

“The Colonel’s Lady”: Somerset Maugham’s Recipe Against Oblivion

Dr. B. Sudha Sai
G.I.T., GITAM University

Abstract

The present article is one of Somerset Maugham’s finest tributes to womankind with the help of his Short Story “The Colonel’s Lady”. Besides exploring the wide varieties of life, the best thing in this outstanding piece of craftsmanship is the character of the Colonel’s wife. It is one of the best short-stories ever written by Somerset Maugham, in its length and characterization. One can find professionalism pervading the manner which he adopts for his story, the matter, theme, situations and the settings to give the public what they want. It also makes one marvel at its details, composition and ability to touch one’s soul with feelings. A sentence, a paragraph, a fragment and everything in the story sit as a perfect gem in an exquisite design. The story is one of the examples where Maugham can be rightly called one of those rare authors, who can make his characters leap off the page and become living and breathing creatures. Even if one is not a fan of the short story form, after reading this story feels that Maugham’s writing is an exception. Especially in the ending of the story, the reader empathizes with the Colonel’s Lady’s need to express her creativity in her own way and feels as if the story resonates with real flesh and blood characters.

William Somerset Maugham is a worldly story-teller with incomparable knowledge of the world. His sense of insecurity as an orphan at an early age of ten, proper professional medical training, series of travels around the world, wartime experience in the secret service as a contact with spies during the Russian Revolution in 1917, interesting and varied life have benefitted him tremendously in his writing career. His training as a doctor taught him about the minute details of human suffering aptly conveyed through a dispassionate and systematic habit of observation. To add to this, his extensive, fearless and productive travels around the world have benefitted him a lot. The acquaintance which he obtained through travel with a diversity of standards, manners, morals rightly served the clinical attitude of his writing. In addition, his spell as a British spy in Petrograd charged with aborting the Bolshevik revolution taught him about politics at the very highest level of world significance. Due to various circumstances he tended to be shy and more of a passive observer rather than an active participant in life. This further clearly explained some of the detachment that one feels in his various stories. On the whole, all these have helped him to develop a keen eye for the minute details of life, which is further combined with his writing style especially of his short stories in such a way as to capture readers’ attention.

Though most of Maugham’s stories can be best recipes against oblivion, “The Colonel’s Lady” is one of his best stories. The story is, in fact, incubated for many years on the back of an envelope. It is based on a note he made in 1901, which appears in *A Writer’s Note Book*. Actually,

there can be few better demonstrations of the art of the short story than a comparison of the variety of characters, scenes and situations which make the finished piece of work written forty years later. The setting of the story is done in a country-side, twenty miles away from Sheffield, near London. The story has a theme of jealousy shown by the husband George Peregrine towards his wife Evie as he is unable to bear the success of his wife writing a book of poetry called ‘When Pyramids Decay’.

George Peregrine, the Colonel, has always considered himself to be superior to his wife, Evie. He is admired by people in and around his locality. According to him Evie is just a middle-aged woman without much attraction but a good wife and a wonderful hostess. Earlier before his marriage even thinks that he is in love with her, but then realizes that they have completely different interests. Though they have no quarrels, as she is unable to give birth to a child, the Colonel thinks that their marriage has failed. Even then he considers himself to be a healthy man and quite normal to have another woman in order to have fun n enjoyment in life. Thus, in the process, he does not respect and understand her feelings and in the process hurts her deeply. He has a secret lover, Daphne but he never thinks that it would hurt his wife. The same situation at the home front is beautifully described by Maugham when they sit far away from each other at the dining table for Breakfast.

The same person gets totally surprised when he knows about his wife publishing a book of poetry called ‘When Pyramids Decay’. Evie in-fact publishes the book without his knowledge, that too in her maiden name. As usual at first, the Colonel underestimates and thinks nothing of her book of poetry. The same situation is once again well depicted by the author where even though they are aware of the situation, their daily routine life continues as normally as it happens in any other family. She as a house wife goes on to do her duty very well. She doesn’t get affected by her husband’s affair though she knows about it. But when he goes to London, he gets totally surprised as her book is very popular and well received. At the same time, he is neither able to understand her nor the reason behind everyone appreciating her poetry. As her poems turn out to be quite successful both in bookstores and in the eyes of the literary critiques, he begins to pay greater attention to her work.

Everything around him gets changed as people start talking about the beauty and originality her poetry. People start to refer to George as Evie’s husband, rather than the colonel. At this point it is natural for him to feel unbalanced and very jealous. He finally manages to buy the book, reads it again and again until he understands that the passionate poems are about a love affair between an old woman and a young man. Till now in the story he completely discounts his childless wife until he finds, upon reading that she's published to critical acclaim, that ten years earlier she had a clandestine affair with a younger man. The husband even thinks it to be a true affair and soon becomes jealous even though he is *“supposed he’d been in love with her when he asked her to marry him, at least sufficiently in love for a man who wanted to marry and settle down, but with time he discovered that they had nothing much in common.”* Although, he is cheating on his wife with Daphne, a girl *“with whom he was in the habit of passing a few agreeable hours whenever he went to town,”* he feels hurt by his wife’s confessed betrayal through the book. He is left wondering why he couldn’t catch the

passionate and attractive side of his wife. Here one finds that Maugham's portrayal of the husband's character is one-sided and static.

Till now in the story, one can see that the selfish husband has put himself in a superior position by not thinking about the wife. He rather neglects and never gives any credit to her. But at this point he doesn't change his mind about relations with his better-half and at the same time does nothing about it. Her possible affair acts as a trigger and in addition her intelligence and charm make him angry. But once he finds out that he is nothing, tries to deny the same by blaming others. He is angry with his wife for the possible imaginative affair. But Evie's magnanimity is well portrayed when she continues to tolerate his affair and disrespect. At the beginning, he even thinks the book would be a failure, but the same feeling further resulted in his humiliation. The greatness of her character is further brought out when she does not accept the invitation extended by the literary critique on the occasion of success meet of the book, fearing that George would not enjoy the party. On the other hand, the husband doesn't even clarify with his wife on the issue of clandestine relationship and goes to the extent of meeting his lawyer and sending a detective to investigate the same.

His disturbed mental condition is well brought out where he wants to divorce her but unable to do so as he feels very sad about it. Besides, he also thinks that she could even do the same with him. Then he tries to look back and compare what all she has done for him. He is also reminded of his affair with Daphne whenever he goes to London. He then worries by imagining his situation after divorcing her, as there won't be a nice, kind and diligent wife anymore to serve him. He realizes that there won't be a patient wife to receive his bad behaviour. Moreover, there won't be a smart and popular poet beside him anymore. He recollects and admits the fact that there has been an increase in his popularity after his wife's publication of the book. So in the end, he doesn't divorce and lets her affair remain a story for the readers. This story makes one marvel at its details, composition and ability to touch one's soul with feelings. It is a comedy with overtones of sadness as Colonel is a comic character but sympathetic at the same time. Finally the reader might not understand the husband, but understands his wife's need to express creativity in her own way, about that part of the life about which the husband is not aware of.

The story is one of the examples that describe volumes about Maugham as a consummate story teller. He tells the story because he is blessed with a narrative quality for refined story-telling. It has a huge readership and seems to appeal to all classes of people. He has a gift for creating a gallery of varied and lively characters like Evie, the Colonel, the critique, the lawyer and Daphne. The characters in the story are brought to life in an unhurried, unstrained and unnoticeable manner. Once again, the reader finds Maugham to be less of a writer and more a story teller. Besides, his style has an informality which makes for unimpeded reading. The diction used by him is informal. Finally, it can be appropriately said that Maugham has reached the pinnacle of his art in the form of short stories. The expertly told tales with their twists and vividly drawn characters prove to be wonderfully entertaining. After going through the entire corpora of short stories produced by Maugham,

especially the present story, one can say that he is a born short story writer, one of the most skilful and fertile ever to have practiced the art.

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Dr. B. Sudha Sai
Assistant Professor, Department of English
G.I.T., GITAM University
Visakhapatnam-530045
sudhasai70@gmail.com

From the walls George Peregrine's ancestors, painted by the fashionable painters of the day, looked down upon them. The butler brought in the morning post. There were several letters for the colonel, business letters, The Times and a small parcel for his wife Evie. He looked at his letters and then, opening The Times, began to read it. They finished breakfast and rose from the table.