

Maugham's "Rain": Depiction of American and Western European Imperialism

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Abstract

The present article is an exploration of what happens when East meets West in a tropical setting. It is a study of the bizarre behaviour that results when a European temperament must face prolonged exposure to tropical climates and customs. It is one of the best short stories ever written by him, in its length and characterization along with resonance of real flesh and blood characters. One can find professionalism pervading the manner which he adopts for this story, the matter, theme, situations and the tropical settings to give the public exactly what they want. This story makes one marvel at its details, composition and ability to touch one's soul with feelings. Even if one is not a fan of the short story form, feels after going through this story that Maugham's writing is an exception.

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

Among Maugham's first collection of six perfectly competent pieces of short stories, '*Orientation*', "Rain" is written first. It is one of his best-known short stories and before writing this he has disguised himself as a reporter to work for the British Intelligence in Russia during the Russian Revolution in 1917. As a result of the above reason, his stuttering and poor health hinders his

writing career. He then happens to set off with a friend on a series of travels to Eastern Asia, the Pacific Islands and Mexico. The story is inspired by a missionary and a prostitute travelling along with the fellow passengers on a trip to Pago Pago. It all takes place in 1916, while a small group of English and American travellers are travelling from Honolulu to Apia on business and personal trips. An epidemic of measles breaks out suddenly and the disparate characters are forced to stay for a couple of weeks in Pago Pago in American Samoa of the South Pacific island of Tutuila. The clash between Pacific and European cultures informs every aspect of the story. For each Anglo-Saxon character, the tropics represent some different and alien reality.

It so happens that the arrival of the ship in Pago-Pago has coincided with the beginning of the tropical rainy season, and it rains almost ceaselessly during the time period covered by the story. As it is announced that they wouldn't be able to leave the island for at least ten days, the two couples, the Davidsons and the Macphails are temporarily detained from continuing their journey to Apia. The couples have though socialized on shipboard; happen to be very different from each other. The Davidsons have been absent from their medical and religious mission north of Samoa for a year. They are religious enthusiasts with a single aim in life to convert Samoans to Christianity. They see the South Seas as a vast pagan chaos waiting to be colonized and Christianized. The missionary's wife too is in possession of a mind akin to his own. They are determined in their ways about the morals and habits of the local folks. They are at the same time a dreary, severe, self-righteous, authoritarian and serious pair.

They associate with the Macphails as the rest of the ship's passengers seem "fast" by comparison. Though the women folk find a lot of things in common to talk about, the men folk share only an association with medicine, for Dr. Macphail is a shy, reserved, contemplative man to whom religion means little. The doctor is a good-natured person and prefers to take things quietly. He does not poke his nose in other people's affairs and his wife tends to follow his lead. The couple are weak but tolerant people with no fixed convictions. The Scottish doctor pair is travelling to Upolu by ship to recover from war wounds and accompanied on the long voyage by the missionary pair. Even the even-tempered Macphail is affected by the strange world of the tropics. Horrified by the unpleasantness and disease of Pago-Pago, he is driven to distraction by the unremitting rain.

At this moment in the story, when all the passengers get stranded, the energetic Davidsons become active and take initiative. Davidson through his influence with the local Governor, is able to find them rooms in the establishment of Mr. Horn, a local trader. Mrs. Davidson, with characteristic efficiency, helps the rather unimpressive Macphails settle into the boarding house. She is determined to make the best of things in spite of the bleak environment. The rest of the passengers also find lodging in the same expansive house. At the house, they pass the time in conversation and other so-called proper activities while other residents pursue smoking, gambling, and dancing.

Soon Macphail finds out that another of their shipmates, a second-class passenger named Sadie Thompson would be lodging there. Miss Sadie is a young woman with unrefined manners, vulgar appearance, improper speech, over-stylish dress and on the whole can be described as entirely sensual. For her the islands represent an escape, a place to begin life anew. She is actually travelling

to a distant island where she has secured a job as a cashier. She is in-fact judged “fast” by Mrs. Davidson and Mrs. Macphail for dancing with the ship’s quartermaster at the shipboard party, the night before the landing at Pago-Pago. She happens to be a friendly, socially active and vivacious type. She seeks, in the following days, to enliven the depressing boarding house by giving frequent parties, loud and raucous affairs attended solely by the island’s sailors. One evening the couples’ dinner conversation is interrupted by loud noises coming from Sadie’s room on the floor below. As they try to talk over the dinner, Davidson is particularly troubled by her lack of what he considers decent and moral behaviour. He has a sudden revelation that Sadie, who boarded the ship at Honolulu, must be a denizen of Iwelei, that city’s notorious red-light district, which has only recently been shut down through the efforts of Hawaiian missionaries. Further, she must be plying her trade and continuing a life of sin here in Pago-Pago, just below them in her room.

On the next day Mrs. Macphail and Mrs. Davidson walk together through the village. They happen to encounter Thompson on two occasions, and both times she calls at them insultingly. Mrs. Davidson feels they must have Mr. Horn, the local trader turn her out of his house. As it begins to rain again, everyone returns to the house, Davidson coming in late and drenched. At lunch, he sends the serving girl to ask for an appointment with Thompson. As she too agrees to meet with him, he determines to speak to her clearly about it. Mrs. Davidson on the other hand believes it to be a sheer waste of time, but Davidson is determined to extend Thompson the full mercy of God as he perceives it. He proceeds downstairs and spends a quiet hour with her. As usual, upon his return, he seems visibly agitated and angry on her rejection of his offer. Over the next three days whenever the Macphails or the Davidsons encounter Thompson, she is aloof. In the evenings, she takes no visitors but continues to play her gramophone. On Sunday, she begins to play her gramophone and the missionary complains to Horn about the impropriety of music on the Sabbath. Horn also insists that she should discontinue the music. After the incident, Davidson spends his time away from the house and all of them including Sadie get the feeling that he is concentrating his attention on some plan, though they are not sure about it.

As the story is a bitter indictment of intolerance, both political and religious, all of them realize that the arrogant and self-righteous Christian missionary, attempts to reform another character, whom he mistakenly assumes to be a common prostitute. He is determined to cleanse her soul of sin. After all, he is a stern New England Evangelical Puritan with an unbending sense of duty and an unyielding horror of what he believes to be sin. Over the objections of Macphail, who considers Sadie’s actions none of their business, Davidson insists on storming into her room and trying to break up the party. As expected by everyone, his wife and the Macphails listen, Davidson being thrown out of the room by the sailors. In addition to it, after the Davidsons go to their room, the party starts up again, even louder than before. His initial attempts to make her mend her ways lead into ridicule and dismissal on part of Sadie. This provokes ferocity in Rev. Davidson which is further masked by his missionary zeal. He then attempts to have her turned out of the house but there is no other lodging available. He also seeks to enforce his own standards of behaviour on her by pressurizing various island inhabitants. So far Davidson is largely successful in cowing Thompson as she determines to pass the time as quietly as possible to avoid further angering the politically powerful missionary.

The missionary is not satisfied, however, and enlists the aid of the local governor of the island again to deport her on the next ship leaving for San Francisco. The governor too knows very well that the missionaries are well connected in Washington. Sadie then requests Davidson to allow her to leave the island destined for any location other than San Francisco. The missionary, in an obvious revelation of a secret, decides that Thompson must be facing a prison sentence in San Francisco. She then seems to confirm his belief and states that she faces a three-year prison term if she is returned to San Francisco. Dr. Macphail on the other hand is surprised to see that the missionary is firm in his resolve to have her deported to San Francisco.

Realizing that Davidson has mastered the situation and her fate, Thompson becomes despondent and then seeks forgiveness by repenting of her life of putative sin. An epic struggle between them seems to ensue. She begins a prolonged ordeal of weeping, praying, and reading the Bible, assisted all the time by Davidson. For four days they are shut up together in Thompson's room while she grovels in her pajamas and begs him to counsel her. The missionary too remains at her side throughout as a confidant and confessor. Sadie is at her wit's end and seems resigned to her fate of having to board her ship to San Francisco when it arrives in about a week's time. She appears to have a change of heart and decides to mend her ways. In fact she takes a turn towards spiritualism and Reverend Davidson willingly takes on the role of her mentor.

The secluded environment of the island and the boarding house is reinforced by the relentless rain that pours throughout the day. It seems to echo the message that there is simply no escape from what is preordained, and nature must take its course. In the mean while Mrs. Davidson confides to Dr. Macphail that her husband has been having strange dreams, notable about the mountains of Nebraska. The doctor silently recalls that the mountains reminded him very much of women's breasts. Meanwhile Davidson himself becomes increasingly agitated and the doctor finds him to be intolerable. Davidson is enraptured by the apparent transformation of Thompson's soul, and exults that Thompson has submitted to return to San Francisco and face the penalty for her sin. She appears a broken and frightened woman. She apologizes, admits she is powerless against Davidson's decisions. Thompson, frantic, collapses and things pass on uneasily. Outward appearance seem to show that he is succeeding his cause to the extent that Sadie is so remorseful that she has accepted the need for her to be sentenced to prison. On the night before Sadie is to leave, Dr. Macphail assists her to her room and gives her an injection to calm her down. On the next day Dr. Macphail naturally checks in on Thompson to assess her health. Surprisingly he finds her in her room in a disorder and dreary state. Although he is concerned for her health, she claims to "only want to see Davidson". Actually, on the night before Sadie is to leave, she seduces Reverend Davidson and he succumbs to human frailties.

On the morning of Thompson's scheduled departure, Davidson is found dead on the beach. He has used a razor to slit his own throat, with feelings of moral failure and frustration. Shocked at his fall from grace and unable to face suddenly the uncertain future, he takes the drastic step of self-destruction. It could be the product of an unbearable but self-imposed religious guilt. After a difficult few hours the Macphails and Mrs. Davidson return from the mortuary to find her playing loud music, chatting up a sailor, and once again dressed in all her gaudy style. The hypocrite and repentant

woman in Sadie have evaporated with Davidson's suicide and she is once again in her original appearance. She actually savours her triumph and at once resumes the way of life she knew. Finally Dr. Macphail realizes that her deliberately crafted behaviour has led to the seduction and subsequent suicide of the stern Davidson. Suddenly things are as clear as rain in the mind of Dr. Macphail and the reader. Not to leave anything vague and hanging in the reader's mind, Maugham clarifies everything when Mrs. Davidson confronts Sadie about the tragedy. As shocked Mrs. Davidson rushes to her room, Sadie cruelly flaunts herself, laughs and spits at her. Later the doctor too when confronts Sadie to know what is happening and she retorts, "You men! You filthy, dirty pigs! You're all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!". It is a real tragedy and Maugham is inviting all his readers feel genuine compassion for a character whom he has set up to dislike. It is an uncharitable story told unsparingly about the whole missionary profession.

Rain is probably the best short story written by Somerset Maugham, in its length and characterization. One can find professionalism pervading the manner which he adopts for his story, the matter, theme, situations and the settings to give the public what they want. It conforms to Maugham's formula for a story as it has a beginning, middle and end. The story's popularity is sustained over the years as it has been made into movies and plays. This story makes one marvel at its details, composition and ability to touch one's soul with feelings. The clash between Pacific and European cultures informs every aspect of the story and makes it interesting. A sentence, a paragraph, a fragment of the story and everything sit as a perfect gem in an exquisite design. Finally, Maugham can be rightly called one of those rare authors who can make his characters such as Sadie, Davidson couple; Macphail couple leap off the page and become living and breathing creatures. The entire story makes one feel the resonance of genuine flesh and blood characters participating in real life. Even if one is not a fan of the short story form, after going through the story feels that Maugham's writing is an exception.

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