Not-So-Close Encounters: Empire and Emotional Atrophy in W. Somerset Maugham's "P. & O." and "Masterson"

Xavier P. Lachazette
3LAM Research Centre, Le Mans Université, France

Abstract

This article examines conjointly two of W. Somerset Maugham's short stories: "P. & O.," from *The Casuarina Tree* (1926), and "Masterson," originally published as part of *The Gentleman in the Parlour* in 1930. It analyses the emotional quandary of an Englishman and an Irishman, the two settlers at the centre of these texts, while also examining the causal links between their emotional atrophy and the colonial system at work in 1920s Malaya and Burma put forward by these two fictions. It concludes on a hermeneutic reflection on the possible interpretations to which these short stories can lend themselves, somewhere between an indictment of colonialism, a mere illustration of its effects and a broader commentary on the pathos of the human condition.

Cet article étudie conjointement deux nouvelles de Somerset Maugham : « P. & O. », tirée de *The Casuarina Tree* (1926), et « Masterson », initialement intégrée dans *The Gentleman in the Parlour* en 1930. Il analyse le dilemme émotionnel auquel sont confrontés les deux colons au centre de ces textes, un Anglais et un Irlandais, avant de mettre au jour les liens de cause à effet entre leur atrophie émotionnelle et le système colonial à l'œuvre dans la Malaisie et la Birmanie des années 1920 qui sont mis en avant par ces fictions. Il se termine par une réflexion herméneutique sur les pistes d'interprétation possibles de ces nouvelles, entre condamnation du fait colonial, simple illustration des effets de ce dernier et commentaire plus large sur le pathétique de la condition humaine.

Keywords

W. Somerset Maugham, empire, colonialism, national identity, emotions, human condition
W. Somerset Maugham, empire, colonialisme, identité nationale, émotions, condition humaine

Travelling extensively throughout his life, W. Somerset Maugham often used as material for his short stories and novels the information gathered from conversations with the locals that he and his partner Gerald Haxton encountered. The early 1920s were a particularly busy period for Maugham. The five months he spent in 1921 in the Federated Malay States, then under British rule, provided him with enough ideas for a collection of stories, which he later on entitled *The Casuarina Tree* (1926), and to which "P. & O.," one of the two stories analysed here, belongs. The next year, he published a book of Chinese impressions with a kaleidoscopic structure in the modernist taste, suggested by the four months he had travelled up the Yangtze River, an enriching experience in cultural relativism of which not many fellow European writers could boast at the time. Finally, in 1923, the journey he took through not only Burma (also under British rule at the time), but also Siam, Cambodia and Vietnam inspired him to write another travelogue, entitled *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930), in which "Masterson," the second short story studied here, appeared as the tenth in a series of forty-four short chapters.[1]
Maugham's perspective on the lives of British settlers in various Indian Ocean colonies and in China in the 1920s remains unique because he was neither a settler himself, nor a British official, nor a colonial born of British parents, nor a private individual sentimentally attached to one of those countries. Instead, he was an avid globetrotter, a keen observer and conversationalist, as can be seen in "P. & O." and "Masterson." Both these stories focus on the breakup of a relationship between a European settler and the native woman who shared his life for a number of years. Nevertheless, under Maugham's pen such a commonplace storyline gets

[1] "Masterson" was later included as a separate piece in *The Complete Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham*, 3 vols., London: Heinemann, 1951.

transformed into a complex web of forces which ventures far beyond the romantic into the socio-political sphere. Indeed, we will see that these stories bring together elements from such diverse fields as human psychology, colonial studies, racist stereotypes, ethics, and literary hermeneutics.

First, we will define what is meant here by "emotional atrophy" and study the suppression or absence of emotions evidenced by the two settlers' management of a critical moment in their lives. This will lead us to interpret both stories as a representation of the tensions inherently created by the British colonial system. In spite of Maugham's possible reliance on an actual occurrence in "P. & O.," we will then argue that emotional atrophy in both stories acquires a symbolic dimension that places colonialism under harsh scrutiny and reads like an indictment of it along the lines of Homi Bhabha's analysis in his seminal work *The Location of Culture*. We will nevertheless see that other forces also overpower human beings. If the protagonists' weaknesses cannot be condoned when one applies a moral lens to them, they are also treated by the narrator, or by a central character, with a degree of compassion that enriches the points made by the stories and constitutes Maugham's ambivalent signature.

Emotional Atrophy in a Colonial Context

In a quiet, unassuming fashion, the two short stories under study can be said to reveal some of the evils to which any colonial system gives rise, together with the moral dilemma that settlers unavoidably experience when trying to justify such a system to themselves, or for the benefit of colonised others. The concept of "emotional atrophy," diversely used in different contexts, will serve here to analyse the quandary in which Maugham's settlers find themselves. Sometimes used in relation to teenagers' overuse of computers, video games, and online social media, the phrase was also recently transformed into a syndrome, called "Chronic Emotional Atrophy," or CEA, by U.S. Navy Lt. Darryl Diptee, who was searching for a theory to lay bare the mechanism of active-duty suicides. His finding that "suicidal symptoms [in the military] are environmentally induced due to the machine-like, stone-faced bravado that occurs in military culture… leaving little room for any honest expression of personal feelings or emotions" (Stewart 10) is close to how the phrase will be used here, because of its insistence on the conditioning effect of some environments (colonialism, in the case of Maugham's two short stories) and on the consequential difficulty of expressing one's emotions, to oneself or to others.

The study of emotional atrophy in relation to Gallagher, the Irish planter in "P. & O.," and to Masterson, in the eponymous story, underlines both men's paradoxical attitudes as far as sexual relationships are concerned. As A.J. Stockwell informs us in an article centred on British Malaya, a form of "white tribalism" (44) was prevalent among the settlers, so that "anyone who, through introspection or criticism of the system, set himself apart from the European community was suspect" (Stockwell 48). The colonial calendar was punctuated by "ritual and routine" (48) while the club, for those posted not too far away, was both "an oasis" and a comforting "emblem of exclusivity" (Stockwell 48). In such a context, "going native," often a code word for "taking a native mistress" (Stockwell 45), was frowned on because it meant an "abandonment" to the native lifestyle and "a preference for the company of non-Europeans" (45). That Gallagher chooses "to go native" with an Asian concubine rather than engage in one of those "casual and secretive relationships" that were rife at the time (Stockwell 45), lays bare not only the potency of the human sex drive but also the weak grip of local government on far-flung outposts. The conventionality of Gallagher's nature is soon revealed, though, seeing that his presence on board the home-bound ship testifies to his leaving the Malay States—and his concubine of ten or twelve years' standing, according to Pryce (60)—without a backward glance: "'I've got no family,'" he tells Mrs. Hamlyn. 'My mother and father are dead. So far as

I know, I haven't a relation in the world'" (48). By leaving Asia for good after a quarter of a century, that settler behaves true to type, so to speak, seeing that one of the specificities of Malaya-based settlers, according to Stockwell, was the number of career-oriented "transients" in their ranks:

> Quite clearly, communities of settlers in east and southern Africa acquired a definition that differentiated them more starkly from the society and government of the United Kingdom than did the Europeans of Malaya who were transients. Some in Malaya, it is true, did "stay on" and there are a few examples of service dynasties (such as the Maxwells), but for the vast majority of Europeans, Malaya was a career, not a home (Stockwell 51).

Gallagher's emotionless leave-taking of his mistress can therefore be said to dramatise historical data or personal stories which Maugham may have heard *in situ*. So can the story of Masterson's breakup with his Burmese mistress which, though at odds with Gallagher's in many points of detail, ends up in comparable circumstances. Masterson, a pleasant young man in his early thirties (248)—compared with Gallagher's description as an "ungraceful, commonplace man" of five and forty at the least (47)—is the product of just the same colonial context. To the narrator, who meets him "at the club at Mandalay," he introduces himself as "engaged in a business that kept him travelling up and down Burma most of the year" (248). The narrator easily travels by train to Masterson's home in Thazi, a village just over a hundred miles away in today's Myanmar, thus contrasting with Gallagher's hard-to-reach estate.

Interestingly, a key difference is that the narrative highlights various emotions felt by the young man, like his shiny-eyed pride on showing his collection of Burmese artefacts to the narrator (250), the deep flush that appears on his face on seeing pictures of his former concubine and their children (251), or his confession that he also started crying four months before, when his mistress sobbed she would be leaving him that minute unless he agreed to marry her (258).

Such references to Masterson's emotional states are somewhat belied by the summary of his relationship with his mistress, seeing that that relationship started one day on the street when the young Burmese "*rather* took [Masterson's] fancy" and ended in "*rather* a wrench" when they parted (253, italics mine). On one level, Masterson's fondness for understatements and for the degree adverb *rather* can be construed as the product of an English education in matters of the heart. However, as soon becomes apparent, the colonial context lies powerfully behind the young man's emotional self-control because marrying an Asian would entail his having "to stay in Burma for the rest of [his] life" (257). On top of that, as Stockwell explains, "Generally, the British felt that mixed marriages—be they between Europeans and non-Europeans or between different Asian stocks—weakened the strain and produced misfits" (Stockwell 59). Eurasians thus formed "a separate and inferior caste" and "for the most part they lingered in a cultural and social twilight" (Stockwell 58-59), all of which must have weighed heavily on any settler's amorous proclivities.

Masterson's final rationalisation of the breakup is that he would agree to marry his former mistress if she *loved* rather than *liked* him (258-59), the difference in emotional degree stressed by this verbal opposition unwittingly shedding new light on *his* use of understatements, as previously mentioned, and potentially manifesting the actual lukewarmness of *his own* feelings. By pathetically concluding, "But of course, she doesn't [love him], they never do, these girls who go and live with white men" (258-59), Masterson then hammers the final nail in the coffin of a five-year (sexual and otherwise) relationship with a paltry stereotype, that is to say with what Homi Bhabha terms the "major discursive strategy" of colonial discourse (Bhabha 94). More precisely, Masterson uses an ambivalent "form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated… as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of

the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved" (Bhabha 95). The aggressive and narcissistic components of such a discourse, as analysed by Bhabha, will be studied below, but Masterson's reversion to racist and stereotypical representations of Malay women, in spite of five years' close proximity with one of them, already demonstrates their obsessive and destructive nature.

In such a colonial context, emotional atrophy thus corresponds to the settlers' unwillingness or inability to follow through aesthetic or romantic feelings to their logical conclusions—be it assessing natives at their true value, falling in love and declaring it, or consenting to a plea for intermarriage—because those are not sanctioned by a warped and self-serving code of imperial values. If a novel like Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1899-1900) portrays the colonies as a dangerous but enticing theatre of adventure where a man can show his mettle, prompting questions why the eponymous character behaved like a coward and proved unable to rise to the challenge, Maugham's two short stories are of a more domestic nature. Indeed, the moral questioning of each male protagonist hinges this time on whether or not his dealings with his respective mistress "showed that [he] was rather a rotter" ("Masterson" 255).

In "Masterson," the settler is shown to have derived many advantages from the colonial world he inhabits. For instance, his comfort was guaranteed by a "damned good housekeeper" who fed him "like a fighting cock" (253). She also kept the house spotlessly clean (254) and played to perfection the hostess's various roles of welcoming the guests (like a duchess), making conversation (so that no guest ever felt excluded), playing cards (like the best of players), and mixing "the best cocktail you'd get anywhere between Rangoon and Bhamo" (254-55). In exchange for the remarkable skills demonstrated by a person with absolutely no experience of English social mores, Masterson's treatment of his Burmese partner-cum-servant can be considered to have been fair by the standards of the East: she was given room and board, and was not required to live in the servants' quarters. Masterson also put her in charge of his house, a position of some comfort and power which, we are informed, not all native women enjoyed in such circumstances (254).

Yet in his man-to-man conversation with the narrator, the colonial systematically underrates every one of the native woman's achievements by insisting that those were precisely *roles* she was supposed to play: not serious tasks with tangible repercussions in real life but mere games of pretence that eventually did not matter one way or the other. Consequently, in Masterson's view, an invisible gap separated them in their relationship, a form of theatricality of which he was constantly aware, and which made a mockery of all quotidian occurrences and actions. As will be seen when analysing Mrs. Hamlyn's xenophobic reaction to two Japanese passengers in European clothes in "P. & O.," mimicry lies precisely at the basis of the coloniser's ambivalent rapport with the colonised in Bhabha's theory. Here, by not understanding that she was only required to put on a performance, the young Burmese woman became an object of ridicule to Masterson, no better than a child who proves clever at parroting back lessons taught to her but incapable of telling make-believe from reality. Her personal achievements thus trigger nothing but scornful dismissals from him, as when he comments in an allegedly playful manner, "Sometimes it would make me laugh to see the assurance with which she would receive my guests, government officials, you know, and soldiers who were passing through" (254). His idea of the whole colonial experience thus becomes encapsulated in his favourite phrase, "having a good time" (254-55), as if he were talking of a day spent at the park, a good show in town, or a one-night stand.

The partnership that bound Masterson and his concubine therefore consisted in a faulty and asymmetrical transaction between two consenting, but unequal, adults. Indeed, it soon transpires that the settler got the lion's share of the transaction when he crows to the narrator that such an efficient help actually "saved [him] money" (254). This confirms the social and financial imbalance that marked their relationship from the start, seeing that the Burmese

servant came from a family described as “poor as church mice” (256). When the sexual dimension of their partnership is added to that—for example when Masterson refers to the satisfaction of his own “amorous” feelings (255)—the full picture reveals a form of institutional prostitution presented as a freely engaged-in exchange of goods and services with which both settlers and locals are happy to go along. In order to settle their accounts, so to speak, colonials offer “presents” and “pickings” (256) to their servants-cum-partners, especially when the latter demand to be treated like their European counterparts. A case in point is Masterson’s own relation of his reaction when his native “girl,” as he uniformly calls her, broached the subject of tying the knot. As the settler puts it,

> Then my girl asked me to marry her, legally I mean, in the English way. I treated it as a joke. I didn’t know how she’d got such an idea in her head. I thought it was only a whim and I gave her a gold bracelet to keep her quiet. But it wasn’t a whim. (“Masterson” 255)

As Masterson knows perfectly, what awaits retired colonials back in England is a downgraded sort of life, spent at local clubs and talking to Anglo-Indians only (257). Marrying a native would make things worse for him socially since his immediate circle would frown on such a wife. He would become an outcast and find himself relegated to the fringes of society.

The same goes for Gallagher, whose “plans” for twenty-five years never included a Malay *wife*. Gallagher even corrects Mrs. Hamlyn when she imagines that leaving the Federated Malay States after such a protracted period must have caused him pain: “I was glad to get out. I was fed up. I never want to see the country again or anyone in it” (49). As a matter of fact, his plans are to settle in County Galway, and *then* marry… an Irish woman (49). As in Masterson’s case, the British viewpoint is that the colonial behaved as a *gentleman*, providing for his “girl” even after his departure, an even “nobler” attitude as far as Gallagher is concerned because he and his Malay partner did not (apparently) have any children. Mr. Pryce summarises Gallagher’s departure in the following fashion:

> Well, when ’e made up ’is mind to come ’ome for good she didn’t say nothing. She just sat there. He thought she’d carry on no end, but she didn’t. Of course ’e provided for ’er all right, ’e gave ’er a little ’ouse for herself, an’ ’e fixed it up so as so much should be paid ’er every month. ’E wasn’t mean, I will say that for ’im, an’ she knew all along as ’e’d be going some time. She didn’t cry or anything. […] He wanted to say good-bye to ’er, same as anyone would, an’, would you believe it? she never even moved. ‘Aren’t you going to say good-bye to me,’ he says. A rare funny look come over ’er face. (60-61)

In other words, turning the colonial tables exactly like Masterson, the machinery manager lays emotional atrophy at the Malay’s door, using the full force of clichéd representations of Asians as passive and unreadable types in order to transform her into a symbol of ominous vacuity, into a cryptically ungrateful non-entity who neither speaks nor moves. Conversely, the settler is depicted as a perfect gentleman who fulfils his share of contractual obligations, an emotionally stable signatory whose actions bear the stamp of morality and normality (“Of course,” “same as anyone would”).

As readers come to understand, whichever colony those settlers inhabit, and however long they may stay away from their home country, England or Ireland remains the only landmark or criterion in their lives. This is perfectly expressed in a tirade in which Masterson explains that he views all things English as necessarily more desirable, more laden with affect. In the tirade, he clearly asserts it is *England* he wants, with its grey skies and its soft rain, its second-hand bookshops, its butcher’s shops, its grey pavements and muddy lanes, its green banks over which beech trees hang. In a nutshell, as he vividly remarks, he doesn’t want to shoot *tigers*, but *rabbits*

(257).
Likewise, however incongruous they may appear in Asian contexts, what the narrator notices on the walls of Masterson's house, south of Mandalay, are rather low-quality watercolours of English scenes, complete with a cathedral, a rose garden, and a Georgian house (249-50). Later on, besides a "good curry," both men are served porridge, then fried fish—which they duly smother in Worcester sauce (253). Much more tragically, Masterson finds himself unable to fully appreciate for himself, or to praise for his listener's benefit, the good looks of his Burmese companion. The problem is that his aesthetic criteria and his judgement were formed in his youth in England, and thus mirror English values and prejudices. Being too intellectually weak to go against such an education by voicing the idea that Asian women's facial features can be just as attractive as their European counterparts, he finds himself unable to describe his Burmese partner's beauty:

> I showed you her photograph, but the photograph doesn't begin to do her justice. It sounds silly to say about a Burmese girl, but she was like a rose-bud, not an English rose, you know, she was as little like that as the glass flowers on that box I showed you are like real flowers, but a rose grown in an Eastern garden that had something strange and exotic about it. I don't know how to make myself plain. (253-54)

Masterson's mistress's not being an *English* rose implies that she could never dream of being taken seriously by him. At best, because a "glass flower" is a bland simulacrum of a "real" flower and a "bud" can never hope to rival with a fully-fledged rose, she could pass for a good copy or a commendable imitation of the model rose he has in mind. Although this commonplace man's fondest wish barely consists in returning to the "humdrum and provincial and dull" (257) kind of English life that he has come to idolise, so powerful is his *hubris* that he believes an Asian can never measure up to his standards. His disparagement of non-English values and peoples is such that he cannot even relate to his two children—a boy and a girl, a third baby having passed away six weeks after it was born (255)—who leave him perfectly cold. However amiable the narrator takes him to be (he initially states that Masterson's slow and "singularly musical voice […] inspired you with confidence" and convinced you that he "must have qualities that made him sympathetic to his fellows," 248), he is therefore every inch the "rotter" he himself suggests he might be, as previously indicated.
His moral failings are further revealed by the damning evidence contained in the description of the pride he takes in the Burmese collectables on which he spends more than a fair share of his spare money. An emotional attachment to those *objets d'art* would impress the reader in Masterson's favour. In spite of his defects, one would feel that a man capable of aesthetically and sentimentally relating to objects from an antipodal artistic tradition, steeped in a rich history and inherited from a mode of representation quite their own, might eventually open up to the beauties and idiosyncrasies of a foreign land. As it is, however, it is only in the mercantile dimension of his purchases that Masterson anticlimactically glories, thereby showcasing his resistance to acculturation, or incorporation into the prevalent culture. The following excerpt makes this clear:

> He had some lovely things. He showed them to me with pride, telling me how he had got this object and that, and how he had heard of another and hunted it down and the incredible astuteness he had employed to induce an unwilling owner to part with it. His kindly eyes shone when he described a great bargain and they flashed darkly when he inveighed against the unreasonableness of a vendor who rather than accept a fair price for a bronze dish had taken it away. (250)

Masterson is unable and unwilling to go beyond a certain threshold which, he feels, would threaten his (national) identity and cheapen him in his own eyes. His sensitivity to those objects

speaks in his favour because one senses that a nudge in the Asian direction might suffice to prompt him to cross that threshold. Yet what he feels he owes to his Englishness and the image he cherishes of himself pull him the other way. As for the narrator, he is content to listen to the colonial's pangs of conscience and to witness the quandary in which his interlocutor finds himself.

The Symbolic Dimension of Emotional Atrophy

At first sight, therefore, the national prejudices that Masterson and Gallagher imbibed as children, together with the colonial structure that allows them to find live-in partners-cum-servants at no great expense, are what Somerset Maugham underlines in the story. One might even say that the Burmese and the Malay women's low mercantile value destroys their chances of personal happiness and social success in a system that sets no store by easily acquired commodities.

The two settlers' conversation is deemed charming by the narrator. Nevertheless, Gallagher works as a planter in a rubber-tree area while, as previously shown, Masterson only enjoys the acquisition of cultural artefacts for the haggling abilities they allow him to demonstrate, both men exercising undue power over their native concubines. One is therefore justified in regarding the two settlers' professional activities and personal behaviour as instances of colonial exploitation of local resources, as defined by Kyle Whyte in the following quote:

> Colonialism refers to a form of domination in which at least one society seeks to exploit some set of benefits believed to be found in the territory of one or more other societies, from farm land to precious minerals to labor. Exploitation can occur through military invasion, slavery, and settlement. Colonialism often paved the way for the expansion of capitalism, or an economic ideology based on wage-labor that prioritizes growth in monetary profits for the owners of assets as the underlying focus, incentive, and purpose of major human social endeavors. (Whyte 154)

Masterson's and Gallagher's similar attitude to their partners is therefore in perfect keeping with the "major human social endeavors" of which they are a part in the sense that they prioritise the organised exploitation of natural and human resources for the sake of their own nation, not the expression of personal feelings. Conversely, the voodoo curse that the Malay woman is said to have placed on Gallagher, causing him to die of unceasing bouts of hiccups in a matter of days, can thus be construed not only as the colonised's angry answer to the coloniser's multiple forms of exploitations but also as the betrayal of an implicit code of individual conduct which ascribes supreme importance to sentimental attachments and to dignity in all human enterprises. Taking effect when the shores of Singapore are lost sight of, and killing off the planter just before other coasts become visible (61), such a curse clearly conveys the idea that a particular land and its inhabitants resent the immoral treatment meted out to it. Moreover, due to "its connection with insobriety" (58), the slightly ridiculous connotation of the uncommon disease which causes Gallagher's demise works as a tongue-in-cheek response to the settler's former refusal to take Asian natives seriously.

Interestingly, a similar anecdote actually hit the news in 1924, for example in the pages of the *Linlithgowshire Gazette*, a Scottish newspaper published west of Edinburgh. On 8 February 1924, a mere couple of years prior to the publication of Maugham's collection *The Casuarina Tree*, readers of that newspaper were indeed apprised of the following piece of information, which eerily brought together two key elements in "P. & O.," i.e. a ship and a man on board whose life was threatened by a strange pathology:

> HELD UP FOR HICCUP – A Plymouth telegram says that whilst the steamer Glenridge was bound to Baltimore one of her wireless operators was taken ill with

> violent hiccup[p]ing. It had lasted forty hours without interruption, when a wireless call was made for medical aid. The aid came from the United States liner, President Harding, which altered her course and took off the sick man. He must have died if he had not had immediate medical attention. (*Linlithgowshire Gazette* 6)

More interestingly still, three columns to the right of that very news item, the same newspaper page carried a half-column article by one P.C. Coote (“Author of *Peeps at the Malay States*”), entitled “In British Malaya. A Land of Rubber and Tin.” By introducing the Federated Malay States to Scots readers, the article aimed to encourage them to move there — if only because no income tax was levied there. Nevertheless, as with the paradoxical attitudes adopted by each of Maugham’s settlers to their native partner, one is struck by Coote’s ambivalent approach to those Asians, presented as simultaneously frightening (like Gallagher’s voodoo-induced death) and ridiculous (like the role-playing servant in Masterson’s eyes). Indeed, on the one hand, Coote takes pains to alter his contemporaries’ often prejudiced view of Malays by telling them:

> The Malays themselves are a delightfully simple folk, very unlike what one is led to expect them to be. They have a reputation for being a bloodthirsty and vicious race. This may have been true fifty years ago, but the character of the Malay has undergone a rapid and complete change, and the main charge that is brought against them to-day is that they are incurably lazy. (Coote 6)

By substituting a prohibitive charge (the Malays as a bloodthirsty and vicious “race”) for a much more palatable one which Europeans already applied to all colonised peoples anyway (their being “incurably lazy”), Coote seemingly hoped to assuage his readers’ fears. Therefore, the next paragraph’s reference to the *kris*, or short dagger, which every Malay supposedly possesses sounds strangely counterproductive, especially when it is explained that the “number of victims a ‘kris’ has to its credit is of great importance to its owner” (“In British Malaya” 6). Yet Malays have changed completely, Coote assures his readers, so much so that they now seek to emulate their (alleged) colonial betters by putting on classics of the English stage, though the result of such cultural endeavours is presented as laughable:

> Strange and wonderful is the Malay idea of drama, and a theatrical performance in the language must be seen to be believed. Oddly enough, the Malay has a pre-eminent liking for S[h]akespeare, and the efforts of a Malay “wayang” company playing *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* are ludicrously funny. For the sake of those who have never seen Malays act in their natural surroundings, it is to be hoped that some enterprising person has thought of bringing over a “wayang” show in the exhibition at Wembley, even as Burmese and Indian theatres are to be seen. (Coote 6)

Whether Maugham read the astonishing news-in-brief item (or the Malay article, for that matter) in any newspaper at the time, inspiring him to write “P. & O.,” must remain a mystery, but such clippings undeniably help us realise how close the factual premises of his stories could be to the contemporary realities he fictionalised. More importantly, if the English writer read (or heard) this anecdote of a wireless operator taken violently sick on board a ship crossing the Atlantic, and then decided to make use of it in the specific context of a colonial story, a more complex interpretation of this fiction is made possible.

Indeed, this would imply that Maugham deliberately intensified the dramatic dimension of the newspaper story by causing his Irish planter to die of the curse put on him, a development which many disbelievers in black magic could easily dismiss as supernatural tosh. As it is, when Gallagher’s health deteriorates, the ship’s doctor is advised by a colleague to administer adrenalin in spite of the fact that, as the ship’s doctor is quick to remark, “How the devil does [that colleague] expect me to have adrenalin in the middle of the Indian Ocean?” (65). Accordingly, the captain decides to make for Aden, in south Yemen, with all possible speed:

the ship's engines are forced, its course is altered, and a strange nervousness starts spreading on board among the first-class passengers in the remarkable lines that follow:

> The passengers had grown used to the sound and feel of her engines, and now the greater vibration shook their nerves with a new sensation. It would not pass into each one's unconsciousness, but beat on their sensibilities so that each felt a personal concern. And still the wide sea was empty of traffic, so that they seemed to traverse an empty world. And now the uneasiness which had descended upon the ship, but which no one had been willing to acknowledge, became a definite malaise. The passengers grew irritable, and people quarrelled over trifles which at another time would have seemed insignificant. ("P. & O." 66)

Such a "Malayan malaise," so to speak, sounds like a form of colonial guilt and reminds one of Masterson's deep blush on opening the box containing pictures of his former concubine and their children. It is made manifest in the various tensions or contradictions that disturb the passengers' peace of mind and start to gnaw at their hearts. For one thing, though British society is based on a strict regimen of class distinctions (to say nothing of the racial prejudices which the passengers also demonstrate), there is suddenly much talk among first-class travellers of exceptionally allowing second-class plebeians to join their fancy-dress dance. Since they all attended the dead Irishman's burial service that morning, extending such an invitation sounds more modern and democratic to the first-class passengers, in spite of their inferiors' tendency, they think, to overdrink and to misbehave any chance they get. It is therefore a relief for them to see that those unaccustomed guests remain shy, and only occasionally dare to dance. As the consul puts it, "I'm all for democracy, and I think they're very sensible to keep themselves to themselves" (78).

The potential superiority of natives is the second issue with which first-class passengers now have to grapple. Though British settlers in Singapore are described as wearing "a nonchalant and careless air" in the opening paragraph of the short story (44), and although British rulers are said to "take their authority with a smiling unconcern" (44), such a show of natural and legitimate supremacy is debunked by the spine-chilling power of the Malay woman's (alleged) curse. In that sense, the passengers are eager for Gallagher to die because his failing health has come to symbolise the weakness of colonials, and the retaliation that they could one day have to face when natives started to chafe under the yoke. The curse thus sets the settlers' nerves on edge and threatens to disempower them, as when Mr. Pryce suddenly loses his temper in the following manner:

> He clenched his fist and beat it on the rail with sudden, angry violence. "I'm fed up with the bloody country. It's got on my nerves, that's what it is. We're no match for them, us white men, and that's a fact." (63)

As previously remarked with regard to "Masterson," more than just a class system or a whole colonial power at risk, what "P. & O." comes to symbolise is the threat incurred by the settlers' sense of selfhood. Indeed, it is as if the vastness of the British Empire diluted its subjects' identity like wine with water, or as if its immensity actually backfired on them by questioning their possessing any superior ability that might justify the dominant position they enjoy around the world.

A case in point is the distorted image offered by two different episodes in the story on the subject of clothes. Near the end of the story, the first-class travellers play at becoming "other" during a fancy-dress party: the doctor appears as a Malay Sultan, Mr. Linsell as an Arab Sheik, and the missionary couple as two Manchus. Even Mrs. Hamlyn dons a Carmen outfit for the occasion and shares in the general hilarity when the participants laugh and shout, throw balloons and paper streamers at one another, pull crackers and drink champagne (78). However, if the

British passengers regard their own farcical role-playing as trivial and harmless, Mrs. Hamlyn's previous xenophobic reaction when she caught sight of two Japanese men playing deck quoits shows how frightened Britons are of being submerged by "other" people. That previous passage goes as follows:

> They were trim and neat in their tennis shirts, white trousers and buckram shoes. They looked very European, they even called the score to one another in English, and yet somehow to look at them filled Mrs. Hamlyn at that moment with a vague disquiet. Because they seemed to wear so easily a disguise there was about them something sinister. Her nerves too were on edge. (64-65)

In other words, Mrs. Hamlyn construes as an insult or a threat the European clothes worn "so easily" by those Anglicised Japanese and the words they exchange in English. Like Masterson or Mr. Pryce, she is described as unable to analyse her feelings any further, but her "vague disquiet" obviously comes from her need to redefine her sense of self and recognise that "other" selves are as valid or legitimate as her own. As Bhabha contends in *The Location of Culture*, that is precisely what colonials instinctively refuse to do. The aforementioned "smiling unconcern" they display in "P. & O." is a façade behind which lurks the fear that colonised Others may one day become (like) them. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, it also cheapens the colonisers' cherished sense of self by threatening to bridge the gap established by their alleged superiority. For that reason, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 123), which explains why colonial texts uniformly underline "the difference between being English and being Anglicized" (Bhabha 128), as in the Japanese episode just studied. Though the "mimic man" is "the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis" which "*repeats* rather than *re-presents*" (Bhabha 125), such imperfections (or "slippages") are truly precious in the eyes of the colonisers in that they essentialise colonised Others as "almost the same, but not quite." As Bhabha contends,

> colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (Bhabha 122, original italics)

For him, it is mostly narcissism that drives the imperial instinct. It is "the narcissistic demand for colonial objects," he claims, "which intervenes so powerfully in the nationalist fantasy of boundless, extensive possessions" (Bhabha 138). The same impulse leads to the coloniser's "reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy—the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division," and to his desire "for an originality which is again threatened by the differences of race, colour and culture" (Bhabha 107). Whether Mrs. Hamlyn spots passengers that look almost English (but not quite) or Masterson likens his former mistress to a rose grown in an *Eastern* garden, as previously noted, both stories therefore perfectly illustrate the fearful "intricate strategy of defence and differentiation" (188) which Bhabha brings to light in the colonial discourse.

Emotional Atrophy and Other Human Limitations

In the economy of "P. & O.," this disquiet felt by Mrs. Hamlyn is highly problematic in that such a character acts not only as protagonist but also as internal focaliser, central consciousness and moral conscience of the story.

For instance, out of respect for Gallagher's demise, when Mrs. Hamlyn chooses *not* to raise her hand in favour of maintaining the traditional Christmas party, her vote on such a topic is

understood by the reader to imply her high-minded disapproval of an insensitive decision. No one should think of dancing and having a "jolly good time" (76) when a fellow passenger has just passed away. Except for "one old lady who was rheumatic" (77) and thus unable to also raise her hand, Mrs. Hamlyn is alone in taking the high moral ground. The rest of the passengers eagerly embrace the argument that they should carry on with the planned festivities… for the sake of the children. As the narrator explains in a perversely paradoxical passage that equates "altruistic motives" with the pointlessness of "exibit[ing] a certain grief":

> They wanted to forget the brooding terror which had hung over the boat for so many days, they were alive and they wanted to enjoy themselves; but they had an uneasy notion that it would be decent to exhibit a certain grief. It was quite another matter if they could do as they wished from altruistic motives. (77)

Mrs. Hamlyn's xenophobic reaction to the Japanese men's mock Britishness therefore signals the complexity of her character and the fact that more may be at stake in these stories than simply a reflection on the "evils" of colonialism. Indeed, in the opening sentences of "P. & O.," for which Mrs. Hamlyn serves as internal focaliser, references are made to "the gay, multitudinous streets" of Singapore and to the picturesqueness of the various nationalities enumerated: Malay, Chinese, Tamil, Bengali and Japanese natives are mentioned (44). In spite of a few typological remarks also made in that opening, attributing psychological characteristics to whole groups of people for instance, the reader feels that it is a story with a joyous degree of diversity and international interaction that awaits him or her.

One might remember that the same holds true for the beginning of "Masterson," where the narrator straightaway reveals he never had any intention of visiting Kengtung, Burma, until a stranger told him that "it had an important market, held every five days, whither came natives of half a dozen countries and members of half a hundred tribes" (247). Nevertheless, such a promise of cosmopolitan joyfulness is broken by the rest of those narratives, seeing that the antithetical theme of impossible intercultural relationships soon takes centre stage.

Likewise, Mrs. Hamlyn is not shocked at all by Gallagher's abandoning his Malay concubine. She has been married for twenty years, she informs Mr. Pryce, so that she is familiar with human nature, colonial habits and the ways of the world. She is not prudishly offended by the fact that, as Mr. Pryce puts it, "Mr. Gallagher's lived a long time up-country, if you understand what I mean, and of course it's lonely, and you know what men are, miss" (60). What obsesses her on the contrary, on account of the similarity between her own and the Malay native's plight, is the sudden loneliness of the woman thus left behind. On several occasions in the story, we are informed of her picturing that other woman in her mind's eye, seated on the steps of her former bungalow (which is to remain untenanted and unfurnished until the new manager moves in) and gazing at the empty road down which her companion drove away to Singapore for the last time. In Mrs. Hamlyn's vision, "Her heavy face was painted, but in her large, tearless eyes there was no expression" (63).

Yet as the text makes amply clear, however painful the native woman's plight might be, it is no match for the utter loneliness experienced by Gallagher in the ship's sickbay, growing ever weaker because of the strange disease that pitilessly shakes his frame. In Mrs. Hamlyn's eyes, the now Christ-like planter's solitary agony has in fact become the quintessence of the suffering associated with the human condition, while the whole ship, blindly bent on her silent course in the middle of the Indian Ocean, has come to symbolise the pathetic frailty and perilous destiny of humanity. The next quote plainly points in that direction:

> There was something impressive in the thought of this ship speeding through a deserted sea, while to her from all parts came unseen messages. She seemed at that

> moment strangely alone and yet the centre of the world. In the lazaret the sick man, shaken by the cruel spasms, gasped for life. (65)

As stated during his burial service, however cheerful and energetic he had been throughout his life, Gallagher was "cut down like a flower" (74) in a matter of a few days. Such considerations soon ride roughshod over the image of the poor Malay woman's plight, while the poignancy of the human condition—especially that of the *European* characters in the story—is abruptly asserted in its stead. By story's end, it is for Gallagher that Mrs. Hamlyn, the moral compass of the story, grieves, not for the Malay woman, because the planter's suffering is deemed universal and of a higher order. Mrs. Hamlyn's summary of Gallagher's case leaves no doubt as to her opinion on the subject:

> When she remembered how he had come on deck in Singapore, so short a while since, in such rude health, full of vitality, and his arrogant plans for the future, she was seized with dismay. Those words of the burial service filled her with a solemn awe: *Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower...* Year in, year out, he had made his plans for the future, he wanted to live so much and he had so much to live for, and then just when he stretched out his hand—oh, it was pitiful; it made all the other distresses of the world of small account. Death with its mystery was the only thing that really mattered. (79-80)

No one on board suggests informing the Malay woman that her companion for a decade or so has died, even though Gallagher's papers are searched for the name of a friend or a relative. Gallagher's tragic death thus eclipses everything else, and dissolves his past as a colonial planter into nothingness. As for the "self-sacrificing" letter (80) that Mrs. Hamlyn ends up writing to her unfaithful husband, saying that she bears him no malice after all for she has come to understand that he needs to grab the chance of happiness which destiny has sent his way, it is a clear indication that the Malay woman *also* should adopt a more rational (i.e., a less emotional) attitude by simply turning the page and making a clean slate of the last few years in her life.

Testifying to the protean power of literature in general, and of short fiction in particular, one can therefore contend that both stories, studied together, make two essential points. On the one hand, they show the dark underbelly of colonisation by touching on various forms of exploitation of natural resources, but mostly by stressing the personal quandary in which settlers ended up by tapping *human* resources, i.e. by taking native mistresses whom they planned to leave behind when the time came for them to return home. That Maugham regarded the settlers he met in the 1920s as mostly pathetic and deficient types is apparent from *A Writer's Notebook*. For instance, he writes, "You would have to go far to find among the planters a man of culture, reading or distinction" (*Notebook* 216-17). He also notes that a Resident Councillor he met "speaks little Malay and takes no interest in the country or in anything else but […] getting away as soon as he is entitled to a pension" (*Notebook* 216). In the Malay state of Sarawak, he remarks that "the white man who rules" the local population is

> never part of the life about him. So long as the Chinese keep the peace and pay their taxes he does not interfere with them. He is a 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. […] 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. (*Notebook* 193)

Or again, the settler referred to by the letter "L." in the same notebook is said to have "a native *wife* [my italics] for whom he does not care and four half-caste children" educated in Singapore.

This did not prevent him from getting "engaged to a girl on one of his leaves in England," though he finally broke off the engagement (*Notebook* 192).
On the other hand, despite such deficiencies, we have seen that a more general reflection on human nature and on the human condition is manifest in the pre-eminence given to the benevolent character of Mrs. Hamlyn, to the symbolic dimension of Gallagher's hiccoughs, or to the lone ship image.
This is in keeping with Maugham's often-stated, though ambiguous, refusal to use literature as a vehicle for ideology. One may remember for instance that, speaking of Chekhov's longer stories, Maugham regretted the "aberrations forced upon him by the pressure of opinion (common in all countries) that the writer of fiction should be a prophet, a social reformer and a philosopher" (*Selected Prefaces* 55). The same went for the role he assigned to drama, seeing that, as one critic puts it, "unlike Shaw, Maugham never felt that its out-and-out purpose was to be a platform from which one shouted his personal conviction" (Fielden 221). Likewise, in his autobiography, Maugham tersely states, "I have never been a propagandist" (*Summing Up* 212), before explaining why he stayed away from a certain literary school that did not agree with him (he may have had in mind novelists like Aldous Huxley or H.G. Wells):

> The novel was regarded as a convenient pulpit for the dissemination of ideas, and a good many novelists were willing enough to look upon themselves as leaders of thought. The novels they wrote were journalism rather than fiction. They had a news value. Their disadvantage was that after a little while they were as unreadable as last week's paper. (*Summing Up* 213)

Surprisingly enough, if Maugham shied away from acting as a "propagandist" in his fiction, his art of the short story did include the need to "make a point," even though he was fully aware that critics with a preference for modernist stories in the vein of Katherine Mansfield or Virginia Woolf, for instance, openly criticised such a habit in their reviews. As Maugham elaborates,

> I had no fear of what is technically known as 'the point.' It seemed to me that it was reprehensible only if it was not logical, and I thought that the discredit that had been attached to it was due only to the fact that it had been too often tacked on, merely for effect, without legitimate reason. In short, I preferred to end my short stories with a full-stop rather than with a straggle of dots. (*Summing Up* 206)

Maugham does not define the essential difference between *propaganda* and *point* in his autobiography. Doing so could actually prove an impossible task beyond (one may suggest) a mere insistence on a difference in scope and degree—though not necessarily in nature. Accordingly, however unevenly supported by the narratives, the two complementary strands detailed above (the immorality of colonialism and the broader foregrounding of the human condition) are distinctly perceptible in both stories. This makes it difficult to understand why H.A. Phillips, who critiqued the *Casuarina Tree* collection (including "P. & O.") for the *Saturday Review* in 1926, saw Gallagher's death as "a piece of needless homicide" and failed to see any point to the whole story:

> There seems no point to it all. We do not know what we are led to expect, and if we were expected to expect anything, it does not come off. […] Mr Maugham always has a big idea behind his stories, but this time he did not put it across. (Phillips 172-73)

Likewise, much closer to us, three articles published in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s disagree on what to make of Maugham's colonial writings. The oldest of the three articles claims that "the question of imperial decline and the concomitant issue of growing political challenge" to British authority were only peripheral to Maugham's interest in Asia (Christie 682). By

contrast, following Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism, the most recent of these articles starts by reviewing the main imperialist tropes at play in Maugham's travelogue *The Gentleman in the Parlour*—tropes like systematic oppositions between East and West, the dehistoricising of the Orient, references to the (supposedly) low valuation placed on human life in Asia or to the (alleged) ubiquity of tropical diseases (malaria) and drugs (opium) in all Southeast Asian environments. This leads its author to conclude that "Despite his intentions to avoid the question of European imperialism, Maugham frequently played upon the recurring themes, and had recourse to many of the well-used tropes of that hegemonic discourse" (Doran 8). His book is thus starkly presented as "a repository of Western colonial ideas and attitudes, integrally involved in the circulation of the prevailing European discourse of high imperialism" (Doran 2), a conclusion at odds with the previous perception of Maugham's innocuity or of his unconcern for the decline of British rule.

As for the third article, it underlines the importance of Maugham's narratorial strategy, based on a voice that is "worldly-wise, sympathetic, but generally detached from the tragedies that unfold," or again on "an objective, even emotionally detached yet perceptive narrator who tells the reader both the story and the significance of that story" (Galmish 47). Galmish elaborates what the "significance of that story" might be in the following quote:

> As with many perceptive writers of his time, Maugham recognizes the sterility of the colonizing enterprise and even predicts its ultimate failure; he describes, with poignant accuracy, the deleterious effects upon the characters who find themselves caught between conflicting cultures. (Galmish 46)

Following Bhabha's analysis, the same article further comments that Maugham's characters have "lived through the shock brought by colonialism" and are therefore in a position to "comment upon the misunderstandings caused by the narcissistic misreading of a foreign culture" (Galmish 47). The spectrum of critics' assessments of the "points" made by Maugham's short stories is therefore quite wide. Though looking for a "propagandist" thrust in his short fictions would certainly be doomed to failure in terms of a conscious and structured critique of colonialism, the Sphinx-like persona of his narrators and their studied neutrality do encourage a plurality of readings, thereby beckoning critics to delve into their shimmering and elusive complexity.

As we have seen, emotional atrophy characterises the English settler and his Irish counterpart at the centre of the stories under study. Whether Masterson lies to himself when claiming that his children mean nothing to him cannot be asserted; nor can one say how long his grief over his concubine's departure will last. As for Gallagher, his plans having been made ever since he set foot on Malayan soil, he never looks back nor stops to consider his native mistress's suffering when the time comes for him to go.

Since both settlers pay the price for their choices, these stories can be read as moral tales of ordinary exploiters getting their comeuppance, as an indictment of the effects of colonialism, or as a charge against colonialism itself. However, they also embody some of Maugham's long-cherished convictions: that human nature is often pitiful and fallible; that humankind is no match for the social, psychological or sexual forces that assail it; and that our human condition should make us more lenient and more thoughtful of others.

In that sense, Maugham was much more of a fatalist and a moralist than a historian and a propagandist, even though in "P. & O." and in "Masterson" he may have come closest to playing those last two roles all the same. A critic like Don Adams even suggests that we see Maugham as a "writer of ethical parables," one who "attempted through the parables of his didactic fiction to instruct others in the acceptance of their individual natures and to condemn a society that causes unnecessary human misery through its oppression and suppression of

joyful individual desire (Adams 55). That "suppression of joyful individual desire" could be another name for the "emotional atrophy" studied here.

Bibliography

Adams, Don. "Somerset Maugham's Ethically Earnest Fiction." *Cambridge Quarterly,* vol. 45, no. 1, Mar. 2016, p. 42-67.

Anonymous. "Held Up for Hiccup." *Linlithgowshire Gazette,* 8 February 1924, p. 6.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. 1994. Routledge, 2004.

Christie, Clive J. "British Literary Travellers in Southeast Asia in an Era of Colonial Retreat." *Modern Asian Studies,* vol. 28, no. 4, Oct. 1994, p. 673-737.

Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim*. 1899-1900. Norton, 1996.

Coote, P.C. "In British Malaya. A Land of Rubber and Tin. (By P.C. Coote, Author of *Peeps at the Malay States*)." *Linlithgowshire Gazette,* 8 February, 1924, p. 6.

Doran, Christine. "Popular Orientalism: Somerset Maugham in Mainland Southeast Asia." *Humanities,* vol. 5, no. 1, Feb. 2016, n. pag.

Fielden, John. "Somerset Maugham on the Purpose of Drama." *Educational Theatre Journal,* vol. 10, no. 3, Oct. 1958, p. 218-22.

Galmish, Hank. "Melville and Maugham: Colonial Desires in the South Seas." *Leviathan,* vol. 11, no. 2, June 2009, p. 43-56.

Maugham, Somerset W. *A Writer's* Notebook. 1949. Penguin, 1967.

Maugham, Somerset W. *Far Eastern Tales*. Vintage, 2000.

Maugham, Somerset W. *More Far Eastern Tales*. Vintage, 2000.

Maugham, Somerset W. *Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham*. Doubleday, 1963.

Maugham, Somerset W. *The Summing* Up. 1938. Vintage, 2001.

Phillips, Henry Albert. "In the Shadow of the Casuarina Tree" (*New York Evening Post*, 2, October 1926, p. 7). *W. Somerset Maugham: The Critical Heritage*, edited by A. Curtis and J. Whitehead. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 171-74.

Stewart, Shawn J. "NPS Class Inspires Officer to Combat Military Suicide with Smartphone App." *In Review Magazine*, Oct. 2013, p. 10-11.

Stockwell, A.J. "The White Man's Burden and Brown Humanity: Colonialism and Ethnicity in British Malaya." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science,* vol. 10, no. 1, 1982, p. 44-68.

Whyte, Kyle. "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *English Language Notes,* vol. 55, no. 1-2, Fall 2017, p. 53-62.

Xavier P. Lachazette

Associate professor Xavier P. Lachazette teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century British literature at Le Mans University, France. He is a member of his University's 3LAM Research Centre and an associate member of the University of Angers' CIRPaLL (as part of the team working on "short fiction"). He has already published articles on two works by W. Somerset Maugham, *On a Chinese Screen* and *The Casuarina Tree*, together with "Stories of Human Character: W. Somerset Maugham" (2016), a general introduction for the Gale Researcher Guide series. In 2021 and 2023, he edited two collections of articles on Daphne du Maurier's short stories.

Xavier P. Lachazette est maître de conférences et membre du centre de recherches 3LAM de Le Mans Université, où il enseigne la littérature britannique des XIXe et XXe siècles. Il est membre associé du CIRPaLL de l'Université d'Angers et de l'équipe qui travaille sur la thématique de la « fiction brève ». Il a déjà publié des articles portant sur deux œuvres de W. Somerset Maugham, *On a Chinese Screen* et *The Casuarina Tree*, ainsi qu'une introduction à ce même auteur pour la série *Gale Researcher Guides*, intitulée « Stories of Human Character: W. Somerset Maugham » (2016). En 2021 et 2023, il a édité deux recueils d'articles critiques sur les nouvelles de Daphné du Maurier.