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How Good Maugham Was: A Critical Reassessment, An International Interdisciplinary Conference (Le Mans, 13-14 March 2025)

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Call for Papers
How Good Maugham Was: A Critical Reassessment
An International Interdisciplinary Conference

Conference Dates: Thursday 13 and Friday 14 March 2025

Location: Le Mans University, France (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/nrrshiTddgof53vB7>)

Keywords: W. Somerset Maugham, Popular, Middlebrow and High Culture, Literary Criticism, Colonialism, Travel Studies, Gender Studies, Biography, Adaptations, Translations, Cultural Transfers, Propaganda

Conference Format: In-person, but videoconference will be possible in specific cases

Conference Languages: English; French a possibility for a limited number of papers

Conference Website: <https://maugham-le-mans.sciencesconf.org>

1. In a Nutshell

Join us in Le Mans, France for a stimulating two-day conference focused on the life and works of one of the most versatile, prolific and influential British writers of the 20th century: W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965). This conference aims to provide a platform for scholars, researchers, and enthusiasts to engage in a comprehensive reassessment of Maugham's contributions to short stories, novels, essays, theatre, travel, film adaptations, and international cultural transfers. It will unravel the layers of Maugham's literary tapestry and assess his legacy. We look forward to welcoming you to this enriching academic event, to be followed by paper and/or online publications.

2. Keynote Speakers

The distinguished scholars in the field of literature and Maugham studies who will deliver insightful talks during the conference will be announced soon.

3. General Context

In 2004, after reading Jeffrey Meyers' *Somerset Maugham: A Life*, reviewer Anthony Daniels asked the question bluntly: "How Good Was Maugham?" (Daniels). His personal answer was that Maugham had made his "the virtue of clarity" at a time when modernism looked down on it. He also contended that Maugham preferred to let his readers deduce the "inner turmoil of his characters" from their behaviour, which led to the charge that he was "a mere observer of externals without much in the way of a soul" (Daniels). Yet Maugham's soul and heart are precisely what makes Maugham an arresting figure for Daniels: he rather regards him as terrified by his own emotions, not detached at all but needing to prevent himself from "break[ing] down altogether," being constantly torn between the contradictory desires for "freedom and license" on the one hand, and "social respectability and observance of social convention" on the other (Daniels).

Although (or because) Maugham's popularity hardly ever waned, and he could still be paid \$500 for a two-minute radio talk in 1939 or sell a story to a magazine for \$25,000 in 1941 (Hastings 535, 560), he was keenly aware of how condescending or dismissive of the quality of his books critics could prove to be when any new work of his came to their attention. In 1940, an insulting phrase from a review of his previous collection of short stories prompted him to call his next such publication *The Mixture as Before*. Eight years later, he summarised the usually unfavourable opinion of his reviewers thus in the introduction to *Quartet*, his first anthology film: "In my twenties the critics said I was brutal; in my thirties they said I was flippant; in my forties they said I was cynical; in my fifties they said I was competent; and then in my sixties they said I was superficial" (*Quartet* 3'20"-3'31").

Yet, as has now been fully proven, Maugham's allegedly ranking himself "in the very first row of the second-raters" is apocryphal (Blackburn and Arsov 139), and though usually modest about his own gifts, Maugham did occasionally state his good points, as in the following quote from his autobiography, *The Summing Up*: "I had an acute power of observation, and it seemed to me that I could see a great many things that other people missed" (qtd. in Hastings 520). This led some critics to claim that Maugham's writing "deserves to be judged entirely on its own merits, as does his legacy as one of the most prolific and popular writers of modern times" (Blackburn and Arsov 148).

Well may they say so, seeing that "the English Maupassant" (MacCarthy) achieved literary prowess across genres, his notable works spanning not only novels (*Of Human Bondage*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, *The Razor's Edge*, etc.) and short story collections (*The Trembling of a Leaf*, *The Casuarina Tree*, etc.), but also plays (*The Circle*, *Our Betters*, *Sheppey*, *The Constant Wife*, etc.), travelogues (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*, *On a Chinese Screen*, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*), essays (*Ten Novels and Their Authors*, *The Vagrant Mood*, *Points of View*, etc.) and memoirs (*The Summing Up*, *A Writer's Notebook*, *Looking Back*). In Michael House's documentary *Revealing Mr. Maugham*, novelist and essayist Pico Iyer even goes so far as to praise the power of Maugham's quietly subversive prose over the somewhat arrogant modernist ambitions of literary luminaries like James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence or Virginia Woolf: "I think, in some ways, he was more effectively fearless than any of them because his subject matter was just as way out as theirs were, and yet he placed it in a frame that anybody could read. That ability both to shock you and to put you at ease at the same time is what most of us aspire to, and almost nobody has, but he had instinctively" (House 1'50"-2'07").

In the wake of the 125th anniversary of Maugham's birth (in 1874) and in celebration of the 60th anniversary of his demise (in 1965), the time has thus come to honour one of the most widely read and adapted, revered and dismissed, prolific and versatile British writers of the 20th century, and to reassess not only his extensive body of works but also his contribution to English-language literature, his international aura, his afterlives and legacy. That this conference will take place not only in France, the country Maugham called home for several decades, but also in Le Mans, where his maternal grandmother resided for the last eighteen years of her life, will make it the perfect venue for a long-overdue critical reassessment.

4. Thematic Interdisciplinary Approaches

Organised by Le Mans' "Labo 3L.AM" research unit—in partnership with Sorbonne Université's V.A.L.E., Rennes 2's A.C.E., and Angers' C.I.R.P.a.L.L.—this conference will welcome papers in line with two of the Labo 3L.AM's research focuses. These focuses revolve around the dialectics between popular and high culture, and around the cultural transfers or circulations of knowledge made possible by works of all kinds, as evidenced by their reception, adaptation, translation, or appropriation by international readers, critics, and academics ("Les Axes de Recherche"). In addition, to make this interdisciplinary conference a stimulating and groundbreaking event for all participants, we also invite submissions on a wide range of topics related to Maugham's protean output, including but not limited to:

➤ **MAUGHAM'S POIESIS AND AESTHETICS:** How can one define the "perfection of form" associated with Maugham's novels, short fiction and plays? What function is played by the aesthetic "pattern" he claims to have tried to fill out in his life? (Curtis, or *Quartet* 3'40"-3'49"). What can one make today of Maugham's narrative techniques and his worldly, emotionally detached narrators? What does his lifelong love affair with paintings, evidenced in *Purely for My Pleasure*, tell us about him? Are his essays on books and literary genres (*Books and You: A Dissertation upon Reading*, *Points of View*), or his introductions to great classics (*Ten Novels and Their Authors*) helpful forms of literary popularisation? How does Maugham's familiarity with philosophy and ethics inform his works?

➤ **MAUGHAM'S INTERNATIONAL AURA:** How can one account for Maugham's unflinching popularity with various academics across the world in his lifetime, like Professors Paul Dottin in Toulouse, France, Klaus W. Jonas in Germany (at first), Richard A. Cordell in the United States, or Yoshio Nakano in Japan? In Paris as well as in Japan, why does Maugham "make absolute sense," as Pico Iyer puts it, "in a way that most writers couldn't because they're too culturally limited, or either their language or their frame of reference would put them very precisely in a certain part of London or New York"? (House 27'51"-28'20")

➤ **COLONIAL, POST-COLONIAL AND DECOLONIAL STUDIES:** Though the British Empire forms the background of *The Painted Veil* and a handful of Maugham's lesser-known novels (*The Hero*, *The Explorer*, *The Narrow Corner*), it is in both his travelogues (*On a Chinese Screen* and *The Gentleman in the Parlour*) and his short stories that his first-hand experience of colonial outposts is best foregrounded, capturing the atmosphere, social dynamics, and tensions inherent in such settings. How does Maugham explore the impact of colonialism on both the coloniser and the colonised, or the power dynamics, exploitation, and moral dilemmas associated with imperial rule? In Maugham's fictions, owing to their "disrupting power" (Chemmachery), do colonial encounters always lead to the invisibilisation of the colonial Other, and to identity issues or "emotional atrophy" (Lachazette 2023 and 2011) in the displaced coloniser?

➤ **TRAVEL WRITING, "EXOTICISM," AND ECOCRITICISM:** Maugham wrote travelogues that captured the allure and mystique of distant lands like South Seas islands, China and South-East Asia. By simultaneously engaging with, and deconstructing, the Western concept of exoticism, what do his works contribute to discussions on how travel literature shapes perceptions of other cultures? An indefatigable traveller, he also wrote about Spain (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*), which also inspired him to write both appreciative essays on "Siglo de Oro" writers, painters, or religious figures (in *Don Fernando*) and more sombre religion-themed novels (*The Making of a Saint* and *Catalina*), a body of works which still begs critical attention. An ecocritical approach to Maugham's travel writing is also called for, in the wake of Pillai and Sankaran's recent research (2021).

➤ **BIOGRAPHY AND GENDER STUDIES:** What does a comparative study of the most recent biographies of Maugham (Hastings, Meyers, Calder, Morgan) tell us about biography studies? If "the greater part of his *oeuvre* could be read as an exercise in revenge" (Raphael 73), why did he see himself as unable to "bring myself to judge my fellows" and "content to observe them"? (Jonas 2009, 36). Is Maugham a "homosexual albatross with clipped wings" and a figure of "gay melancholy"? (Lhomme 51, translated from the French). Can he be a gay icon when he (allegedly) described his greatest mistake as trying "to persuade myself that I was three-quarters normal and that only one quarter of me was queer—whereas really it was the other way round"? (Robin Maugham 201). What is his contribution to LGBTQ+ literature?

➤ **FILM, STAGE AND TRANSMEDIAL ADAPTATIONS, TRANSLATIONS:** Why have upwards of sixty films been made from at least thirty-eight of Maugham's novels, short stories and plays? How do the four star-studded versions of "Rain" or the three renditions of *Of Human Bondage* compare with each other, and what do they add to our understanding of the original texts? How did the last adaptations of three Maugham works—*The Painted Veil* (2006), dir. John Curran; *Being Julia* (2004), dir. István Szabó; *Up at the Villa* (2000), dir. Philip Haas—fare at the box-office, and are their merits likely to rekindle a filmic interest in Maugham's works? Is Maugham still good enough for the 21st-century screen? What themes or features in Maugham's works explain their success when translated into non-European languages? Into what kind of character is Maugham transmuted in a recent comic book (Floc'h and Rivière) and a novel (Tan)?

➤ **WARTIME JOURNALISM AND PROPAGANDA:** Though Maugham tersely opposed writing “for my own pleasure” to the writing of propaganda, “a thing for which I had no gift and so found a distressing burden” (Jonas 2009, ix), his two contributions to the war effort in France in World War II (*France at War, The Hour before the Dawn*) and his novel *Christmas Holiday* have never been studied together. What can one make of those works? How do they compare with other English-language books on wartime France, like Edith Wharton’s *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919), for instance?

➤ **POPULARITY, POPULARISATION AND LITERARY CRITICISM:** How can Maugham simultaneously be hailed as “the Dean of English Letters” or “undoubtedly [...] the most widely read English author of the first half of the twentieth century” (Jonas 2009, 29, 1), and dismissed as “for our day what Bulwer-Lytton was for Dickens” (Jonas 2009, 35)? What accounts for his “quite fantastic” and “really staggering” popularity in Japan in 1959 (Hastings 630)? Why did his abridgements of, and introductions to, ten international *Great Novelists and Their Novels* hike the sales of *The Sunday Times* by ten percent in 1948 (Hastings 603)? What kind of literary criticism do Maugham’s own collections of critical essays put forward? What makes a writer middlebrow or highbrow?

➤ **MAUGHAM AND THE CLASSROOM:** What place does Maugham occupy in college syllabuses today? Does the short form, at which he excelled, lend itself well to current literary studies in narratology? What reception do Maugham’s works get in different cultural and linguistic contexts? Do his stories of young men and women grappling with the meaning of existence (*Of Human Bondage, The Moon and Sixpence, The Razor’s Edge, Mrs. Craddock, “The Alien Corn”*) still resonate with the experiences or sentiments of today’s younger generation? Which filmic adaptations of his short stories or novels provide the best frameworks for classroom projects and discussions? How does Maugham blur the lines between popular culture and canonical (or high) culture?

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7. Submission Guidelines

- 300-word Abstract and 100-word Bio-bibliographical Information Submission
- Deadline: 15 September 2024.

- Notification of Acceptance: by 15 October 2024.
- Conference: 13-14 March 2025. Panellists will be allotted 20-min time slots, to be followed by a general discussion at the end of each panel.
- Full Article Submission Deadline: 15 September 2025. Accepted articles on Maugham's short stories will be published in the international *Journal of the Short Story in English (JSSE)*, in both paper and online formats. Articles on Maugham's life or on all other aspects of his vast literary production will be published in paper format or online in an international journal to be determined. All articles will be in English.

Abstracts and bio-bibliographical details will be submitted in one .docx (.doc, .rtf or .odt) file via the Conference Submission Portal. Please avoid other formats. Do not submit PDFs.

8. *Organising Committee*

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10. *Contact and Website Information*

For general inquiries, please contact the organising committee at maugham-le-mans@sciencesconf.org, or visit the Conference website at <https://maugham-le-mans.sciencesconf.org>.

œ 20 March 2024 œ