



The Trembling of a Leaf

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English novelist, short story writer and playwright, William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), achieved incredible success in the twentieth century with the reading public, despite a lackluster reception from literary critics. His simple and lucid style complemented his interesting and highly-developed characters, appealing to readers as much in the 1920s and 1930s as it does today. The works contained in this edition—The Pacific, Mackintosh, The Fall of Edward Barnard, Red, The Pool, Honolulu, Rain, and Envoi—were inspired by Maugham's journeys to the South Sea Islands of the Pacific. Through these stories, Maugham sought to differentiate between his view of life in the South Seas from the views of his 'Romantic' predecessors like Herman Melville, Pierre Loti, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Readers will appreciate Maugham's honest and vivid accounts of cultural and racial interactions, love in the tropics, and his unforgettable descriptions of exotic islands in these dramatically powerful tales.

The Trembling of a Leaf Details

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From Reader Review The Trembling of a Leaf for online ebook

Barbara says

Wonderful set of stories, including the well-known Rain. I could do without the disparaging talk of half-castes and the use of the N word, but the attitude of the white man's superiority was a true representation of its time. Very evocative of the time and the South Pacific of the 20s and 30s.

Diane S ? says

The short story Rain, may be one of the best short stories I have ever read and I am an avid short story reader. The human condition, religion, power, lust, a tropical setting, outsiders vs. natives against the backdrop of the constant, seemingly never ending rain. Thought this was a very powerful story and though come could say the language and situation is dated, I don't necessarily consider that true as there are still missionaries serving all over the world and there are new cultures being discovered yearly.

The other stories take place in Samoa and also highlight the human condition, something this author chronicles very ably. Many of the themes are repeated, though the outcomes vary. All were very good but none had the power for me that Rain did, first story set the bar high. They all do though serve to enlighten as to a particular time and place and the invasion and consequences of the imposition of will on native peoples.

John Parks says

Sometimes stories are better told in 25 pages than in 250 . Maugham is a master and I think his best writing is in the short stories in this compilation. Some of my all-time favorite stories.

Shane says

Maugham, like my other favourite author, Graham Greene, walked the roads less travelled of the former British Empire, and like Green, was a spy, and a man with dark secrets and skeletons in his closet. What better person to write about flawed and vulnerable characters!

In these tales, occurring around the western islands of Samoa which were occupied by New Zealand and its colonial master, Britain, Maugham brings to life the isolation faced by the westerner; he skillfully depicts how island life strips the foreigner of his dignity, localizes him, and finally destroys him. An about-face of the traditional colonial story, in which the colonizers go in imperiously, and, using a combination of language, laws and religion, civilize the natives. Maugham paints a reverse picture too, of the native transported back to Britain, who finds the climate, customs and culture oppressive enough to destroy.

In "Mackintosh," the colonial master is the old chief, Walker, who has been on the island for so long that he is good for nothing else. He rules with an iron fist with disregard for directives from the capital of Apia. He treats his islanders as his children, yet browbeats and pushes them over the edge when they disobey him.

Mackintosh is the newly arrived aide, caught between his brutal master whom he hates, and the local population aching for a better deal. Mackintosh is unable to challenge Walker's authority and succumbs to getting rid of the old man in the most diabolic way, thus succumbing to the guilt that accompanies his action.

In "Pool" we see the marriage between the colonial and his native wife. The marriage is doomed from the start because, he can't live in Samoa and be increasingly localized by the wife's family, and she can't live in Scotland where she is seen taking her traditional pool bath in sub-zero temperatures. She runs away back home to the islands and he follows only to be consumed by joblessness, culture, gossip and alcohol. Hints of sado-masochism emerge in this troubled union, for the wife only respects her husband when he beats her, and then disrespects him when he begs forgiveness for his actions – another sign of their incompatibility.

In "Rain" we return to the colonial master using religion as a whip to guilt and subdue his subjects. By classifying every aspect of native behaviour as a "sin," the missionary, Davidson, converts his flock into "civilized" people. While quarantined on the island of Pago Pago during an outbreak of measles, Davidson sets out to convert a young American prostitute Ms. Thompson. The ever-falling rain on the island during their forced stay acts as a metaphor for entrapment, for both the missionary and his charge are locked in a clash of wills that eventually vanquishes the former. In this case, human nature again shows its weakness, despite the accoutrements of civil conduct and religion.

Maugham is a master for subtly upping the stakes, and what begins as a benign situation soon accelerates to a point where death is the only outlet. Although the writing style is a bit dated (this book was published in 1921 and some of the stories written earlier), Maugham's insight into human behaviour under the pressures of empire, foreign culture and declining fortune is unparalleled. He was obviously one of those writers who saw the cracks in the empire and was unafraid to expose them, while still enjoying a vast following of readers in his day.

Dr.J.G. says

Rain:-

This must have been terribly shocking to the hypocritical and pious while being nothing new to those without blinkers, when published first - 20th century was nothing if not one that shredded many such veils of pretension from established societies of west.

The story takes place on a voyage in Pacific where a woman of certain profession is having fun along with a few of males around - after all being alone most of their lives far away from home was tough on the guys, and an accommodating woman who was not merely paid goods but one with some spirit, some heart and joy, was a blessing.

Unfortunately for them there is not merely a usual contingent of the disapproving couples and other respectable members of society but also a preacher very sure and proud of himself, who goes after the woman with denunciation and promised hell fire to all that would consort with her. She is brought to abject surrender and is entirely dependent on him subsequently in her submission to a pious life henceforth. And the preacher is willing to sacrifice himself, to go to her at any hour of day or night she might need him, as his wife very proudly testifies to his selfless sacrifice of his own comforts.

The preacher meanwhile has dreams of hills of Nebraska (having read it so long ago I could be wrong about the name of the particular state) - and then one day the preacher is found dead, having committed suicide, while there is sound of phonograph and laughter and dancing from the room of the woman who was trying to reform, and a note of bitter victory.

She was sincere in her repentance and her attempt to reform, but the high minded preacher all too fallible and unaware of his own Achilles's heel shared with all life, if not more than a little hypocritical in his imposition of his will and his standards of virtue on all and sundry.

.....

Pool:-

About a young and self assured woman who bathed in the pool in the forest - and the story around that enchanting scenario.

.....

MacIntosh:-

The elder man was the sort who would dress for dinner, in heat of Malaya, every single day - for years and decades that he spent alone in his bungalow on the plantation. The younger one is not quite from the same class, and is disapproved of by the elder. It takes time for him - the younger one - to realise it is not all about class and money, and that values imparted by upbringing is a vital part of it.

While not every upper class person brought up in cushy circumstances does always behave appropriately, the story is about values, essentially.

.....

Perry says

The Male's Ancient Conflict: His Inherent Sexual Nature vs. His Moral Fibers, Bonds of Loyalty and Religion

If you play with fire....

I consider Maugham as one of the top two or three short story writers of all time. His best is "Rain," one of the most powerful and symbolic short stories in the canon of Western lit. The tale explores in a most profound way the inescapable nature of **all** men as sexual beings (here, heterosexual*).

On a Pacific island quarantined during the tropical wet season, two married couples reside in the same building as a prostitute. One couple are missionaries, the other a mild-mannered doctor and his wife. The doctor is the story's narrator. I cannot think of another tale (in short or novel form) better illustrating a man's losing struggle, despite calling to all his morals, loyalty and religious beliefs, against his overpowering natural desires for the female. If you've not read it, I won't spoil for you one of the most affecting and effective last few pages I've read in all of literature. Prayers and faith can fortify the spirit, but they cannot

stop the Rain. Ironically, man could have saved himself, as with the Fall, by walking away.

Moral: avoid, at all costs, any situation that may provoke the masculine inner predations; else, you play a deadly game.

It seems to me that Maugham is one of the most underrated writers in Western Literature. Here, he displays his masterful creative talents for the short story in this collection of his stories set in the South Seas.

*I only note this here because Maugham was not.

Chrissie says

Stories as listed:

1. Intro
2. "The Pacific"
3. "Mackintosh"
4. "Rain"
5. "Envoi"
6. "The Casuarina Tree"
7. "The Letter"
8. "Sanatorium"
9. "Jane"
10. "The Judgement Seat"
11. "The Colonel's Lady"
12. "The Verger"

George says

A LUXUIOUS PLEASURE.

“...and the mystery of the sunset, the deep silence of the water, the lithe grace of the coconut trees, added to her beauty, giving it a profundity, a magic which stirred the heart to unknown emotions.”—page 114

“His manner was not agreeable. It was sycophantic, and yet behind the cringing air of an old man who had been worsted in his struggle with fate was a shadow of old truculence.”—page 115

W. Somerset Maugham, storyteller par excellence, is a master of the character flaw; crafting hauntingly beautiful and subtle portraits of distressingly, often fatally, flawed characters, all the while holding a mirror up to a horribly, rip-your-heart-out flawed humanity. The collection of short stories in ‘Rain and Other South Sea Stories,’ teeming with characters you’ll both love and hate almost simultaneously, lushly and entertainingly reaffirms Maugham’s superior storytelling talent.

Recommendation: Like O’Henry, Damon Runyon, and Mark Twain; W. Somerset Maugham is one of my favorite go-to guys whenever I want to read something just for the pure pleasure of the reading. If you like a

touch of profundity and magic with your beauty, he's the writer for you. As C. K. Chesterton aptly put it, "Literature is a luxury; fiction is a necessity." For me, reading W. Somerset Maugham, from time to time, is a necessary luxury.

[A word about Dover Publications, Thrift Editions: Unless you have incredibly good, un-hobbled eyesight avoid at all cost. It seems that all the 'Thrift' comes from substantially reducing the number of pages in a volume by printing it in the teeniest-tiniest type ever invented. For anyone whose eyesight has been spoiled by the luxury of 12-pt or better type, and especially by those of us who have been pampered by the larger type sizes available with an electronic reader, the type of a Dover Thrift Edition is very uncomfortable to read.]

Dover Publications Thrift Editions, Copyright 2005; 159 pages.

Daniel Villines says

The colonial era in the South Pacific was filled with self-righteous imperialists whose own good opinions of themselves were only overshadowed by their racist opinions of the native inhabitants. Maugham, captures this aspect of life and places it up front in every story. I understand that attitudes were different during Maugham's life, and that Maugham, given his dedication to capturing life as it is, could not write stories that were otherwise. Nonetheless, this aspect of the book makes each story somewhat acidic.

The stories themselves range from average to very good. Maugham exhibits his ability to capture life, and, in particular, the imperfections of love. In actuality, these stories are more about love than they are about the south seas. In much the same way that Maugham captured the emotions of love in his book *Of Human Bondage*, he captures various aspects of this complicated emotion in these tales.

Maugham also captures the beautiful setting of the tropical islands. The setting is not overplayed and he uses the setting as a reminder that many times the breathtaking beauty of the tropics is more permanent and lasting than any moment in time experienced by the humans residing among them.

Linda says

Since we'll soon be visiting several of the South Pacific Islands, I'm reading classic literature about the islands beforehand. We'll be at The Sadie Thompson Building in Pago Pago, Samoa, where Maugham wrote one of the stories, "Rain." I planned to only read it, but all the stories were so delicious I couldn't stop. His stories and his writing are exceptional and timeless. I'll certainly remember his stories, especially when we're in Tahiti, Samoa, and Honolulu. (There are several politically-incorrect words since this was written well before the term even existed.)

AC says

Read Rain, skimmed the Pool... O.K. If you like this sort of stuff... A bit of melodrama based on a moral code that seems rather remote today....

Joel says

I've been reading a great deal of W. Somerset Maugham lately; and I daresay it will continue. His tales of the human condition – of heartfelt mistakes and foolish blunders – juxtaposed against the matter-of-factness of imperialism in turn of the century Victorian England make for charming stories. They are so naturally international – about a time when Englanders thought of the world as their own and acted accordingly – that they teem with an unpretentious multi-culturalism.

These days we are accustomed to reading political thrillers or crime stories set against the backdrop of this-or-that exotic location; authors attempting to prove their grandiloquence through expert, almost surgical use of the foreign. As if to show that simply through their ability to write about a dark corner of the world, the significance of their book is proven; and their use of these locations as the backdrop for grand moments of imperial import – this time American – confirm the multi-culturalism of the American artist in the new world. Yet somehow they do not ring true; they seem contrived, thereby losing their worth.

Maugham's novels shine because they do no emphasize the exotic in far-away places and try and shock with bizarre cultural rituals or the important geopolitical realities of life lived in significance in faraway places. His novels are in fact the opposite, as they emphasize the constancy of British civilization which was effortlessly employed even in the furthest corners of her empire.

His stories are those of everyday British citizens who live ordinary lives – fraught with mischief and mistakes – as they carry out their business, live and love. In Up at the Villa, Maugham tells a story about a woman widowed from an unsatisfying marriage and who makes a careless mistake while on holiday in Florence that upends her life entirely. Rain is the story of a British missionary returning from furlough to his mission in the South Sea Islands when he confronts a worthy adversary in the form of a harlot from Hawaii and is bested in his attempts to convert her. Mackintosh is the tale of a colonial administrator of a small island in the pacific who misinterprets the changing times, and loses his life in the process.

And there are many, many others.

Each of these stories is so full of humanity, abounding in emotion and passion for life lived more abundantly; of the richness offered by the world around us; lives a spirit occasionally sweet but more often with a bitter bouquet, served indiscriminately in chalices both simple and majestic. Of the potential for great opportunity and of failure; of the ecstasy of forbidden and sometimes sordid love and the promise of redemption or at least the gentle salve of forgetting. These are Maugham's stories, upon a canvas as vast as the world around us.

I hope you pick up a book by W. Somerset Maugham, to find as I often do a new perspective or a refreshing moment. You will find yourself better for it.

Maggie says

Did I enjoy it? I did. Like with any short story collection there were stories I liked and stories I didn't care about, but overall this was pretty good.

Would I read it again? Unlikely, but not because it was bad, just because I don't tend to reread short story collections. Occasionally I'll reread stories from the collections, but not the collection as a whole.

Who would I recommend it to? If you enjoy Maugham's writing, specifically his stories focusing on British Imperialism, you'll probably enjoy these. Like I said earlier, these aren't his best pieces, but there's still something distinctly Maugham in there. I would not read this as your first foray into his writing though, stick to his better known novels for that!

Any other thoughts? This was the first of Maugham's short stories that I've read, and I gotta say they weren't my favorite. I prefer his novels, but that's not to say that these weren't well-done. The stories in this book were heavily linked to the themes of religion and morality, which isn't uncommon in Maugham's books, but definitely felt a little heavy-handed in several of these instances. One of my favorite things about Maugham's writing is his treatment of women, they always feel like fully fleshed out characters with their own rich history and thoughts and emotions, but in these stories they all fell flat, which was disappointing. The descriptive scenes were a rich as ever though, and the mood and atmosphere of the South Sea region during the early-1900s was well-painted. "The Pacific" was probably my favorite piece in the book, even though I think it might have been the shortest of the lot.

Lesley says

Am hugely enjoying Somerset Maugham's stories, so much so that after I have finished each one I read it again. They're very subtle and full of profound and detailed analyses of human character. Each has a twist in the tail which is why I want to go back and read it again. He is a master of prose and of exploring what it means to be human. He also depicts the extraordinary heart rending beauty of South Sea islands like Tahiti and Samoa so powerfully that he has me wanting to buy a plane ticket and go there immediately and never come back.

Rain is the most famous but I particularly liked the Fall of Edward Barnard. He tells the story from the point of view of Bateman Hunter, a rich and no doubt virtuous young man from Chicago. There's obvious satire at the expense of this young man who can't see any value in anything beyond wealth. And Maugham's depiction of life on Tahiti is irresistibly seductive.

Have just read Red which is equally unforgettable.

Maugham may not be the most fashionable but I do highly recommend these stories. They make the works of contemporary writers seem rather shallow.

Jim Fonseca says

There's a politically incorrect expression used in this book, "going native," but that is a lot of what these stories are about.

Brits (mostly men) from the sun-deprived northern climes (and in one case, an American) arrive in the tropical South Pacific isles, mainly Tahiti, to shed their clothes and their work ethic and to drink and chase island women. But there is trouble in paradise and these stories focus on murder, suicide, prostitution and the clash of races and classes.

The stories are set in the steamship era, late 19th to early 20th Century, and around the time other European notables visited the South Pacific, including Paul Gauguin and Robert Louis Stevenson. In fact, Maugham visited Tahiti to research Gauguin's life which he wrote about in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

These are great stories that have withstood the test of time.

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