Queer Eye: The Moorish Talisman of W. Somerset Maugham

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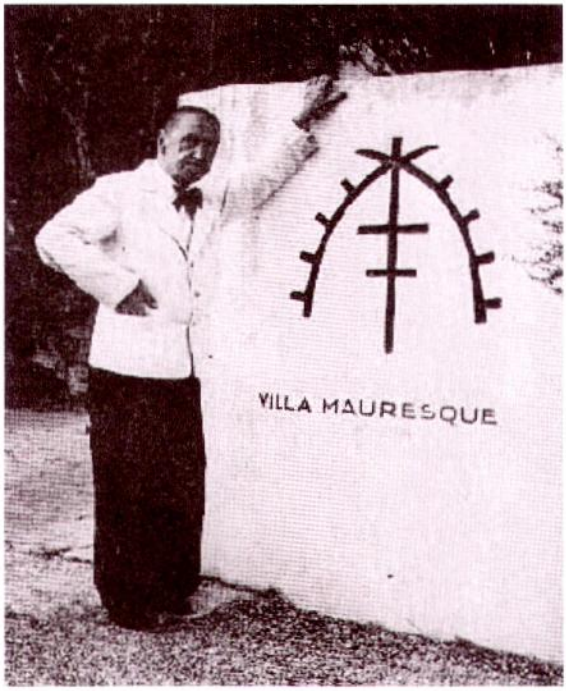
In his prolific and prosperous 67-year career, W. Somerset Maugham wrote "twenty novels, filled nine volumes with his short stories, wrote thirty-one plays, and published seven volumes of prose non-fiction" (Rogal vi). As well as the massive edifice of his literary output, Maugham's creative, financial and social success was given concrete form in his magnificent villa overlooking the Mediterranean at Cap Ferrat, on the French Riviera. The grand, colonnaded Villa Mauresque (loosely translated as the house of Moorish things, of Moorish art or architecture) once belonged to the despotic King Leopold II of Belgium and, renovated to Maugham's precise specifications, became a formidable bulwark against intrusion and envy. One particular Moorish symbol became Maugham's personal and professional talisman, and, I suggest, offers a telling entry-point to his life and his writing.



Maugham and the Moorish symbol at the entrance to his beloved villa. From Upaka the Ascetic.

This symbol, the *hamsa*, was a stylised downward pointing hand, an ancient form of protection against the evil eye. Found on travels in Morocco by his father, it was engraved on the windows of the family's summer home where the young Maugham was familiar with it as a child (S. Maugham, *The Summing Up* 18). Maugham etched the symbol in red at the entrance to the Villa Mauresque and also had it engraved on his hairbrushes, paperknives, matchboxes, on ornaments for his cars and on his cigarette cases. To his intense irritation, guests at the Villa pocketed the engraved items as souvenirs (Calder, illustrations 33 and 34). As well as adorning his personal possessions, the symbol became a watermark in his collected works, the letterhead on his personal stationery and, beginning in 1901, was stamped on every one of his books (Curtis, *The Pattern* 4). Over time, readers came to recognise a Maugham book by the distinctive mark on the spine.[1]

Belief in the evil effects of the malevolent gaze is universal and many cultures have adopted amulets or inscriptions to protect the individual from the fear of the consequences of envy (Bohigian 91; Abu-Rabia). The concept of the evil eye is also well established in Islam, and in Morocco where Maugham's father encountered it, the symbol of the downward pointing hand (in Arabic, *hamsa* or five) is regarded as a powerful charm against malign powers (Marcais). Belief in the efficacy of the 'hand of Fatima' is widespread and the mark of a henna-painted hand, or a more schematic pattern with five branches, or a hand with an eye symbol in the middle, is to be found on the walls of houses (Hildburgh 70). The *hamsa* functions in two ways: it protects the individual from the evil eye and, at the same time, deflects the evil power back onto the envious or malevolent (Westermarck 212-213).

Up until now, Maugham's use of the *hamsa* as his personal coat-of-arms has been so omnipresent that its significance has been overlooked. However, I suggest it exerts a potent symbolism in his life and writing. The *hamsa* is both a shield and sword, with the associations of defence and attack, protect and deflect, implied therein. As a shield, the *hamsa* emblematises Maugham's efforts to protect his private life, particularly his illicit sexual liaisons with men, from the evil eye of public exposure. As a sword, the *hamsa* represents Maugham's deflection into his writing his piercing contempt for the stifling social norms he was obliged to observe. From this angle of vision, a new reading of Maugham's work emerges. The arch-conservative, misogynistic second-rater becomes a surprising social subversive with a trademark writerly technique.

The evil eye strikes

Maugham's early life gave him good reason to fear the evil eye and confirmed in him an obsession with shielding his activities from the malign effects of public exposure.

Born on 25 January 1874 in Paris, his early childhood in France was idyllic (Calder 1). With his brothers away at school, the precocious Willie had his beloved

mother, the beautiful, tubercular Edith, all to himself (Curtis, *Somerset Maugham* 19). This Proustian idyll was soon shattered, however; when Willie was just eight years old, his adored mother died (S. Maugham, *The Summing Up* 17). Her loss was the defining tragedy of his life. Soon afterwards his father, Robin, also fell ill, and Willie was taken out of school. Maugham's first language was French and his tutor, an English clergyman, taught him English by making him read aloud the police-court news from the *Evening Standard* (Morgan 19). Thus, Maugham acquired English, the language in which he was to become a celebrity author, via sordid newspaper accounts of British human frailty. Perhaps it was from this time that he acquired his fascination with human transgression that would go on to provide writerly inspiration for over 60 years.

Just two years after Edith's death, the evil eye struck again. Maugham's father died of cancer and with little inheritance, the grieving, sensitive boy was sent to live with his paternal uncle, the Reverend Henry MacDonald, in Whitstable in England. To his stock of knowledge of the England of the *Evening Standard*, Maugham added his experiences of life at the cold and austere Vicarage. His uncle was, in the words of Maugham's brother, Frederick, "narrow-minded, severe, pedantic and bigoted" and his wife was strict and unsympathetic (Meyers 12). On Sundays, as the devoutly Christian Maughams feasted on a roast joint, their small nephew had to be satisfied with half a boiled egg (Calder 10-13, 20-21).

At eleven, he was enrolled at King's School, Canterbury, England's oldest public school, where:

> The traditional ration of bullying, beating and buggery seems to have been unusually effective in his case, leaving him with a frightful life-long speech impediment and a staunch commitment to homosexuality. (Hitchens 6)

While Hitchen's account may be overstated, it is true that at King's, Maugham was a complete outsider. He was tormented and mocked by the boys and by the teachers for his French accent, for his speech impediment, his small stature and his failure at sports. His only defence was a watchful silence with his unhappiness deflected, on occasion, by a sharp wit. Even at this early age, Maugham was made acutely aware of the misery that public censure brought upon its victim. His early exposure to the purgatory of ridicule and abuse made him even more observant and circumspect, forced to conceal his sensitivities, and to devise means to deflect the malice of the tormentors.

Leaving school in 1890 and going to Heidelberg to study was formative both socially and intellectually. It was in France that he learned English but it was in Germany that he began to write. He conducted passionate discussions on long walks with his friend, the aesthete and poet, John Ellingham Brooks (Daniels 19). Although he had developed a great fondness for a boy at his school, his friendship

with Brooks is alleged to have been Maugham's first adult homosexual relationship (Calder 35). Brooks was open about his life and longed to live in a homosexual-accepting world but Maugham's early experiences of malign fate and public ridicule made him reject this as an impossibly romantic ideal.

Returning to England to begin his working life, Maugham, like Chekhov and Arthur Conan Doyle, chose medicine, and he entered St Thomas' Hospital in London in 1892. There he attended classes, dispensed drugs and accompanied the house physician as a medical clerk writing up histories. By 1895 he was on the way to establishing a career in medicine and was writing.

His clinical training made him a disciplined note-taker and his diagnostic and writerly abilities were honed daily by the pathologies he confronted in his professional life. In his private life, Maugham did not confine himself to fixed sexual boundaries and he had numerous liaisons with men and with women. His activities with men were concealed, partly from his own *hamsa*-like need for secrecy but mainly from a very real fear of the consequences of public exposure. Oscar Wilde's trial had caused a sensation both at home and abroad and homosexual writers and artists rightly feared the application of the vicious laws and the public calumny that Wilde had suffered. After Wilde's trial, many writers fled London to the Continent to escape the virulent atmosphere left by the trial and its aftermath. Like so many others, Maugham began to associate sexual freedom with travel – or rather, with not being in England.

Looking back, Maugham said that "for him England signified constraint and convention, whereas France signified freedom and adventure."[2] Emblematised by the *hamsa*, the early tragedies of his life, his experience of being an outsider in England and his sexual transgressions, if discovered, combined to make him a shielded and guarded individual, rightly fearful of the malign powers of the malevolent gaze. Armed with a biting wit, he maintained a protective carapace of reserve to avoid ridicule and to protect his privacy. His clinical training, with its focus on observation, accurate records and diagnosis, contributed to the formation of the emerging writer's queer and penetrating eye.

Maugham strikes back

Biographical and critical commentary of Maugham's writing has sought to expose evidence of the homosexuality he sought so carefully to conceal, or has highlighted instances of his alleged notorious misogyny, his imperial one-sightedness and his failure to engage the 'native' Other. While such analyses are valuable, I suggest the *hamsa* angle of vision uncovers a larger story about Maugham's attitude to the issue of how society defines and polices individual transgressions. I do not address the aesthetic quality of his writing, but draw on the examples of some of his early novels, his Far Eastern stories and his writer's notebook to suggest that Maugham's

hamsa emblematises a trademark writerly technique that goes far deeper than mere surface branding.

England, the environment he had first encountered in newspapers in France, provided the backdrop for his first literary success. This was the prelude to the Edwardian era, *La Belle Epoque*, with its new king, and its upper classes enthusing over continental European arts and fashions. The class system was as rigid as ever but there were calls for improvements in the status of the poor and in the rights of women. Maugham the medical student-turned-serious-novelist, the rationalist man of science, observed daily the appalling incongruity of wealth side by side with squalor, and the rigid social mores that repressed and confined at every level.

Maugham's first success was a social protest novel, born out of his experiences as an outsider, a covert violator of his society's conventions and his experiences as a medical practitioner. *Hamsa*-like, he deflected into the novel a searing scrutiny of the hypocritical social mores of the time. Launching his literary career with *Liza of Lambeth*, Maugham presents the squalid and tragic story of Liza's adultery, pregnancy, failed abortion and death against a backdrop of lower-class hypocrisy, wretchedness and brutality (S. Maugham, *Liza of Lambeth*). As a medical student, he had seen at first hand the miserable lives of the poor of London. He "attended sixty-three confinements in twenty-one days" often in conditions of appalling squalor in the "stinking alleys" and "sinister courts" of the Lambeth slums that surrounded St Thomas' Hospital (S. Maugham, *The Selected Novels* viii). Belonging to the socialist-realist school popularized by George Gissing and Arthur Morrison, Maugham's novel reflected the preoccupations of the then Labour Opposition and its calls for social reform. Focussing on the hypocrisy of the sexual and social relationships of the poor of Lambeth, *Liza of Lambeth* was hailed as a brutally successful form of naturalism. Its characters and scenes were so real that one critic said he "felt as if he had taken a mud bath in the filth of a London street" (Sanders 15). The first print run sold out in weeks.

In *Liza* Maugham focussed his penetrating and clinically trained gaze on a small, rule-bound community and delivered a damning indictment of its petty mores, its restrictions on pleasure, its brutality and hypocrisy. He delineated the brutish ways of the poor of Lambeth society and presented its denizens with little in the way of redeeming characteristics. Liza, the female protagonist, transgressed the mores of her community and, yet, despite his later reputation for misogyny, Maugham did not damn her. Rather, she was depicted with great compassion and affection as the spirited and resilient heroine. I suggest this clinical depiction of transgression in a small, circumscribed, rule-bound community was his first successful venture into an enduring literary specialism. Maugham did not condemn Liza but instead attacked the social milieu that confined and condemned her. His target was not the desperate woman but the hypocrisy that defined and sanctioned particular forms of human relationship, and rejected others.

While Maugham's first successful attempt to deflect the lens from the individual to the milieu occurred in *Liza*, the book itself did not feature the *hamsa* symbol on its cover. In a sense, Maugham perfected the technique in *Liza* first before he went on to stamp the *hamsa* as a visible trademark on his next book. Sensing the zeitgeist in 1901, he produced *The Hero*, a novel dealing with the return of a Boer War soldier, and sexual disillusionment amid the pettiness and snobbishness of a small Kentish village (S. Maugham, *The Hero*). Again, his depiction of human relationships in another small, repressive environment saw critics lauding its cleverness and the "unobtrusive success" of its psychology (Sanders 18). This environment was a vast distance, both socially and geographically, from the Lambeth tenements. Comprising a "sustained attack on contemporary middle class values from within the framework of English society", *The Hero* was the first novel to bear the Maugham trademark (albeit on this occasion only, placed upside down) of the Moorish symbol against the evil eye (Curtis, *The Pattern* 45). In this way, he proclaimed his developing sense of his writerly identity.

In 1902, *Mrs Craddock*, a novel set in provincial English society, shocked reviewers and challenged convention. Initially refused by publishers because of the sexually explicit nature of some passages, it told the story of the passionate and sensual Bertha, trapped in an oppressive marriage with a cold, inhibited, socially inferior husband (S. Maugham, *Mrs. Craddock*). Bertha's open need for sexual gratification reversed contemporary standard sex roles with the sexual protagonist and transgressor being a woman. Edwardian England was thrilled and shocked by this minor sensation because it introduced a note of "nastiness in English fiction" (Morgan 73). Again, Maugham focussed his gaze on the sexual limitations placed on the individual by the oppression of narrow social convention.

Criticised for writing such dark, realistic, dramas, the ever-responsive Maugham tried his hand at lighter social issues. Next he focussed his queer, clinical eye on British high society: another small, compact, community, with its own set of social mores, its connivances, its unspoken rules. His play, *Lady Frederick*, became a phenomenal hit. Depicting a high society lady who tries to get rid of a persistent young suitor, it was an instant success in London's West End and it secured Maugham's place as London's premier playwright. By 1909, he had 4 plays running consecutively – a first in British theatrical history – with 35,000 people seeing them every week (Meyers 69). With Lady Frederick and others, Maugham distilled the essence of "that over-fed, exclusive, insolvent, elegantly covertly libidinous Edwardian society that had repudiated its greatest wit and sent him to Reading gaol" (Curtis, *The Pattern* 62).

Maugham's writerly trademark was forged in England, and demonstrated an almost ethnographic preoccupation with the trajectories of individuals who transgressed the written and unspoken rules of their particular communities. However, he did not condemn these individuals, but held up for scrutiny

the hypocrisy and pettiness of the urban, village, provincial and aristocratic environments they belonged to.

Although he lived most of his life with men, Maugham had love affairs with four women, loving one and, rather reluctantly, marrying another. His affair with Sue Jones, the actress, and the inspiration for the affectionate, sexually active Rosie Driffield in *Cakes and Ale*,[3] continued for over eight years. In 1913, to his dismay she refused his proposal of marriage (Calder 122). As well as his numerous liaisons with men, and while he was still in love with Sue, Maugham began an affair with Syrie Wellcome Barnardo, the daughter of the founder of the famous children's charity. An "independent minded, unreflective and brassy" individual, Syrie's flamboyance was a direct counterpoint to Maugham's chilly reticence (Meyers 80).

Maugham's social position and literary reputation in Britain depended on his adherence to the social mores of his own caste and class, rules that were unstated but understood. In the prevailing culture of deference to the upper classes, as long as Maugham maintained a decent discretion, he could behave unconventionally in private. Had they become public however, his sexual relationships with men would have scandalised the outwardly strict and repressive norms of English upper class society. Exposure and the resulting infamy would have meant professional and personal ruin.

The cosmopolitan and outwardly conventional Maugham at 40 had a very complicated private life and an increasing need to deflect attention from it. By the time World War I started, he was too old to enlist but nonetheless, he volunteered. As a Red Cross ambulance driver and nurse on the Western Front, he was fearless in recovering the wounded and transporting them to hospital. It was in the trenches in Flanders that Maugham met Frederick Gerald Haxton, a charming American, who was to become his companion, secretary and lover for the next 30 years. Haxton was handsome, gregarious, sexually voracious, venal and utterly charming (Meyers 102). In 1915, while the intrepid Maugham was on a spy mission for the British Secret Service in Switzerland, Haxton was arrested in England for committing lewd acts with another man. Even though he was acquitted, as an American and thus an enemy alien, he was permanently banned from England, a situation that the influential Maugham could do nothing about and which provided him with further impetus to travel.

Unfazed by fame, it was the tawdry spotlight of infamy and the malign gaze of public scrutiny that Maugham feared (Daniels 21). As a means of gaining a socially respectable cover and thus deflecting the evil eye of notoriety, Syrie and Maugham married in 1917 and the marriage was the greatest mistake of his life. Syrie was a snob, she was jealous of Haxton and their marriage, including the arrival of their daughter, Liza, consisted of bitterness and recrimination. Syrie repeatedly threatened to expose his relationship with Haxton and in 1926, he paid $48,500 for the Villa Mauresque. Placing the *hamsa* symbol on the front entrance,

and apart from his frequent travels, he lived there for the rest of his life (Meyers 167).

Maugham strikes the Empire

Maugham's travels included the Pacific Islands[4] but he is arguably most famous or indeed, infamous, for his Far Eastern tales. As at home, so it was in the Far East. With his unerring eye, he crafted set piece narratives that focussed on flawed characters, highlighting the pretence, fears and tensions of the colonial societies he travelled through.

In his Far Eastern tales, he mapped with clinical precision individual transgressions, uncontrollable passions, sordid intrigues, and venal behaviours against a backdrop of the hypocritical respectability colonial societies seemed to demand. Using the device of the narrator to give the stories an authoritative intimacy, Maugham sought to present his tales as being utterly objective. Freely admitting that he lacked imagination, he drew on real life events and recorded what he saw. A keeper of notebooks, he assiduously noted details of people met, anecdotes recounted and characters destroyed. Clare Hanson notes his penchant for the anecdote, pointing out that the

> ...anecdote relies for its effect on convention. It both appeals to and endorses a shared system of values; at its simplest level it appears as the "in joke" and it may have a certain bravura quality, affirming group values a shade too emphatically. (35)

Maugham was indeed deeply familiar with the conventions and the group values of his chosen societies and he had made a speciality of exposing them. Hanson's analysis presupposes there is only one kind of anecdote but Lionel Gossman however suggests that there are in fact two forms of the genre. The "classic, well-defined anecdote with its triadic structure of exposition, confrontation or encounter and punchline" counts on "commonly shared assumptions to drive home its meaning". Then there are the other, more complex types of anecdote, those that are more loosely structured and, "as instances that resist neat interpretation, far from consolidating what we think we know, may cause us to question it and provoke inquiry into it" (161). The latter, the more Stendhalian kind, "disturbs intellectual routines and stimulates new explorations of history" (163). I suggest that a deeper reading of Maugham reveals he uses anecdote as a disruptive element to highlight while at the same time to undermine shared assumptions, a far more subversive enterprise.

Maugham deliberately and consciously emphasised group values in order to highlight the hypocrisy and cant inherent in them. He focussed on examples of human transgression, not as an end in itself, but as a means of highlighting

underlying pathologies. I suggest that his stories, based as they were on anecdotes and incidents relayed to him, serve as "'*an indicateur de santé*', a signal of trouble in the texture of society, politics, the economy or the prevailing value system" (168).

The Painted Veil (1925) illustrates Maugham's trademark writerly technique as well as the colonial reaction to it. Set in Hong Kong, *The Painted Veil* describes Kitty Lane's adulterous affair with a senior Hong Kong colonial official and her husband, Walter's reaction. It was a critical success when first serialised but, before it could be published, was subject to libel actions which necessitated drastic alterations in the text. A Mr Lane from Hong Kong brought an action for libel against the publishers because he felt he might have been defamed. The publishers agreed to pay him £250 for any inconvenience to his reputation, and changed the name to Fane (S. Maugham, *The Painted Veil* 10).

Following the successful resolution of this particular action, Maugham and the publishers found themselves confronting another legal dispute. Mr A.G.M. Fletcher, the Assistant Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong at that time, protested that *The Painted Veil* vilified not just one individual, but the entire colony of Hong Kong, and he too threatened legal action against the publisher, Heinemann (Lethbridge 56, footnote no. 57). The depiction of the colonial society he lived in and ruled over upset him as did the portrayal of the fictional senior government official and his adulterous wife. In the main, the communities in *The Painted Veil* are portrayed, both in England and later in Hong Kong, as being obsessed with keeping up appearances, with viewing wedlock as the first step to social success, with brittleness and falsity. As a result of the legal threat, Maugham had to change all the names and thus Hong Kong, Happy Valley and the Peak became Tching Yen, Pleasant Vale and the Mount (Stott 14). Later, responding to the legal action, Maugham delivered his verdict. He expressed his surprise at how, in England, writers could put the Prime Minister or the Archbishop of Canterbury in a book and these exalted figures did not complain yet "It seemed to me strange that the temporary occupant of so insignificant a post should think himself aimed at" (S. Maugham, *The Painted Veil* 10). The experience may have jaundiced Maugham against colonials but it also revealed colonial sensitivities about how they, their colonial milieu and, by implication, their imperial project were represented in the wider world.

By the time Maugham directed his gimlet eye on the white colonial societies of Singapore and of the Federated Malay States, it was the middle to late imperial period; a time of financiers and familiarity with rule. The presence of a famous author and his garrulous companion, Haxton, in these hermetic, artificially constructed societies was immensely gratifying. People at all levels of society, despite knowing Maugham's reputation for using his travel experiences in his writing, exerted themselves to display the famed colonial hospitality. While in Kuala Lumpur in 1925, Maugham and Haxton stayed at Carcosa, the residence of the highest British

representative to the Malay States ("Somerset Maugham Interviewed"). Over dinner, at the Club, at tennis parties, colonials repeated salacious gossip about their friends, and those who were often the most assiduous in relaying sensational items, later condemned Maugham for betraying their trust (Rogal 49).

Following his Singapore/Malaya trip, Maugham produced a number of stories which, following his usual practice, were serialised in magazines first for maximum exposure and financial gain.[5] These individual serialisations were followed by a collection, *The Casuarina Tree,* first published in 1926. It was hugely successful with critics comparing Maugham to Loti and Stevenson, and praising his "near perfect objectivity." L.P. Hartley, reviewing *The Casuarina Tree* for the *Saturday Review* said "there is something in the air that seems to 'get' them down around Singapore" (Hartley 172).

The short stories in the collection reveal Maugham's trademark technique of placing a small social group under the authorial microscope, dissecting it and offering up morsels of hypocrisy and cant to the reading public. *P&O* tells of the events on board ship on the way Home from Singapore, including the lingering illness and painful death of Gallagher, a man cursed for abandoning his Malay wife. While Gallagher's transgression and illness might appear to be the focus of the story, the real action takes place among the upper class passengers and their reaction to a suggestion that Christmas Day festivities be open to all on board. First class passengers want to maintain social distinctions but want to appear as if they do not. They feared that second class passengers would probably "drink more than was good for them and unpleasantness might ensue" and really, they "would enjoy themselves much more if they had a party of their own" (S. Maugham, *P &O* 1192).

The devious colonial official chairing the meeting is a man who "often said that if a thing was worth doing it was worth doing well", a Maughamian locution that skewers a man for perpetually saying something rather than ever doing anything. The serpentine outcome involved inviting the second class passengers while at the same time, privately suggesting to the captain that they should not be allowed to enter the first class saloon (S. Maugham, *P &O* 1193). Passengers were concerned about the dying man but only because they were afraid he would die on Christmas Day and thus deny them the chance of having the fancy dress ball (1211). He did die and the ball went ahead justified because it "would do them all good if they had a jolly good time" and "they mustn't think only of themselves" but of the children who had been promised a viewing (at a distance) of the costumes immediately after the first-class passengers' dinner, and it would be a shame to disappoint them (1213). The tense, brittle dialogue, the coded disparaging of the second class passengers and the agonies of the dying man as afterthought to the main event, the party, all highlight the Maugham technique. So too does the surgical excavation and serving up of the mouthed platitudes and the highlighting of self-serving hypocrisy.

The Letter is another example of the Maugham technique of using transgression to highlight hypocrisy in a small, colonial outpost. It concerns the trial for murder of Leslie Crosbie, a white woman accused of killing a white who, she claimed, had tried to rape her. Her defence at trial was that she had killed him in defence of her honour, but it was a lie. It appeared that they had been having an affair but he had abandoned her for a Chinese mistress. Being rejected, and for a 'native' woman, so outraged her female pride and her colonial prestige that she killed him. Maugham's story depicts the scenes behind the case, and describes with claustrophobic intimacy the attitudes and social outlooks of the society in which the murder took place. The tale hangs on the evidence that would transform Leslie's public image from that of a respectable married European woman to that of a vengeful, depraved killer. In an introduction to the collection, Anthony Burgess said *The Letter* was "one of the most dangerous stories of all" and based on a "real crime committed in Singapore when Maugham was there" (Burgess xvii). According to Frederic Raphael "'The Letter' was so scandalously *à clef* as to amount to a flagrant breach of hospitality and perhaps of good taste" (62). Like so much of Maugham's writing, the story itself was based on real events that occurred (not in Singapore as Burgess suggested) but in the Federated Malay States in 1911, events which caused a sensational public scandal and became the topic of much gossip and speculation. *The Letter* was based on the trial for murder of Ethel Mabel Proudlock and Maugham learned of the details of the case from Mrs Proudlock's lawyer some years later. Although a fictionalised account of a real event, this short story reveals the Maugham technique. In addition, it goes a long way towards illuminating historical reality because of what it has to say about colonial worldviews, values and expediency.[6]

Maugham tried to reassure his readers that the people he wrote about formed the exception to the vast majority of ordinary colonials. Ever obliquely insulting, he went so far as to warn readers against thinking that the "incidents I have narrated were of common occurrence" because the vast majority of those "who spent their working lives in Malaya were ordinary people ordinarily satisfied with their station in life." They performed their duties "more or less competently", they were "as happy with their wives as are most married couples" and they led "humdrum lives." While they were decent, normal people who had their "little tiffs, their little jealousies, their little flirtations, their little celebrations", he focussed on those who had "some singularity of character" (S. Maugham, "The Letter" viii). Telling his colonial victims that he considered most of them too mediocre to rate more than niggardly faint praise reveals a great deal about Maugham's contempt for the white denizens of 'Cheltenham on the Equator'.

But it was not just in his novels or short stories that Maugham applied his particular writerly technique. His writer's notebooks which always accompanied him on his travels also indicate his approach to his subjects. Severely edited by Maugham, who managed his image with *hamsa*-like vigilance, the published

version nonetheless contains fascinating insights into what he was prepared to reveal about what he saw and experienced in his travels. As well as his pen portraits of individuals, planters, officials, wives, dinner parties, etc, he writes of the milieu and attitude of the white man, the

> ...pale stranger who moves through all this reality like a being from another planet. He is no more than a policeman. He is the eternal exile. He has no interest in the place. He is only waiting for his pension[7], and he knows that when he gets it he will be unfit to live anywhere but here. In the club they often discuss where they shall live when they retire. They are bored with themselves, bored with one another. They look forward to their freedom from bondage and yet the future fills them with dismay. (S. Maugham, *A Writer's Notebook* 169)

From 'The Door of Opportunity':

> Most of them drank a great deal too much. They read nothing worth reading. Their ambition was to be like everybody else. Their highest praise was to say that a man was a damned good sort. If you were interested in the things of the spirit you were a prig. They were eaten up with envy of one another and devoured by petty rivalries. They made a circle that was more provincial than any in the smallest town in England. They were prudish and spiteful. (S. Maugham, "The Door" 405-406)

These descriptions of the provincialism and pettiness of colonial environments caused outrage. Maugham was vilified because he "abused hospitality by ferreting out the family skeletons of his hosts and putting them into his books." His passage in Malaya was "clearly marked by a trail of angry people" (Purcell 271). In Malaya, he was the "national red rag," and the mere mention of his name was enough to invoke rage and disgust (Sharp 106). In response to his critics, Maugham said he was hardly the only author who had drawn on real events and people but, in his own defence, he had been vilified by those who

> .....claimed that I had stayed with them and abused their hospitality by writing about them when not only had I not stayed with them, but neither knew nor ever heard of them. The poor drabs were so vain and their lives so empty that they deliberately identified themselves with a creature of odious character in order in some small circle to give themselves a petty notoriety. (S. Maugham, *The Summing Up* 211)

Reaction to his colonial writings indicates sensitivities particular to the imperial project. The poor of Lambeth had not protested at Maugham's treatment of them; no threat of writs was heard from the aristocrats of Belgravia; the provincials of Kent had not complained about defamation, and, as far as we know, no individual or collective complaint issued from the citizens of the Java, Siam, the Pacific Islands, India or the United States. Maugham seems to have struck a nerve

in the Far East. What was shocking to the colonials was that he, with his candid camera writing, revealed to the world at large an unflattering view of the British colonial sphere in Southeast Asia. He broke ranks and instead of leaving gossip to circulate undercover, he clothed it in fiction and published it for the edification and amusement of an international audience.

In a sense, Maugham did to white people in the tropics what white people had been doing to 'natives' for centuries. Far, far more than a "consummate recycler of orientalist tropes," (Holden 151), he offers his audiences a view of colonial society in the Orient, that reflects how "exotic, indolent, devious and untrustworthy" they were (Brooker 183). Said's Orientalists may have given us the debased Oriental, but Maugham has given us the debased Colonial.

Conclusion

In later life, Maugham said that while his father had been a distant figure to him "somehow the sign against the evil eye seems to have bound us together, for as you know I've used it a great deal" (R. Maugham 110). As well as providing a link to his father and his childhood home, a unique form of brand recognition on his books and a symbol of ownership on his private possessions, the *hamsa* offers a new angle of vision on Maugham's life and his writing.

Maugham had early experience of the evil eye, of tragedy and of loss. His exposure to ridicule and public censure at school made him circumspect and watchful and his professional training as a doctor armed him with the detachment and the observation skills necessary in a writer. As an Edwardian public figure, he conducted his affairs covertly, obliged to live according to the norms of his class and caste.

Following the *hamsa's* dual imperatives to protect and deflect, Maugham obsessively shielded his privacy and, in his writing, deflected his contempt back onto those possessing malign intent. His early interest in human transgression and frailty found resonance in his later work, and his trademark writerly technique involved attacking the repressive and restrictive social norms and not the hapless individual. He reserved his contempt for the milieu, not the sinner or the sin.

Maugham never received the recognition he felt he deserved. Criticised for his lack of aesthetic felicity ("Class II, division I" according to Lytton Strachey (Curtis, *The Pattern* 169)), he has been accused of over-productiveness, of a failure to consider the 'native' in his colonial stories, of cynicism, of misogyny, of a lack of imagination, and an unforgiveable tendency to use the private lives of his friends and others as material in his books. Critics rightly caution against evaluating his "fiction in terms of its mimetic representation of Maugham's life" (Holden 10) but, with the *hamsa* as a new angle of vision, perhaps the time has now come for a reappraisal of his work.

Maugham's almost-ethnographic writerly technique bolsters the place of storytelling in the social process. It is in the very combination of the tragedies of his past, his secret lives, his medical training, his writerly milieu and his queer and potent observations that we can explore the 'grey, unresolved problematics' of domestic British and colonial society. It has been fashionable to dismiss Maugham but he was a setter of trends and a detached, clinical recorder of English local and imperial realities. Emblematised by his trademark *hamsa*, Willie gave the colonial guy the queer eye, and in the process, created a surprisingly subversive literary and historical archive.

Notes

[1] Maugham's use of a trademark was unusual but not unique. Rudyard Kipling used a trademark comprising the Hindu god, Ganesh, with a small swastika in the top left hand corner. I have recently heard that the *hamsa* symbol adorned the Swamp, the doctors' tent in *M.A.S.H.*, the American TV series about the Korean War.

[2] See the Preface to *Mrs Craddock*, written 51 years after its publication and Maugham's ruminations on himself as a young writer. W. Somerset Maugham, *Mrs Craddock* (London: Heinemann, 1955), p.8.

[3] The events in the novel were based on a scandal that occurred in Whitstable when Maugham lived there as a boy. Meyers, *Somerset Maugham; a Life*, pp.199-200.

[4] Apart from Maugham's own writings about the South Pacific, see also Wilmon Menard, *The Two Worlds of Somerset Maugham* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, 1965).

[5] For example, in April 1924, *The Letter* appeared in *Hearst's International* and, in May 1924, *in Nashs*. Stott, *Maughamiana: The Writings of William Somerset Maugham, Being a Handlist of Works by William Somerset Maugham and of His Contributions to Certain Selected Periodicals Together with an Introduction and Some Notes on the Periodicals*, p.50.

[6] For an analysis of the historical events on which Maugham's *The Letter* is based, see Mary Kilcline Cody, "Tropical Gothic: Murder and Retribution in Malaya, 1911" (Southeast Asian History, Australian National University, forthcoming).

[7] Any historian who has trawled through the Colonial Office files pertaining to British Malaya cannot fail to note the high proportion of original correspondence related to issues to do with pensions.

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