



Maugham, Robin (1916-1981)

by Stephen da Silva

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Scion of a wealthy and powerful family, Robin Maugham rebelled against the expectations of his father, whose title he eventually inherited, to become a popular and prolific writer. Defiantly homosexual, Maugham regularly features homosexual themes and homoerotic situations in his work.

Robin Maugham, the youngest child and only son of Viscount Frederick Herbert Maugham, Chancellor of England, was born Robert Cecil Romer Maugham on May 17, 1916. He was educated at Highfield, Eton, and Trinity College, Cambridge. Although he was forced by his father to study law and although he briefly served as a judge's marshal, his true calling was that of a writer.

During World War II, Maugham served in a tank regiment in the Western Desert and was wounded in action. He also served as private secretary to the Director of the National Service Campaign and became a close personal friend of Winston Churchill.

Maugham had a highly ambivalent relationship to his famous family. On the one hand, he assiduously used his family name and his connection to his famous uncle, W. Somerset Maugham, to promote his artistic career. On the other hand, he was obsessed with escaping from the oppressive shadows that the figures of his repressive father and his eccentric and anxiously closeted uncle cast over him.

Maugham recognized that he was a homosexual at an early age, and much of his fiction candidly and often erotically represents homosexual relationships. His novel *The Wrong People* (1967) in particular, with its frank treatment of pederasty, was considered so scandalous that Maugham initially published it under the pseudonym "David Griffin." Somerset Maugham saw his nephew's candor as unwise and found it personally threatening, and this divergence in attitude and sexual openness caused considerable tension in their difficult relationship.

Maugham was a prolific writer, publishing some 30 books. He wrote about a dozen novels, including *Line on Ginger* (1949, also published as *The Intruder*), *The Last Encounter* (1972), and *Enemy* (1983), several collections of short stories, half a dozen books of travel, two autobiographies (including *Escape from the Shadows*, 1972), and a biographical account of his family (*Somerset and All the Maughams*, 1966), focusing on his uncle. In his novel *The Barrier* (1973), he collaborated with poet John Betjeman, integrating five of Betjeman's sonnets into the novel.

Several of his works were made into films, most notably his novella *The Servant* (1949), which was the basis of Joseph Losey's 1963 film of the same name, featuring a script by Harold Pinter and acclaimed performances by Dirk Bogarde and James Fox. Maugham also wrote several screenplays, including one based on *The Wrong People*, which was purchased by Sal Mineo but never filmed.

To put it schematically, Maugham represents homosexuality in two ways. First, he represents it as a splitting or doubling of the self. In his autobiography, he describes the role that his virile and daring imaginary alter ego "Tommy" played in his own erotic life, and male doubles play a major role in novels like

The Link (1969). His reliance on metaphors and images related to mirroring and shadows seem apt given this understanding of male homosexuality as doubling.

Second, he represents homosexual relationships in terms of polar difference: both in his personal life and in his fiction, Maugham was fascinated by relationships between older, middle-class white men and working-class or non-Western youths. In many of his works, he powerfully captures how destructive and egotistical the older man's desire to "civilize" or "educate" the younger partner can be. In general, he does a better job of capturing the working-class youth's complicated feelings of resentment and complicity with the older man's desires than he does in representing non-Western youths. His non-Western "boys" tend to be beautiful, innocent, "primitive" stereotypes.

There is a sadomasochistic *frisson* to Maugham's work. Many of his novels bemoan sadism in the English public schools or in places like Morocco but lovingly linger over scenes of homoerotic sadism. By the same token, loss is a major theme in Maugham's work, and the reader often derives a vicarious elegiac, masochistic pleasure from the white protagonist's loss of his working-class or non-Western lover.

Maugham could be a stylistically uneven and repetitive writer, and he provokes some politically correct qualms, but his compulsively readable novels vividly and candidly capture the ambivalence surrounding homosexuality for a gay Englishman of his class and generation.

Maugham was an alcoholic and a manic depressive, and it is probable that some of his later work was collaboratively written with or even ghost-written by his young lover Peter Burton, though Burton's highly self-serving account of their relationship in *Parallel Lives* (1985) should be treated with caution.

On the death of his father in 1958, Maugham became the second Viscount Maugham of Hartfield; in later years he used his title to further his celebrity, making frequent appearances on British television and radio talk shows.

Suffering from diabetes and alcoholism, Maugham died on March 13, 1981 in Brighton.

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About the Author

Stephen da Silva earned his Ph.D. from Rice University. He has published on Amitav Ghosh, Christopher Isherwood, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, and Eve K. Sedgwick. Currently, he is studying how late-Victorian and modernist writers drew on the idioms of Hellenism and primitivism to challenge the association of homosexuality with arrested development.