ungraciously. We respect, even if we do not always take on, the tough assignments – Finnegans Wake, Nightwood, The Anathemata. But for those writers who pack the most readable punches (Trollope, Kipling, Waugh) we too often have high-spirited contempt. (437)

To prove his claim, Raymond highlights how the average highbrow reader perceives as outdated the clarity of intentions associated with a readable, intelligible text, then expands his argument by providing samples of Maugham’s own critical stances towards his contemporaries, which he interprets as scholarly compelling points. Maugham’s ill-concealed discounting of Henry James, his sly fault-finding in E.M. Forster (437) signal, according to Raymond, Maugham’s profound attentiveness the literary trends of his time. However, Raymond appears to struggle to demonstrate that Maugham holds a mastery of his own, let alone proving that he can be considered a creditable peer of his generation’s best spokespersons. As a matter of fact, Raymond is not exempt from the same derogatory practices that critics usually act against Maugham, for example, to thoroughly dissect Maugham’s prose in the light of his financial status and housing situation:

Despite his great gifts, Maugham seems at first sight to lack one quality that is vitally important if he is to survive in the mind of the next generation. His work displays no wound. […] Dickens had his father, Zola his mother-complex, Proust had his asthma (caused, the psychologists tell us, by his hunger for affection), Kafka had his T.B. Mr. Maugham has long enjoyed fame, riches, excellent health and a swimming-pool on the Riviera. (438-9)

Nevertheless, Raymond perceives in Ashenden the turning point in Maugham’s career, specifically, the first occurrence of his emblematic “easy, super-efficient style, the smooth, dexterous craftsmanship, the mellow bachelor philosophy” (439-40). Raymond also touches on this type of stylistic detachment as a defining feature, but treats it as a shortcoming. The intentionally crafted, exterior perspective Maugham
adopts, starting with *Ashenden* onwards, Raymond maintains, is construed as a renunciation to perform active characterization and analysis, it amounts to a willing demarcation between authorial voice and the stories' inhabitants: a "decision to write off life rather than from it" (440). Raymond eventually ascribes to the writing mode of *Ashenden* – a lucky hit and a major input to Maugham's wealth – the automation of Maugham's legendary efficiency and resolution. Tonal detachment and reticence of descriptions therefore appear, in Raymond's reading, as stylistic tools Maugham uses to boost his productivity while simultaneously enhance clarity and strengthen the text's structure. Nevertheless, they do not signal a deliberate philosophical design: a factor Raymond understands to be as meaningful to the plot as characters and incidences are.

The recurring structure reviewers and scholars alike seem to adopt looks like a balanced combination of praises and criticism: caustic remarks are usually sweetened with comparisons to past masters of the genre, whereas direct approbation is frequently tuned down with quibbles about technicalities. Often, the ambiguity of the reviewer's judgment can be such that the foundational opinion, then, needs being stated in unequivocal terms at some point in the text. Appraisals, in most cases, are unlikely to be inferred from the simple reading of the article. H.E. Bates, for example, opens and concludes his Maugham overview in *The Modern Short Story* (1941) in unmistakably disparaging terms, but fills up the space between them with some of the pithiest and most flattering analyses of Maugham's work to be found in analogous criticism. He may concede that Maugham is a "master of cultivated acidity" (422), but quickly enlists the unadorned terseness of his prose in the imaginary syllabus for a "course in commercial-literary craftsmanship" (422). Despite his characteristic bitterness, Maugham's "ironic impatience with the stuffiness of literary and moral conventions" (422) seem to win him a comparison with Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (422), all the more so when considering his achievement with satirical novel *Cakes and Ale*:

Maugham and Butler again and again use this trick of creating ironic effect by disclaiming all trustworthy knowledge of what they are talking about, and by pitching their remarks in a negative key. The effect is delicious; butter won't melt in these acid mouths. (422-3)
Eventually, Bates accomplishes a synthesis between his opposite interpretations: what he believes casts Maugham far from his self-elected masters – Chekhov and Maupassant – is his lack of heart, or rather, his having “a piece of clockwork” (423) in its place. This is the feature that Bates accounts responsible for the “impression of cheapness” (423) his work conveys. Still, he readily assuages the charge with an unexpectedly gentle reminder that Maugham’s cynicism is just a pose, since it:

[...] indeed peels off under too-close examination, thin, extraneous, tinny, revealing underneath a man who is afraid of trusting and finally of revealing his true emotions. (423)

His conclusion is ultimately derogatory: Bates finds Maugham’s work derivative of French naturalist style, which is unfortunately too well-established to allow innovation or improvement. Consequently, Bates is of the opinion that Maugham’s literary influence on their contemporaries and on the posterity alike is nil (424).

Theatre critic Sewell Stokes dulls his chuntering profile of Maugham as dramatist and novelist by quoting an “apocryphal story most often related about Somerset Maugham” (424), which immediately clicks with the ever-present, widely quoted template of Maugham’s self-deprecatory humbleness. Sewell Stokes recalls a thriving Maugham declaring:

Would you rather I wrote books like War and Peace and live in modest comfort – or am I to be allowed to write the popular stuff I do, and by it earn the luxury I enjoy? (425)

Seemingly unwilling to openly criticise Maugham solely on the basis of his relentlessly produced stack of theatrical and literary work, Sewell Stokes cautiously blames its being a profitable product, its openly unoriginal and simple construction as intrinsic limitations that blight the validity of the whole oeuvre. Nevertheless, Maugham had a considerable number of supporters within the British intelligentsia. The relationship between Maugham and Christopher Isherwood, for example, was one of mutual appreciation and endorsement. To Maugham’s claim, in 1938, that the future of the English novel lay in Isherwood’s hand, the latter responded with flattering – yet punctual – analysis of his “Eastern stories”, which he had included in the personally curated collection Great English Short Stories. Isherwood compares Maugham and
Kipling: both expert travellers and connoisseurs of East Asia and the British South-Eastern colonies, both renowned for the inveterate recycling of personal, first-hand experience as material for fiction-writing. In doing so, he highlights what he has identified as Maugham’s fiction’s core points: a pessimism, which, unlike Kipling’s, is reassuring (445). Isherwood’s Maughamian story of choice is “The Book-Bag”, a work whose lengthy narrative frame, an experienced traveller of faraway countries and his characteristic, massive suitcase full of books – a sort of MacGuffin – introduces a reported tale of incest between brother and sister, culminating into the woman’s suicide. For some reason, Isherwood believes it necessary to praise “The Book-Bag”’s “leisurely, autobiographical opening which introduces us to Maugham himself and thereby greatly strengthens the credibility of the whole story” (445). However unimportant as some readers might find the guarantee of trueness provided by the symmetry between character and historical author, one cannot but help appreciate Isherwood’s extremely cautious introduction of critical notions, a rare approach among the mostly assertive, or even raucous, criticism of Maugham that is so common elsewhere. Isherwood’s delicate treatment of the piece resonates with the “reticence” of the short story itself:

[...] such a classic demonstration of how to handle a “shocking” subject – incest – in an absolutely inoffensive manner, yet without sacrificing any of the shock. Notice how the nature of the situation is conveyed entirely by the violence of the reaction to it, not by any description of the situation itself. [...] Maugham does not need to elaborate, there is no other possible explanation. (445)

Isherwood concludes his concise foreword just as neatly, explaining his simple take on the story’s intent: “I find the end of the story deeply moving in its quietness. It beautifully illustrates [...] the quality of giving reassurance” (445). Isherwood carves deeper in Maugham’s apparently brutal stripping down of existential certainties and comes up with a minimal truth in a nutshell: “one survives somehow, and it is, after all, not quite as bad as one might have expected” (446).

Rebecca West, however, when asked during a 1981 interview to talk about Maugham, both in terms of literary persona and private acquaintance, thus sets off:
He couldn’t write for toffee, bless his heart. He wrote conventional short stories, much inferior to the work of other people. But they were much better than his plays, which were too frightful.

She goes on to pay tribute to the man himself, defying his reputation as a cold misanthrope and admittedly giving in to his charm as a caring, friendly person, as well as a good conversationalist and thoughtful host. Oddly enough, West seems to represent the only instance in which Maugham’s physical appearance is not only taken into account, but celebrated in funny terms: “he was so neatly made, like a swordstick that fits just so”. As if moved by the recollection, West concludes her thumbnail description of Maugham with a defensive statement about his legacy: “I object strongly to pictures of Maugham as if he were a second-rate Hollywood producer in the lavish age”. The indulgence West grants Maugham, however, clearly reads as a projection in hindsight. Sixty years before, West’s condescending opinion of Maugham’s work had found its full expression in her 1921 review of the collection *The Trembling of a Leaf*. In it, West starts off with an acute reflection about the power an epigraph bestows upon the reading of the work it heads. She finds Saint-Beuve’s metaphor for the difference between bliss and despair – a “trembling leaf” – too simplistic a reference and, moreover, one that inevitably suggests “a certain cheap and tiresome attitude towards life, which nearly mars these technically admirable stories” (153). West finds Maugham crucially wanting of a philosophical standpoint, an inconvenience which, West argues, Maugham has resolved by “stuffing” his pieces with cynicism. Referring specifically to short stories “The Fall of Edward Barnard” and “Red”, West claims:

> Mr. Maugham is, in fact, just as cynical at the expense of the hibiscus ideal; and the philosophy of the two stories cancels out and leaves an impression of nothingness.

(154)

Yet her judgement is not altogether negative: “Mackintosh”, and “Rain” especially, are appraised as remarkable works. Through the two stories’ startlingly disrupting endings,

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2 West is here referencing back to her definition of Edward Barnard’s lifestyle in the ironically eponymous “The Fall of Edward Barnard”. The short story deals with the disappearance of the heir to a wealthy family in Chicago, who is eventually discovered by his cousin to be living humbly and with no ambition in a Hawaiian isle – hence the “hibiscus ideal” – firmly refusing any capital-propelled system of values.
Maugham accomplishes a considerable level of characterial exposure, and finally causes his readership to feel a peculiar kind of unpreparedness.

It now appears evident that the sort of criticism Maugham could be expected to have come across during his lifetime is not at all eulogistic: even the best commentaries seem to give way to a sort of half-hearted approval, while the prevailing opinions apparently mingle their lack of enthusiasm with somewhat sneering tones. Some of these commentaries also seem to be built on the assumption that Maugham himself held a disenchanted opinion of his own work: the alleged affirmation that his work is "second-rate" often reappears in various forms. Blackburn and Arsov trace the history of what appears to be a fatally misattributed quote from Maugham. Originating in reviews published in the 1940s, the “second-rate status” sneaked into later academic criticism as “a spurious admission of mediocrity […] used to diminish the author’s literary legacy” (Blackburn and Arsov 148). After having perused the totality of Maugham’s autobiographical essays, personal writing and literary criticism, they state no such self-derogatory statement ever appears (142), at least, not with the negative implications Maugham seemed to bestow to the expression “second-rate”: a synonym for “cheap”, “mediocre” and “inferior” (144-5). Although Maugham was aware of the modest scope of his prose – Blackburn and Arsov incidentally quote from The Summing Up: “I have painted easel pictures, not frescoes” (143) – it appears inexcusable to exploit an alleged self-deprecating remark from the writer himself to assuage snarky criticism. Maugham’s “legendary” awareness of his own limits as a writer, however, also evokes underscoring themes of profitability, productivity and the open-ended dichotomy between art and business. Notoriously, he has continuously generated a diverse array of largely positive reactions from the general public; his success hence appears as a conspicuous variable, which alone distinguishes him from most of the other members of early twentieth century British writing scene, and, obviously, overlaps with his books’ commercial profitability. As anticipated by the sarcastic allusions that sprinkle the reviews I have selected, the impressive sums Maugham earned from the staging of his numerous plays in London, reprints and translations of his books, licensing of film and, later on, television rights, provided fully as his family’s primary income. Furthermore, his writing also paid for a comfortable Provençal mansion-house – Villa Mauresque, on Cap-Ferrat peninsula near Nice – and, most importantly, allowed him to travel the world at leisure. Given the widespread availability of Maugham-branded material (distributed worldwide, translated in many
languages and almost uninterruptedly in print) a whole marginal universe of unsourced, apocryphal and generally colourful feedback has accompanied the more serious reviews and academic dissertations.

The following fan-letter, sourced by Richard Cordell, crystallises the fundamental tension at the heart of Maugham’s fragmentary process of validation and understanding:

Dear Mr. Maugham,
I have read nearly all your books and I have liked them, but my daddy says I am only wasting my time because they are only a potboiler and will be forgotten as soon as you are dead. Are you a potboiler?

Yours affectionately,
Rosemary.

(Biographical and Critical Study 211-2)

Cordell also provides a summary of Maugham’s acute answer to the young reader, which ostensibly resolves the contradiction between art and business that oppresses popular writers, and their reviewers particularly: Maugham states he has always written the books that he wanted to write, free from the pressure of external obligations and always trying to convey in their writing the best of his artistic abilities (212). Moreover, it is especially interesting to note how Maugham’s fame has survived, and thrived, elsewhere than Britain, especially in countries that shared dramatically different worldviews from post-war Europe’s. The former USSR was home to – and, to some degree, modern-day Russia still is – a large cultism of Maughamiana. Aleksandr Paskhover chronicles how, throughout the 1960s and 70s, Soviet publishing industry thrived under governmental aegis, receiving a great push also from the increased levels of literacy in the post-war generation and the improvement of the network of public libraries and bookshops throughout the country. The state-controlled range of available titles, however, did not satisfy the widespread hunger for international works in translation. Besides obvious ideological restraints, an endemic shortage of paper prevented the USSR from accommodating popular requests. Starting in 1974, central authorities permitted printing and selling of highly popular, but virtually unobtainable books, but only allowed their distribution through a highly organised system: by means
of a personal “subscription card” to be handed in exchange for wastepaper destined to recycling. Paskhover quotes from several people’s personal recollections of the time, and evokes lengthy queues outside of specialised pavilions followed by the submission of an amount of surplus paper not inferior to five kilos. Such offerings would result into the right to purchase works by well-liked foreign authors, such as Alexandre Dumas’ *La Reine Margot* or *The Three Musketeers*, Willkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* and, of course, William Somerset Maugham’s many novels. While heavy full sets of Lenin’s *Complete Works* and Gorky’s whole oeuvre were being handed in, only worth the vegetable fibre they were printed on, Paskhover ultimately points outs that a flourishing black market also contributed to the capillary expansion of Maugham’s fame in the Slavonic world.

The very Jorge Luis Borges takes Maugham into account, although only at a minor point of criticism: he specifically mentions Maugham in the seventh lecture of his *Curso de literatura inglesa en la Universidad de Buenos Aires*. Maugham serves as an example for Borges’ assertion that the English language, despite being extremely simple in its grammar, has a very tricky pronunciation system, especially when it comes to utter famous people’s names out loud. When Somerset Maugham came to fame as a writer, Borges claims, his readership would pronounce it “Moguem”, since they had no way to know its pronunciation (87). However, quibbles over correct pronunciation evidently did not stop Maugham from nurturing a public persona for himself in addition to the writerly portrait made up by the press. It is key to point out how Maugham’s reputation has gradually been shaped by the publishing industry as well as readers. In 1955, following a condescending review about Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* in which Maugham grudgingly described – with reference to Amis’ protagonist – the increasing number of university students as “white-collar proletariat”, the *New Statesman and Nation* announced a contest for readers to answer back at Maugham in the voice of Jim Dixon (Lorentzen). Irony of fate, the same year Amis was the recipient, and for *Lucky Jim* of all novels, of the Somerset Maugham Award, the prize Maugham had established in 1947, through the Society of Authors, to provide for young British writer’s mobility abroad.

Maugham has certainly left an imprint in literary culture, although it is difficult to trace the full extent of his legacy, partly because of the shallowness of the scholarly work available, and partly because of the marginal reputation his oeuvre still retains. The great number of filmic adaptations of novels and short stories alike, however,
bespeaks the persisting appeal of Maughamian material, and proves the ongoing framing of Maugham’s prose as an engaging cultural product. However, there is also a burgeoning interest for Maugham’s persona: the hunt for real-life occurrences dramatized in Maugham’s work has also given way to a hybrid form of literary criticism that combines the extensive memoirs Maugham wrote at the end of his career as an analytic tools to understand the clues scattered in his fiction. Recent biographies such as Jeffrey Meyers’ *Somerset Maugham: A Life* (2005) and Selina Hastings’ *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* (2010) suggest fact-based interpretations of literary occurrences together with a prominently traditional approach to biography: overall, their assessment of the subject seems to indicate a renewed and growing interest for Maugham’s life and work, at least in the English-speaking countries.

1.2. Current Appreciation

Somerset Maugham’s London residence at number 6 Chesterfield Street, in Mayfair, is an austere Georgian apartment building of red bricks, now rearranged as an upmarket hotel. A blue plaque on its front wall commemorates the years spent there by the “novelist and playwright”: 1911 to 1919, a timespan overlapping the growth of his commercial fame – *Of Human Bondage* was published in 1915 – and the beginning, in 1917, of his unhappy, decade-long marriage with fashionable interior decorator Syrie Wellcome, née Barnardo. The insignificance of the blue spot on the building is unlikely to appeal to the casual passer-by. Also, the overload of security cameras peeping from every corner adds to the sense of unease that leaks from the neighbouring Middle Eastern embassies besieged by protesters, and even more from the series of industrious-looking private banks and hedge-funding firms that dot the cityscape enclosed between Bond Street and Hyde Park. Indeed, looking for relics from a former era of social stylishness and unquestioned richness in Central London does not account for urbanistic curiosity any more than it does for a scholarly research. Traces of Maughamian literary authenticity seems to be nowhere to be found in modern-day England, and Mayfair obviously comes out as the wrong place to turn to in order to get a sense of Maugham’s writerly intent and context.

Nonetheless, interest in biographical research acquires a particular weight in Maugham criticism, given the patent coherence between fictional facts and
documented episodes from Maugham’s life. Ruth Franklin’s New Yorker piece is at once a review of Selina Hastings’ 2010 biography The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham and an introductory overview of the British writer’s major novelistic work for the use of an unaccustomed American public. Franklin draws heavily from personal events recounted by Hastings’ to establish a map of the themes and objectives a reader can expect to find in Maugham’s novel. The piece centres on ideas of artistic value and popularity and, more specifically, on how to classify Maugham’s editorial parabola and legacy. Franklin questions the notion that true art must always be original and visionary, rather she retorts that prioritizing the account of trueness in art can be just as important as innovating it. Still, she constantly links novel plots to the Maughamian track record: she draws a comparison between Of Human Bondage’s Philip Carey’s clubfoot to Maugham’s own debilitating stammer. Franklin then implies a self-referential basis behind The Moon and Sixpence’s Dirk Stroeve’s awareness of his own lack of tantalizing artistic drive, a feature she recognises as crucial in leading the character to understand his intellectual output mainly as a chosen, patient practice. Franklin also adjusts the label of “realist” so often attached to Maugham. By taking notice of Maugham’s gift for acute social observation, his awareness of public’s tastes and desires, and his keenness on reemploying first-hand material in his prose; she specifies how much of his work depended on common people’s stories, and states that such an extreme amplification of the real often risked being perceived as slander. Most importantly, Franklin also remarks how the aforementioned feature’s immediate outcome is the development of “insufficient”, rather than unreliable, narratorial figures: intradiegetic voices overwhelmed by their narrative endeavour, who readily decline imposing an objective vision upon the facts they are about to recount. The self-named “Somerset Maugham” narrator in late novel The Razor’s Edge, Franklin argues, is no exception: the desire driving protagonist Larry Darrell to embark on a quest for knowledge in order to build up his freedom remains, in the end, just as baffling and mysterious to the narrative voice, and through him to readers alike, despite the novel’s initial claim of sheer realness.

Present day academia persists in reluctantly acknowledging Maugham’s significance as author and historical profile. Jeremy Treglown’s recorded lecture for the undergraduate module “Literature in the Modern World” at University of Warwick is self-conscious about the unwontedness of inserting Maugham as required reading in university syllabi. During his talk Treglown goes through the customary stylistic and
thematic overview of the assigned author using short story “The Coronel’s Lady” as example. He points out how the piece, although maintaining a simple and traditionally structured layout, still manages to engage with experimentalism in the arts, double standards in a misogynistic society and the idea of women as full-fledged artists, as well as sentient individuals. Treglown, however, seems to be more concerned with questions of critical relevancy and cultural selection of a canon than solely with Maugham’s work. He acknowledges, with a quote by George Orwell, that “when one says that a writer is fashionable one practically always means that he is admired by people under thirty” (16:46 – 16:52): despite the poor reputation Maugham suffers in the academic scene, the majority of his oeuvre is still in print, many titles available as mass-market paperbacks (15:48 – 15:56). Throughout his lecture Treglown quotes largely from George Orwell’s essay Inside the Whale: he reclaims the idea of “survival as a critical criterion”, a wide concept whose scope does not only include the standardized reading of fictional works, “not simply a matter of what is highly regarded in the literary world, or what is or isn’t on any other university syllabus, or the subject of an academic book” (16:23 – 16:36). For instance, Treglown quotes directly from an e-mail he received from a departmental peer, appalled by the presence of Of Human Bondage on the first-year module’s syllabus. The colleague’s email is used as a genuine testimony of how Maugham is not only not read, but “openly disliked and actively though to be bad” (17:50 – 21:24). However, the arguments raised therein, for example, that Maugham’s stance is snobbish and misogynistic, are treated as solid cases for analysis. Still, the core of Treglown’s speech is in the question “why did Maugham’s work fall out of fashion?”, though which he intends to warn his students against the dangers of inherited evaluation. Treglown argues that contemporary neglect is mainly ascribable, first, to the impact of the propaganda put out by the British Modernists3 and, second, to the steady trends in the academic writing that moulded the following generation of Oxbridge educated critics’ unanimous focus on Modernism, to the detriment of alternative facets of the same literary scene (38:00 – 45:36). To prove his case, he takes into account the deep-seated implication that academic readings of works of literature are de facto the most authoritative ones, and refers, as example, to the powerful recovery of obscure literature attained by certain figures, such

3 Treglown mentions as examples Virginia Woolf’s essay “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” and E.M. Forster’s Aspects of the Novel.
as what T.S. Eliot did for the metaphysical poets (47:12 – 47:26). To further prove his point about the culture-shaping power academia enjoys, Treglown’s finally reveals that the same students who are currently taking notes at his lecture will indeed have a say in the matter, in fact, if they will judge Of Human Bondage unfit for the course, it will be taken out the syllabus (46:48 – 46:56). It therefore appears clear that Maugham as compulsory or recommended university reading is an experiment, and implies that Maugham is an author whose precarious position Woolf and Joyce, for instance, certainly do not share.

The critical landscape I had to come to terms with is, overall, rather homogeneous in its few stances. The main points against Maugham all seem to revert around the simplicity of his style, his unimaginative plots, the superficial depiction of characters, his tendency to truncate the exploration of the consequences his stories bring up. There also seems to be a widespread tendency to quote Maugham’s own understated appraisals of his own work to support negative evaluations. Even contemporary criticism seems to still bear the influence of the earliest unimpressed reviews, so much so that the attempts to re-assess Maugham’s role in building twentieth century British literature have a certain reticent quality, and seem to reason in rather skeptical terms. Certainly the next two chapters owe credit to the conventional interpretations of Maugham’s fiction, but I will attempt to be as detailed as possible in my analyses so as to avoid a prejudiced reading of the texts I determine to examine.
2. The *Ashenden* Stories

The late summer of 1915 saw Somerset Maugham moving from Italy to Switzerland with his family, his wife Syrie and newly born daughter Liza: he had recently been recruited by British Intelligence to work as a secret agent. Maugham’s fluency in French and German, as well as the perfect cover provided by living with his young family, allowed him to work expeditiously (Meyers 113-4). Maugham would later reclaim this experience as the subject for a series of short stories which would be collected under the name of their shared protagonist, Maugham’s alter ego, British secret agent Ashenden. However, a decade passed before the stories were put to paper: on his return in 1926 from extensive voyages in South East Asia, China and the Pacific Islands, Maugham moved to his recently acquired property on the Côte d’Azur, Villa Mauresque, where the first work he completed was in fact *Ashenden; or the British Agent* (Whitehead 138). “As would be expected” writes Richard Cordell “his principal interest is the observation of people under the peculiar stresses of war” (157).

References to First World War are scattered throughout all the *Ashenden* texts, but are never specifically exploited as narrative hallmarks. Because of the ambiguity they are treated with, historical references seem to provide a tonal quality to the stories, rather than a political subtext. Maugham’s understated factual allusions to nations at war and the lives of people caught in the conflict appear, more likely, to help single short stories reach a deeper effectiveness as metafictional tools and samples of human elusiveness, rather than operate as plain testimony. However, *Ashenden’s* minimal background, seemingly plain so as to allow cryptic personalities to better stand out (by enhancing their contrast), is appropriately non-neutral. Therefore, it is arguably the suspension of social and political norms – few scenarios look more apt than a raging war to trigger potentially extraordinary behaviours – that makes up the conceptual basis of the collection: these are stories, it is implied, that could never have happened in times of peace.

John Whitehead sets *Ashenden* among the earliest examples of the novelistic genre of spy fiction, but also argues that “the book makes as valid a contribution to the
literature of the Great War as Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*” (143-4). Likewise, Jeanne Bedell accords to *Ashenden* a significant role in the early development of the genre. She further links Maugham’s attempt to show readers the ludicrous nonsense of conventional spy stories to modern “internal repudiation of the genre” (44-5), a tendency Bedell detects in contemporary spy story writing, characterized by the rejection of Fleming-like implausibility in novels’ subject matter (44). *Ashenden* could be readily placed among other canonical works of First World War fiction, but, Richard Cordell argues, its realism is unlike any other, since it is not in the least concerned with upholding pacifism or suggesting jingoistic notions to the detriment of Britain’s enemies (157-8). Cordell then claims:

Why did Goebbels find this book so objectionable that because of it he singles out Maugham for arrest and punishment in 1940? As a matter of fact *Ashenden* is so unconcerned with political and national prejudices that it could very well annoy flag-waving patriots and pacifists who would emphasise the horror and absurdity of war. (158)

Together with *Ashenden*’s narrative pace, critics agree in emphasising the eponymous character’s presence in the text: through Maugham’s “unobtrusive blending of humour and melodrama” (Whitehead 143) and “linking the courageous with the trivial” (Bedell 45). *Ashenden* comes through as a highly verisimilar character who is fully aware of his limitations and failures, an individual who eschews any theme or detail that has become hackneyed, and who is constantly treating the tragic as a farcical matter (Cordell 156-7). The patent biographical link existing between Ashenden and its creator – William Somerset Maugham – mark the narrative tension accountable for the short stories’ characteristic style: a formal omniscience of the narratorial voice which happens to be constantly mined by a frequent and exclusive focus on the protagonist.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to analyse Maugham’s treatment of the concepts “protagonist”, “narrator” and “character”, taking as case studies two stories from the collection: the opening one, “Miss King” and the central one, “Giulia Lazzari”. The vocabulary French critic Gérard Genette uses, specifically in the “Voice” and “Mode” sections from *Figures III*, will serve as major critical basis for my argument. Genette categorises variations of voice – who tells the story and from which perspective – into two types: extra-diegetic and intra-diegetic narrators, the latter type
further splitting in hetero-diegetic and homo-diegetic narrator (233-42). The ensuing discussion will build on the tension between the extra-diegetic setup, the homo-diegetic slant in *Ashenden*, and the unavoidable traces of the work’s non-fiction background, given that Maugham overtly acknowledges it in the introduction and later pursues the issue within the narrative by inserting evidently biographical hints. I will finally argue that it is the exclusive form of internal focalization used throughout the narrative that makes up the major distinctive trait of the work.

2.1. Maugham’s Declaration of Intents

Maugham’s own arrangement of the impressive bulk of his short stories stands out for its accuracy. Each of the neat prefaces threaded into the many different editions of his short story collections tells his eagerness to put the reader at ease, mainly by supplying a whole set of information concerning his praxis and intention. Maugham frequently alludes to the multiplicity of published variations of the same text, whether it is a detail in the preface or a structural change in a piece of fiction. Volume 3 of the *Collected Short Stories*, in effect, carries an abridged version of earlier, more assertive introductions (7). In it, Maugham’s usual concern for story length and the order the pieces of writing are placed in is overshadowed by a more urgent editorial requirement, transparency of subject matter:

[…] I wrote a batch of stories dealing with the adventures of an agent in the Intelligence Department during the First World War. I gave him the name of Ashenden. Since they are connected by this character of my invention I have thought it well, notwithstanding their great length, to put them all together. (7)

The publishing history of this group of works, starting with the 1928 Heinemann edition, develops as a collection of short stories grouped under the umbrella title *Ashenden; or the British Agent*. The body of work, however, has changed throughout the years, seeing the addition of a preface in the Heinemann *Collected Works of W. Somerset Maugham* 1934 edition, which was later expanded into the 1941 US Doubleday edition. Successive numerous replications of the collection testify to its popularity: “first published in 1928, this volume was reprinted twice each in 1928 and 1929, once each
in 1931, 1934, 1938, twice again in 1948 and 1951, once in 1950 and in 1956 [...]” (Einhaus 123). The Doubleday version eventually became the text used in contemporary mass-market paperback editions⁴, yet there exist examples of further reductions of the introductory text.

The rewriting of a preface, however, does not appear as striking as the deceptively seamless merging of the original sixteen titles into seven longer novellas. Notwithstanding numerous editorial interventions, the core of the Ashenden cycle has been preserved as a disjointed juxtaposition of independent texts which happen to share the same main character. Most interestingly, a piece of work that could easily pass as a novel has crystallised, over the years, to be identified with a series of episodes, often anthologised separately or without regards to their tenuous chronological links. A mere lack of an overarching plot, however, may not suffice to explain what it is about Ashenden; or the British Agent that fails to create a novelistic flow. This stalemate is hinted at within the very narration. Sometime after his interview with R. (10), the reader finds Ashenden based in Geneva, already familiar with his undercover profession. A schematic résumé of a forthcoming, hazardous action, told by an Indian collaborator (12), complies with the genre’s expectancy mode and prompts Ashenden’s own action. However, it soon turns out that Ashenden’s part in the plan accounts to nothing more than an ordinary ferry-boat trip to France and back, along with a brief informative interview with a supervisor (12-3). The unexciting situation launches a tongue-in-cheek comparison between facts as they happen in real life and facts as rendered in literature. On the one hand, Maugham could be, in fact, sarcastically self-deprecating his own work, as if he were anticipating reviewers’ discontent with its “ambiguity” (Shanks 175). On the other, Maugham could, arguably, be attempting to channel his own dissatisfaction with highbrow efforts to translate into prose the blind alleys that make up the experience of reality. Very early in the text, Ashenden declares being aware that his own work as spy would have a paltry influence on the development of larger interests, he is but “a rivet in a vast and complicated machine” (13). He then goes on to compare the state of forced ignorance his position entails to a work of experimental fiction:

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⁴ Such as the Vintage Classics paperback (2000). For the purpose of this research, the Penguin edition has been chosen as reference text. “Sanatorium” concludes the Penguin volume, conversely to the Vintage edition, whose concluding piece is “Mr. Harrington's Washing.”
He was concerned with the beginning or the end of it, perhaps, or with some incident in the middle, but what his own doings led to he had seldom a chance of discovering. It was as unsatisfactory as those modern novels that give you a number of unrelated episodes and expect you by piecing them together to construct in your mind a connected narrative (13).

This narrative pause can be read simultaneously as an omniscient narrator's commentary and as a free-indirect style peek at Ashenden’s thoughts as he is walking home, hence a continuation of the narrative. Considering how accentuated the autobiographic basis of the work is, readers might be tempted to, or even tricked into blending the three figures involved: the Ashenden character, the omniscient narrating voice and Maugham, the flesh-and-blood writer. In addition to the preface’s declaration of intents, this narrative pause – together with the literary simile it entails – further clarifies the work’s purpose and limitations, as if to try and prevent flawed readings and, in all likelihood, disappointed expectations on the side of readers and reviewers alike.

Maugham’s preface, which, as previously discussed, focuses on its author’s personal blend of authenticity and invention, might look like an attempt to shield the “ingenious patterns” he has struggled to shape life’s “raw material” into (Vintage vii) from the buzzing of literary critics and nosy biographers. Given that these stories’ “popularity may partly be explained by their claim to authenticity, as well as the popular appeal of their author” (Einhaus 123), his directness in stating “I have written this [preface] in order to impress upon the reader that this book is a work of fiction” (Vintage viii) is too recurrent a self-reflective critical device not to be noticed. However, Maugham’s urgency in pointing out the rearrangement of the real-life experiences in his fiction seems to work against the book’s promise of authenticity, a claim that is likely to have a highly marketable appeal were it to appear on the book’s dustjacket. Arguably, this paradox could be symptomatic of an impairment in the nature or in the reception of the genre: since it is felt convenient, or even necessary, that a short story should be accompanied by an explicit confirmation of its artificiality, the genre might then appear to have lost its conventional capability. Whether the reason is to be looked for among literate, but inadequately educated masses craving for escapist tales of adventure, or else, in the need – especially felt by Maugham – to set up precautions
for the stories’ rather sensitive content, appears of no secondary importance to a critical evaluation of the work.

Peer reviewers would not overlook such literary double-cross; Edward Shanks, for instance, in his May 1928 *London Mercury* review, compares Maugham to:

The old division between jokes that are true and jokes which would be funny anyway. Much of his book would not be interesting if it had been invented. [...] But there is about the whole surprising work an atmosphere of truth and it is not hard to see that it was necessary, as well as convenient, to present it in the guise of fiction. (175-6)

Maugham’s self-supplied frame of reference concerning the purpose and form of his fiction writing is evident enough so that a much too eager scholar or an inexperienced reader alike should be warned off-hand against the interpretative pitfalls of the so-called “literary authenticity”. A work such as *Ashenden* shuns any deliberate appraisal of the stories as mere non-fiction pieces, inasmuch as it disables a biographic research approach by openly indicating the connections that biography lays upon fiction. As Maugham half-humorously admits in his Preface:

Fact is a poor storyteller. It starts a story at haphazard, generally long before the beginning, rambles of inconsequently and tails off, leaving loose ends hanging about, without conclusion. (Vintage ii)

Still, Maugham evidently takes full advantage of the reliability his material validates to draw (commercial) readership’s attention upon it. However, a purposeful recourse to historicity and accountability may combine so as to heighten the potential of single short stories: once the context has been verified, content is necessarily given prominence to. Nevertheless, what is yet left to define is whether there subsists a margin for interpretation and critical analysis of such graphic, concise writings.

In his 1946 paper, W.O. Ross describes Maugham as a “sheep in wolf’s clothing” (122). The essay appears very apt to pinpoint how Maugham’s commercial success, as well as its pursuit, directed the evolution of his prose (113; 115), implying that the quest for visibility irretrievably marred Maugham’s intellectual scope (121-2). The author finds fault with Maugham’s alleged tendency to repeat themes and character types in his work – particularly in the body of short stories – so often that it becomes
possible to detect a pattern. Apparently such a taxonomic approach reveals unforgivable flatness: the brevity of the short story form, Ross argues, cannot redeem the superficiality of the psychological situations supplied, plus, Maugham allegedly aggravates it by insisting in presenting a customary plot-line, complete with climax and denouement (119-20). Ross eventually asserts that Maugham does not exercise insight and, consequently, never provides an interpretation or an explanation for his character’s behaviours (121). Ross concludes that, despite Maugham’s so-called “reporting style”:

The interpretation of life which he offers is abstracted from unaccountable, or unaccounted-for, patterns of behaviour. His vision does not extend far beyond his formula. (121)

Although partial to a specific representation of early twentieth century British literary panorama, fitting with the academic trends of the period, Ross certainly touches on some of the most prototypical Maughamian devices. For example, he remarks upon the omission of structural elements, which he associates with reticence and lack of analytic depth. Also, he notices Maugham’s recurring employment of the surprise factor in the plot, with staggering effects that backlash against the whole narration, and, most importantly, Ross highlights Maugham’s restraint from interpretation and self-imposed limitation to reporting the substance of the story.

The Ashenden collection hence makes a pertinent case of Maugham’s anodyne reporting style. As previously argued, the sheer overlapping of Ashenden’s and Maugham’s lives, which the latter acknowledges, but tries to subdue by means of the aforementioned solutions – preface, historical overview, direct assertion of fictionality – lies at the heart of the whole collection’s distinguishing timbre and narrative style. In the inaugural “Miss King”, Ashenden is introduced merely as observer and reporter of what he sees happening, while simultaneously proving how little he is directly engaged in the action. The piece “Giulia Lazzari” conversely makes up the apex of Ashenden’s emotional and physical involvement in the development of the story, which comes across as a close mapping of Ashenden’s struggle to keep his emotions in check and act cool-headedly to work out a solution. On the opposite end is “Sanatorium”, a story in which Ashenden gets almost completely absorbed into the background. Although “Sanatorium” will not be treated in the present research, it is important to point out how
in the last instalment the leading character is significantly deprived of any narratorial influence, but constrained within an extremely reduced space for action compared to other characters’ conspicuous presence. The following sections will then focus on arguably two of the best examples of Maugham particular use of narrative techniques: the collection’s opening piece “Miss King” and its core piece “Giulia Lazzari”.

2.2. “Miss King”: the “Uneventful” Spy Story

Inaugural short story “Miss King” builds around a virtually non-existent plot, a feature that arguably grants characters a better visibility. “Miss King” might read as an enquiry into the ways characterial descriptions and focalization comply, or do not, with the story’s opted for omniscient mode of narration. Ashenden is its unfocussed protagonist whose assay of war-time human quirks and universal existential duskiness binds together a compendium of stances concerning literariness, fictionality and writing, all of which appear more likely to serve as reflection tools rather than entertaining features. Ashenden's primary profession, writer (9), is promptly singled out as his fundamental feature as a character. In fact, throughout this story and continuing on in the following ones, very little is disclosed of Ashenden, his given name included, while secondary characters are gradually found to enjoy detailed physical descriptions and indirect-free styled accounts of their personality and drives.

The first scene – a sort of preamble titled “R.” in the Vintage edition – briefly mentions the starting point of Ashenden's career as a spy, a chance encounter with a colonel working for the Intelligence Department, thus fulfilling an obligation of plausibility towards readers. Notions of time and space, as well as hints to a social context, whose absence could prejudice the claim of authenticity the text largely relies on, are speedily dealt with in the first sentence: “It was not till the beginning of September that Ashenden, a writer by profession, who had been abroad at the outbreak of the war, managed to get back to England” (9). This digression thus resonates with Maugham’s acknowledgement of the collection’s non-fictional background and therefore presents it as the basic premise of the work. However, the very same section is assembled so as to maintain specific significance even if separated from the context of the collection. Maugham obtains this effect by inserting a metadiegetic narration within the reduced space of the story. Wishing to persuade
Ashenden to accept the position as secret agent, R. speculates over the opportunity to find inspiration for his fiction amid the plethora of bold incidents that would certainly come to make up his life as a spy. In order to further captivate Ashenden, R. starts relating a rather gossipy tale about a French minister whose latest blonde conquest narcotised him so that she could steal a number of top-secret documents. R.’s second-level tale, uttered so as to modify the diegetic situation (Genette 279-80) – namely to provide Ashenden with ready-made plot for a story – actually triggers a remark about the unfillable gap between life and its dramatized versions:

“Do you mean to say that happened the other day?”
“The week before last.”
“Impossible,” cried Ashenden. “Why, we’ve been putting that incident on the stage for sixty years, we’ve written it in a thousand novels. Do you mean to say that life has only just caught up with us?” (10)

Genette’s analysis of meta-narrations focuses on the kind of link occurring between the main narrative and the secondary, framed one: the metadiegetic passage either has an explicative function, it supplies necessary information, or a thematic one, whenever the juxtaposition is based on analogy or contrast (279-81). It is in fact a “thematic relation” (Genette 280) that which unites the primary and the framed narration in “R.”, and which originates a template Maugham employs constantly, throughout Ashenden as well as in other short stories: real-life distance preserved in fiction, not overcome by means of literary devices. Since the narratorial focus is almost exclusively fixed on Ashenden’s (or the main character’s) recollections and narration of factual, key events is then often entrusted to secondary characters themselves, by means of devices such as reported speech or the analogic, metadiegetic tale. The only concession to a quasi-filmic mode is the use of narrative voice-over, which is employed to describe bodily appearances, the environment and also to sketch outward, objective portrayals of characters.

In “Miss King”, the story’s eponymous character exists merely in external, slightly mocking descriptions and is mainly shown in the act of refusing to come into contact with the protagonist and narrative focus, Ashenden. A short synopsis of the story could run as this: a professional writer turned secret agent works undercover in
Switzerland. He dispatches sensible pieces of information to his superior and sometimes may have to face unpleasant interviews with policemen. He lives in a hotel together with a colourful cast of expats. He befriends some of them and tries to ascertain whether they are spies and what is the nature of their interest in the ongoing European war. The only person who openly avoids him is a certain Miss King, an elderly governess, who, however, has the very Ashenden summoned one night to her deathbed. There, just before dying, she fails to tell him a, presumably, important message, but for a word, “England”. The elderly, ill-treated English chaperone to the garish Arab princesses, who only speaks French – “but with an English accent” (30) – and eschews company, responds to Ashenden’s niceties “not merely with frigidity, but with churlishness” (29). Her extreme timidity, which to some could appear as leaning towards impoliteness, or even unsociability, is refuted by her questionable taste in selecting outfits and poor make-up skills. The formidable mix of gaudiness and cheapness in her appearance makes up the majority of the information readers are supplied about Miss King. References to her cheap wig, for example, bounce off in key moments of the story: between her physical descriptions (30) and Ashenden’s entrance in her hotel room (36). Nevertheless, the fact that the piece is named after her is, perhaps, the only feature that prevents readers’ attention from lingering towards more colourful characters during the long-take dining room scene (27-31). Baroness de Higgins, Prince Ali, his daughters and secretary, Count von Holzminden and the rest of the picturesque cast all appear more likely to guarantee ingenious adventure and genuine entertainment if the story were to polarise on any of them, if only for the ridiculous clichés their names suggest.

Maugham does not discard seemingly functional scenes, such as the game of cards Ashenden is invited to join by the Baroness, but rather, he consciously employs them as pretexts. Such scenes, although they represent a tangible structure, have little importance, if any at all, in supporting the whole textual architecture and its overall meaning.

The game played was now contract, with which he was not very familiar, and the stakes were high; but the game was obviously a pretext and Ashenden had no notion what other game was being played under the rose. (32)
The trite metaphor of the table game, a materialisation the ambiguous strategies going on among the players, merely serves to show, within the story’s diegesis, Ashenden’s paranoia. If “Miss King” were to be considered as the opening chapter of a series, then the scene could function as an indicator of the regular presence of such state of mind for a spy. Other than that, the significance provided by the section scarcely applies to the factual consequences in the story, but it highlights Ashenden’s professional and existential concern for “transparency” in real-life and in fictional narrations. Cards, as well as the secret agent profession and playwriting, are simultaneously treated in Maugham’s work as validation and concealment of other activities, to the extent that the separation and the hierarchy between the analogies seem to fade. Is the card game really a surrogate for political plotting? Are the Baroness and the Prince really spies? If they were, how willing would they be to carry on with their secret duties well after dinner time?

Ashenden was sick of the people who saw spies in every inoffensive passer-by and plots in the most innocent combination of circumstances. (42)

“Miss King” warns readers against potentially biased appraisals induced by rough bookshop-like labelling: Maugham’s so-called “spy fiction” does not necessarily involve a profusion of cliff-hangers and dazzling dark ladies. Despite resisting interpretation, Maugham’s prose requires more consideration that a literal reading seems apt to concede. The forced consequentiality between separate sections within “Miss King” may bring about issues concerning the reliability of the narrator: the reader is induced to measure the relevancy of single elements and question the transparency of the actions depicted in the scenes, and to sound out how their truthfulness can be told or their deceptiveness detected.

In the case of Miss King, the aforementioned readerly process of evaluation is surely not encouraged by her position and conduct. After a couple variations on Miss King’s grotesqueness and unsocial manners towards the affable Ashenden, she is made to vanish. Next time readers are allowed a glimpse of her, is when she finally finds herself in the position to act and utter her expression. But, ironically, the moment of full focus corresponds with the scene in which Miss King is bound to die, immobile in her deathbed, her speaking faculties critically compromised. As readers watch Ashenden affecting apprehension for the elderly woman, putting into practice
everything his good manners allow to soothe his embarrassment and perplexity at the ongoing incident, they are forced to go through the assistant manager’s chilling concerns for the establishment’s good name, since he claims that a sudden death might spoil the aura of the hotel. Meanwhile, Miss King lies in her bed, experiencing variable stages of distress and resentment whose intensity can only be poorly inferred through the descriptions of the looks she casts around. The doctor’s cool report is fused into the main narration “in Miss King’s hearing” (39), followed by a free indirect style view of Ashenden’s conjecture that “something of consequence [is] being prepared round about him” (42), which readers might be ingenuously tempted to read as a proleptic hint of imminent narrative somersaults. Miss King’s clear, yet peskily enigmatic, final cry for “England” (42), though, closes the story without providing any revealing explanation, nor any delighted jolt of surprise for the reader.

The narration is built, with the help of strong influences from the Preface, so as to convey the feeling that “narrator = character” (Genette 236). The third-person, omniscient narration gains readers’ trust in the tale, since descriptions of ambiance and narratorial commentaries look, on a first reading, perfectly accurate and dependable. However, by the time the short story has come to its close, suspicions start arising about the more or less evident employment of innumerable alterations in focus (Genette 242-3). “Lateral omissions” – paralipsis in Genette’s terminology – consequently appear as a device used in order to conceal and dissimulate crucial information. Paralipsis could then help to make sense out of a rather pointless narrative: what is going on or has happened is simply not disclosed, kept secret, just as a professional spy ought to do. However, motivations accounting for such a paradoxical shortage of information are likewise unknowable: it is uncertain how much the narrator knows on principle. Were he to know, and tell, less than Ashenden does, in a “narrator < character” relationship (Genette 236), then the story’s inconclusiveness could be acceptably explained. However, if readers were to ascertain that the narrator knows more than Ashenden does, but would neither reveal anything, nor hint at his superior knowledge, Ashenden’s quest for evidences would rather feel more like a succession of vain conjectures than a process of acquisition of factual knowledge. Possibilities of a bolder involvement are wished for, but never uttered. While he is assisting the failing Miss King, Ashenden allows his mind to wonder: he quickly reviews the events of the days, and looks for links and explanations. Yet, his reflections are brief, and crash against Miss King’s dumbness:
It might be that some new plan was in question, it might be that the very greatest affairs were afoot, and perhaps what the old woman had to say might make all the difference in the world. It might mean defeat or victory. It might mean anything. And there she lay powerless to speak. (42)

What makes the narrator appear particularly unreliable, is that readers have no way to ascertain – in “Miss King” at least – whether he is concealing meaningful data or he is assertively presupposing things on Ashenden’s behalf.

What is left if lack of factual information undermines narrative development, and even compromises the story’s validation? Whether nothing of importance happens, figurative features might appear to overcome the content. Maugham shows a keen awareness of the visual aspects a literary text is able to contain, and purposefully practises a habit of descriptive care. Faces, bodies, clothes, objects, documental and biographical evidences, all add up to the all-round construction of the character, to a degree that, in works such as “Miss King”, they eventually strike readers as the characters’ few palpable traits. Maugham appears to have given some thought about the exercise of description – both of character and of locale – in fiction writing. In his essay “The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story” (Vagrant Mood) he briefly highlights Raymond Chandler’s and Dashiell Hammett’s techniques:

Hammett and Raymond Chandler specify the appearance of their characters and the clothes they wear, though briefly, as exactly as do the police when they send to the papers a description of a wanted man. Raymond Chandler has effectively pursued the method further. When Marlow, his detective, enters a room or an office we are told concisely, but in detail, precisely what furniture is in it, what pictures hang on the walls and what rugs lie on the floor. We are impressed by the detective’s power of observation. It is done as neatly as a playwright (if he is not as verbose as Bernard Shaw) describes for his director the scene and the furnishing for each act of his play. The device clearly gives the perspicacious reader an indication of the sort of person and the circumstances the detective is likely to encounter. When you know a man’s surroundings you already know something about the man. (120-1)

Maugham’s praise for descriptive pauses might justify the abundance, and in certain examples, the preponderance, of the device, all the more so if we accept Genette's
designation of the descriptive pause as diegetic, since it exists within “the story’s spatial and chronological universe” (Genette 143). Miss King’s girlish hats and old-fashioned eccentric attires, her hopping walk caused by high heels, her, seemingly contradictory, tininess and withdrawn attitude are compacted into the final definition “she did not look human, but like a doll” (36). Baroness de Higgins’s “lovely dress” which she properly dismisses as “frightful” (31), as refined socialites do, links back to the narratorial statement that “she was magnificently gowned” (27), without contradicting it, but rather to the enforced effect of denoting the Baroness’ proficiency in surfing the complex social system she lives in. Likewise, the specification of the yellowness of her hair, intensified by appraisals of her charm, evokes the French Minister’s episode told by R. in the opening scene, thus providing supplementary narrative material to the scene. This kind of remarks can have as much narrative potential – although they reveal it only after reiterated readings – as a reported speech: they imply personal characteristics, suggest past conditions and invite independent filling-in of gaps in the story. Whether a character whose inner life is shut off from narrative perusal, who is excluded from dialogues, whose words are deleted, should still count as one is the problem concerning the nature of characters which Maugham’s short prose seems to draw attention to. Visual descriptions of material features in “Miss King” may appear, at first, as a prearrangement of the narrative development: they are descriptive pauses which convey atmosphere and set the tone of the story. Their superficially emblematic value, in agreement with Maugham’s distinctive reporting style, succeeds in creating the effect of a rational, detached process of assessment of one’s environment, such as the one Ashenden goes through in the exercise of his secret profession. Suspicions and hesitations caused by the inherent lack of a complete outlook on characters and situations are likewise incorporated.

In the space of fiction-writing, descriptions can be as meaningful as the depiction of actions or the reporting of speeches are: they imply resonances between previous data and extra contextual knowledge. However, Maugham’s outsourcing of information to an extradiegetic cultural framework debatably succeeds in conveying adequate characterial pictures, given his reliance on a shared set of conceptions, in most cases very conventional and, sometimes, straightforwardly stereotypical. In “Miss King”, oriental royalties bear farcical names, are attended by bland factotums who carry out unspecified duties, and allow their bratty, bored offspring outlandish behaviours. Refined ladies of ample means cannot help but mix urbanity and seduction, seemingly
unable to take a break from their full-time occupation of being charming. They provide no action, no purpose, but enthuse a sense of cosmopolitanism and a touch of exoticism to the scene. In an unflattering 1928 review for *Vogue* of the *Ashenden* collection, D.H. Lawrence finds that:

[…] these stories, being ‘serious’, are faked. Mr. Maugham is a splendid observer. He can bring before us persons and places most excellently. But as soon as the excellently observed characters have to move, it is a fake. Mr. Maugham gives them a humorous shove or two. We find they are nothing but puppets, instruments of the author’s pet prejudice. (176-7)

Undeniably, Maugham appears to possess a gift for conjuring up casts of quaint, somewhat trite walk-on roles: characters whose presence may provide some mild and soothing entertainment, but who also bespeak an outmoded taste. Hence his static, tawdry characters are unlikely to resonate with contemporary readers’ exhausted sensibility, while scholars seem to find them guilty of an endemic lack of appeal.

Nevertheless, characters whose appearance does not provide an immediate, intelligible explanation or countercheck of their personality are invariably those whose names make it to the title. Miss King, Giulia Lazzari, His Excellency either fail to comply with expectations – both the readers’ and the diegetic ones – or manage to keep their drives, intentions or true fibre secret throughout the story. The unimaginative catalogue of conventional types – blondes and Orientals, for example, are plentiful – thus employed might then explain why some of Maugham’s characterization has been perceived as hackneyed, and has also attracted negative evaluations because of it. Uri Margolin reflects on the process of “readerly characterization”, that is, the intuitive and the deliberate groupings readers make on the basis of the few pieces of information provided by the story. Margolin notes how any piece of information supplied in literary writing accounting for an individual’s appearance, behaviour, peculiar attitudes and clothing, along with notions concerning that very same individual’s customary environment, all sum up as “indicators for inferences about his or her mental and moral features” (77). Because of what Margolin calls “rules of inference” (77), the act of shaping and developing a character appears as subjective as each readers’ conclusive reception and evaluation of the same figure. No matter how scarce the information provided, each reader almost involuntarily draws upon
“schemas and stereotypes pertaining to both world knowledge and to the literary encyclopaedia” (Margolin 78) to supply or add up data to what is demonstrably communicated in the text. According to this perspective, Maugham’s alleged uninventiveness is therefore more apt to require an extra effort on readers’ side than it is liable to flatten the whole picture.

Overall, there seems to be a paradoxical quality to “Miss King”, not only because its length defies its content. Although the plot seems to provide poor excitement, characterization – or lack thereof – fills in the blank. In his own critical work, Maugham has remarked, in appreciation, Jane Austen’s alleged inability to create a convincing, or composite, narrative plot, which she would substitute with common material “made […] uncommon by the keenness of her observation, her irony and her playful wit” (Great Novelists 88). Whether Maugham equally succeeds in rendering the commonplace unusual in his account of espionage humdrum, is a debatable issue. There are elements in “Miss King”, for instance, which ultimately reveal their inadequacy, or even uselessness, to propel the economy of the story. Ashenden’s trip to Berne, whose purpose is to deliver a scanty piece of information, which later turns out to be of little use; the unnerving police interrogation, or rather, a plain literary manifesto; the game of cards hosted by the Baroness, an unconvincing allegory of the ongoing two-facedness: these episodes seem to provide more of a scenographic contribution rather than narrative inputs. The content of Ashenden’s very preliminary interview with R. could also have been integrated smoothly within the following text, had the scene not served an, apparently, necessary introductory function. However, just as the R. interview introduces a series of chapters all concerning Ashenden, the aforementioned episodes could all gain significance if inserted in a wider narrative, such as the whole of the Ashenden saga. The separate segments making up the initial and prevailing part of “Miss Kiss” could be addressed as one single iterative tale (Genette 165-8). They could be intended as an arrangement of emblematic situations which, despite the perfective aspect employed throughout, convey an impression of continuity. It is then necessary, though, to take into account the ensuing chapters, the other short stories, in order to confer to “Miss King” the role of pilot episode, in which the occurrences that make up a day in the life of Mr. Ashenden, writer turned spy, develop a habitual mode of existence. Therefore, solitude, boredom and paranoia become key concepts for an evaluation of Ashenden, both character and collective title for distinctive works. The uneventfulness of Ashenden’s spying career, which is, on the
one hand, a decisive shortcoming when it comes to weighing the piece’s genuine
pertinence with the genre, works, on the other hand, as a subtle introspective tool. The
available space fills up with implications concerning the individual’s state of mind in a
given situation, which in this case is uncommon, as well as potentially highly
distressing, and yet is treated as customary. Combat in the trenches is not the only
kind of war going on – although it is definitely the more suitable to spectacularization –
and Ashenden brings parallel evidence of individuals risking their lives elsewhere too.
The severe effects that the unpredictability of external circumstances and unceasing
worrying produce on Ashenden – whose defences are always up, perpetually craving
a relaxing hot bath, visibly tense at the prospect that he will not be able to finish writing
his play – are implied in Ashenden’s seemingly objective sketch as a self-possessed,
cool-headed professional.

Ashenden’s deceptive aloofness echoes the outward expressionlessness the
other characters all seem to share. A dismissal of the whole cast as a mediocre
underachievement could appear like an unproblematic stance, especially since so little
evidence concerning characters is granted readers. Quite clearly, despite the handful
of details that can make them look engaging, supporting characters are left static,
underdeveloped: props, rather than agents. By contrast, the uninteresting nature that
appears to be the prerogative of the character under the title’s spotlight is likely to
produce a polarising effect, causing the text to result either unbearably boring or
successful in arousing readers’ curiosity (or at least capable to hold their attention until
its closing line). Deadpan Miss Kings’ encumbrance of narrative space, for instance,
might feel unbalanced to some readers. Not only her departure from the scene is more
likely to baffle than surprise, but her very appearance likewise fails to reward readers
who have already read halfway through the story to get to meet her. Miss King – both
character and short story – seems to challenge the very meaning and purpose of the
piece. Her presence may serve as a reflexive tool to question what a short story is,
what it means for it to come to an end, how that is supposed to happen and, most
importantly, what a character should be and what meaning it should provide to the
whole piece of literary fiction. Moreover, rather than dismiss the piece as an ineffective
exercise in composition, it could be worth drawing attention to its position as the
opening chapter of a series of stories, all centring on the same character, who observes
rather than act, whose accounts of the events are rendered mainly through external
description, and seldom commented on. Distance of observation point and avoidance
of interpretation as they are employed in “Miss King” mark the first appearance of key features that will repeat throughout the whole of the Ashenden cycle.

2.3. Ashenden, from a Distance: “Giulia Lazzari”

The first piece “Miss King” ends abruptly and without providing much of a solution, the sophomore story, “The Hairless Mexican”, despite similarities in style, offers an even more chilling ending; Ashenden’s day-to-day schedule is not resumed until the third chapter of the collection. The opening section of “Giulia Lazzari” sees Maugham at its most experimental: the distinction between the primary, omniscient narrator and the main character on focus is hardly ever as evident in the remaining parts as it is here. Following a humorous, and slightly sarcastic, overview of Ashenden’s relationship with notoriety, and an unprecedented, clear statement of the economic stability and personal fame he has achieved, the subject, as well as the type of narratorial intrusion, changes: “But he thought himself intelligent and so it was absurd that he should be bored” (81). This example of free indirect style emphasises the shifting of focus occurring all along the Ashenden cycle, a modification in mode so subtle that it is very unlikely to stand out from the deceptively more pervasive external focus. The list of circumstances under which “it [is] absurd to think that […] he could possibly be bored” (82) calls for Ashenden’s daily activities and usual recreations: outdoor excursions around Lac Léman, nostalgic strolls about old Geneva, more or less enjoyable reading of the French classics, urbane small talk with fellow guests at the hotel and, occasionally, writing. However, this “iterative sequence” (Genette 165), following a decorative anecdotal commentary – in which Ashenden discloses his musings about the difficulties of translating French ideas into the English language (82) – suddenly switches its frequency back to a seemingly historical mode of narration.

It might be, he mused, as he rode along the lake on a dappled horse with a great rump and a short neck, like one of those prancing steeds that you see in old pictures, but this horse never pranced and he needed a firm jab with the spur to break even into a smart trot – it might be, he mused, that the great chiefs of the secret service in their London offices, their hands on the throttle of this great machine, led a life full of excitement; they moved their pieces here and there, they saw the pattern woven by the
multitudinous threads (Ashenden was lavish with his metaphors), they made a picture out of the various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle; but it must be confessed that for the small fry like himself to be a number of the secret service was not as adventurous an affair as the public thought. (82)

Besides being, conceivably, one of the longest sentences to be found in Maugham’s oeuvre, it represents an unusual attempt to combine focal restrictedness (and its consequent mental insight) with external, visual description. The bracketed self-reflective remark about the alleged verbosity traceable in Ashenden’s sentences demarcates a gap between the narrator’s voice and the character’s expression, hence it endorses the temporary slip into Ashenden’s consciousness to convey an effect of “unfilteredness”. The stroll on horseback functions as a device that distinctly marks the beginning and end – “He turned his horse and trotted gently back to Geneva” (84) – of the quasi stream-like merging of Ashenden’s half-aware thoughts, fancies, expectations and unfulfilled desires as the principal channel of narration.

As previously argued, the formal omniscience of the narrative voice includes a fundamental ambiguity: the employment of a conventional third-person narration, considering the wanting connections among scarce pieces of information, might arouse a feeling of distrust in readers. They may soon find they have no means to ascertain whether the narrator has wilfully chosen not to share certain facts with the public – and if so, what, how much and why – or if, instead, they are facing a case of relative omniscience, which causes acquired information to be regulated “by strictly natural means or limited to realistic vision and inference” (Booth 160). Wayne Booth formalises the issue as a matter of “privilege” (160), a purely theoretic notion which regulates how much of what the author knows is shared with the narrator and, potentially, disclosed to readers. That this story, as it is told and published in the collection entitled Ashenden: or the Secret Agent, could be only one of many other possible variants is hinted at in the ensuing summary of Ashenden’s aborted romance with the Baroness de Higgins. Because of a blunt reprimand received from R., demanding an immediate interruption of any note-writing, lake-rowing or theatre-going with in company of the Baroness, Ashenden suddenly realises:

[...] what he had not known before, that there was someone in Geneva part of whose duties at all events was to keep an eye on him. There was evidently someone who had
orders to see that he did not neglect his work or get into mischief. Ashenden was not a little amused. (83)

This could epitomise a further blow struck against the functioning of the seemingly objective, omniscient narrator: an alternative narrative of Ashenden and his “adventures” appears no longer as a purely hypothetical endeavour, so much so that the passage above is likely to induce an overlapping of the roles of narrator and main character. Genette illustrates his definition of “internally focalized” narrative as “vision with’ the character”: the character does not exist by means of the exposure of its inner being, but rather through the picture they construe of others5 (Genette 240). In the case of Ashenden, focalization is primarily internal, but it works by way of the illusion of objectivity that the external focus can achieve: the narrator appears to be omniscient, external and separate from Ashenden, who exists as a character, on an equal level with the supporting cast. Booth similarly ascribes to the acquisition of “an inside view of another character” the highest rhetorical privilege possibly attainable (Booth 160-1): that does not appear to be the case with Ashenden. For example, the arguably most intimate insight available of the Baroness de Higgins is a short, corny sketch of the allusions she makes to her sentimental life: “[...] letting her long white hand drag through the water talked of Love and hinted at a Broken Heart” (83). Those capital letters bespeak enough irony to disclose the interplay happening between narrators caught in the act of making sense of the behaviour of an extraneous being. A narrative situation in which the extra-diegetic context states its authenticity and, to a certain extent, its verifiability, whereas the speaking voice maintains an external, third-person approach could, ostensibly, achieve the uppermost effect of narrative objectivity. Ashenden’s “undramatized narrator” (Booth 151-3) however, applies a very close focus upon one specific character, who at the same time fails to be perceived as a “dramatized narrator-agent” (Booth 153-4). Therefore, the close focalization exerted on Ashenden seems to bias the whole narration, almost imperceptibly though, and through the exclusive resort to the experience of, paradoxically, the undramatized narrator/character, Ashenden. Consequently, the first emerging issue may concern the

5 “Jean Pouillon relève fort bien ce paradoxe lorsqu’il écrit que, dans la ‘vision avec’, le personnage est vu ‘non dans son intérieurité, car il faudrait que nous en sortions alors que nous nous y absorbons, mais dans l’image qu’il se fait des autres, en quelque sorte en transparence dans cette image.” (Figures Ill 209)
outright “undramatic presentation” (Booth 161-2) of the surrounding characters. Since any unmediated insight within “consciousnesses” other than Ashenden’s is proved impossible by a narrative structure similarly organized, as anticipated distrust towards the tale of their deeds and attitudes might consequentially happen to creep in. Although the issue of unreliability has already become clearly visible by the time the collection reaches its “Giulia Lazzari” chapter, this short story forms a backdrop allowing a psychological plunge into Ashenden’s consciousness, something that has previously been overlooked or deemed unconvincing. Such insight is not reduced solely to the thorough survey of his thoughts taking place during the horse ride scene, but especially in contrast to, and out of the meeting with Giulia Lazzari.

Awareness of the risks correlated with romanticizing people and circumstances insinuates within the piece from its beginning: suffice to notice the opening-page caustic dismissal of learned audiences’ critical appraisal of Ashenden’s work in favour of the “tangible benefits” connected with literary notoriety (81). Ashenden and R.’s night out “some place where they could see smart people” (95) offers both the chance to enact notions of representation and interpretation. Finding himself “in that fashionable restaurant cheek by jowl with persons who bore great or distinguished names” (95) causes R. to exclaim a rather silly “By George, this is life,” (96) and Ashenden to spot R.’s concurrent elation and unease. The abundance of biographical details and evidence of R.’s diminishing standoffish attitude towards Ashenden, which almost borders playfulness, as provided during the Parisian hotel room interview scene (85-7), suggest deepening confidence between the two characters, a significant evolution from R.’s initial extreme secrecy (9-11). An indication of the growth their relationship has undergone in time is implied, but, above all, the passage arranges a credible viewpoint for any subsequent supply of information. R.’s brilliant career is found to have flourished in the Colonies, to the detriment of R.’s personal life and first-hand experience of metropolitan society (86-7). R. has only recently started to get involved with female company, his great success only tainted by traces of deep-seated coyness. While R.’s gawkiness seems to endear him to Ashenden, it also warns off readers from R.’s adroitness in assessing female character (87; 95-6). The template mode of description in Ashenden, consisting in a block paragraph crammed with physical, personal and biographical data about the character, such as the brief analeptic summary of R.’s past, is particularly suited to introduce the objectives of Ashenden’s forthcoming mission. The target is Chandra Lal, a high-profile Indian activist who has
long been involved in secessionist movements, including various violent acts of protest. At the time of the events, he is known to be based in Europe, most probably in Berlin. Chandra Lal’s dossier:

was narrated dryly, without comment or explanation, but from the very frigidity of the narrative you got a sense of mystery and adventure, of hairbreadth escapes and dangers dangerously encountered. (89)

The fracture existing between the two secret agents’ approach to the job and its target prove, once again, different. Moreover, Ashenden’s cognizance of its conflicting outcome causes him to consciously adapt his spoken opinion to what he believes are R.’s expectations. Therefore Chandra Lal is labelled as “a fanatic”, “a very dangerous fellow” (89), whereas his anti-British political activism and his unfailing flights from the secret services are to Ashenden “romantic and attractive” (89). However, Ashenden will later try to smooth R. in a positive, or rather, receptive evaluation of the Indian agitator. Open discussion of the legitimacy of the British Raj either between characters or hinted at through narratorial commentary, is never attempted, or at least, never reported. Even if the issue of colonial rule does not count as conversation topic between civil servants – just as it appears to only provide contextual validation in the whole of Maugham’s short format prose – it nevertheless triggers further insight into each character’s mode of perception and work ethics, or lack thereof. Ashenden is, in fact, revealed to have a penchant for idealistic revolutionaries, whose bravery and commitment he understands as quixotic oddities: “one can’t help being impressed by a man who had the courage to take on almost single-handed the whole British power in India” (96). While Ashenden inadvertently downplays Chandra Lal to a storybook figure, R. dismisses him altogether and urges his subordinate not to “get sentimental about it” since he is “nothing but a dangerous criminal” (96). R.’s chilling devotion to duty – “our job is to get him and when we’ve got him to shoot him” (96) – nullifies any expectable moral scruple with regards to the political situation, furthermore, it rejects any questioning stance on the matter as “far-fetched and morbid” (96). The unwillingness to empathise with the inscrutable Indian expatriate displayed by both Ashenden and R. does not merely convey a sense of urgency to the narrative, and neither does it foster an interpretation of the developments as inevitable; rather, it further stresses the paradoxical condition of the whole operation. Ashenden’s
resistance to abide blindly to the plan – a seemingly imperative necessity to eliminate
a man whose influence is quantitatively impossible to ascertain – is readily compared
to the principle behind the game of chess (97), a yearning to move according to a
precise, overarching strategy. A remark that could appear all the more disquieting
since it is voiced by R., whose degree of control and authority comes out considerably
downsized, considering how poorly grounded his motives to have Chandra Lal killed
appear to be. All of sudden, many unacknowledged issues about the structure and
ethics of the organization both agents are working for turn out. Whose orders is R.
obeying, whose strategy he is applying, how aware he is of the moves he is playing
are questions that flash at readers, and further complicate their likelihood to recognize
a meaningful pattern in the narrative.

The implicit rectification of the hierarchical position occupied by R., whom is
revealed to be less of a scheming brain than it could have appeared before, resonates
flawlessly with the general tone of “Giulia Lazzari”: a tale of marginal characters
involved in a peripheral plot. Yet the story also becomes a safe space in which to
address metaliterary concepts: “Giulia Lazzari” hosts self-addressed analyses and
definitions of the act of writing – something which acquires a special significance in the
piece – along with issues of style, authenticity of subject matter and the possibility of it
being in contrast with authorial intention. Moreover, Maugham shows a peculiar
penchant for detailing the complexities caused by the multilingual European
background: the differing levels of linguistic proficiency held by single characters and
the necessity of translation they might require, all add up his concern for what makes
a communication channel successful or not, which also forms the story’s focal point.
Giulia Lazzari herself is nothing more than a pawn in the game, with little interest per
se, but potentially crucial according to the move it can be involved in. As R. puts it, as
if to clarify his take on the matter, “it was espionage made easy. Of course I didn’t care
a damn about her, it was him I was after” (93). The plot is straightforward, although its
planning is purposefully left unspecified to readers by means of an abrupt employment
of omission:

“I’ve made a few notes that may be useful to you. I’ll read them to you, shall I?”
Ashenden listened attentively. R.’s plan was simple and explicit. Ashenden could not
but feel unwilling admiration for the brain that had so neatly devised it. (95)
Giulia, readers learn soon enough, in exchange for her absolute freedom, needs to convince her lover to reach her in France, where he can be arrested and tacitly murdered. British and French secret services have no interest in her whatsoever: she’s described as an Italian dancer regularly touring Europe with her Spanish-inspired flamenco show. Under stage name La Malagueña, she sports a trite Spanish costume, “mantilla, a fan and a high comb” (90), and pursues a mediocre career in cheap and disreputable music-halls; R. even assumes that “she looked upon her dancing chiefly as a means to enhance her value as a prostitute” (91). Just as R.’s description of Giulia’s seedy livelihood is the only one coming up throughout the whole short story – she never mentions her profession – R.’s assurance that “she is mad about [Chandra Lal]” (91) is coincidently the foremost statement, but also the only one, of her inner state of feelings. Just as Ashenden laboriously struggles to get a grasp of Giulia’s authentic drive and to determine the seriousness of her commitment to Chandra Lal, readers likewise plod along. True enough, Giulia sobs and weeps while reading her lover’s first reply since she has been put under arrest, she also gives “little exclamations of love, calling the writer by pet names French and Italian” (99), but says to Ashenden: “You can see he loves me, can’t you? There’s no doubt about that. I know something about it, believe me” (99). Despite her firm confidence in his devotion, when questioned by Ashenden about the genuineness of her own love, she sidesteps a direct answer:

“He’s the only man who’s ever been kind to me. It’s not very gay, the life one leads in these music-halls, all over Europe, never resting, and men – they are not much, the men who haunt those places. At first I thought he was just like the rest of them.” (99-100)

The hues of decadence insistently added to the narrative readers and Ashenden are already familiar with through R. – the heart-breaking story of a drifting failed performer – just do not comply with the picture of fate-stricken lovers an average readership might be though to crave for. Giulia’s charge for espionage is made-up, her detention a trick to exploit her personal correspondence with Chandra Lal to get him to cross the border from Switzerland to France; the snare she is kept under, a ten-year conviction in Britain, strikes as the only thing to which Giulia responds bluntly: “I can’t go to prison,” she cried out suddenly, ‘I can’t, I can’t’” (100). Apparently, the inescapable constraints
set by rule of law work as the only fixed mainstays supporting characters’ motivation and become the source of ultimate agency. There are various forms of power within the story which are inherently treated as more durable and rational than any other form of sense-making: unlawful, violent threats of detention against helpless individuals, the unquestioned inviolability of national borders, a tacit agreement over British legitimate hegemony over a crumbling empire. The inherent frailty of personal feelings, be they of affection or of allegiance to alternative authorities, is fully exposed in the moment these dissolve, their regulatory influence gone. Maugham, however, seems eager to treat both foundations of agency with equal contempt: on one side, the misleading and fully devastating force of emotions, on the other side, the brutal and intrinsically nonsensical workings of established authority. Ashenden’s part, therefore, is that of a kind of sense-seeking tool: his role as chaperon turns him into the enquiring eye that tries to skim the plethora of discourses and absurd arrangements that separate Giulia’s physical circumstances from the ultimate aim of her will. Chronicling Giulia’s crystal-clear pursuit for absolute, individual freedom, however, is not the point. Detailing what clouds her resolve – a more or less developed dependency on Chandra Lal and her frenzied dread of custody, for example – is, instead, a pivotal concern of Maugham’s.

Paper is the main battleground in “Giulia Lazzari”, specifically the supposedly secret love letters the two lovers exchange. The materiality of this correspondence is described in attentive and frequent details: the quality and state of the sheets of paper, the prettiness and roundness of the writer’s calligraphy; most importantly, there are numerous considerations over the letters’ writing style. Exegesis appears as the crucial undertaking in the story: R.’s masterful linguistic analysis of the written word is what propels the action, while Chandra Lal’s deficiency in detecting the incongruities in a text dictated under constraint causes his defeat. R., for instance, deduces the nationality of Giulia’s lover by means of the “flowery, stilted English” (104) of his letters:

They seemed to be ordinary love-letters, but they were coming from Germany and the writer was neither English, French, nor German. Why did he write in English? The only foreigners who know English better than any continental language are Orientals […]. I came to the conclusion that Julia’s lover was one of that gang of Indians that were making trouble for us in Berlin. (92)
Ashenden dictating to Giulia is a scene repeated often enough, its violence increasing every time, that it acquires a topical meaning. Despite Ashenden’s care in dictating “the letter more or less in the way she would naturally have put it” (112) – by avoiding fluency and literariness while allowing the melodramatic conveyed by strong emotion (112) – the language Giulia writes her forgeries in is hardly ever mentioned. A comparison with an earlier example of Giulia’s authentic writing, as quoted by R., shows her aptitude to blend languages in a “queer mixture of French, English and German” (92) to express herself quicker rather than to pursue a specific effect: “I have so much to tell you, mon petit chou darling, and what you will be extrêmement intéressé to know” (93). Giulia’s very concession to Ashenden’s spontaneous use of English alone seems too abrupt a variation not to ring sinister to a frequent correspondent. Hence, the enquiry about the correct spelling of “absolutely” (104) counts as a crucial glitch. Although bizarre enough, it appears more substantial than any other of Giulia’s mistakes – phonetic or erroneous spelling, childish handwriting, repeated crossing out and rewriting of words, hasty translations in French of some passages and tear-blotted ink (113) – despite which, as Ashenden records, the letter detains “an air of verisimilitude” (113). The fact that Chandra Lal does not catch the nuanced modifications in his beloved’s writing pace and style however, does not seem to justify a similar hasty dismissal on the reader’s part: after all, Chandra Lal pays for a rushed and inattentive reading with his life. Roland Barthes’ encyclopaedic figures in A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments map the territory of the amorous experience as linguistic utterances, Giulia and Chandra’s thorny situation is no exception to Barthes’ linguistic analysis. Their systematic physical separateness nearly rubs out any suggestion of a past time of togetherness, its material counterpart, the letters, set up the purely linguistic nature of their relationship. Barthes definition of “Absence” perfectly suits them:

Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object – whatever its cause and its duration – and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment. (13)

Above all, Giulia and Chandra’s hardships resonate with Barthes’ account of the “insupportable present” the lonely lover dwells in, a painful temporal distortion caused by the conflicting situation in which the other is at once absent “as referent”, but
“present as allocutory” (15). The paradox Giulia is forced into is indeed the fact that she must play the part of the longing mistress, unable to bear being separated from her lover any longer, while struggling to maintain the Barthesian absence “an active practice, a business” (Barthes 16). That is to say, “Giulia Lazzari” is about purposefully manipulating the absence, either by staging “a fiction” that “postpones the other’s death” (Barthes 16), or by exploiting a previously standardized manifestation of lover’s discourses. British secret services, in the person of R. and Ashenden, however, are not merely taking advantage of the lovers’ intimacy, they are reclaiming political power on the basis of subjective applications of language. In the entry for the “Uncertainty of Signs”, Barthes observes how no known system of signs guarantees the lover accuracy and authenticity of expression. Barthes takes up the voice of the paradigmatic lover, and states “I shall no longer believe in interpretation. I shall receive every word from my other as a sign of truth; and when I speak, I shall not doubt that he, too, receives what I say as the truth” (215). Ashenden and R. cannot not triumph, for they leak into a form of communication that, merely because it happens linguistically, rings inherently true to the parties it officially and exclusively involves:

Signs are not proofs, since anyone can produce false or ambiguous signs. Hence one falls back, paradoxically, on the omnipotence of language: since nothing assures language, I will regard it as the sole and final assurance. (Barthes 215)

Violence performed against Giulia exceeds forcing her to a mendacious writing, it actually finds a singularly vicious and disturbing expression:

Ashenden watched her as she took off her dressing-gown and slipped a dress over her head. She forced her feet into shoes obviously too small for her. She arranged her hair. Every now and then she gave the detectives a hurried, sullen glance. [...] she went up to the dressing table and Ashenden stood up in order to let her sit down. She greased her face quickly and then rubbed off the grease with a dirty towel, she powdered herself and made up her eyes. But her hand shook. The three men watched her in silence. She rubbed the rouge on her cheeks and painted her mouth. Then she crammed a hat down her head. (110-1)

As if showing the manipulation of Giulia’s correspondence were not enough, Maugham thus further enhances the continuous description of the intrusion in and the negation
of an individual’s intimacy. The men do not merely attend to Giulia’s morning toilette, they watch her throughout the whole performance: the cruelty, the show of power inherent in their behaviour is simply nerve-wracking.

It is important, however, to scan the increasing preoccupation in Ashenden: his role as general overseer and upfront ghost-writer wavers progressively along with the interest and the compassion he comes to feel for Giulia. Ashenden’s interest in the woman is, at the beginning, limited to inferring notions from her appearance: “too big to dance gracefully” (98) and “shabbily dressed, there was nothing to explain the Indian’s infatuation” (98), so that it appears how “her sullenness was only a mask, she was nervous and frightened” (98). Giulia’s persona and attitude is what puts Ashenden off feeling sympathy for her – “there was something theatrical in her expression that prevented it from being peculiarly moving” (105) – despite admitting, after some readings of Giulia’s own letters, that her writing, although clumsy and cheesy, conveys “a certain passion” (104). Ashenden’s self-styled “cool head” and emotional control (105), however, soon appear to give way to a genuine curiosity for the woman: he wonders about her origins, how did she end up working as a low end dancer, what sort of men she must have come across in years of solitary touring (109-10) Still, he fails to sympathise with her as a woman. Her alleged moonlighting as a prostitute is thus rationalized: “to her they were paying customers and she accepted them indifferently as they recognized and admitted supplement to her miserable salary, but to them perhaps it was romance” (110). Ashenden would rather fancy about all those men, all romantics at heart for sure, who hoped “in her bought arms” to catch a glimpse “of the adventure and glamour of a more spacious life” (110). However, almost unexpectedly, as Ashenden is watching Giulia slipping on her dress, yet another brusque focal restriction on his consciousness allows readers to grasp some of his irrepresible empathy for her: “Ashenden wondered if she would have the nerve to go through with it. R. would call him a damned fool, but he almost wished she would” (110). Necessarily, the air of newly found civility forming between the two in the concluding paragraphs – immediately after Ashenden has notified Giulia with the news of Chandra Lal’s suicide by poisoning – is perceived as artificial. At any rate, it effectively stresses further the needlessness of Giulia’s abusive captivity, and does so in a rather disturbing way. However, the cold ending – Giulia asks to be given back Chandra’s pocket watch, a costly present of hers – might lure readers into dismissing the whole story with a sarcastic flip of page. “Giulia Lazzari” can indeed easily pass as a snarky cautionary
tale: it is, after all, mostly about the trashy nature of sentimentalism and the tawdriness of its expressive forms – letters, “tendresses” (100), presents, fluctuating degrees of monogamous commitment – concepts that seem to become all the more obscene when mouthed by a woman of dubious integrity. The element of undecidability in the story is rooted in Giulia’s performance, or rather, in the narratorial effort to render the character on the basis of little and shaky evidence. Moreover, a great component of the story’s success resides within readers’ reaction. Whether Giulia’s concluding question is deemed able to retroactively affect her and her dilemma, or if, on the contrary, it comes out as yet another example of Maughamian dry humour – capable of lightening up the piece from too gloomy a conclusion, without attempting to suggest any constructive clue – “Giulia Lazzari” can then take on divergent meanings. Nonetheless, the non-fiction background in “Giulia Lazzari” tallies with the deficiency of crucial information and coherent action: while literary fiction demands unity, the real does not have to necessarily make sense. Giulia, therefore, does not need to explain wanting Chandra’s pocket-watch back, neither does her request impair her previous display of grief, but constitutes, actually, a very precious piece of additional information. There are enough elements coming up as the story unfolds that can either prove her sincerity or expose her disingenuousness: readers will pick according to their preference.

The whole Ashenden cycle swings constantly between entertainment and dullness: Maugham’s anti-spy stories seem primarily concerned with asking whether flatness, of character and of plot, can be tragic. In Ashenden, unavoidable limitations to the individual’s freedom are embodied in political games which often make up the story’s fundamental principle: Giulia Lazzari’s threat of conviction of course, as well as “The Traitor”’s contradictory allegiance to two nations at war and “His Excellency”’s ambitious drive which outweighs a personal passion. This is a recurring feature in many other Maughamian short stories, markedly within the Malaysian cycle, but especially in those allocated in a European setting. Manifest elements of randomness regularly distinguish the decisive events, for example, in “Mr. Harrington’s Washing” John Quincy Harrington’s comic stubbornness surely foretells catastrophe, but his demise is utterly accidental; just as the wrong man’s death is equally unintended in “The Hairless Mexican”. Consequently, chance, or rather, haphazardness in intention and outcomes, becomes another crucial motif, and one that further complicates the likelihood to recognise a meaningful pattern in the single stories, as well as in the whole
collection. Furthermore, every short piece prompts, especially by means of narratorial commentaries, metaliterary subjects which also resonate with the extradiēgetic context of readership and authorial production. The entire collection seems to tackle the very concept of writing, implying reflections about why writers write, what is the purpose of chronicling or recording real occurrences and what is meaning of inventing facts, and manages to play with the infinite possibilities that merging fact and reality enables. Simultaneously, *Ashenden* challenges the univocal reception of the written text by the audience: what entertainment is and what features it requires, what sort of boredom or restlessness sneaks in if the literary craft fails, are some of the concerns showing through the work.

It is perplexing how a literary work characterised by such scantiness of detail and a marked refusal to provide explanations – as well as logic and foreseeable outcomes that would require a reasoned commentary – could achieve such commercial acclaim. Arguably, it is each story’s minimal narrative structure that is liable for providing basic, yet rewarding, entertainment, while still allowing plenty of space for the single reader to “fill in the gaps” spontaneously. Jeanne Bedell’s reading, for example, swiftly lets go of “Miss King” by explaining the aged governess’ last quirk as a mere wish for a fellow Englishman to stand in behalf of their shared country at her deathbed (41). However, rather than accept the impenetrability of the fact as a specific textual feature (and one that stands for a wider narratorial statement: unknowability of characters) Bedell accounts for it as an implicit critique to what both Ashenden’s and the readers expect from genre literature: amazement and entertainment (42-3). Similarly, Maugham’s few denotative commentaries allow Bedell to infer that Giulia Lazzari’s ten-year imprisonment represents a catastrophe not for the loss of freedom per se, but rather because it would “rob her of the remnants of good looks, essential to her career as ‘Spanish dancer’ and prostitute” (43). Maugham’s prose then, appears suited to host indications of the feminine condition which receptive readers can pick up on; this is just one example of the many thematic possibilities the text provides. Maugham consistently eschews open commentaries about the state of commercial literature or the perks of the writerly profession, let alone offering insight into the role and meaning of culture. Yet, all these are recurrent concerns of his prose as above them all is contemplating the act of writing as self-expression or, as it more often becomes, a deliberate warping of the communication. On the basis of simulated narratorial omniscience – which for the majority consists of a slight close-up of
Ashenden’s consciousness – Miss King’s denied self-representation and Giulia Lazzari’s forged expression inevitably imply issues of fairness of representation through the written medium, besides questioning the authority and the authenticity that are usually held as prerogative of authorship. Therefore Ashenden, both for its subject matter and for its general outcome, could easily be assumed to treat as its foremost concern the idea of “writing as choice”, and, inevitably, bring about situations that showcase how this activity relates to individual will and unrestricted choice-making. Simultaneously, Ashenden could be understood as an enquiry within the concept of surveillance, in the meaning of literal control as well as the need to comply with requests, orders, expectancies, traditions or even mere vogues: basically a whole range of freedom-limiting examples of force majeure.

“Narrator” is a critical concept in Ashenden: it never passes as completely reliable, yet it never explicitly results unreliable; moreover, it stresses Ashenden’s role as character, which is central, but keeps a low profile throughout. Margolin asks:

Can the reader carry over the description of a literary figure from one text to another? Can we unite the descriptions of the same-named character in different texts by the same author or by different ones in order to get the complete story of X? (70)

Accordingly, Ashenden’s very recurrence in a series of clearly linked short stories must undertake a certain significance: it does not merely work as a signifying tool. Arguably, the Ashenden of each short story is an “alternative elaboration of one common core” (Margolin 70), but there does not seem to subsist, as a matter of fact, any intention to achieve a clearly definable staple: Ashenden remains a mystery, even when the reading is over. The narrating persona, meanwhile, can trick readers who have dutifully read Maugham’s preface, or know a few things about his private life, to fuse it with Ashenden the character. This situation, unfortunately, is quite tangled: Margolin charges the narrating voice with indicating consistency and linearity amid shifting circumstances (75), but how can that be applied to Ashenden’s osmotic narrative situation? Let us grant that:

characters will identify themselves from the inside (the mental dimension), so that as long as they preserve their memory of past experiences they will think of themselves
as the same continuing individual, even if their body is radically transformed. (Margolin 75)

Then, on condition that the connecting voices of narrator and protagonist are accepted indiscriminately, Ashenden could be received as Ashenden’s own assessment of his identity. The short story “Sanatorium” – infrequently linked to the bulk of more straightforwardly “spy” stories – is able to support the idea of Ashenden as a personal, character-bound collection of significant experiences and meetings. The fact that Ashenden is a guest at the story’s Scottish sanatorium for TB patients, not only suggests an unplumbed profundity to the character’s story (TB has very much the air of a moniker), but places the character inside a temporal trajectory. The episodic quality of the short-story collection has not yet given evidence of a concern with time as an integral structure, neither for the character, nor through the whole work: time, in Ashenden, appears as a fully incorporated element rather than a major influencing force; a cultural standard, expressed in units of measurement, unable to disturb its character’s transcendential lives.

In conclusion, Ashenden, which may supposedly appear as a compendium of meta-fictional reflections – it deals with the quest of a purpose in writing, it acknowledges artistic manipulation as a filter that can warp biography, and debates the sameness of author and artist throughout – presents several structural concerns which attain significance in the enlarged perspective of Maugham’s oeuvre. First, Ashenden’s rather pointless “adventures” challenge the expectancies of the spy fiction genre. Second, Maugham seems to substitute thrills and common page-turning devices with a realistic mode of fiction, mostly inspired by French naturalism, which, however, imitates real life self-enclosure, especially in its awareness of the unreliability no narrator can escape from when recounting their stories. Lastly, in Ashenden Maugham displays a peculiar eagerness to soothe and guide his readers by allowing his flesh-and-blood authorial figure to show through the fictional pages. Despite his persisting remarks concerning the fictitious quality of content, and the artificiality of forms, Maugham appears eager to ascertain the correct functioning of the communication channel with his readers. Willing to secure his readership’s loyalty and confidence, through Ashenden Maugham seems to claim that while narrators are likely to be unreliable, the writer himself never is.
Maugham’s popular, bulky Künstlerroman novels – Of Human Bondage (1915) and The Moon and Sixpence (1919) – did not exhaust his interest in the process of art-making and in the lives of creative people, and are not the only cases proving his undercurrent concern for what art itself is. In fact, Maugham appears to have delved into this sort of aesthetic enquiry in his short stories as well, albeit almost exclusively in those set in a British or European location. This is especially interesting since his best-known short pieces are those commonly labelled as “Malaysian” or “Far Eastern” stories. These are texts build around a specific plot pattern, the portrait of Westerners captured the moment they face madness, crime, death, or at the very best a major crisis in their values and ethics, when they resettle to the Asian outposts of the British Empire. In them, the laboratory-like observation of specific behaviours, which in most cases are deemed excessive, if not outrageous, does not allow space for intellectual wanderings. Just as he appears indifferent, or unwilling, to portray non-Western characters, Maugham seems equally uninterested in describing the life of the successful artist or reflect on the forms and effects within works of sublime genius. The five short stories analysed in this chapter might look like they have been selected arbitrarily among Maugham’s vast corpus of over a hundred short stories. Incidentally, they have been written at different stages of Maugham’s career, “Daisy” is in fact one of his first attempts at writing, dating as far back as 1896. They target different publishing media, “Gigolo and Gigolette”, for example, was published in two American magazines, Nash’s Magazine and Hearst International, in 1935, before being collected in book form in The Mixture as Before in 1940. What they do have in common, however, is a keen focus in unheroic characters living in urban or provincial environments, their preoccupations related to income and their attitude to work and time-planning seemingly regulated by a middle to upper-class background. Nevertheless, these are characters who are strangled by a profit-seeking cultural economy, unsupported or even ostracized by their closest relatives, but whose hardest struggle is fought against their own average wits, which readers get to know through
their variably frantic attempts to make the most of whatever sample of artistry they can produce. Maugham exploits the short story’s conciseness to expand, usually, on a single character’s unique artistic or existential challenge: Gigolette’s dread of the very performance show she thrives on, Colonel Peregrine’s embarrassment for his wife’s widely-read poems, Mrs. Albert Forrester’s best-selling achievement following her pragmatic rejection of intellectualisms, Daisy’s success in the entertaining industry misjudged by her family. The creative practices all these characters engage with never seem to make it to be labelled as “art”, on the contrary they are kept lingering between the definitions “entertainment”, “private expression”, “amateurship” or “craft”.

Nevertheless, the major point of interest in the grouping of the aforementioned short stories is my choice to present them as case studies for Maugham’s approach to various forms of storytelling. I argue that their stylistic elements can count as prototypical of Maugham’s work, especially when it comes to balance character’s exposition and, consequently, the availability of information to readers. Each of the short stories hereby mentioned displays a peculiar narrative mode: some of their structures will either echo the devices previously detected in the examples from Ashenden – in “The Colonel’s Lady”, Evie Hamilton’s scanty dialogue lines remind of Miss King’s erased expression – or supersede them, such as “The Alien Corn”’s conclusive crucial change of mood conveyed through a shift of focalization. Maugham’s trademark eye-of-the-camera perspective on his protagonists, although very often adulterated with a diegetic narrator/character voice (usually a writer himself by profession) suggests, in fact, a deeper understanding – or counts at the least as a notable attempt – of the conditions of characters than in the Ashenden collection. This chapter proposes to enquire how Maugham’s narrative devices work in slightly more reduced contexts (compared to the extended background connecting the Ashenden episodes) such as singular, thirty-page long short stories, and, moreover, whether they lead to different approaches to characters’ descriptions and development. It will also attempt to highlight the individuality of Maugham’s thinking and the inquisitiveness of his process, which often leads to unusual conclusions. Furthermore, given the recurrence of specific themes, it will advance hypothesis concerning Maugham’s ideas of art as inferred from the selected texts. Ultimately, it will question whether, and how, his chosen narrative techniques affect the idea of Maugham as a cynic storyteller, a trashy potboiler or as an underappreciated writer of his days.
Past reviews and studies have tended to treat this body of short fiction superficially, or even to overlook it in favour of the more eventful and thrilling group of Far Eastern stories. For example, John Whitehead presents in his Maugham: A Reappraisal a range of opinions concerning the European stories which diverge radically from those expressed in the present research, especially when it comes to compare conclusions and, in some cases, the very interpretation of the stories' subject matter. Whitehead tends, throughout his essay, to limit the analysis of Maugham's single works to a brief overview and a direct rating of the same; for instance, he decides to group together “The Creative Impulse" and “Jane": “because of their similarity, each consisting of the portrait of an eccentric woman, the point of which tends to elude the present-day reader” (146). Whitehead’s clumsy attempt to justify the fact that he did not enjoy the stories – “contes à clef whose keys have been lost” (146) – does not appear half as ludicrous as the suspect that Whitehead’s actually lacks the basic empathy the stories require and encourage. Unimpressed by Mrs. Albert Forrester’s literary career and inventiveness, Whitehead appears to retain a rather sneaky indifference to feminine characters’ lot and trials, since not even the satire of London intellectual society is “of sufficient interest to justify narratives of such length” (147). “The Colonel’s Lady” is, in turn, catalogued as one of three “rancid little anecdotes of the kind that have given Maugham a reputation for cheapness" (187) and its review is well-worth being quoted in its entirety:

The only point of the “Colonel’s Lady”, about a middle-aged man who finds out when his wife publishes a book of poems that she has had a passionate affair with a younger man, is the husband’s curtain-line: “...what did the fellow ever see in her?” (187)

Whitehead just as gracefully laments the lack of detailed physical description of beautiful Daisy, who only discloses blue eyes and blond hair, and seemingly equates this to undeveloped depth of character (22). Nevertheless, his judgement of “Daisy” is not altogether negative, since he identifies an association between it and Thomas Hardy’s Far from the Madding Crowd; however, not because Daisy and Bathsheba are

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6 I will hereby quote and discuss exclusively, for obvious reasons of coherence and brevity, Whitehead’s opinions concerning the same European short stories which I intend to analyse more fully in the ensuing discussion.
both independent and self-reliant ladies, but because both Daisy and Sergeant Troy end up playing pantomimes for a living (and the former one’s scanty costume is but an aggravating factor) (22-3). Whitehead even condenses George’s hardships, disillusion and final suicide in “The Alien Corn” – one of Maugham’s most explicitly tragic setups – in one dry sentence: “he is found wanting [of artistic talent] and kills himself” (147). Among the conclusions he draws, Whitehead declares that:

It is odd that Maugham never seems to have realized that by putting out third-rate work, however superficially entertaining for the casual reader, he was giving hostages to fortune. To the end of his life he had to endure being labelled a “trashy” writer by the ill-disposed, and all that can be said in defence of such shoddy work […] is that he was capable of better things. (162)

This chapter aims at controverting the deep-rooted assumptions that justify disinterest and even overt aversion, such as Whitehead’s, against these lesser-known specimens of Maugham’s work. It will argue that there is a recognizable thematic pattern and specific examples of careful characterization in the short stories hereby covered, as well as evident and consistent significance granted in each of them to a distinctively Maughamian discourse about the nature and experience of art, and, most importantly, a genuine moral sensibility. Maugham’s narrators are the pivotal concern of each section, therefore I will engage with defining, for instance, “Gigolo and Gigolette”’s and “Daisy”’s discriminating omniscience, “The Creative Impulse”’s mock first-person narrative, “The Alien Corn”’s double storyline and swinging narratorial stances, and then track the cascading effects they originate in their respective short story.

In order to try and demonstrate how narrative techniques and moral calibre are densely woven together, I will reason on account of Booth’s conclusive remarks in The Rhetoric of Fiction. Booth premises are that an author’s moral judgement can be inferred from the stylistic and structural choices he or she makes within the work of fiction, as long as a basic wish to improve or observe through art is admitted:

But I am convinced that most novelists today – at least those writing in English – feel an inseparable connection between art and morality […] their artistic vision consists, in part, on a judgement on what they see, and they would ask us to share that judgement as part of the vision. (385)
Booth openly trusts writers’ ethical intent, which can be communicated only if they “write well” (388), and he is therefore especially concerned with the exercise of “noncommittal techniques” (388) - unreliable narrator and/or objectivity – which can allow readers too many occasions to diverge from the moral basis of the work. What Booth particularly insists on is the obligation for the writer to transform his private vision, his personal system of values – however in contrast with the mainstream set in effect outside of his or her private study – into a public work that is widely, albeit not universally, comprehensible (393-5). The need to look for, enquire, question and eventually convey meaning, Booth claims, is the ultimate moral responsibility that ties all writers (394). I argue that these short stories do provide all of the aforementioned: doubt, curiosity, enquiry and eventual description of a specific problem: a para-phenomenology of the artistic practice. The ensuing discussion will attempt to highlight how Maugham’s scope exceeds the facile blueprints of commercial literature and, although maintaining soft elements, his stories are able to offer much deeper satisfaction than merely provide reading material for leisure hours. Rather, these short stories tackle complex or unusual themes, they often provide a solution or an interpretation that is likely to arouse reflections in the readers; they also collectively form a pattern – one that is essentially a thematic one, but also structural and, ultimately, philosophical – which resonates with the whole of Maugham’s literary production.

3.1. “The Creative Impulse”: the Potboiler

Mrs. Albert Forrester’s first exterior scene takes place well after two-thirds of the story: in it, she is seen riding buses and trams from Marble Arch across the Thames, until she reaches Lambeth, the working-class neighbourhood where her husband has resettled with Mrs. Bulfinch, their former cook. On her way to Kennington Road “she neither felt nor looked like Delilah” (142). Maugham is not new to referencing the biblical heroine: in “Mr. Harrington’s Washing”, title character John Quincy Harrington nicknames “Delilah” Ashenden’s former Russian lover, Anastasia Alexandrovna,

whom he has befriended and whose name he claims he is unable to pronounce. She, in return, calls him “Samson” and, although unexplained, the moniker rings sinister when Mr. Harrington is found murdered on a Muscovite pavement. Mrs. Albert Forrester’s indirect free style refusal of the Delilah resonances conveniently puts on hold the straightforward metaphors the allusion could easily have evoked: the manipulating woman who is willing to do whatever it takes to secure the source of her wealth, figurative hair-cutting included. Mrs. Albert Forrester’s mission to get her husband – or rather, his position and income – back, results into a different sort of compromise. The hundred pieces of silver Delilah was after pour in from somewhere: Mr. Forrester’s reminder that she has “a fluent, a fertile, and a distinguished pen” (146) prompts Mrs. Bulfinch’s suggestion that she should write “a good thrilling detective story” (146). Appalled as Mrs. Albert Forrester may be, she remains, in fact, a well-known author of poetry and highbrow prose, whose work is repeatedly talked of as being highly disadvantageous for publishers, since her books are as unprofitable to print as they are highly critically acclaimed. *The Achilles Statue* is, however, the best-seller she puts out several months after meeting for the last time with her husband and cook. The short story opens on the list of revenue-driving activities connected with the launch of her detective novel: continuous reprinting in the UK and America, translations, dramatization for the stage and for the screen, raging reviews and skyrocketing sales. Mrs. Albert Forrest does not feel and does not look like a Delilah: nobody’s hair is cut – although she briefly considers shingling her own hair into a fashionable crop (133-4) – nor is her desertion of serious literature in favour of the profitability of novelistic entertainment perceived as selling out. Maugham’s narratorial intervention shapes the scene crucially: the first-person intradiegetic character, who blends in almost seamlessly into an omniscient voice, is responsible for the deeply sarcastic flavour the piece gives out. Purportedly and insider into the London lit scene, the personified “I” lingers gladly onto the niceties of the drawing room furniture, the menus served at luncheons and teas, the gossip and the idle chat, the quoting of passages from newspapers reviews rather than quote or describe Mrs. Albert Forrester’s artistic work itself. The narrating voice belongs to a member of Mrs. Albert Forrester’s close circle of literati friends and is, presumably, a writer himself, yet he admits being bored by the lady’s intellectual tea parties, and is usually tipsy when he comes to attend them. His physical presence at her salons, however, clashes with the total omniscient mode of the second half of the short story. The opening sentence “I
suppose that very few people know how Mrs. Albert Forrester came to write *The Achilles Statue*" (121) directly challenges the concluding scene in which Mrs. Albert Forrester unequivocally avoids mentioning her trip to Lambeth and the origin of her lucky strike. The implication of a wider context, the air of affected familiarity, the ease characterizing the almost bodiless, virtually featureless voice of the simulated intradiegetic narrator/character creates a jarring effect when juxtaposed to total, undisputed omniscience. The speaking “I” also works as a reminder of the subjective perspective on the narrated occurrences, thus endangering its own voice’s reliability. The reader is confronted with a contradictory situation: a speaking “I” that grants accurate accounts of other people’s remembrances despite being swallowed by the objective omniscient mode of narration early on in the piece.

It is debatable whether the lack of any attempt to further fabricate a context for the speaking I and the switching of narrative modes count as flaws. Maugham never ventures to provide, by means of fictional quotation, specimens of his artist characters’ work (just as he shirks from attempting ekphrasis in *The Moon and Sixpence*), but resorts to describing their subject matter and their effects, imitating a sort of scholar’s or reviewer’s vocabulary. Nevertheless, readers have no means to judge the character’s work by themselves and are, consequently, forced to accept the narrator’s description of it as well as, most importantly, the “art” label he has put on it. Whether “telling” really is a weaker, safer narrative technique than “showing” art – which would require a double production of artworks – is questionable, but not crucial to the appreciation of this specific short story: the focus shifts away from the work, attention is then granted to its author, their daily living along with, or despite, the artwork they are producing, other people’s feedback and the production circle it inevitably gets tangled in. “The Creative Impulse” could very well stand for a mockery of readers who seldom venture to express opposed opinions, let alone choosing to pick up an unfashionable read, as well as a way to gauge a creative process per se. Besides suggesting unreliability in the narrative itself, this recurrent device is likely to underscore how the general reading public unquestionably embraces tastemakers’ verdicts and automatically swings along with cultural trends. Ultimately, on the one hand Maugham mocks the stale, indoor realm inhabited by the professionals of the arts and culture fields – who are revealed, in the end, to be more concerned with cakes and wine than with books – along with the commodification of literature for the masses. However, on the other hand he appears to claim for his prose the same defining power
that is usually entrusted to cultural decision-makers: he asks his readers to believe blindly in his concept of “good art”.

Therefore Maugham’s Künstlerroman-like stories seems to be more about the pragmatic facets of art-making than affected by aesthetic judgments. Ironically, intellectual merit is meant to look unimportant in its depiction. What receives full attention is, however, the gossip and the food; both themes are treated so as to prove uncommonly silly, almost as if readers were to share Mr. Forrester’s perspective on his wife’s witty luncheons, so much so that it does not appear altogether surprising when he eventually reveals how her intellectual circle and ambition have always bored him stiff: “the fact is, my dear, you’re dull” (147). Maugham prefers to record the urban development of arts and culture, thus profiling a sort of “cultural archipelago”: an indoor environment made up of dinner parties, networking and mentorships, hence a precise description of the mechanisms behind publishing and the cultural industry at large. The undercurrent tension between social classes is constant: the intelligentsia is shown actively setting boundaries against the “man on the street” (130), the category to which “the Philatelist” (131) Mr. Albert Forrester and the cook Mrs. Bulfinch belong, since they enjoy reading entertaining detective novels in which ladies in evening dresses and diamonds are stabbed at the heart, or respectable family solicitors are found lying dead in Hyde Park (147-8). “Give the highbrow the chance of being lowbrow without demeaning himself and he’ll be so grateful to you, he won’t know what to do” (147) and “If you can give the masses a good thrilling story and let them think at the same time that they are improving their minds you’ll make a fortune” (147) are the previsions made by Albert Forrester whose ironic tone barely blunts a disenchanted representation of literature as mere profitable entertainment. Besides, caution with money links the female characters together: The Achilles Statue does solidify Mrs. Albert Forrester’s economic situation, and it concludes the process of emancipation she has been obliged to go through, from learning to do the housekeeping herself, to becoming aware of her income. Her situation is absolutely opposed to Mrs. Bulfinch’s, who is “very independent-like” (145) and has always been a savvy manager of her money and properties, and even to Miss Warren’s, a kind of prototype unpaid intern, who pours tea at Mrs. Forrester’s parties and types her manuscripts, while somehow managing to scrap up a living. Maugham hence chooses to tell the stories of women whose lives are shaped by vital needs and the force of individual circumstances rather than by their will or aspirations. These women are diametrically opposite to, for instance, Virginia
Woolf’s surrogate-author in her 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*, the woman intellectual whose yearly five-hundred pounds legacy allows her to dedicate her time freely and entirely to art and research. Their predicaments confirm Woolf’s fundamental statement: art depends on material stability to come into being. After listing the unrewarding “chief occupations that were open to women before 1918” (Woolf 43) – such as addressing envelopes, making artificial flowers and reading to old ladies – Woolf continues:

[...] what still remains with me as a worse infliction than [hardness of work and difficulty of living on earned money] was the poison and fear and bitterness which those days bred in me. [...] always to be doing work that one does not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning, not always necessarily perhaps, [...] and then the thought of that one gift which it was death to hide – a small one but dear to the possessor – perishing and with it my self, my soul – all this became like a rust eating away the bloom of the spring, destroying the tree at its heart. (43-4)

In spite of the fact that Mrs. Forrester’s and Mrs. Bulfinch’s circumstances mark the beginning of success stories – women who have crafted their independence through work – one cannot help but wonder what has become of pallid Miss Warren after she has run away shrieking with laughter (137).

3.2. “The Colonel’s Lady”: the Philistines

Maugham’s curiosity with writing ladies leaks over “The Colonel’s Lady”, in which he tackles a different facet of the same theme, but develops the story on opposed premises: the sudden rise to fame of an obscure writer of avant-garde verse. Unlike Mrs. Albert Forrester, whose Christian name is never revealed, “The Colonel’s Lady”’s character benefits from a more detailed biographical overview. Evie Peregrine is thought of by her husband as a “sad disappointment” (221)⁸: despite being a flawless manager of the house, “a lady” (221), and having dutifully provided good looks and a considerable dowry upon marrying, she has not had any children. Colonel Peregrine

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interprets the uncommunicativeness between himself and his partner as a natural drifting apart of two people who don’t find each other very interesting (222). He praises Evie’s temperament, but merely to describe how her particular blend of excellent manners, good education, extreme discretion and deep reticence have spared him from having to deal with scenes and quarrels; the Colonel must “admit that she’d never bothered him” (222). They sit at opposite ends of a large table, exchange niceties such as he cutting the twine around the parcel she has just received, she not forcing him to read the book he has just found out she has written, unless he really wishes to. Relieved by the fact that Evie has chosen her maiden name, Eva Katherine Hamilton, to sign her debut poetry collection – so that no “unheard of penny-a-liner” should make fun of her effort in the papers (223) – the Colonel heads to his studio, where he undertakes a shallow and partial reading of When Pyramids Decay. When Evie’s book quickly becomes a best-seller, the Colonel finds he has to tackle with increasingly pressing questions concerning his wife, and he is asked and offered opinions about her work, which is “selling like hot cakes. And it’s damned good” (223). Evie’s accomplishment is antipodal to “The Creative Impulse”’s Mrs. Albert Forrester’s: she gets immediate and, allegedly unexpected, commercial and critical success for a highbrow work of lyrical content. She and her husband get caught early on in the whirlpool of the publishing industry: glamorous parties in London, meetings with reviewers, outlandish flowers, photo shoots, invitations from neighbouring pseudo-intellectual country gentry, the sale of rights to foreign publishers.

For once, Maugham’s point of view never flinches: omniscience is kept up throughout, free indirect speech employed deftly, its focus, however, only fixed on the Colonel’s perspective. Colonel Peregrine roams through the whole story without ever grasping what happens around him: he does not pay sufficient attention, he links facts and consequences late, he does not believe and, most importantly, does not wish to. His indifference, although amusing, screens readers’ view over the action: Evie’s present experience as a successful writer is, possibly, left even more opaque than her reported, fictionalized (although ultimately unexplained) past illicit love story is. Colonel Peregrine desires no higher praise than to be called a jolly good fellow (221), he is a staunch Conservative and a diligent administrator of his estate, and loves few things more than fishing and hunting. He does not think much of When Pyramids Decay: its irregular and unrhymed lines do not comply with his conception of poetry – “That’s not what I call poetry,’ he said” (222) – informed by F.D. Haman’s classic elementary
school textbook poem “Casabianca” and a vague remembrance of the opening line in Thomas Gray’s “The Bard”, as well as the notion of having read, sometime at Eton, half of Henry V. The Colonel counts up the fourteen lines of the pieces headed Sonnet, sighs “Poor Evie” (223) then puts the unfinished book down. Only a few weeks after, exasperated by a comparison drawn between his wife’s work and Sappho’s, and later irked by the prying looks he collects from party-goers, he would have to walk into a Piccadilly bookstore and ask for another copy of the same book, finally resolved to read it through.

The drafting of “The Colonel’s Lady” has been a lengthy one; Maugham’s autobiographical A Writer’s Notebook contains entries which can be connected with subsequently published work, and mentions of “The Colonel’s Lady” date back to 1901 (Whitehead 202). The brief note thus runs:

They were talking about V.F. whom they’d all known. She published a volume of passionate love poems, obviously not addressed to her husband. It made them laugh to think that she’d carried on a long affair under his nose, and they’d have given anything to know what he felt when at last he read them. (Writer’s Notebook 80)

The revised short story, however, was first published forty years later, in 1947, in Maugham’s collection Creatures of Circumstance (Whitehead 186-7). It contains clear temporal references: the opening line “All this happened two or three years before the outbreak of the war” (220) and ensuing brief mentioning of the titles the Colonel has gained while serving for the Welsh Guards during “the last war” (220); all this contributes to date with considerable precision Mrs. Peregrine’s poetic production. It can be tempting to align E. K. Hamilton’s poetics to the trends promulgated by the Modernist circle, especially in the light of Maugham’s sarcastic treatment of the same. Chapter II of The Moon and Sixpence, for instance, reads like a manifesto of sorts, a bold rebuff of literary fashions. It appealingly voices Maugham’s refusal to side with wartime young intellectual cliques through the novel’s sketchy narrator figure:

I have read desultorily the writings of the younger generation. It may be that among them a more fervid Keats, a more ethereal Shelley, has already published numbers the world will willingly remember. I cannot tell. I admire their polish – their youth is already so accomplished that it seems absurd to speak of promise – I marvel at the felicity of
their style; but with all their copiousness (their vocabulary suggests that they fingered Roget’s *Thesaurus* in their cradles) they say nothing to me: to my mind they know too much and feel too obviously; I cannot stomach the heartiness with which they slap me on the back or the emotion with which they hurl themselves on my bosom; their passion seems to me a little anaemic and their dreams a trifle dull. I do not like them. I am on the shelf. I will continue to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. But I should be thrice a fool if I did it for aught but my own entertainment. (12-3)

While it is viable to read in Maugham’s rant the figures and the style of the Bloomsbury circle, it might be unavailing to force the same interpretation onto Mrs. Peregrine’s parable. Since Maugham does not provide quotes from *When Pyramids Decay*, but only indicates its irregular, unrhymed metre, the assumed lack of political engagement, and, of course, it crucial autobiographical bend therefore, do not seem to provide enough evidence of it being an actual avant-garde imitation, let alone a parody. Besides, the necessary placement of the events not earlier than the late 1930s, opens up a new perspective on the actual significance and cause for fictional success of *When Pyramids Decay*. Treglown attempts to link Maugham’s writing with the political context of the time, especially with the impact of the Suffrage Movement in the UK (35:32 – 37:47). Without implying that Maugham’s prose presents explicit pro-suffragettes elements, Treglown claims that his texts, “The Colonel’s Lady” especially, do show a pictures of paradigmatic feminine inequality and, simultaneously, depict women characters who are fully and consciously in charge of their actions, both artistic and personal (5:56 – 6:17). At the same time, however, there is a discernible contempt for work by women, mainly expressed in slightly mocking tones. For instance, the comparison the famous critic draws between Evie’s style and Sappho’s (225) echoes Mr. Albert Forrester’s warning that, with a fashionable hair crop, his wife might evoke “the Isle of Greece where burning Sappho loved and sung” (134): both remarks have disrupting effects on the plot and especially on the relationships between characters. The critic’s observation is “too much for George Peregrine and he got up” (225), resolved to get to the bottom of the matter and read the book himself; the Philatelist’s comment, on the other hand, casts him for the first time as a creditable character, not merely a stock character. However, the aforementioned built-in references actually alienate “The Colonel’s Lady” from the historical and literary framework that, if
convincingly applied to it, would inspire a reading of the short story as a counternarrative or a caricature of those very scenes, the Suffragettes and the Modernists.

Maugham’s detachment from historical verisimilitude, therefore, causes “The Colonel’s Lady” to herald principles of social and cultural equality between the sexes and issues of recognizance of intellectual and artistic production, but also to do so because Colonel Peregrine and Evie accomplish the status of theoretical case studies. Through Peregrine’s outlook, the cultural industry and its review-based system are ridiculed, literature and art failing media, a philistine commodity. The focus on Peregrine’s scepticism and disregard towards literature transcends the growing irony of his situation when, reflecting on his lover Daphne’s disinterest for his wife’s poetry, the Colonel says: “he was amused at the thought of her tackling that book because she had been told it was hot stuff and then finding it just a lot of bosh cut up into unequal lines” (224). The Colonel channels provoking concepts as well as performing disturbing behaviours: his absent-mindedness at times gets close to callousness. Nevertheless, Maugham arguably stores up some sympathy for him, in spite of the fact that (or maybe, indeed because) he entirely fails to understand his sensitive wife as well as his surroundings. Eventually, Peregrine’s conversation with the bookshop clerk during his visit to London seems to support The Moon and Sixpence’s banter against the experimentalisms of the new generations: “it’s the story they like. Sexy, you know, but tragic” (228) says the Cockney bookseller; Evie’s poetry is successful because it achieves to communicate an understandable meaning. However, in The Moon and Sixpence Maugham writes:

The writer should seek his reward in the pleasure of his work and in release from the burden of his thoughts; and, indifferent to aught else, care nothing for praise or censure, failure or success. (11)

If we were to attach to “The Colonel’s Lady” the aforementioned considerations, then the therapeutic effect of writing When Pyramids Decay on Evie would likely absorb any other merit of the work, despite it being “just a flash in the pan, if you know what I mean. She’ll never write anything else” (229). Entertainment and healing for the writer – Evie is praised for never letting off how unhappy she was and rather choosing to channel her depression into art (232-4) – and for the reader as well, finally confirm The
Moon and Sixpence’s narrator/character’s delight in writing “moral stories in rhymed couplets” (13).

Maugham manages to be at once conservative and broadminded with regards to his subject matter and characters. His trademark deadpan ending – the Colonel’s proves he has failed to develop empathy towards his wife and poses no objections to being called a fool (234) – chops the narrative and leaves many loose threads hanging. Who Evie’s lover was is not revealed (although an early allusion to a dead brother of the Colonel’s does have a suspicious lure), and most importantly, whether George understands who the man Evie refers to in her poetry was is also left undisclosed. An evident concern for the feminine identity in the arts and the attempt to feel the pulse of the artistic production itself – especially when it is conceived as an industry – is cleverly wrapped in a narrative perspective which, because of its inherent limited scope, is exceptionally unqualified to provide ultimate answers as well as sufficient evidence. “‘We only have men’s words for that’” (233) replies George’s solicitor to his claim that women, unlike men, do not crave for companionship, love or sex: the blatant inexperience and irrelevance of the spokesperson’s stance exceeds unreliability, its ironic backlash, then, hits on the short piece’s very significance within the literary corpus rather than on the characters or the extradiegetic categories they stand for.

3.3. “Daisy”: the Artist as a Young Woman

Back in the Ashenden trials, early on in the Anastasia Alexandrovna episode within “Mr. Harrington’s Washing”, the free indirect speech looped into Ashenden’s train of thought takes on a flippant tone to draw analogies between real-life situations and literary cases:

Ashenden remembered Rosmelsholm. In his day he had been an ardent Ibsenite and had even flirted with the notion of learning Norwegian so that he might, by reading the master in the original, get the secret essence of his thought. He had once seen Ibsen in the flesh drink a glass of Munich Beer. (Collected Short Stories 3 208)

The comparison between Henrik Ibsen’s play Rosmelsholm and the melodramatic circumstances developing around Ashenden is, however, only implied: Ashenden finds
himself at a turning point in his affair with Anastasia Alexandrovna when they must get to a decision, whether to come out as a couple or break up. Still the resonances with Rebecca West’s catastrophic revelation of amorality appear, possibly, only grounded in the common theme of suicide (only suspected in Maugham, unlike in Ibsen) and illicit love (which is developed to tragic heights in Ibsen, but watered down to a farce in Maugham). Maugham’s interest in and admiration for the work of Henrik Ibsen has long been spotted, particularly in the study of his theatrical production; Seward Fielden expressly links Maugham’s best group of comedies – those in which he argues that the problem play is blended with the comedy of manners (143) – to the Ibsenite influence on his theatre. The seriousness and the dreariness enfolding Maugham’s direct satires, Seward Fielden argues, not only do not hamper commercial audience’s attention, but help making the most of their moralizing rationale. This is deemed possible because two opposing tendencies in drama seem to merge:

In the comedy of manners, society rules supreme and it is the renegade or the eccentric who is chastised […]. In the play of ideas of Ibsen and Shaw, it is society – the “damned compact minority” – that is always wrong, and it is the renegade or the eccentric, flaunting conventions at every turn, who is exalted. It is in this sense than Maugham is an Ibsenite even when writing high comedy. (148)

The difficulties critics find in classifying Maugham’s theatrical work into specific genres – if it is comedic, what sort of comedy is he making up? – can arguably extend to his short stories repertoire, especially if we take into account the bulk whose drafting date is uncertain. Supposedly, these texts belong to Maugham’s debut years, which incidentally coincide with the launch of his playwriting career: the period ranging from the late 1890s to the mid 1920s. “Daisy” is one of the two short stories rookie Maugham submitted, in 1896, to a cheap fiction series, the Pseudonym Library published by T. Fisher Unwin; initially it faced rejection, only to be later printed in the collection Orientations, which came out in 1899 (Whitehead 21).

“Daisy”9 is structured according to a seemingly theatrical arrangement, it is divided into fifteen chapters, tableaux of sorts, each dealing with a very specific scene, and also mentions theatre and the life of performers among its key subjects. Crucially,

the short story’s very structure resists being pigeonholed into a clear-cut genre. The plot is straightforward and can easily pass as facile moral fable: Daisy Griffith, the beautiful and cultured daughter of the village carpenter, elopes to London with a married cavalry officer. Her family denies her help when she is in need and rejects her as a relation; as a result Daisy starts working as a prostitute, then moves up to become an actress and singer in a touring troupe. Years later, however, the Griffiths find themselves in desperate need of money and consequently attempt to reconnect with the daughter they had cast out, whom in the meantime has become Lady Ously-Farrowham by marriage. The story ends on the private talk between a sulky Daisy and her husband, which happens right after she has met her family for the last time and has agreed to provide for their living: Daisy asserts that she hopes she will make a good wife to him. The reminiscences with Ibsen’s theatre of ideas and especially with Rebecca West’s exposure in *Rosmelsholm* are, at once, identifiable and diverging; ultimately, French critic Paul Dottin points how Maugham distances himself from Ibsen: “According to Maugham, the era of realist, prose theatre seemed gone: ‘Ibsen lead it to its perfection and, in so doing, killed it’” (234). In Act Four Rebecca gets to show her authentic nature and she tells her version of the reasons that lead her to come to Rosmelsholm and explains the nature of her relationship with Johannes Rosmer but, crucially, must pass away once she has ended her confession. On the contrary, Daisy is shut inside other people’s narrative of herself, but, by cutting all claims to meaningful relationships, both social and emotional, she wins a kind of freedom for herself, a chance to survive, possibly to thrive. On the whole, the unresolved fading out over Daisy’s fate at the end of the story, is arguably challenging to Dottin’s assumption that “Maugham has often been reproached for not being able to prolong his characters’ existence beyond the final scene” (248).

Pfeiffer pools a series of narrative devices Maugham uses – intersections of stories, a narrative frame that tells how he came to know the core story, a tendency to expand descriptions – and classifies them as responses to feeble plots (“when he hadn’t much story to tell” are Pfeiffer’s exact words), a pattern that “not only plumps a meagre story, it also lends verisimilitude” (194). “Daisy”’s structure, however (similarly to “Miss King”’s) seems to exceed Pfeiffer’s categories: the overall feel is that focus is off-centre and timing persistently deferred. Daisy, the purported protagonist, is allowed exclusive and direct coverage only in the fifteenth and final instalment of the short story (612-3), together with a brief restriction on her perspective at the end of chapter seven
(595) – she is shown looking out of the window as her brother leaves – in both occasions she hardly utters a few sentences and weeps for most of the time. Daisy’s characterization builds on the reading of her letters, her brother’s exclusive outlook during the aforementioned encounter in London, but mainly through the village gossip and some private conversations between her closest relatives. It does not look as if Maugham did not have “enough story”: on the contrary, the trials of a nonconforming woman, who survives working in late Victorian sex trade, carves out an acting career and rises as the top performer in her touring company to eventually tie the knot with the collective’s wealthy patron, sounds just like the juicy storyline of a smash hit literary product. It is also a theme that is familiar enough, one that is closely knit with the long tradition of variably depicted female heroines of the Anglophone canon. Dottin describes Maugham’s theatre and prose heroines as “impulsive, superbly ignorant of social rules” (256), arguing that their “only, so-called quality is that of wanting something, for better or for worse” (248), while somehow appeasing his charge when stating that it is “blind fate” that moves Maugham’s protagonists, who are, “in general, determined like those in Greek theatre” (256). Daisy then, among many other similarly construed female characters, is a perfect mix of strong will, adverse circumstances and wavering fortune. Her story might call to mind Virginia Woolf’s imaginary portrayal of Shakespeare’s sister of genius, Judith (Room 54-6), only with a happy ending (Woolf has Judith, pregnant and unfulfilled in her ambitions, to take her own life instead) and a more fitting background education. In Mrs. Griffith’s words:

It’s her father who brought it about. He would have her take singing lessons and dancing lessons. The Church school was good enough for George. It’s been Daisy this and Daisy that all through. [...] I didn’t want her brought up above her station, I can assure you. It’s him who would have her brought up as a lady; and see what’s come of it! (587)

Despite Daisy’s patchy characterization, it is tempting to identify her as a distinctively twentieth-century made-up projection of the late Victorian woman, a figure that could have a lot in common with, for example, John Fowles’ unruly Sarah Woodruff in The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969), or even Michel Faber’s cultured prostitute Sugar in The Crimson Petal and The White (2002), and, especially within the Maughamian oeuvre, Cakes and Ale’s lovingly dissolute writer’s wife Rosie Driffield. It is not by
chance that Daisy can evoke much belated novel heroines, daring women who inhabit a carefully researched and reassembled nineteenth century, crafted in hindsight so as to resonate with a specific post-feminist cultural shift. Unsurprisingly, Daisy appears more likely to shock or irk than to inspire sympathy in Maugham’s contemporaries; for instance Cordell notes, rather convincingly, how “the story lacks fairness – the virtuous people have all the disagreeable qualities and the sinners have too much charm and generosity” (144). Moreover, he claims that “‘Daisy’ has a shocking ending: a former prostitute, unrepentant, is left wealthy and not particularly unhappy. This was a bold ending in nineteenth-century fiction” (Cordell 144). It is left uncertain whether the shock is due to Daisy’s luck despite her wayward past or to the fact that she somehow manages to be “unrepentant” and “not particularly unhappy” at the same time. A feminist reading of “Daisy”, however, is to some extent jeopardised by the short story’s formal shape: all the aforementioned discussion concerning Daisy’s characterization exists on a purely theoretical level, since the story has more to do with a caustic comedy of manners than with a Dickensian tale of one hero. The passage about Daisy’s upbringing quoted above, in fact, highlights the bias tainting all information concerning Daisy. Whitehead correctly signals Maugham’s bovarism in crafting a heroine that manages to escape a seaside village ennui (the scene is set in Blackstable, a Kent resort inspired by Maugham’s childhood Whitstable), but, above all, he points out that “interest focuses on the reactions of the church-going community to the elopement of a local girl” (22) and that “Maugham does not attempt to describe realistically Daisy’s melodramatic fall and rise” (22).

Yet again, it is not that there is not enough story in “Daisy”, but is the perspective on the events, warped as it appears, that wriggles away from telling the plot fully. The story only chronicles the village occurrences, such as Miss Reed’s panting run uphill to chat about the Griffiths’ latest misfortune during mass (580-2) or the vicar’s sermon against Daisy, delivered “hinting at scandal in the matter of the personal columns in newspapers, and drawing a number of obvious morals” (588). Maugham signals the story’s turning point by flipping the villagers’ ethical mood, hence neatly reversing the power relations between characters, when he has Mrs. Gray and Miss Reed, Blackstable’s newsmongers, to rebuke Mrs. Griffith for her “most unforgiving spirit” (602), adding that, considered the treatment she has reserved Daisy, she is neither a good mother nor a good Christian, and her husband’s financial troubles “a judgement of Providence” (602). The farcical element, however, subtly acquires a sadder tone
when Mr. Griffith is shown assuming the rumours are well-grounded, thus forsaking his daughter twice, first when she is most in need and even more decisively later, once she has gained a position that allows her to help them. “They made me write the letter” (610) is how he greets his daughter, whom has come solely on account of his request, thus re-establishing the Griffith’s prideful superiority against Daisy – regardless the fact that they accept her money – only to succeed in alienating her forever from the family. Indeed, the mode of narration is deliberately uninteresting, almost petty, an obvious reinforcement of the rewriting process Daisy undergoes and which bespeaks the story’s authentic satirical intent, namely, to reveal the schadenfreude of the pious Blackstable people (Whitehead 23). Overall, “Daisy” gets closer to the “Chekhovian school” Cordell dubs to group the “plotless story, perhaps only delineating a mood” (142), than to the distinctly Maupassant-inspired “stories of incident” (142) Maugham customarily pens. By meticulously excluding direct access to the actions and thoughts of the titled protagonist of the piece, and having her struggles filtered through the grudging people Daisy has escaped from instead, Maugham crucially affects the story’s potential. It is not the plot or the subject that stand out, but the narrative itself, its perceptual scope particularly, hence representing, perhaps, the closest Maugham gets to metafiction.

Seymour Chatman carefully splits the concept of “perspective” in its trifold meaning: a physical viewing, a conceptual filter and an individual position (151-2): in narrative texts, he deduces, “point of view is the physical place or ideological situation or practical life-orientation to which narrative events stand in relation” (153). Besides, Chatman clarifies that “point of view is in the story […] but voice is always outside, in the discourse” (154), perhaps as an additional reminder that the ambiguity between narrator’s and character’s utterances must not be accountable for conflating the two. However, “Daisy” seems to defy Chatman’s statement that “point of view does not mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression in made” (153): by limiting the expression to geographically and culturally narrow Blackstable, in fact, Maugham does indeed convey voice through perspective, but does not appear to (be able to or want to) craft narrative voice so as to overcome perspective. The consequences of voice’s subaltern state to perspective in “Daisy” primarily affect style, but, fundamentally, influence the story’s characterization and significance. Since its object (Daisy) and events (her daring life) come across in terms of Blackstable folks’ jaundiced rationalization, Daisy cannot exist, in readers’ minds, as
anything more than a wicked upstart, because she only lives in the gossip of Miss Reed, in the rejection of Mr. Griffith and in the envy of her brother and mother. The effect is remarkable, but imperfect, given the passing focalizations on Daisy I mentioned early on: curiously, Daisy weeps in both occasions, the first time we see her at the window, dejected by her lover and brother; the second, she seeks comfort in her husband after leaving Blackstable for good. Still, the overall result is impressive: an engaging storyline sacrificed to an experiment with form by an early crafter of the literary trade.

3.4. “The Alien Corn”; or, the Talentless Artist

So far Maugham's women have proven capable of finding a way to reconcile themselves with their circumstances, however shattered their identity or uneasy the process may be: Evie Hamilton receives confirmation of her personal talent outside of her marriage, Mrs. Forrester learns how to earn her living, Daisy can rightfully cut ties with her family for good now that she has built a life for herself, and Giulia Lazzari is, in the end, free to go. When their respective stories come to a close, readers leave them able, and willing, to function in society, all of them are perfectly aware of the necessity of negotiation. George Bleikogel, better known as George Bland, however, is crucially excused from partaking the women's redemptive outcomes. He is one of the few suicidal characters\(^\text{10}\) in Maugham's work, and the only one who succeeds in taking his life together with Olive Hardy in “The Book-Bag” (the British beauty isolated in the colonies who kills herself when her brother, and incestuous lover, arranges her meeting with his new wife). George’s suicide, however, gets across to readers as the direct consequence of his realizing that his artistic ambition is ungrounded. He is, in

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\(^{10}\) Maugham probably finds the non-tragic more compelling than self-procured death. Failed suicides and awkward attempts to live regardless of it all seem to provide him with better scope for his short stories. Examples of unexpected, non-tragic stories are Thomas Wilson's in “The Lotus Eater”, who is unable to stick to his suicidal plan when he runs out of money in Capri, and brokenhearted bacteriologist Walter Fane in the novel The Painted Veil, who debatably attempts to kill both himself and his unfaithful wife Kitty with a trip to cholera-ridden inland China. Moreover, Mr. Harrington’s violent death during the Muscovite uprising can, debatably, stand in the line of a foretold self-sabotaging attitude demonstrated throughout “Mr. Harrington’s Washing”.
fact, a rare example in Maugham's work of a struggling artist who is allowed to suffer and perish for art. George is the heir to an ambitious, wealthy family of Jewish descent whose passing as a landowning English household is quite convincing, but, as the narrative often underlines, not fully established. His parents, Adolf and Miriam Bleikogel, have dropped their German surname and changed their names to more English-sounding Sir Adolphus and Lady Muriel Bland, and dream of their eldest son to become “an English gentleman”: an accomplished sportsman who can dutifully cover his father's seat in the House of Commons. George’s *hamartia*, therefore, is fully embodied in his sudden announcement that his only wish is to become a professional pianist. George tricks his family into allowing him to settle in Munich, Germany, where he intends to fully devote himself to practice the piano. However, their arrangement comes with a requirement: after two years of study, George is to come back to England and perform in front of a professional musician, who will declare whether George is truly talented or not. If he is, then the Blands will help him in his art by any means; however, if he is found lacking, George shall then renounce his dreams and give in to his parents’. “The Alien Corn”\(^{11}\) is yet another one of Maugham’s Chinese-box stories: his intradiegetic narrator is the customarily unnamed professional novelist and man-about-town. The speaking narrator is better developed than in “The Creative Impulse”, here it is an example of Maughamian fully-fledged character whose point of view is essential in conveying the effect of verisimilitude. In this specific short story his presence is particularly conspicuous, and goes slightly beyond that of the mere witness and teller. George Bland’s tale, in fact, struggles to affirm itself as the primary storyline, given that the narrator’s account of his friendship with George’s grand-uncle, Ferdy Rabenstein, takes up almost half of the narrative (and also branches off to include small sketches). The account of George’s downfall rather owes its prominence to the seriousness of its subject matter, while the introductory portrait of eccentric Ferdy arguably stands out for its descriptive accuracy and perceptible greater insight (and possibly betraying a deeper interest on Maugham’s part for nominal narratives).

Customarily, it has been the theme of Judaism as a mark of social and personal identity woven throughout the story that caught critics’ attention, and deservedly so, considered the title of the piece. The curious image of the “Alien Corn” can be found in

\(^{11}\) All page numbers quoted for “The Alien Corn” refer to the text in *Collected Short Stories Volume 2*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
line 67 of John Keats’ 1819 “Ode to a Nightingale”: “Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn” (145), first within a list of legendary situations Keats imagines his ethereal nightingale to have sung to soothe people’s soul. While Keats enhances’ biblical Ruth’s uneasiness as a foreign worker in Bethlehem, a gleaner in Boaz’ wheat field, Maugham’s seems to draw upon Ruth’s significance within the Old Testament as the foremost convert to Judaism, hence deepening the implications of George’s rejection of his rootless Englishness in exchange for a wilful embracement of his German origins and Jewish heritage. The religious underpinning within “The Alien Corn” has definitely been the most widely explored, especially considered the paucity of similar treatments of Jewish themes in Maugham’s work. Cordell, for example, seems to take in the dramatic conclusion of the short story quite lightly – although he records that George’s “pathetic failure” “moves us to pity” (159) – but aptly summarises it as “a suave and wise account of a Jewish family trying desperately to smother their racial characteristics and become entirely Gentile-English” (159). However, it is worthwhile to take notice of the apparition date of piece, anthologised in Six Stories Written in the First Person Singular from 1931, which is likely to confer “The Alien Corn” a peculiarly foreboding feeling if its reading is informed of the increasing popularity of the German Nazi Party and its burgeoning anti-Semitic rhetoric in the early 1930s. Perhaps awareness of the historical context of the time can influence readers’ reception of an artsy young man who flees his home country, fulfils his creative, bohemian ambitions and rekindles his heritage at a time when being a German Jew is becoming highly problematic. It is debatable whether this link can highlight, albeit implicitly, a contradictoriness of sorts in the situation portrayed, to the detriment of George’s credit as a tragic character and, superficially, to Maugham’s sensitiveness, or rather, willingness to allow his short pieces to mirror real-life political circumstances. Maugham’s reasoning of Jewishness and Englishness is, however, rooted too deeply into hackneyed stereotypes and cultural tòpoi to, one would hope, be taken seriously. Maugham painstakingly mentions physical details such as weight, fleshiness of noses, what makes fair hair legitimately blond, and also brings in Muriel’s nape of the neck as a racial indicator (97). Yet, the “study of a Jewish family of great wealth” (Dodd 193) is promptly broadened as “the resulting tragedy is a deeper sounding of those strange, compelling mid-sea currents of race than you might easily suppose” (Dodd 193-4).
Just as the “Jewish” theme does not absorb George’s individual trial, unsurprisingly, his artistic temperament magnetises comparisons: Calder ascribes him to the other Maughamian artistic types, brilliant painter Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*, and Philip Carey’s untalented artistic friends, Fanny Price, Miguel Ajuria and Clutton in *Of Human Bondage* (146). A resemblance further remarked by Whitehead, who goes as far as to find an umbrella definition for the totality of these works, “the theme of the Artist who Failed to Make the Grade” (175). Furthermore, notions of artistic fruition take up as much importance in the narrative as the display of artistic ambition. The covert leitmotif that links the Ferdy Rabenstein vignette to the Blands’ breakdown – besides blood relation – is their shared instinctual and authentic appreciation of the arts. Ferdy, for instance,

liked to patronize the arts and would take a great deal of trouble to get commissions for some young painter whose talent he admired or an engagement to play at a rich man’s house for a violinist who could in no other way get a hearing. (90)

During George’s decisive performance in front of his family, the narrator/character notes how “music was in the blood of all of them, all their lives they had heard the greatest pianists in the world, and they judged with instinctive precision” (117). This is a remark that doubtfully clarifies the Blands’ reactions to George’s playing described just previously: Ferdy’s “look of faint surprise” (117) to his sister, Muriel’s eyes that “dropped, and for the rest of the time stared at the floor” (117), Sir Bland’s face going “pale, betray[ing] something like dismay” (117). It is uncertain whether Lea Makart’s negative judgement comes as a surprise to the Blands; readers, on the other hand, must abide with the version of a narrator who, in his own words, “know[s] very little of music, and that is one of the reasons for which [he has] found this story difficult to write” (110) and merrily tells an anecdote about that time he went to Munich’s Wagner Festival and did not hear a single note of *Tristan und Isolde* because, utterly uninterested, he spent the evening thinking of plots and characters for his own writing (110).

Although there is not enough evidence to suggest that the narrator’s incompetence grants the benefit of doubt towards George’s talent – above all, because of George’s undisclosed admission of his limitations when he accepts Lea Makart’s verdict (118) – it is interesting, however, to notice how Maugham plays with a querulous
narrator/character who nonetheless subtracts vital information to the straightforward understanding of the events. The very stylistic relevance of the blunt ending within the whole short story is controversial. Louis Kronenberger describes how:

There is a momentary catch in our throats at the end of the “The Alien Corn”; the next moment we feel emotionally duped. And once the spell is broken, it is broken forever; nothing in the world can make us believe Mr. Maugham’s contrived illusion again. (281)

Later in his review Kronenberger goes on to grieve the “emotion” and “intimate reality” (282) Maugham leaves out of his prose to make room for “drama and suspense” (282). However, to claim that the concluding paragraph undermines the emotional commitment the story’s subject matter has construed, and demands from the reader, might appear, to some extent, excessive. Certainly, the consistent tone the narrator/character maintains throughout the descriptive Ferdy Rabenstein sketch is followed by the fluctuating narrative of the George Bland segment, culminating in an objectively omniscient up-close of the Blands when they are left to themselves, our smart novelist/chaperon having got on board of Lea Makart’s carriage. The quality of the conclusive shifts of narrative point of view is surely debatable. When they are alone, George refuses his father’s offer to go back to Munich and study another year, or go on a fully-sponsored grand tour, or even go for a walk the two of them; later Muriel and Adolphus turn down his mother’s plans to combine George’s marriage with a wealthy Jewess (119-20). It is in this passage that Maugham provides his most insightful and intimate details, going as far as stating how unusual it was for father and son to kiss, and that neither Sir nor Lady Bland would dare go against the dowager’s opinion concerning their offspring’s brides’ religion. What Kronenberger probably – and convincingly – finds fault with is how voice, so far lively and almost chatty, deliberately avoids spelling out the actual occurrences of George’s death and takes on a truly caustic, sinister tone:

When [the servants] went into the gun-room they found George lying on the floor shot through the heart. Apparently the gun had been loaded and George while playing about with it had accidentally shot himself. One reads of such accidents in the paper often. (120)
On the one hand, it is easy to find a justification for the arbitrary shift of perspective: just as the narrator enters the Blands’ heads, he can just as easily embody the talk of the town and quote the ensuing chit-chat based on newspapers clippings. On the other, the sudden dropping of all amiability on the narrator’s part can convey a rather creepy impression, let alone altering the tonal texture of the short story. Nevertheless, Maugham’s stylistic choice has at least one advantage: it dulls the horror of a self-inflicted death on a youth, even though it has been foretold with large advance (113). It allows space for doubt by simply tuning down the implications, thus evading too dramatic a conclusion. Arguably, the device is necessary in case readers wished to believe George had an accident while loading his gun, although he had stated his position clearly: “what’ll you do if she says you’re no good?” ‘Shoot myself,’ he said gaily” (113). The abruptness and alleged coldness of the conclusion, therefore, cannot undermine absolutely what has been disclosed about characters’ worldview and intentions. It certainly cools down the drama, but in no way does it appear to mock sentimentality. On the contrary, it functions so in order to avoid commotion, which is the very mood that what would certainly ruin the story’s growing sense of inevitability and foreboding, as well as its subtle tragic vein.

Still, is it legitimate to demand (and grant) such flexibility from a text? In the short stories analysed so far, especially those dealing with female characters, the limit appears to be searched for, securely delimited by focalization. Hence, the intelligibility of their predicament is, on purpose, formally shrunk; the skipping glimpses of explanation allowed to George’s position, conversely, bespeak a lot more of information. Suffice to note how the narrator/character bothers to reach George in Munich, experiences a day in the life along with him and eventually reports their confidential interview (108-13): George’s deep satisfaction with the penniless student’s life he leads, his eager acceptance of Jewishness, his bold statement “shoot myself” (113). Admittedly, the narrator/character thus closes the passage:

It seemed unnecessary for me to pay too much attention to what George said. It was the sort of nonsense a young man might very well indulge in when thrown suddenly among painters and poets. (113)

Still, despite the virtual indifference to the young man’s claims, George is nonetheless heard playing twice; the fact that his hands do not synchronise (111) and that he adds
too much strength and brio to Chopin’s “nervous melancholy” (117) do not refute the attention he has been granted, an interest shown towards his artistic potential that is both diegetic and extradiegetic. Giulia Lazzari’s dancing exists only in conversation, and hinted at as a cover for prostitution; Mrs. Forrester and Mrs. Peregrine’s pages are but reviewed, albeit positively, but never quoted; Daisy is basically only shown as she weeps. The openness towards and the care bestowed upon George by people, not only his family, make his lack of talent look all the more striking, since there is nothing an encouraging and sheltering environment can do to foster it. Here lies “The Alien Corn”’s controversial staple: George rejects life the moment he realises that, condemned to be nothing more than “a very competent amateur” (118), he cannot hope to join Lea Makart in the rank of those who “give the world significance” (118), but is bound to be the artists’ “raw material” (118). Hence, “The Alien Corn” reads as a space in which Maugham purposefully wonders what makes an artist a valuable one and, especially, what meaning comes attached to their practice: should only the elite produce and enjoy art? What does not reach, or even come close, to mastery or brilliance, should be discarded or aborted?

A choice such as George’s seems to directly contradict the conclusion Albert Camus comes to in his 1942 essay about suicide as a philosophical problem, The Myth of Sisyphus. Camus’ prerogative is that suicide is not the sole consequence to an individual’s newly acquired awareness of the gap between one’s quest and need for clarity, and the substantial meaninglessness of the world one lives in. Camus rejects prior philosophical systems that attempted to appease the paradox by bypassing human reasoning or human perception – hence committing “philosophical suicide” (39) through a “leap of faith” (34) – and advocates the “absurd man”’s capacity to recognise his limits and go on living even “without appeal” (64), accepting his powerlessness and marginal position in the world. Camus illustrates cases of absurd men “who think clearly and who have ceased to hope” (89) and get very close to the status of absurd hero that Sisyphus holds. First is Don Juan, a “conscious seducer” (70) whose quest for the absolute leads him to multiply his gesture ad infinitum until creating a life that is wholly made up of short-lived sensual joys (74). Second is the Actor, who wants to know all and live all the possible human lives, but ends up simulating superficially on the stage in the hope to achieve a fleeting fame (76-8). Third is the Conqueror, the individual whose total engagement with the realm of human relations (86) involves his rejection of thought in favour of action. Sisyphus’ standpoint, however, is exemplary
because “the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory” (117). The rock he relentlessly needs to push uphill only to see it roll down again, or better, the moment he “returns towards his rock, in that slight pivoting” (119), Camus argues, do have meaning in Sisyphus’ silent yet sensible worldview. Camus ends his essay by asking readers to “imagine Sisyphus happy” (119), a conclusion that is inherently bound with his previous claim that artmaking is what sustains the absurd man throughout his life, provided it refrains from explaining, and embarks in the description of worldly circumstances, and that the creator should “not prize his work” and “could repudiate it” (94). Camus employs Dostoyevsky as a case study and also cites other canonical writers to make his point (98), namely, that life is worth living because we can make art during and with it. In fact, he states that “the chaste man, the civil servant, or the President of the Republic” can “play the absurd” just as well as Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror; he claims “there are civil servants without screens” who are as at ease in their awareness just as Sisyphus is. Unfortunately, Camus never specifies what sort of art is worth producing and, above all, how individuals should relate to their creative impulses. He skims over concepts such as talent, apprenticeship, relevance, exposure, public fruition or profit that invariably affect creative production, regardless of level or field. He seems to be contented with implying that it is the act of creating itself that ought to matter as “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (119) as a way to expand on his previous precept “what counts is not the best living but the most living” (58). George’s situation seems akin to that of the Actor: because of the nature of his practice, he “succeeds or does not succeed” since “for him, not to be known is not to act, and not acting is dying a hundred times with all the creatures he would have brought to life or resuscitated” (76). Given that George craves a positive response to his performances – “the only thing in the world I want is to be a pianist” (119) – his suicide can likely be accounted to his inability to find solace in the mere act of playing the piano and enjoy the music composed by others. “The Alien Corn” hence comprises Camus’ pivotal concern – artmaking as an antidote to suicide – but touches on its very obscure drawback: the inability to find comfort in work that is not good, or not as good as one would hope or according to extraneous standards.

It is difficult to deny that George’s leap of faith into physical suicide indicates that he was far from reaching Camus’ absurd heroes’ control and understanding, the qualities that seem to distinguish, for instance, Ashenden, or even the speaking I of
“The Alien Corn”. Maugham heaves on a conceptual lacuna to shoehorn the concerns that pop up so often in his prose, especially his anxiety towards the line separating the excellent, pure art from for-profit creation. Maugham does not seem to simply ask whether George should be able to value the proficiency he has acquired through hard study and cherish being an expert and accomplished amateur musician. There is an inkling that George’s final gesture somehow captures, in a very disturbing snapshot, the lot shared by those who wished they had talent on their side, but just cannot be artists, and are aware of it. With George Bland’s downfall, Maugham once again demands his readers an aesthetic, non-ethic acceptance of his narrated universe. He carefully sheds only those details that would make his story univocal – in meaning and in genre – but maintains as much still-life minutiae as possible so as to deliver a rich, full description. He firmly refrains from commenting on the drama: whether George’s suicide is a spoiled, privileged child’s response to his first real disappointment, or a drastic refusal to partake with the trivial life of society, is up to readers. After all, there seems to be no reason not to believe that George really could, while playing with a loaded gun, have shot himself by accident.

3.5. “Gigolo and Gigolette”: Art, Superseded

George’s drama seems to come out through the filter of Maugham’s sarcastic storytelling, and develops on the implicit assumption that George’s spoiled nature and unwise youth blinded his reasoning. The anguish inherent to the crisis faced by Syd and Stella – the eponymous Gigolo and Gigolette – however, appears rooted in the unsettling and controversial notion that the opposite of death is not not living, but not owning money; therefore lacking the freedom to act and choose independently. Death threats lurk all over “Gigolo and Gigolette”12, and take up a whole range of shapes, the most obvious is Stella’s paralyzing terror to break her back against the pool’s floor when she dives. There also is an implicit, yet recurring, dread of physical hunger and anxiety towards perspective lack of means: the “English Lord and his Lady” (221) are willing to dine with whomever offers to pay for them; Syd recollects the week all he and

his wife had left to eat were “a hunk of bread each and a glass of milk” (233). The feeling of claustrophobia one gets out of reading “Gigolo and Gigolette” mirrors its characters' seemingly amputated choices, the contraction of their freedom looks critically marked by their affluence: lack or possess of money have an existential value, wealth then effectively becomes the foremost variable in shaping individual character. The setting is a casino in a nameless resort town on the French Riviera, arguably not the most fashionable one, given its staff’s disbelief at the influx of customers, which is unusually steady for July. The venue’s success is accountable to the entertainment number scheduled during the dinner service: Madam Stella’s spectacular dive from a height of sixty feet into a five-foot deep pool whose surface is set on fire. Stella Cotman, however, is far from being the character most desperately in need of money in the building. Maugham conjures a succinct party of marginal characters that roughly, but effectively, convey the grotesqueness of the ambiance. A sample of the restaurant’s regulars includes: a “gaunt Scotch woman, with a face like a Peruvian mask that has been battered by the storms of ten centuries”; “an Italian countess who was neither Italian nor a countess, but played a beautiful game of bridge”, and the Russian suitor of rich American widow Mrs. Barrett, who, while waiting to marry her, trades in “champagne, motor-cars, and Old Masters on commission” (221). The fact that the “press representative, a little haggard woman with an untidy head” (221) asks the guests to whisper their names also contributes to frame their pettiness. Meanwhile, the staff, whose duty is “to be civil to the rich and great” (220), meanwhile, is either only talked about in resignation – strict manager Paco Espinel dictates the contract provisions with the Cotmans – or, like Angelo the head waiter, admittedly select customers and seat them only on the condition that they do not dance (224-5). The supposedly unwelcomed guests are self-titled Count and Countess Penezzi, an elderly couple who now manages a low-end pension nearby, but has, in their prime, staged a very successful stunt in London: Mrs. Penezzi as “Flora, the 'uman cannon-ball” (226) would charm crowds at the London Aquarium for over a year round. The Penezzis wish to meet the star of the show and therefore engage in a slightly off-tune conversation at the bar with Syd and Stella: “Mrs. Penezzi was not vexed at finding that these young people had never even heard of her. She was simply amused” (228). The conversation obviously has a negative impact on Stella’s nerves and the remaining part of the short story focuses on the couple’s private discussion, with Syd trying to comfort Stella, who is too afraid to dive anymore.
The Cotmans are neither artists nor ordinary people, but nonconformists who linger in a grey area. They aim to attain the latter group's financial stability and seem to identify in their values, but try to achieve that status through the ideation, practice, performance and promotion of an entertaining show. The glitch is in their refusal or inability to supply anything more valuable than a momentary chill with their act – “it’s the most sick-making thing I’ve ever seen” (219) – which cannot be redeemed from the limitations of entertainment. The performance’s core morbidity makes up its distinctive appeal: “I want to be in at the death. She’s bound to kill herself one of these nights and I don’t want to miss that if I can help it” (220) says Sandy Westcott; a fact Stella is perfectly aware of: “what do they come and see me over and over again for? On the chance they’ll see me kill myself.” (230) she says. Maugham, however, knows his subject matter too well to force sympathy on readers via an exploitative husband-wife relationship. Syd Cotman is said to truly love and care for his wife, hence making up one of Maugham’s rare portraits of successful marital happiness:

And now, without warning, at the top of their boom, Stella wanted to chuck it. He didn’t know what to say to her. It broke his heart to see her so unhappy. He loved her more now even than when he had married her. He loved her because of all they’d gone through together; […] and he loved her because she’d taken him out of all that; he had good clothes to wear again and his three meals a day.” (233)

There is loyalty and mutual supportiveness between the Cotmans, a bond that looks similar in strength to the one between Flora and Carlo Penezzi, whose solidity inevitably heightens the hideousness of what they have to do for money. Maugham craftily watches over as two extremes clash in a cartoonish scene: the decadentism of gambling, a sense of grotesqueness inherent to excessive richness on one side; on the other end, the ridicule and the danger of the implausibly high diving board, that the Cotmans consider the only way out of deprivation, because it is unlikely that “jobs can be had for the asking” (233). Syd and Stella met while both working in French hotels: she, as a swimming instructress, he as an escort and dancing partner to old, wealthy ladies. Constantly down on their luck, and totally devoid of skills, but devoted to each other, they have always waded through life by pawning their belongings, doing mediocre ballroom acts and enrolling in dancing marathons. Maugham fosters the ambiguity surrounding Stella’s stunt: is her life really at risk? “Stella always said she
could dive in a saucer. It was just a trick” (233) Syd reports. In spite of Sandy Westcott reckoning that “she’s got to turn like a flash the moment she touches the water” (221) – and admitting that the reason he comes to see her dive over and over again “it’s the expression of her eyes. She’s scared to death every time she does it” (221) – the public holds true the view that “if there’s no danger there’s nothing to it, anyway. [...] it’s over in a minute. Unless she’s risking her life it’s the biggest fraud of modern times” (222). Danger, suspense, a potential shock therefore draw more genuine attention – and paying customers – than a display of expertise, the proof of hard-gained, much rehearsed athletic experience and knowledge.

Maugham holds on to the doubt by providing one of his finest specimens of narrative balance. Focalization and voice are consistent, control over point of view exemplarily achieved by means of an omniscient narration, so much so that for once Maugham discards his trademark characterized narrator and framing story. An objective, external narrative is the one that, in this context, seems to serve the purpose best: it allows characters the space to show themselves at their purest, their intentions and drives are rendered crystal-clear, any psychological plunge or intrusive focalization is made to look excessive and redundant. Each character is allowed a certain degree of sympathy which, however, is always balanced with a pinch of scorn, in line with Maugham’s customary sneer at his own creatures. No sides are taken and even the most despicable characters reveal enough weaknesses and dark sides to induce in readers some sort of understanding. Through its plainness, the text allots room for a specific and layered characterization of each of its profiles: enough detailing is provided so as to hint at personal tragedies, or at least ensure a smudge of existential drama to all of them. None, not even the hotel’s manager, is reduced to a flat stereotype. Still, “Gigolo and Gigolette” explores various kinds of fiction: the casino’s staff’s costly politeness, a service they only bestow upon the wealthy; the dining parties, their friendships only sustained by one of the participant’s preparedness to foot the bill; the short story’s own title, an homage to Syd’s gigolo years, his prime spent dancing and sleeping with lonesome, mature patronesses, all the way up to Stella’s diving knack. A peek into the artist’s, or diver’s, mind, however, it yet again denied: “you don’t know what it looks like from up there, the top of the ladder, when I look down at the tank” (229). Above all, the short story ends on Stella’s resolving utterance “I mustn’t disappoint my public” (234): reminded by her husband of their past scraping by in “lowdown joints” contesting in dance marathons (234), she ushers to get ready
for her scheduled second dive of the evening. Finally, Stella decides to go on with her show “tonight, and every night till I kill myself. What else is there?” (234). The story’s ending hence acquires a peculiarly disquieting feeling, since Maugham insistently denies to cast clarity over Stella’s authentic state of mind, and never concedes whether she really got a grip of her nerve and is effectively able to get back in the game. Is the contemplation of her body in the mirror, naked but for her stockings (234), the correlative of another epiphany – the second one after the eye-opening meeting with the forgotten “human cannon ball Flora” – this one time leading to her suicide? Readers’ inability to find an answer, or even a clue in the text, does not come as surprise, given the strictly physical terms Stella is described in: “a beautiful diver” and “a good ballroom dancer” (232); the owner of a good figure, “small, beautifully made, with legs long for her body and slim hips” (222), although the prettiness of her face, with its grey eyes, short brown hair and reddened lips, does not match her body’s (226). Maugham is, de facto, silencing the feminine point of view, but seems to do it because of a precise narrative strategy, namely, to maintain the final ambiguity concerning the title character’s reactions, rather than as a response to a specific gender bias. Therefore, to cloud the pivotal character’s say in the matter of her daily exposure to life-threatening danger as her sole source of income, for no other reason than to enthrall a bunch of bored gamblers, arguably acquires a whole new level of significance. It appears then, that even when Maugham’s narrative devices are kept down to their most basic structure, “Gigolo and Gigolette”’s almost zero narratorial intrusion is an example, they still, to a great extent, influence the narrative’s effects and contents’ reception on the readership.

Quoting George Bernard Shaw, Paul Dottin notes that:

Maugham’s comedies are, at first, pleasant: they but tickle the audience agreeably. Next, they become unpleasant in the sense that they contain too much truth and the tickles transform into scratches; later, these scratches will become injuries […]. (28)

Maugham has indeed a way to thread the tragic in a seemingly light textual environment, a tendency whose effects some readers may find remarkable, others cynic or commonplace: hopefully the analyses I have presented in this chapter provide evidence for the first. The conflict between voice and focus in “The Creative Impulse” – in which an omniscient overview of Mrs. Albert Forrester’s thoughts and recollections
swiftly absorbs the first-person speaking narrator – leads to consider the workings behind creative production and its public, commercial reception as worthwhile as any other more conventional attempt to ekphrasis or artist’s tale. In this piece, Maugham frees a space for the pragmatic sides of art-making – from the search for inspiration to the logistics of literary fame – and dares to downsize the objectivity of intellectual merit. Moreover, Maugham seems to sketch out an ironic urban planning of the arts, hence suggesting a tense social landscape in which economic dependency is, at once, a major hindrance and a formidable boost to feminine creativity, but, most importantly, cuts back on reinforcing the idea of literature as art. The unflinching narrative perspective that Maugham maintains throughout “The Colonel’s Lady” – an omniscient voice that is consistent in its exclusive focus on Colonel Peregrine’s experience – strongly impacts the quality and reliability of the information provided, and is able to steer the short story’s formal structure. Maugham, through the limited range of Peregrine’s grasp of his own and his wife’s circumstances, not only makes a case against feminine constrictive social roles by showcasing inequality, but also dismantles the short story’s capacity to convey a thought-provoking, informative plot. A similar device is seen in “Daisy”, whose third-person narrator strategically avoids focalization on the title-character, but seemingly embodies the small-town chitchat to the detriment of the exploration of Daisy’s coming-of-age trials. While Maugham seems to favour a sort of experimentalism in the aforementioned stories – a deliberate bending of the main storyline to prioritize secondary points of view – in “The Alien Corn” he again mixes two modes of narration, this time in a more orderly fashion than in “The Creative Impulse”. Ferdy Rabenstein’s witty profile is linked to the Bland family’s crisis and tragic climax, the suicide of the heir George, by the speaking I’s presence as witness. Despite exceeding the limits of narrative mimesis and coming to include several slips into obtrusive omniscience, which are arguably necessary to deepen characterization, the first-person account of the events is fully exploited to maintain some crucial lacunae (especially with regards to George’s real artistic talent). With “The Alien Corn”, Maugham arguably broadens the enquiry into the nature of creative processes he got underway with Daisy’s cutting her teeth as a pantomime actress and Evie Hamilton’s confessional poetry as a therapy for loneliness: George Bland’s tragedy indirectly asks what meaning individual artists could and should attribute to their practice, and gauges to what extent they would push their creativity and expectations. “Gigolo and Gigolette” hence serves as closing evidence of Maugham’s numerous impressions of art-making
and its fruition: its protagonist is a burnt-out performer who begs her husband to free her from her contractual bonds, since she has grown too afraid to hit the pool’s bottom. Stella performs a diving stunt that can either read as a sound, reliable trick or as a tangible threat to the athlete’s life, depending on the external narrator’s momentary focus, which, nevertheless, consistently excludes hers. The flawlessly omniscient narration skims over the couple’s continuous financial strains, but decisively refrains from explaining Stella’s decision to climb back on top of the diving board, proving once again how Maugham’s prioritizing of formal narrative aspects over intrigue, wholeness and gratification, eventually shapes the short story’s overall effect.

This chapter has attempted to challenge the assumption that Maugham’s straightforwardness in plot-construction makes him a boring read, in keeping with Dottin’s assertion that “superficial readers and spectators are victims of his simplicity, his naturalness, the plainness in style and dialogues” (258). On the contrary, Maugham does operate on the formal and stylistic level, and appears perfectly capable of twisting plotlines in a crafty way, for instance, by shifting the focus on secondary characters or channelling all the available information through a rather unreliable narrator. These devices manage to affect the short stories’ very subject matter and significance, the omissions Maugham drops about hint at a firmly rooted subtext that extends to his whole production, not just his body of short stories. His is a constellation of themes that originates in his analysis of the state of reading culture, and takes into account the increasing speed in the production cycle and the supply chain of reading and cultural materials. It comprises Maugham’s take on the life of the artist – within society and in private – and appears to display a vivid concern for the ways artists come to terms with the gap between their preferences and capacities against the public’s expectations from their work. Maugham’s quest eventually encompasses the continuous evolution of the role of women and their own attempts to partake in the cycle of production of consumption of art: his female characters become striking interpreters of the pains, failures and achievements, visions, limitations and rejections Maugham eagerly enquires and describes in his fictional prose work.
Conclusion

The title character in Maugham’s short story “Jane” is a middle-aged woman who “managed (as so few people do) to look exactly what she was. You could never have thought her anything in the world but the respectable relict of a North-country manufacturer of ample means” (Short Stories 326). Jane is modest, reserved, enjoys few things outside of knitting and visiting her only relation, her sister-in-law in London, much to the latter’s discomfort. “She’s worthy, she’s dowdy, she’s provincial” (323) is how Mrs. Tower describes Jane to Maugham’s personified narrator and socialite personality. Jane, however, soon makes a reputation for herself: she marries a man half her age and starts dressing eccentrically – she sports short hair and an eyeglass – but always with flawless taste. Above all, Jane becomes famous for her humour. The secret to Jane’s wit remains unknown to both Mrs. Tower and the narrator:

“Are you sure she's dull?” I said. “It's true she doesn't say very much, but when she says anything it's very much to the point.”
“I've never heard her make a joke in my life.” (334)

Jane is funny because she only tells the truth, or rather, her observations ring funny to her overstimulated dining companions: Mrs. Tower does not “get” her alleged wit, because she is unable to appreciate and distil “reality” the way Jane can. Jane is thoroughly aware of how flimsy her fame is, she knows her “trick” cannot go unnoticed for long, nor does she wish it. “Jane” might be a fitting representation of Maugham’s work and career. Jane shocks and amuses at the same time, but while she never hides the hard work required to keep up the appearance of her lifestyle – the custom-made gowns, the monocle, the young husband – she also shows off her effortlessness: her conversation does not try to be erudite or witty, her crowded Tuesday soirees offer no particular entertainment. Just like Maugham, Jane’s public status and practice have a polarizing effect on the public: they cause either skepticism or enthrallment. The point, however, is not to state that Maugham has crafted an allegory for himself with “Jane”,

nor to suggest that split readerships need to identify as Mrs. Towers if they dislike his work, or else blend in the adoring crowd of high-society guests if they do enjoy it. “Jane” is yet another sample of Maugham’s remarkable control and keen perception which, in this specific short story, are dealt with as subject matter and do not merely come across as his customarily applied techniques. Just like Jane, Maugham only trusts his awareness and acumen in order to understand, and subsequently describe what he has witnessed to, usually anything that has to do with people, situations, conversations. Both are constantly aware of the goings-on around them and, crucially, are able to track their innermost mechanisms to evaluate their worth: Jane’s and Maugham’s success is built on their ability to discern the true weight of things, and communicate it accordingly.

The strategies and devices Maugham adopts in order to steer narrative voices and points of view decisively affect plots, characterizations and overall significance of the pieces, a tendency this research has attempted to provide examples of. Manipulations of characters’ expression function in accordance with the deliberate deviation of readers’ expectations. For example, in “Miss King” the eponymous protagonist appears in very few scenes and hardly speaks at all; similarly, Giulia Lazzari’s possibility to communicate, as well as her personal history, are wholly channelled by her abductors’ directions. My study has also attempted to question whether, and how, his chosen narrative techniques affect commonly held ideas of Maugham as the author of tasteless bestsellers or, conversely, as an underrated figure in the literary history of twentieth century Britain. Maugham seems to purposefully select unconventional angles from which to develop his narratives: the sequence of downfall and rebirth in “Daisy” is told through the narrow perspective of the small town residents’ gossip; the artistic process and publishing success of “The Colonel’s Lady”’s poems are delivered through the filter of the Colonel’s poor understanding and appreciation of the literary arts. Likewise, Maugham’s frequent shifts of perspective contribute to regulate reader’s reactions to provoking subject matters – such as suicide, emotional exhaustion and failed ambitions, as in “Gigolo and Gigolette” and “The Alien Corn” – in order to prevent shock or discomfort from spoiling the entertainment. Indeed, the melodramatic characters and the lurid themes, although kept in check by Maugham’s standard detached style of storytelling, can be held largely responsible for his poor reputation. Maugham is deemed unable to “lead his readers to be concerned about the future lot of his heroes” whereas he tends to “put together
works that delight and captivate during reading, but which are then totally forgotten” (Dottin 258). Nevertheless, my entire research was inspired by the conviction that
Maugham’s stories have a sort of lingering quality. Although his plots are linear – they

can be summed up easily and their endings are sharp and concise – each appears to
hit its prefixed point with precision and in a timely manner, so much so that, were they
not to strike a chord for their content, their formal workings are still very likely to impress
readers’ memory. The examples I have selected have, hopefully, proven the existence

of a structural research showing through Maugham’s texts. Therefore, the quality of
Maugham’s fiction derives, in part, from its author’s awareness of how powerfully a
certain style of storytelling can influence the significance conferred to a character, or
to a series of events.

The initial proposal was to contribute to re-evaluate a seemingly “simple” literary
style, while at the same time advance ideas concerning intertextual links between
Maugham’s work and his intellectual context. During the drafting process, however, I
came to realise that the majority of the texts I had selected had women characters as
protagonists, a simple feature that, through my readings, appeared to have a huge
impact on the texts’ significance. Decidedly, I did not set out to write about gender or
female-centred issues, still the topic emerges consistently in my analyses, in a way

that clearly suggests the need for further research in the domain. In addition, I wonder

if it is possible to expand the hypotheses I have advanced, which are limited to
Maugham’s formal patterns within a selection of case studies, to the other domains in
his work, novels and theatre, so as to prove if there actually exists a general template
in Maugham’s literary production my study only shows an inkling of. In alternative, it
would be interesting to contrast the devices I have drawn attention to with the radically
different solutions that it is possible to come across in the innumerable visual
adaptations for cinema and television. Films based on Maugham, in fact, tend to often
delete the inherently disturbing or bothersome features that are peculiar to Maugham’s
open-ended texts, and to provide, instead, detailed happy-endings that appear skilfully
adjusted in order to ensure the viewers’ unblemished entertainment.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the extensive commercial success Maugham
enjoyed during his lifetime has constantly perplexed me: to try and understand the
reasons behind Maugham’s popularity is, unfortunately, yet another among the
aforementioned aspects I had set off to tackle which remain but possible incentives for
future research. As I conclude this study I cannot but acknowledge that I embarked on
this extended appraisal of Maugham out of, possibly, a camp sensibility. Despite my repeated readings, I still ponder whether it is possible to sincerely enjoy Maugham’s inelegantly named characters, so outlandish in their appearance and ethos that they risk growing into uncanny, almost dreamlike creatures. I find it hard to honestly appreciate the garish tones that seem to cast an aura of creepy charm on situations and characters alike. Susan Sontag describes “camp” as a sensibility that “sees everything in quotation marks” *(Notes on ‘Camp’)* 280, and Maugham’s style seems to do just so: his images are stylized, mannered, filtered so as to give the appearance of being serious; consequently his compositions come out as *mise en abyme* images, the lives of his characters appear as roles played on a stage. It would be unlikely to question the fictionality of the universe Maugham conjures up, were it not for Maugham’s constant reminders that the majority of what he bases his writing on truly happened; moreover, the fact that he guarantees his being a witness does not make his prose any more reassuring. Contrived, grotesque, lacking the kind of allure that stimulates nostalgia, Maugham’s literary world appears to be a-logic rather than nonsensical. However, it also seems still firmly rooted in an idea of traditional Britishness that is righteous in its practice of colonial rule and distrustful of new-fangled intellectual movements. Maugham’s is a marketable environment that complies with a commodified idea of early twentieth century Britain: a tea-drinking, tweed-wearing country gentry sunken deep in its own stale traditions; flourishing London-centred cultural innovations which coexist with a preposterous system of metropolitan networking. A confident superiority, shared on a national scale, which justifies the rule and exploitation of remote lands, along with the overarching sense that two impending wars will devastate it all, although merely hinted at, are substantial factors in the making of Maugham’s work’s repute. Possibly, there is a sort of old-fashioned quality in Maugham’s prose that is responsible for its contemporary appeal: while his interwoven critique have faded, what is left in his texts are postcard-like tokens of a past, lost era. However, it is precisely Maugham’s ultimate reticence in explaining the reach of his work that redeems it: since his intention cannot be discerned with absolute certainty, it is impossible to prove whether he was inspired by a kind of seriousness which, however, dwindled along the way, or if a draft of a farcical “human comedy” glimpses through the texts that are available to us. To understand whether Maugham was completely, consistently serious in his stances, is not, after all, that important. Besides, the unsettling endings that Maugham seems to have so often favoured in his
short fiction – those instances in which the narrative flow is cut so as to inhibit any unequivocal interpretation – remain, indeed, the major factor that singles out the reading of Maugham as a demanding, but ultimately rewarding experience.
Works cited


