

## A Formalism Reading of Maugham's "The Three Fat Women of Antibes" and "Rain"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a formalist analysis of Maugham's two stories "The Three Fat Women of Antibes" and "Rain" and it offers a discussion of some major aspects of the work as a whole: genre, narration, character relations, and setting. The aim is to provide a sense of Maugham's art of the short story with an assessment of the vital elements of what makes a short story successful in the work of William Somerset Maugham and an exploration of how his work exposes the experience. The main part of this manuscript provides a detailed analysis of selected short stories by Maugham. Especial emphasis is placed on the author's gifted talents which shows the diversity of Maugham's literary legacy that made him the most popular writer of his time. The study discloses that conducting a formalist analysis is supposed to be a good way in understanding literary works.

### INTRODUCTION

Formalism reading is an important way in analyzing literary works, especially in analyzing short stories. Formalist Approach aims to make of a literary work a scientific object, centering on the text's internal workings. Setting pattern of the short story structure could help readers to appreciate and create brilliant short stories.

Long before any written literary form such as the modern novel and short story developed, people were telling one another stories, passing them on orally down generations, acting them out and singing them too. When systems of writing were developed, stories began to be recorded for future times. And these records take many different forms which distinctly separate one kind of story from another. Essentially, there are two distinct types of records: one is a record of fact or data commonly known as history. History comes from a Greek word that originally meant inquiry or investigation but it gradually acquired the meaning of things that have *happened or a recorded version of things that are supposed to have happened*. Examples of historical records are government records, travel documents, news report and the bible, all of which are real but a dealing of the past. It is a continuous record of events especially public happenings such as the world wars, all of which we can only experience

through reading and after the effects of it without physical involvement. However, we have experienced something emotionally and intellectually. The other one is the record of fiction, stories that are made up, the unreal product of human imagination. This does not mean that fiction cannot be factual. In fact, it can maintain the closest possible correspondence between its story and things that have actually happened in the world. It can be very fanciful, defying our sense of life's ordinary possibilities, such as fairy tales, mythologies,...etc. Fiction is derived from the Latin word  *fingere*  which means to make or shape; it is a created world out of its creator's imagination but nevertheless offers us our "imitation of life". It helps us to understand life; and life in turn, helps us understand fiction. We recognize and identify ourselves with certain aspects and situations in the more obvious perspectives of fiction; and we also see ideal and debased extremes of existence – both possible and impossible- that are interesting in themselves and interestingly different from our own experiences. According to Scholes (1981) "fiction interests us because of the complicated ways in which it is at once like and unlike life". (43)

The modern short story is said to be the newest of literary genres. It emerges with the rise of literary realism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is not to be understood as being exclu-

sively realistic but that it is a form influenced by realism. At first, the short stories still bear moral fables and hints of allegory about them but with Maupassant in France and Chekhov in Russia, we see the realistic short story taking the form of being brief, pointed and ironic. The story becomes truly short, selecting a moment or a few moments out of life rather than recounting it at length. Once good example of this is "story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin. The influence of Maupassant and Chekhov was to become dominant in the development of short story for the next century. But the impulse to tell fables still prevails. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new impulse to write about fiction, or "metafiction" was aroused. Metafiction explores the relationship between fact and fiction. However, it is important to know that the most fantastic of these fictions has something to do with reality and even the most realistic must not be confused with life itself. In this study, the researcher chooses to focus on the genre of short story in its most effective form. This means that it must refer to predominant norms than all-inclusive categories. Its evolving features are to be taken as general rules of art which is descriptive but not prescriptive to develop a more unified approach to story-telling.

Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) devoted himself to the short story like few other British writers such as: H.G. Wells, V.S. Pritchett, Kipling and show a comparable interest in short fiction. Maugham wrote approximately more than a hundred short stories in his long literary career; and is one of the first British writers of fiction to represent aspect of life in a natural and a realistic context. His works contain a good deal of naturalism and realism which led him to portray the realistic rather than the fantastic. Antony Burgess states "The short story was Maugham's true m'tier, and some of the stories he wrote are among the best in the language" (16). Also, Hanson (1985) claims:

"Maugham is said to be incapable of being dismissed by anyone interested in the forms and distinctions of short story because he is one of the most widely read of all English writers". (49)

A study conducted on Maugham's structural evaluation of his short fiction by Al Matarneh (2014) explores the basic elements of the short story, namely a beginning, middle, and end, unity of effect, conflict, character changes and realistic style (71). It seems pertinent that Maugham's short fiction is within the formula of what made it successful.

Consequently, in 1947 Maugham instituted the Somerset Maugham Award, awarded to the best British writer or writers under the age of thirty-five for a work of fiction published in the past year. He influenced many writers such as: Eric Ambler, Green, John Lee Carre, and Len Deighron (Arche, 1994:118). On the other hand, Maugham was commonly influenced by a German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and writers Guy de Maupassant and Oscar Wilde in his writings. His natural settings were first based upon theatrical, literary and upper-class London. Nevertheless, his wide travels especially including colonial places provided him to encounter all types of people, which enriched the diversity of his writing (Meyers,

2004: 156). Furthermore, each of these stories can stand on its own. Maugham himself wrote that such a compactness of technique, character and incident may seem disconcerting in a world where at least one loose end is normally left behind; but the compactness is part of the method used by such short story writers as Maugham.

## SYNOPSIS OF THE TWO STORIES

### Rain

Dr. Macphail and his wife were on their way to Apia for medical duty and had for come to know the Davidsons, who were missionaries, on board of the ship. The Davidsons appeared to be a pair of rather pedantic Christian who were not quite willing to associate themselves with the community on board (other than the Macphails), as they considered the other passengers a rough lot and did not approve the behavior of the passengers. Mr. Davidson was, in fact, a rather solemn and reserved man.

The ship had made a stop at Pago-Pago island when an epidemic of measles, a disease then considered fatal among the kanakas, had broken out. A case had unfortunately developed among a crew member of the schooner that was taking them a Apia and thus, caused the affected passengers to be quarantined on Pago-Pago. It would only be allowed to continue its journey to Apia when it has been made certain that no one else on board was affected.

Thus, being forced to put up at the island for at least two weeks, they decided to take lodgings with a certain trader. It was the most uncomfortable stay as the rain poured almost unceasingly. Meanwhile, they discovered that a Ms. Thompson who was sailing with them had come to take a room below theirs. She was totally noisy, coarse and rude, making the stay more unpleasant than it already was. Ms. Thompson was then discovered to be a prostitute; and she had been carrying on her trade there, thus causing the perturbation. Mr. Davidson broke out in wrath against what he considered scandalous, evil and sinful conduct. He exhorted Sadie to repent but she continued to act in defiance.

Davidson then insisted on turning her out of the inn but when she could not get lodging elsewhere, he urged the governor of Pago-Pago to deport her on the first boat that leaves the island. The boat that was coming would be sailing to San Francisco, where she came from. Sadie Thompson was horrified at the idea of going home where she had escaped from being sent to a penitentiary and begged to be allowed to go to Sydney instead. However, the missionary was a dament on his stand; and this made her hysterical. After much tears and prayers with her till the day she was to sail. That morning, Dr. Macphail was roused from his sleep to be led to inspect a dead body. The trader had found Davidson at the beach with his throat slit from ear to ear. It was confirmed as suicide case but nobody knew why he did it. Back at the inn, Sadie Thompson was back to her old ways, dressed in her loud clothes and flirting with the sailors. She even made rude remarks at Mr. Davidson; and Dr. Macphail, not tolerating such nonsense, confronted her angrily in her room. Suddenly, Sadie Thompson started screaming contemptuously

on him, accusing him of being the same filthy, dirty pig as the rest of the men. It was then that Dr. Macphail realized what had happened to the missionary.

### The Three Fat Women of Antibes

Arrow Sutcliffe, Beatrice Richman and Frances Hickson shared two things in common: they loved the game of bridge and food. They were basically good natured, had cheerful souls and nothing could impair their good humour until they stepped on the weighing machine and realized how heavy they weighed. They had met at Carlsbad, where they were being treated for their weight problem by the same doctor. They hit it off almost immediately as great pals as soon as they discovered that each was a great fan of the game of bridge. Thus, they spent most of their days watching their weights and playing bridge.

However, the game needed four players; and they obviously lacked the fourth. It had been difficult for them to find someone in their class to play with them. It was for this reason that Frank invited her newly-widowed cousin, Lena Finch, to come and stay with them at Antibes. It was believed that Lena was a challenging bridge player. She proposed that upon leaving Carlsbad, they should take a house at Antibes where they could stay together to govern each other's appetite and at the same time enjoy the game. When Lena arrived, they formed her to be thin. Furthermore, she often ate a lot of fattening food like bread, butter and cream – the very kind of food that the 3 women were trying to avoid. As the days passed, it became more and more frustrating for them to see Lena gorging greedily on the things that the three were forbidden to eat. They traced themselves even though it agitated them tremendously. They went home thinking they could continue the slimming task successfully after all. However, to Frank's horror, she soon found Beatrice pigging out at the hotel poolside. Lena's stay had caused every string of resistance in her to be broken and she decided that she was going to eat everything that she had missed out for so long. Seeing this, it was the last straw for Frank and Arrow and they too began indulging. And all three were friends again.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Rain

Rain is about a missionary who condemned a prostitute but ironically fell into sin with her in the end, and suffered a tragic consequence. This story-line parallels what O'Connor claims: "the short story rarely deals with heroes but rather, with a "submerged population group" (110). Davidson is indeed not a hero but rather a figure of social disjunction.

In comparing the story to the frame of the elements of what makes a story successful, it is found that Maugham has certainly lived up to what he professes as rules for short story writing: that a story must have a beginning, a middle and an end.

Rain began with the introduction of the two central characters – Dr. Macphail and Davidson. Dr. Macphail functioned as the observer while Davidson, the tragic protagonist. They had first met on the ship sailing to Apia. Dr. Macphail

noticed that Davidson "was a silent, rather sullen man, and he was by nature reserved and even morose. "He also noticed that Davidson was a missionary who has an extraordinarily low tolerance for anything against his belief" (248). Furthermore, "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." (249)

Next, the scene was set on a remote port of Pago-Pago island as the schooner which was to bring them to Apia was prohibited from entering the harbour of Apia due to an outbreak of a measles among its crew members. It was at the island of Pago-Pago that they came to know Sadie Thompson whom the Davidson held in total contempt for her conduct. Clearly, the beginning has set a conflict ready for further development in the story then, moves on to the middle part where the complication is followed up with the main character's subsequent action to resolve the situation. In this case, Davidson tried to expel Sadie from the island to stop the immoral activities on the island. The complication intensified as life was made unendurable for her on the island and climaxed at the point when she went almost hysterical pleading with Davidson to change his decision.

The complication was finally resolved when Sadie decided to repent of all her sins and even agreed to be sent home to receive her due punishment. The falling action however, did not decline into an anticlimax but instead took an unexpected twist at its very end. The writer surprises his readers with the sudden and shocking truth regarding the death of the missionary. The story ended on a highly strong note, leaving the reader with something that is difficult to swallow because the events that led up to the death of Davidson and the cause of death itself whether it is suicide or murder are perversions of the Christian teachings which were preached by Davidson himself. It was suggested, and not described, that what had passed between Sadie and the missionary was sexual in nature. However, whether the missionary had passed between Sadie and the missionary was sexual in nature. However, whether the missionary had killed himself or was murdered by Sadie, the ending has an open-endedness, rather than a resolution that requires the reader's own interpretation of the situation such as:

"Say, doc, you can that stuff with me. What the hell are you doin' in my room? "What do you mean?" he cried. "What d'you mean?" She gathered herself together. No one could describe the scorn of her expression or the contemptuous hatred she put into her answer. "You men! You filthy, dirty pigs! You're all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!" Dr. Macphail gasped. He understood. (311)

In Terms of character change in the characterization, Davidson was an active character who was responsible for shaping the events that ironically brought him to his doom. In the instance when Davidson was conscious of Sadie's profession, he unmistakably shaped the events to his will. He became obsessed with reforming the flamboyant prostitute; and bullied her into submission with threat of a prison term. His intention to get control over her went beyond a missionary's duty and into sexual subjugation. Here, we may

observe the appropriateness of Macphail as narrator, for in the first half of the story, the doctor had established enough moral authority and objectivity to outweigh the powerful religious symbols cloaking Davidson's personality.

The story (*Rain*), has achieved its impact through compassion and unity of effect. Written approximately in 10800 words, the story managed to condense most of the elements essential to fiction such as: plot, setting/situation, characterization and focus; it successfully exercised the reader's emotional and intellectual satisfaction. To accomplish this, Maugham did not waste his words and his initial sentence directed straight to this effect, "It was nearly bed-time and when they awoke next morning, land would be in sight". (246) The setting was made clear in one line to be on a sailing ship. It was then followed by introduction of the two central characters. Davidson's character was first established through the eyes of Dr. Macphail and further drawn according to his reactions to circumstances and Davidson's own wife's account of what he was capable of doing to the natives in the places of his missionary work. Her comments and reactions towards him helped the reader to understand his personality through inferences, without the writer having to draw it lengthily as in the novels. For example, of her comment: "It would be a brave man who tried to stand up against Mr. Davidson" (280), this implies not only her opinion of him but also how he would react in certain situations. Therefore, this worked as a foreshadow to his reactions towards Sadie Thompson and her fate.

The compression in *Rain* is also made possible by the use of symbolism. The entire story itself could be a symbolism as it carries a connection of the writer's intention. The *Rain* which corresponds with the unceasing rain in Pago-Pago island could possibly bear a biblical implication of the Flood which God had sent through an unceasing downpour of 40 days and 40 nights as punishment to mankind. In the same way, *Rain* could possibly be interpreted as having a divine intervention upon mortal sin. Davidson, a servant of God, had committed a similar sin and thus was punished for it. Even his death ended in the sea water. Moreover, the narrative style in the story is colloquial as it employs a narrator-character who shares a similar role as a first-person narrator and thus, offers a "natural" pretext for the omissions and temporal dislocations which are common features of short fiction. (Hanson, 1985)

The plot outlines the course of events that had taken place. With reference to the summary, it is clearly seen that the plot is "one-tracked" and focused on a single event, without any subplot at all. It ran from the beginning to the end concerning one person who is not happy with another about one incident; their interaction sparks off reactions and consequences. As the story focused on a central issue – Davidson's concern with Sadie's repentance – the story thus created a single effect that is complete and self-contained, thus successful in making a unity of effect.

Conflict is another element that stands prominent in the story. It consists of both kinds of conflict; the external conflict obviously endorses the struggles between Davidson and his antagonist. Davidson posed a threat to Sadie because he

had the power to have her extradited from the island to be sent home to San Francisco where she stands the risk of being sent to jail. Sadie, in turn posed as a symbol of evil because of Davidson's deep sense of religious indignation against her profession. The internal conflict reigns in both the characters. Sadie was torn between a willful repentance and lusting after a worldly living. Similarly, Davidson struggled against the war between his spirit and his flesh.

It is clearly seen that the conflict is a significant event developed and united to be the core of the plot; and it entails a suspenseful outcome to the two opposing forces that are equal in strength. On top of that, its plausibility is convincing because such incidences are not totally unfamiliar in our world – the hypocrisy of people hurling judgement against others without considering their own faults and weaknesses as a human being. It is even more real and recognizable if the reader has a reasonably sound understanding of Christian teachings and the true Christian world where even the great leaders of churches who preach the holy word of God fall into adultery and shame the God, the church and the community they serve. One case in point, a world renowned Christian writer named Gordon MacDonald committed adultery at the last decade. However, he did not end up like Davidson. Instead he confessed his sins to his church, repented and began anew with God, his wife and his church. He is still greatly respected, if not even more, for his courage to confess.

Nevertheless, the way Davidson chose to react in that particular situation, though irresponsible and untoward, is an understandable and familiar aspect of human behavior. He succumbed to his sexual urges because he was probably eaten up by shame and self-condemnation. It is in fact a reflection of actuality even though the story itself could have been invented by Maugham. Thus, the study is condensed true to the frame of an effective piece of short story. "Rain" is one of the best of Maugham's short literary fiction. Dr. B. Sudha Sai (2016) states that "one can find professionalism pervading the manner which he adopts for this story, the matter, theme, situations and the settings to give the public what they want" (11).

### **The Three Fat Women of Antibes**

The story is simple and uncomplicated in terms of its plotting. Three women tried to lose weight but got their diet regime upset by a visitor. Having lost their determination, they threw themselves into an acting orgy again. This story is different from *Rain* in many aspects. It is a comedy and it is not heavy with abnormal or unbalanced states produced by unusual or tragic circumstances and pressures. Its characters are not self-destructive but enjoy the luxuries life has to offer, such as eating. The narrative style is also different as the writer employed a third-person narrative voice rather than the usual first-person in the *Rain*. However, the reason of choosing this story is to show that Maugham is capable of writing something light-hearted and entertaining; and that his writing capability is not confined to tragedy even though he is well-known for his preoccupation with sordid human condition and colonial issues. Other stories have similar to the tone of this story include *The Luncheon* and *The Ant and The Grasshopper*.

The story began with the introduction of the three main characters: Arrow Sutcliffe, Beatrice and Frances Hickson, providing their background and narrating the first encounter with one another. Having established their common problem, the story is followed up by the characters' subsequent effort in resolving their weight problem. The idle part of the story saw the characters' struggle within themselves to fight against the temptation of eating. The conflict that exists here is fundamentally an internal one. Even though the three women were portrayed as venting their frustration on one another; nevertheless, it was themselves that they are really fighting against. Therefore, this exemplified a 'decision story'. The conflict is significant because it formed the core of the story or theme. The struggle was of obvious importance on the characters involved because it concerned the scales of their health and image. Its plausibility is high because this is very common of the women with their image is indubitably a cliché today, but one that is acted out every day. Besides, the reaction of the characters were only too familiar to the principles of human behavior. The increase in anorexic and bulimic cases is a proof to this. As the events unfolded, the conflict began to resolve itself when the sources of their temptation left. Everything seemingly went back to normal after Lena went home and the girls were once again allowed to resume their diet peacefully. The falling action then took an unexpected twist as it surprises the reader with the three bingeing as the final resolution.

It must be recognized that this is a rare example of a story in which a group of people is treated as a single personality undergoing a change. However, this singleness goes so far as to deliver the plot only. The women were not that flat characters; they were given individual personalities as well because they shared the same kind of personal problems. Thus, they worked together to help each other watch their weight so that each would not give up. And finally, when the fragile thread of perseverance is broken in one of them, all three broke loose the eating monsters that they had held back so far.

Unlike the story *Rain*, the elements are compressed within thirteen pages only to achieve its light and humorous effect. The simple story line is unified around a theme of temptation. The story was able to exercise an understanding plight of the sisterhood. The effect of totality is kept true to the uniqueness of the genre. Thus, it is a simple tale of three women struggling with their weight problem; the writer was able to tell his story in the most effective and impactful style by adapting the basic element of the genre.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that formalist criticism will help bring out all of the great, hidden qualities the stories possess. Maugham essentially stays mostly within the conventions of realist short fiction. *Rain* is among probably the best short stories written by Maugham, in its length and characterization. As stated earlier, the readers of Maugham's stories realize efficiency pervading the manner which he adopts for his story. Maugham's formula for a story as it has a beginning, a middle and an end. The story's popularity has sustained over the years as it has been made into movies and plays. *The Three Fat Women of Antibes* reveals his capability to produce a story not merely with tragic effect but also a story tackles comic common social dilemma in the modern era. Maugham's formal elements such as plot, theme, conflict, setting, character, climax help in understanding his intension behind the story and the readers could catch the meaning of the story. Finally, Maugham remains one of the twentieth century's most productive, outstanding, and popular writers.

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