Kinga Földváry

Colonial Women in Control – W. Somerset Maugham's Female Characters on the Page and the Screen

When looking for powerful female characters who appear to be in control of their own fates, we rarely turn to literary works written by white middle-class men who were subjects and in many ways beneficiaries of the British colonial empire, and yet, such preconceptions on our part may result in the same kind of neglect towards thought-provoking, even revolutionary writings as the forms of silencing that females, colonial subjects, and other historically disadvantaged groups experience to this day. At the same time, it is hard to change the reputation of authors who have become associated with a period and a style of writing whose controversial aspects we are now fully aware of, owing to the work of feminist and postcolonial scholars. Some writers appear to have gone out of fashion not necessarily for what or how they wrote, but simply because the socio-historical context in which they lived and worked is no longer entirely laudable, and if their careers flourished under such eras and regimes, they may easily end up being condemned to silence for crimes they are innocent of.

Such a controversial literary figure is William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965), who was an extremely popular writer throughout his long and prolific career, from the end of the nineteenth century to the early 1960s. In fact, his commercial success, which greatly surpassed his contemporaries, may have been precisely the reason why he was never quite accepted, and certainly not appreciated by "the English-language literary establishment and intelligentsia in a century in which the writers most highly regarded by the academy were modernist psychological and ontological experimentalists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and Samuel Beckett, who struggled to attract a large readership and found it difficult or impossible to make a living by the pen" (Adams 43). Whatever the reason for the snubbing of him and his work, the result is obvious: Maugham, whose plays used to be popular repertory pieces for decades, and whose novels and short stories were found on the shelves of all and sundry, has by now all but disappeared from not only academic but popular discussion as well.

This neglect is evident from the almost complete absence of recent critical appreciation of, or even interest in, his work. A search for his name brings up no more than four entries in MTMT, the Hungarian Scientific Bibliography, one of which is a translation (Maczelka), another a historical account of the Jewish ghetto in Subotica, or Szabadka in Hungarian, with only a passing reference to Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (Dévavári), and there is one unpublished conference paper discussing the novel *Theatre* in the context of theatre studies. The single monograph that gives a broad overview of his career for the general reader, rather than the literary scholar (Budai), is also nearly forty years old. It is true that Maugham's name is still used as a common reference point by scholars with

a broader-than-average erudition, and therefore the new Hungarian-language English literary history also includes a short analysis of his autobiographical novel (Bényei, "Az Edward-kori regény" 390, 392–4), and several brief references to his work (Bényei, "A századforduló" 314, 316, 320; Bényei "Az első világháború irodalma" 430–32), but for in-depth literary analyses one either has to dig extremely deep, or to time-travel to earlier periods when the author's name was still common currency in literary parlance and scholars dedicated their attention to his work and thought.

What is particularly painful in this neglect is that Maugham's realist and possibly middlebrow (cf. Bényei, "A middlebrow irodalom" 192), but highly readable and often thought-provoking work features a number of extremely – and unexpectedly – interesting female characters. Many of these women are found in colonial settings clearly informed by Maugham's own travels around the world, his acute observations of fellow humans, and his own feelings of social marginalisation, rooted partly in his unconventional upbringing, the early loss of his parents and the consequent absence of a loving family environment in his life, and his latent homosexuality (or bisexuality). The ambiguity regarding his sexual orientation came partly from his own attempts to avoid suspicion of what was still considered a criminal offence throughout his life, and partly from his desire to conform to social convention, even against his own feelings. As his nephew relates in his account of the family, the repression of Maugham's sexual inclinations (which he referred to as his greatest mistake) was directly responsible for the unhappiness of his private life: "I tried to persuade myself that I was three quarters normal and that only a quarter of me was queer–whereas really it was the other way round" (Robin Maugham 212). Whether it was his own fears of exposure, or his natural talent that he also used in his time as a spy in revolutionary Russia (see Jeffreys-Jones) that made him such a sharp-eyed observer, he was certainly able to transform his raw material to captivate the reader with the almost poetic descriptions of exotic landscapes (something he rarely did in his work set in England), and particularly his tales of people set in circumstances that will reveal what they are truly made of.

It is no wonder that so many of his stories have been adapted into other media, from the stage through the cinema and television to radio, and inspired the greatest stars to play his complex characters, battling moral dilemmas, fighting their own desires and failings as well as social convention, prejudice and the power of circumstances. *The Painted Veil*'s Kitty Fane was played by Greta Garbo in 1934 and Naomi Watts in 2006; Leslie Crosbie in *The Letter* brought yet another great triumph to Bette Davis in 1940; Mildred Rogers in *Of Human Bondage* was embodied by Kim Novak in 1964; and *Theatre*'s Julia Lambert was brought to life by Annette Bening in *Being Julia*, directed by István Szabó in 2004. In fact, some scholars go as far as claiming that "considering that his books have been made into forty films and hundreds of radio and television plays, it would be fair to say that no other serious writer's work has been so often presented in other media" (Calder 262). Though this statement may probably be refuted by looking at the unceasing popularity of William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and a few other "serious writers"

on the screen, Robert L. Calder is clearly right when he explains the abundance of adaptations with reference to Maugham's skill as a dramatist and the fact that "[h]is dialogue – whether witty, colloquial, or earthy – often needs little alteration by the screenwriter; and his realist's external point of view, with its diagnostic concentration on physical characteristics, provides memorable roles for many performers" (263).

The woman I wish to single out from the long list of these memorable characters inspiring spectacular performances is the protagonist of "Rain", one of Maugham's most famous short stories, the first one he ever published about his travels to the South Sea Islands. The significance of this character within the narrative is also signalled by the fact that when the story was first published in the American literary magazine *The Smart Set* in 1921, it was still titled "Miss Thompson". The character of Sadie Thompson was also immortalised in at least five different screen adaptations, not to mention the countless theatre and radio reworkings, and out of these adaptations, the three Hollywood feature films had Gloria Swanson (*Sadie Thompson*, dir. Raoul Walsh, 1928), Joan Crawford (*Rain,* dir. Lewis Milestone, 1932), and Rita Hayworth (*Miss Sadie Thompson*, dir. Curtis Bernhardt, 1953) in the lead. This list of Hollywood stars should be sufficient to prove that the central character allows an actress to shine – no wonder that all three films were nominated for various awards, and both Gloria Swanson and Joan Crawford received Photoplay Awards for their performances in the role of Sadie Thompson, a prostitute on her way to a new life.

In the briefest possible summary, the short story's plot has been described as follows: "a missionary persecutes a prostitute until suddenly a taste for forbidden fruit which no one suspected him of entertaining gets the better of him" (Ross 225). Even though such a description makes the story sound like an unrealistic cautionary tale, or even a psychological exploration of the power of repressed desire (after all, Freud's *Totem and Taboo* was published in 1913, and even though Freud is not mentioned in Maugham's notebooks, there are plenty of passages contemplating pleasure and pain, religion and desire, hedonism and social conformity to imply that the writer was just as interested in these notions as the majority of his contemporaries), the narrative is known to have been inspired by real life. In *The Summing Up*, the author talks about the inception of "Rain" during his travels in the South Seas, although he admits to "have always liked to let things simmer in [his] mind for a long time before setting them down on paper," therefore it was only about four years after making his notes that he wrote "the first of the stories [he] had conceived in the South Seas" (129). Even more interestingly, among the 1916 notes in *A Writer's Notebook*, we can find the following remark: "On these three notes I constructed a story called 'Rain'" (106) – but when leafing through the volume more carefully, we can observe not three, but a whole host of further passages that are used sometimes verbatim in the published story. The notes include brief sketches of several passengers, among them a missionary and a prostitute called Miss Thompson, but also an account of the clearing of Iwelei, the red-light district in Honolulu that the author witnessed (*A Writer's Notebook* 97–9), which plays such a prominent role in "Rain", too.

At the same time, the story has mostly been interpreted, and was probably meant to be interpreted, as an exploration of human behaviour, a conflict between types placed in specific situations. Graham Greene famously wrote, acknowledging the long-lasting power of the story: "Mr. Somerset Maugham, I suppose, has done more than anyone to stamp the idea of the repressed prudish man of God on the popular imagination" (*Journey* 205). Don Adams, on the other hand, encourages reading Maugham's work "figuratively as ethical parables that exhort readers to fulfil their unique individual natures and that condemn social moral intolerance that prohibits the free expression of our natural and best selves" ("What then is Right Action?" 105).

What should we then see in these characters? Are they types, or even two-dimensional stereotypes? Or are they carefully observed sketches from life, immortalising the author's random travelling companions? I believe they are neither – though they are certainly rooted in reality, and their stories can be read as parables, their literary representation, Maugham's rich and often poetic writing style turns them into flesh-and-blood, thought-provoking complex characters who cannot simply stand for virtues or vices precisely because of their multi-layered composition. The setting, and the constant references to the rain that also gives the story its title are equally meaningful – the rain represents the metaphorical prison that the travellers are cast into, and it is the source of tension that drives the characters to breaking point.

The narrator of the story is Maugham's favourite kind, introduced in *The Moon and Sixpence*: "the semi-autobiographical narrator who serves as the ethically exemplary Everyman figure, and whose task it is to observe closely and honestly, refusing judgement and censure, while interacting with the reader directly, transparently, entertainingly, and with scrupulous consideration" (Adams "Somerset Maugham's" 57). In "Rain", the third-person narration is limited to the point of view of Dr Macphail, a Scottish doctor and wounded veteran, who is travelling with his wife to the Pacific island of Samoa to rest and heal from his war injuries. His medical background and his position of focaliser make him reminiscent of the author, particularly in the way he sees the follies and shortcomings of his fellow travellers, but he rarely passes judgement on anyone. True, he does have a few arguments with Davidson, the American missionary hell-bent on eliminating sin from the world of the natives, and on saving Miss Thompson by making her pay for her past, but in general, as the name Macphail suggests, he has no real power or desire to change the course of events.

The story, as expected, has a small number of named characters, among them Dr Macphail and his wife, a weak and colourless woman eager to conform and visibly afraid of upsetting others or stepping out of line; the Davidsons, both missionaries returning to Apia after a year, and Miss Sadie Thompson, a woman who is accused of being a prostitute on the run from Iwelei, Honolulu's infamous red light district, and on her way to Apia, in search of a new occupation. The text does not mention any real evidence for her past other than the fact that she came abroad in Honolulu, and of course her loud

and coarse behaviour, playing her gramophone even on a Sunday, and entertaining male visitors in her room with drink and raucous conversation. Yet even if these signs are more than enough to suggest a woman who has no place in polite society, it is telling that the accusation comes indirectly, from Davidson's speculation, rather than through an eye-witness account of her actions. It is also true that the author was probably trying to steer clear of censorship by avoiding explicit references to sexuality or promiscuity – at the same time, the narrative leaves sufficient ambiguity to allow a benevolent interpretation. It is not only the modern reader who can fail to notice Miss Thompson's loose morals, but Dr Macphail and his wife also try to treat her as just another fellow passenger stranded in the boarding house in a muddy little harbour while they all wait for their destination to be clear of the measles.

While Mr Davidson begins his assault on Sadie Thompson's morals of his own accord, it is interesting to note the way she is described by the narrator. "She was twenty-seven perhaps, plump, and in a coarse fashion pretty. She wore a white dress and a large white hat. Her fat calves in white cotton stockings bulged over the tops of long white boots in glacé kid" (Maugham, *Collected* 15). At this point it is hard to see what the problem may be with her appearance, as white has traditionally been associated with innocence and purity, therefore in itself it should not raise the alarm of any fellow traveller. What is more, we do not get to see what colour the Macphails are dressed in, and on the tropics it would not be uncommon to wear light colours and materials – although the Davidsons are wearing black, but that is clearly a consequence of their vocation, rather than any other fashion trend. The only issue with Miss Thompson's clothing therefore may be its impracticality, and as the narrator notes once again the next day, it is not whiteness in itself, but its unsuitability for the location that makes her stand out: "She was dressed as on the day before, in a white frock, and her shiny white boots with their high heels, her fat legs bulging over the tops of them, were strange things on that exotic scene." It is the timid Mrs Macphail whose remark draws our attention to what is wrong: "'I don't think she's very suitably dressed, I must say,' said Mrs Macphail. 'She looks extremely common to me.'" (Maugham*, Collected* 21).

Whiteness, and the shiny glacé kid boots, especially high-heeled ones, are therefore not indecent in themselves, or suggestive of anything sinful, but when they stand out, drawing attention to themselves, they imply an attitude that is against public decency in an unmarried woman who should never draw attention to herself in society, something that Miss Thompson is evidently unwilling to do. When the Macphails pass Miss Thompson in the street on the next day, another detail is emphasised as tasteless: "She had all her finery on. Her great white hat with its vulgar, showy flowers was an affront" (Maugham, *Collected* 25). What is remarkable here is that the author, who takes such great pains to describe landscapes and natural sights in detail, is surprisingly slow in sharing the details of this woman's appearance, even though this is what is responsible for the conflict. But as her character is slowly but surely taking shape in front of our eyes, we will realise that she represents everything that the puritanical spirit of American new Protestant churches

condemns: excess of all kinds. She is excessive in the size of her hat, the showy decorations, the festive dress, and her body itself which cannot be contained by the boots.

This latter sign that invites criticism in Miss Thompson's appearance is, moreover, no fault of her own, and while it is not yet an example of body-shaming, but it shows a traditional association with weakness and vice. Her plumpness, and the way her calves bulge over the tops of her shoes may metonymically signal her resistance to restrictions, whether social conventions or legal, moral, religious codes of conduct. While body size and beauty ideals are culturally coded, in this context the prostitute's body is associated with unbounded bodily pleasure – and it is in clear contrast to the Davidsons, a woman of small stature and dressed in black, and particularly the "singular" appearance of the man, who will take on the role of antagonist in the short story:

> He was very tall and thin, with long limbs loosely jointed; hollow cheeks, and curiously high cheek-bones; he had so cadaverous an air that it surprised you to notice how full and sensual were his lips. […] His dark eyes, set deep in their sockets, were large and tragic; and his hands with their big, long fingers, were finely shaped; they gave him a look of great strength. But the most striking thing about him was the feeling he gave you of suppressed fire. It was impressive and vaguely troubling. He was not a man with whom any intimacy was possible. (Maugham, *Collected* 13)

As this description suggests, neither is Mr Davidson presented as a positive character, and from the moment of his first introduction, the narrator implies that his highly controlled external appearance hides secrets, and even passions that are about to break free. In this sense, he once again appears as the direct opposite of the prostitute, who pretends to have passion even when she feels none – whatever the case, these two characters are the ones who display passion and are willing to fight for their own attitude towards it. At the same time, the text already foreshadows the ending: the "hollow cheeks", and particularly the "cadaverous" air associate the man with death, and the "tragic" eyes create an equally ominous atmosphere that add to the suspense slowly building up to soon reach breaking point.

But to return to the question of appearances, when looking at the socio-historical context of the lives of colonial women in the Far East, it is clear that being unmarried in itself was against the norm, and thus seen as provocative and potentially even dangerous to the Western norms of monogamy. As the white colonial population tended to comprise a higher proportion of men than women, prostitution and concubinage were more or less accepted phenomena, similarly to intermarriages, though the social position assigned to the women involved in any of these relationships was at the bottom of the hierarchy, and even "decent" occupations did not much help. As Stoler explains,

> Single professional women were held in contempt as were European prostitutes, with surprisingly similar objections. The important point is that numerous categories of women fell outside the social space to which European

> colonial women were assigned; namely, as custodians of family welfare and respectability, and as dedicated and willing subordinates to, and supporters of, colonial men. The rigor with which these norms were applied becomes more comprehensible when we see how a European family life and bourgeois respectability became increasingly tied to notions of racial survival, imperial patriotism and the political strategies of the colonial state. (643)

Within this system, an unattached woman is therefore in an equally inferior position, whether she is a cashier, a singer, or a prostitute – but what I find remarkable is that Maugham portrays Sadie Thompson with a strong emphasis on her resistance to conformity. I would therefore disagree with Anna Gaździńska's overall assessment that "Maugham's female characters are thus denied the fundamental independence enjoyed by his male protagonists" (72). Her view may indeed apply to many of the novels' protagonists, but Miss Thompson defies this categorisation, as well as many others. Although she appears to be broken by the missionary's powerful onslaught of forceful conversion, Maugham's heroine begins and ends the narrative as independent, with a mind of her own, and willing to make her way in life in whatever way she pleases.

Ironically, but perhaps predictably, in every one of the Hollywood film adaptations, several of these moments of ambiguity are eliminated for the sake of a more appropriate, socially more acceptable representation of the heroine. For one thing, none of the Hollywood stars playing Sadie Thompson sacrifice their own beautiful slim ankles and attractive bodies to make the character's appearance more controversial, or less appealing. This, of course, makes it easier to relieve the guilt of the men who fall under her spell – who could not? after all, the whole world admired Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford and Rita Hayworth – and also distance us from the uglier side of reality, which is not absent from Maugham's description of the red-light district. More importantly, in each of the films, the protagonist ends up losing her independence, sacrificing it for the sake of morality, but the films also more or less explicitly deny her being an actual prostitute. All three films can thus easily offer her redemption in the form of a respectable existence, conforming to what G. B. Shaw's Alfred Doolittle would call "middle-class morality" (Shaw 121). Sadie Thompson is relieved of the obligation to return to San Francisco and go to prison when the missionary commits suicide, therefore she happily gets on a boat, accompanied by the bright-eyed American Sergeant Tim O'Hara (an addition from the 1922 stage adaptation by John B. Colton and Clemence Randolph), who offers her a home, a future, marriage and a family. It is also significant that in each of the three film adaptations, she gets to leave the boarding house, the suffocating hypocrisy of social conventions, but she does so in a way that can once again be seen as a renewed imprisonment within patriarchal society. As Sarah Projansky describes the conclusion of the 1928 film version called *Sadie Thompson*, it can be seen as "extremely ambivalent about its critique of gendered oppression" (56). On the one hand, the film conforms to the Hays code's stipulations by making Mr Alfred Davidson a reformer, rather than a missionary, "one of the Hays Office dicta being that the clergy should not be represented in a pejorative fashion" (Calder 264), yet the narrative "links a religious interest in reforming

prostitution and in colonizing the "south seas" to a patriarchal oppression of women" (Projansky 56). The film also makes its eponymous protagonist more acceptable to its middle-class viewers by implying that Sadie's lifestyle is not one of choice, and she is innocent of the crime that would result in a prison sentence awaiting her in San Francisco.

As Projansky sums up her findings, she notes that "the majority of the films addressing rape and feminism, while they may offer a woman's *experience* of rape, even a feminist *perspective* on rape, […] do not engage a particularly feminist *response* to rape" (58, original emphasis). This is certainly confirmed by the two later adaptations of Maugham's story – both end with a triumphant woman, leaving the island before the "respectable" travellers do, but what is more remarkable is how the short story can be read as offering a more open, and possibly more feminist response to the confrontation between the representative of patriarchal colonial society and an independent female who refuses to conform to the implicit and explicit social conventions of the era.

This may be my tentative conclusion at the end of this brief and rather superficial examination of a nearly forgotten short story and its protagonist. Although it is less surprising that the Hollywood studio system produced white-washed and moralised versions of such ambiguous and open-ended narratives, it is worth remembering that the literary text, and its literary author, who was born in Victorian England, and travelled all over the British Empire, saw the world in a considerably more complex light. That is why he ended the story without a departure – every character is still stuck in their own rut, the missionary is dead, his wife is shaken out of her emotionless convictions, and Sadie Thompson is back

> in all her finery, in her white dress, with the high shiny boots over which her fat legs bulged in their cotton stockings; her hair was elaborately arranged; and she wore that enormous hat covered with gaudy flowers. Her face was painted, her eyebrows were boldly black, and her lips were scarlet. She held herself erect. She was the flaunting queen that they had known at first. (Maugham, *Collected* 44)

What is more, she has the final word in the whole story: "You men! You filthy, dirty pigs! You're all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!" (45) But this is not an empty outburst, as it has the structural position that will make a lasting impression on the reader, just like it has an impact on her fictional listener: "Dr Macphail gasped. He understood." (45) Let us therefore remember Miss Sadie Thompson not as a virginal victim, nor as a middle-class maiden angling for a decent match, but as a bold, flesh-and-blood woman, who can open the eyes of society, making them face their own vices, even if it costs them everything, like the hypocritical Mr Davidson – and let us follow Maugham's narrator in trying to look behind the scenes and understand.

Works Cited

Adams, Don. "Somerset Maugham's Ethically Earnest Fiction." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 45.1 (2016): 42–67.

Adams, Don. "'What then is Right Action?' Somerset Maugham's Ethical Parables." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 99.2 (2016): 105–35.

Bényei, Tamás. "A middlebrow irodalom és a huszadik század közepének irodalmi kultúrája." Bényei, Reichmann, and Séllei 187–205.

Bényei, Tamás. "A századvég és a századforduló irodalma." Bényei, Reichmann, and Séllei 285–321.

Bényei, Tamás. "Az Edward-kori regény." Bényei, Reichmann, and Séllei 371–395.

Bényei, Tamás. "Az első világháború irodalma." Bényei, Reichmann, and Séllei 430–457.

Bényei, Tamás, Angelika Reichmann, and Nóra Séllei, ed. *Az angol irodalom története, vol. 5*. A viktoriánus és a modernista időszak. Kijárat, 2024.

Budai, Katalin. *Maugham világa*. Európa, 1986.

Calder, Robert L. "Somerset Maugham and the Cinema." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 6.3, (1978): 262–73.

Dévavári, Zoltán. "'A lány elém dobta Somerset Maugham könyvét, az *Örök szolgaság*ot': számok, statisztikai adatok, tények a szabadkai gettóról, 1944. április 27–1944. június 16." *Aetas* 35.4, (2020) 5–23.

Gaździńska, Anna. "A Woman Imprisoned. Analysis of Formal Inferiority of Women in Selected Novels of W. S. Maugham." *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis*, Folia Litteraria Anglica 5 (2002): 71–85.

Greene, Graham. *Journey Without Maps* [1936]. The Viking Press, 1965.

Jeffreys-Jones, Rhodri. "W. Somerset Maugham: Anglo-American Agent in Revolutionary Russia." *American Quarterly* 28.1 (1976): 90–106.

Maczelka, Csaba (trans.). "Maugham, William Somerset: A csavargó." *Nagyvilág* 49.10 (2004): 802–7.

Mackay, Marina. "The novel and thirty years of war." *The Cambridge History of the English Novel,* ed. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes, Cambridge UP, 2012, 677–92.

Maugham, Robin. *Somerset and All the Maughams*. The New American Library, 1967.

Maugham, W. Somerset. *A Writer's Notebook*. William Heinemann, 1949.

Maugham, W. Somerset. *Collected Short Stories*: Volume 1. Penguin, 1963.

Maugham, W. Somerset. *The Summing Up* [1938]. The New American Library, 1951.

Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape. Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. NYU P, 2001.

Ross, Woodburn O. "W. Somerset Maugham: Theme and Variations." *The English Journal* 36.5 (1947): 219–28.

Shaw, Bernard. *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* [1912]. Penguin, 1969.

Stoler, Ann L. "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-century Colonial Cultures." *American Ethnologist* 16.4 (1989): 634–60.