

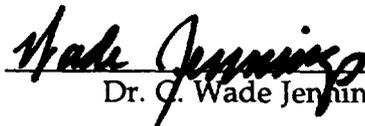
Intention and Meaning:  
The Significance of the Persona in the Telling of  
W. Somerset Maugham's The Razor's Edge

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Much of the study of literature involves understanding an author's intent. Critics of literature puzzle over why a particular type of character appears again and again in an author's work or why authors follow a particular theme in their writings. W. Somerset Maugham's novel The Razor's Edge poses an interesting dilemma in terms of another question of intent--what is the meaning of the story. Already a difficult question to answer, searching for the meaning of Maugham's story proves even more confusing because Maugham tells the reader one thing and through the use of the persona narrator, conveys quite another.

In Maugham's opening chapter of The Razor's Edge he informs readers that his book "consists of [his] recollections" of "a very remarkable creature"--Larry Darrell (1-2). From this point, readers naturally assume they are reading Larry's story. As close analysis will prove, however, the technique Maugham uses to tell "Larry's story"--what has come to be known as the "Maugham persona"--conflicts with the one-character's-story impression we initially find in the novel. In examining the function of the persona point-of-view in relation to The Razor's Edge readers discover not only Maugham's focus, in terms of a character(s), but also a possible meaning for his work.

An added dimension to the analysis of The Razor's Edge comes in the form of two film versions of the novel. The interpretations of the novel found in both the 1946 and 1984 film provide an interesting commentary on the meaning and focus of Maugham's story. How each film handles the various characters in the novel--particularly, Larry, Mr. Maugham and Elliott Templeton--also proves interesting. In addressing or choosing not to address the "Maugham persona" in their works, the makers of the two film versions of The Razor's Edge inadvertently convey the significance of the persona not only in the telling but also the meaning of Maugham's story.

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The use of the persona in the telling of a story originates much further back in literature than Somerset Maugham. Writers Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg argue that the persona--what they label the "histor"--dates back to Herodotus and Thucydides (266). Whatever its date of conception, the appearance of the persona in literature is certainly widespread. The persona's popularity stems from its versatility, but also its established role. The choice of the character of the persona can be as vast as the works of literature in which it is included; however, in every work where it appears, the persona functions in a particular capacity--irregardless of its eventual character, certain attributes are always present.

In their early study of point-of-view, Scholes and Kellogg define many of the traits of the "histor"--persona. "The histor," they explain,

is the author as inquirer, constructing a narrative on the basis of such evidence as he has been able accumulate . . . . a man . . . who is entitled not only to present the facts as he has established them but to comment on them, to draw parallels, to moralize, to generalize, to tell the reader what to think and even to suggest what he should do. (265-66)

As these attributes suggest, the "histor" wields sizeable, if not complete, power in the narrative. "It is his business," Scholes and Kellogg further purport, "to guide the reader's response to the events narrated" (266). The "histor" guarantees writers that their readers will view the story and characters through a particular perspective. Using the "histor" point-of-view, then, empowers the author as well as the "histor."

Although primarily interacting with the reader, the persona does have many obligations to those within the text of the story. Norman Friedman's study of the persona addresses the qualities that what he terms the "'I' as

witness" narrator exhibits. His analysis concerns itself more with the persona's interaction with other characters. According to Friedman, The "I" as witness "can talk to various people within the story and can get their views on matters of concern . . . ; he can secure letters, diaries and other writings which may offer glimpses of the mental states of others" (150). All of these qualities give the "I" as witness narrator a basis for credibility in the eyes of the reader; they also make the narrator's *story* more credible--details seem less based on opinion than on actual conversations and written facts.

Friedman recognizes that, as Scholes and Kellogg suggest, the "I" as witness narrator has a great deal of power in the narrative. This type of narrator controls both the presentation of events in the story and the extent to which the reader is distanced from the story. "Since the witness-narrator can summarize his narrative at any given point as well as present a scene," Friedman states, "the distance between the reader and story may be either near or far, or both" (152). Reader distance is an important element in the usage of the persona narrator because with it, authors direct readers towards their intention in a work. Greater distance implies a view of the story from what Friedman dubs "the wandering periphery"--in a detached, observing role outside the immediate action of the story (150). A lesser, more intimate distance suggests that the author wishes readers to somehow become a part of the action--place themselves in a position of relating to events.

The "Maugham persona" embodies many of the characteristics Friedman, Scholes and Kellogg mention. Other attributes Maugham brings to his persona in The Razor's Edge and many of his short stories help define a more distinct persona. Critic V. S. Pritchett terms the Maugham literary persona "the Great Dry Martini in person" (in Calder 24). His description is not only

witty, but accurate. The "Maugham persona" is typically a recognized, seemingly well-to-do writer who conveniently mixes with people of various social classes and distinctions. He has a quick wit and is often sarcastic and cynical. When in social situations, he places himself in the role of observer, allowing his opinions and reflections to appear well-founded and accurate. In fact, characters often come to him for his "knowledge and sympathetic understanding" (Burt 122). A very convenient attribute of the "Maugham persona" is that characters seek him out, wishing to share confidences with him. Taking part in these confidences, his character challenges Friedman's conception of the narrator on "the wandering periphery." The "Maugham persona" explains why he is privy to such confidences in an early scene in The Razor's Edge. Having just listened to and discussed over one of the character's problems he says,

It may surprise the reader that she should have chosen to tell so much to someone whom she knew so little. . . . It did not surprise me. . . . as any writer will tell you, people do tell a writer things that they don't tell others. I don't know why. (85)

As a writer, the "Maugham persona" is in a convenient position for gathering the various pieces of his story.

By nature of his need to obtain information about the happenings of the characters in his story, the "Maugham persona" requires some type of consistent, guaranteed access to the other characters. In The Razor's Edge, the "Maugham persona," aptly named Mr. Maugham, is introduced to the main characters by his friend Elliott Templeton. The facts he gathers in the rest of the novel arise from gossipy luncheons with Elliott, renewed acquaintances, or chance meetings with other characters. Maugham is clever not to suggest

what he has written is entirely accurate. "I do not pretend that the conversations I have recorded (in the novel) can be regarded as verbatim reports," Mr. Maugham says. "I have taken the liberty . . . to put into the mouths of the persons of my narrative speeches that I did not myself hear and could not possibly have heard" (2). From the beginning he lets us know that he has structured events, and to a great extent, structured characters and dialogue.

One of the ironies of Mr. Maugham, or any persona, is that whatever power he has over the story, he does not have the power to see everything. He is not part of every original conversation or occurrence. This non-omniscient situation leads Mr. Maugham to rely heavily on what is said or told by others. We often receive Mr. Maugham's telling of a conversation he has been a part of or observed, involving another character who tells us details of the story. This somewhat convoluted method of storytelling poses a rather interesting point concerning the use of the persona: with the input, or more precisely stories, of so many other characters, it is difficult for a novel using the persona to be a one-person's-story novel. The persona novel, ultimately, conveys the story of a select group of people, not of one specific character.

The pervasive role Mr. Maugham plays in The Razor's Edge is obvious to any reader of the novel. The transfer of the story to a medium like film, however, throws the dominance of his role into question. Involving a persona in the telling of a film story is very different from the telling of a printed story. One of the primary obstacles in using a persona in a film is that, more often than not, a film does not use one of its characters as a narrator. If we can even ascribe a narrator role in film it must be to the

camera. The camera is the only film element which tells us the story and leads us through its action--traits of the narrator in fiction. Arguably, even when a film gives a particular opportunity to "tell" the film as his or her story, the camera still holds the ultimate "telling" position. Films like Sydney Pollack's Out of Africa or Woody Allen's Radio Days attempt to capture the narrator position for their main characters using a voice-over. Some filmmakers try using a subjective camera--filming as if through the eyes of a particular character--to give ownership of the story to a character. Using the voice-over or subjective viewpoint does not guarantee the main character his or her story, however. By nature of modern cinematic conventions, a voice-over cannot be present at all times and the camera must wield some of the storytelling responsibility. The subjective viewpoint also falters because it often gives a stifled, claustrophobic effect to a film; only a horror or suspense film can capitalize on its effect. The limitations these techniques place on a film narrator explain why a majority of films are told through an omniscient camera that can see all the conversations and activities and tells of them by capturing them on film.

The approaches taken by the makers of the two versions of The Razor's Edge suggest that they, too, recognize that the Mr. Maugham character is a difficult one to capture accurately on film. Edmund Goulding's 1946 version of The Razor's Edge makes some attempt to incorporate the Mr. Maugham character and the way he functions in the the novel. In trying to tackle Mr. Maugham, the 1946 film uses all the cinematic devices possible to make the story appear to be told through Mr. Maugham's perspective. The film opens with a voice-over of Mr. Maugham saying "[T]his story consists of my recollections of a very unusual young man with whom I was thrown into

contact for long intervals." The voice-over is particularly powerful and grabs our attention because Goulding precedes it with commanding music and then drops the sound to silence, other than Mr. Maugham's voice. Through the voice-over we know the story follows events Mr. Maugham has witnessed or heard about. In many of the group scenes, Mr. Maugham has little to say, but Goulding makes him distinctly prominent at a distance from the primary action, observing. This distant position in the frame composition is particularly apparent early in the film. The opening party scene allows us, along with Mr. Maugham, to meet all the principle characters. Through most of the introductions and conversations Mr. Maugham listens, standing away from the center of activity. The fact that he turns towards Sophie when she talks about Larry, or specifically looks in the direction of Gray and Isabel when they enter the conversation guides us to what has captured Mr. Maugham's attention. Goulding often utilizes the observing stance for Mr. Maugham, especially in group scenes. With this stance he also has the camera follow Mr. Maugham's eyes when he looks at specific people or glances from character to character.

Goulding's techniques in presenting Mr. Maugham enable him to capture many of the qualities of Mr. Maugham's observer role in the novel. We recognize him as the teller of the story; through his pointed attentions to other characters, however, we see Mr. Maugham more as an auxiliary character than the novel's focus. By placing Mr. Maugham at the outside, focusing his attention on others, Goulding suggests to us that we are not to follow Mr. Maugham's story; we are to use him as a guide. We are to focus on what and who he places his attention.

Although the opening voice-overs claim the narration of the story for Mr. Maugham's, many scenes in the film take the story away from him. Situations in the film like Sophie in the hospital after her car accident and Larry's travels in the East no longer appear to stem from Mr. Maugham because we know he is not present for them and we have no indication anyone had told him about them. The omniscient camera takes control of the film in scenes like these. This discrepancy in the film telling confuses Mr. Maugham's role and implies that the film has no individual narrator. More confusion in Mr. Maugham's narrator role develops because his presence in the films becomes erratic; he disappears for a number of scenes and then is suddenly part of the action again. Although he resumes the same observer position when he returns we are uncertain whether or not the story is still his. He does maintain his role as our indicator of what and who to watch. The disappearance of the voice-over in the last half of the film, coupled with Mr. Maugham's inconsistent appearance in the film, however, subvert the narrator role Goulding attempts to establish for Mr. Maugham.

The 1984 film avoids the hassle of dealing with Mr. Maugham on screen by taking him out of the story all together. The story is told through an omniscient camera. The film wisely makes no attempt to devise a different narrator from one of the other characters in the film. Byrum chooses instead to center his camera's "narration" on the Larry character.

In light of the properties the persona narrator brings to The Razor's Edge, his minimized role or absence in the films dictates that another character(s) replace his pervasive role. Not surprisingly, both films choose Larry as Mr. Maugham's replacement. By placing Larry in a more dominant position in the story both films must make some adjustments to his character. In the

earlier film Larry is very similar to the character Maugham created. He is friendly and well-liked, but at the same time somewhat distant and detached from the other characters. Maugham and Goulding's Larry bear an ironic similarity to Mr. Maugham; he is often the observer in a situation, not an active participant. Larry differs from Mr. Maugham, though, in that he is not an observer to absorb details of the other characters' lives, but merely because he does not choose to play an active role in the conversations or actions. He is content to watch. In the novel Mr. Maugham says of him,

I was interested in the fact that though, so far as I could remember, he hadn't said half a dozen words . . . he seemed perfectly at ease and in a curious way appeared to take part in the conversation without opening his mouth. (17-18)

The focus Goulding places on Larry does allow Larry some of the passiveness Maugham gives him in the novel. More often than not, unfortunately, Larry suffers from the Hollywood "good guy" stereotype; he bears the do-no-wrong, "good example" image throughout the film. He is open and talkative. His friendliness and goodness easily explain his popularity with the other characters. In establishing this image for Larry, Goulding exchanges some of the elusiveness Larry possessed in the novel for traits which make him more accessible to the film audience.

Goulding's emphasis on Larry distorts the relationships Maugham establishes between the characters in his novel. We no longer have characters who interact independently in the same social sphere, but characters who revolve around the actions and behaviors of Larry. This type of arrangement leaves us anticipating the events of Larry's story and, only to a minor extent, wondering where the other characters fit in Larry's activities.

Through Goulding's reformation of the social fabric of Maugham's story, he makes clear that out time should be spent examining Larry.

Larry enjoys an even greater focus in the Byrum film. Much of this focus can be attributed to the fact that Bill Murray, coming away from the recent box-office hit Ghostbusters, stars as Larry and co-authors the film's screenplay with Byrum. Larry's is the only storyline we follow exclusively. Byrum and Murray's script constantly singles out Larry from the other characters. He is present in every scene but two and maintains a presence in whatever is happening in the story. In this version more so than the earlier one, the other characters in the film exist merely because they are in some way connected to Larry. As in Goulding's film, this "centering" of Larry draws him to our attention. Murray's characterization also makes Larry more prominent in our minds. Murray capitalizes on his screen image of the "fun guy" that everyone wants to be around--cracking smart jokes, flirting and teasing. His Larry focuses on the likability Mr. Maugham mentions in his Larry. Murray's characterization never suggests Larry as a side-line observer content to merely listen. He is a bold force in the action whether he is or is not physically present in a scene. Larry's character and relationship with the others in the film leave no doubt that his story is the story of the film.

Using a method less subtle than character and relationships, both film indicate Larry as their focus right from the opening scene of the film. They each build our anticipation to see Larry by having characters speak of him before he appears on screen. In the Goulding film Mr. Maugham questions Sophie about Larry and asks where he is. Sophie, along with the camera, scans the party crowd in a rather extended search for Larry. When Larry arrives, the camera focuses on him and follows his every move until he

speaks. Larry's entrance is also accompanied by the voice-over of Mr. Maugham explaining that "this is the young man of whom I write."

Larry's entrance is given a slightly more subtle approach in the Byrum film. The opening scene involves a send-off picnic for the local men heading off to France during World War I. Larry is to be at the picnic, but no one can find him and everyone asks where he is. The next shot shows Murray. We automatically identify Murray as Larry and recognize that his character is to be the film's focus.

The greater focus Larry is given in the films guarantees that the size of the other characters in the story diminishes. The character who suffers the most from this reduction is Elliott. In the novel he is the one who brings Mr. Maugham to the characters of his story. In both film versions he becomes a symbol of the materialistic society that Isabel chooses over Larry. Elliott's reduced role has many implications. First and foremost, the filmmakers deny us the chance to appreciate what many consider Maugham's best characterization. Elliott is the ultimate snob, and yet, Maugham somehow endears him to us. On a level more closely related to the persona, the reduction of Elliott's role takes away one of the key elements of Maugham's story. Maugham focuses on Elliott and his activities during two-thirds of the novel for a reason: he wishes to focus on the society which Elliott, Isabel, Larry and all the characters inhabit. Placing Elliott in the role not of the one who always has information on the other characters, but as one of the many who somehow relate to Larry, undermines Maugham's intention for Elliott in the novel.

Elliott's diminished role in the films is logical considering the changes both directors make with the persona. Since neither film really has a Mr.

Maugham telling its story, Elliott is not a necessary link in knowing the details of the story. His role changes from a functional one to a symbolic one. In Goulding's film Elliott still provides us with details of some of the occurrences we have not seen on screen and he plays an integral part in Isabel's life. Byrum's Elliott seems a frivolous character part that parades across the screen flaunting his money, connections and goodwill in whatever direction it seems most necessary--a somewhat exaggerated image of the "noblesse oblige" present in Maugham's Elliott. More so in the later film, Elliott becomes an extreme example of the frivolity and materialism of Americans in the 1920s. His role is trivialized in both films and dwindles to a size and scope nowhere near the distinction of Maugham's Elliott.

If through the films we must resign ourselves to Larry as the focus of The Razor's Edge, our most obvious question is what does Larry symbolize or what type of message does his story present. Each film presents a straightforward message from Larry. By placing him at the center the films ask us to admire him and, perhaps, learn from his example. His example in the 1946 film seems to be that no matter what obstacles we must seek to discover who we are. Larry's willingness to live in a shabby Paris apartment, work in a coal mine, and meditate in the Himalayas implies he has the strength to overcome the censure of Isabel and Elliott. The filmmaker is gracious enough to share with us how we, too, can approach Larry's strength in discovery. If we follow Larry's example, we are to read and travel. We will no doubt find ourselves in India and realize, as the swami tells Larry, "God is the only guide." With continual statements from the swammi like "(on the mountain) there is nothing but you and God" or "you had the feeling you and God were one," Larry's discovery appears to be that we must recognize

God's omnipresence in our lives and realize that God will supply the answers to all our questions; these references also suggest that we are to strive to be like God.. At the close of the film we see that Larry has, to some extent, reached this godliness. Mr. Maugham says of him, "Goodness . . . is the greatest force in the world, and he's got it." Larry's message to us is that we must first discover God, and then, through God's guidance, we will find the peace and serenity to know ourselves.

Larry's example in Byrum's film attempts to answer a question more broad-sweeping than "Who am I?" The film pursues the question "What is the meaning of life?" This question derives from Larry's experiences in the war. Maugham intentionally leaves Larry's war experiences vague so as not to force himself to create too concrete a direction for Larry's personal search and questionings. Byrum and Murray decide to elaborate on the few details Maugham provides. They have Larry and Gray serving as ambulance drivers in France. While there, they work under a gruff and cynical leader named Piedmont. During a border skirmish Larry is attacked by an enemy soldier; Piedmont steps in the way of the two and is killed. In one of the few emotional scenes for Larry, Larry clutches Piedmont's body and says, with tears in his eyes,

He was a slob. Starving children could feed off the food that landed on his shirt. . . . I never understood gluttony, but I hate it. . . . He was despicable. . . . He will not be missed.

Although Larry declares he will not miss Piedmont, Piedmont's spirit remains with him. In the closing lines of the film, Larry tries to explain to Isabel what he has learned. "When Piedmont died," he says, "I had to pay him back for my life. I realized there was another debt to pay--for the

privilege of being alive." Larry's experiences affirm that we must each find meaning in our lives. Interestingly, Byrum and Murray end Larry's explanation on a bleak note. Larry tells Isabel, "I thought that Sophie was my reward for living a good life, but I was wrong. . . . there is no pay-off. . . . It doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter." This final scene suggests that Larry has not completed his search, that he must continue searching for meaning in his life; it paints a far more accurate and realistic picture concerning the searching individual that Goulding's film presents.

Examining the films' perceptions of Maugham's work leads us back to the novel itself. The definitive focus each gives in not only character but also theme makes us wonder if Maugham's novel is so clear-cut in its focus. The films' choice of Larry as a focus is not unpardonably incorrect. Centering on his personal search and what that search involves is also a fair interpretation of the novel. Mr. Maugham himself lends credibility to these interpretations when, referring to his conversation with Larry about India, he says, "I should add, however, that except for this conversation I should perhaps not have thought it worthwhile to write this book" (241). As in the first chapter, Mr. Maugham can lead us to believe that it is Larry's story. From his statement we might also infer that what is found in his chapter-long conversation with Larry contains much of the focus of the novel. If we are taking Maugham at his word, however, a comment he makes outside of the novel refutes all our conclusions about the focus in The Razor's Edge. In defining the word "fiction" Maugham says, "(it is) always the particular situation between individuals, never the silent wish to illustrate a general truth" (in Brussell 200). If The Razor's Edge is true to Maugham's "fiction," the novel is not

solely Larry's story and his example is not its focus; in the novel we are to look at characters and relationships.

We need not even look outside of the novel to convince ourselves that Maugham did not intend Larry as his focus. As Robert Calder points out, "Larry is always observed from the point of view of another" (252). We learn of Larry through Mr. Maugham's own observations or his conversations about Larry with Elliott, Isabel and Sophie. Even the crucial chapter containing Mr. Maugham's conversation with Larry about India is told through Mr. Maugham's "recollections." If Larry and his experiences are the core of Maugham's novel, Maugham's best means of expressing this intention is tell the story through either an omniscient or, what Friedman terms, an "'I' as protagonist" narrator--one in which "the author [shifts] the narrative burden to one of the chief characters" (54). These types of narrators enable us learn what a particular character thinks and feels. Larry's struggle appears greater and his ultimate discoveries clearer if we know, through Larry's own thoughts and words, what his experiences were like.

With all the advantages of presenting Larry with the omniscient or first-person narrator, Maugham chooses to tell his story using a persona. He decides to use Mr. Maugham for the many elements he brings to storytelling. Most importantly, Mr. Maugham enables him to encompass a broad-range of characters in his novel. Maugham is able to focus on a select, 1920s American society through stories of Isabel, Elliott, Gray and Larry. Interestingly, while such a broad scope of people, Mr Maugham can also bring us to a narrow focus on individual members of this society. In essence, Mr. Maugham gives Maugham the power to examine, simultaneously, both society and individual. To some extent, we also share this power. The distance Mr.

Maugham establishes for us allows us to be observers and invites us to join him in watching the action of the story unfold. Mr. Maugham does not provide us with the intimacy a first-person narrator involved in the events of the story can. Maugham works with Mr. Maugham, and subsequently a greater reader distance, because he wishes to place us in a position to observe and to make decisions about his story similar to the position in which he placed himself. Maugham's ultimate intention in using Mr. Maugham is to have us examine the society he presents in The Razor's Edge as a whole and not to single out its individual members.

Critics Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross, in explaining Goulding's rationale for using Mr. Maugham in his film, argue that Maugham's use of the persona stems less from design than convenience. "The novelist chose to use himself in the novel," they explain, "as the connecting link in this multi-character tale, a device used more in desperation than by plan, one can easily conclude" (2549). Reducing Mr. Maugham's role in such a way does a disservice to his character in much the same way placing Larry at the center of the story does. Mr. Maugham and Larry are not merely "connecting links." Mr. Maugham serves as more than the one element by which all the characters relate, as does Larry. Maugham intends both his characters for greater roles--Mr. Maugham as narrator and guide and Larry as a doubting member of a society.

If Maugham's persona works to present a society not an individual, his particular attention to Larry appears a contradiction. Mr. Maugham's presentation of Larry in the story, however, does not suggest that we look at Larry alone, but that we examine Larry in the context of the society from which he came. Returning to Calder's point, Larry's story is told through

others because their views of Larry explain to us how Larry fits in their society. And, as in many of the methods Maugham has cleverly chosen in the telling of his story, having others speak of Larry provides both the details of Larry's life and details of the characters speaking as well. A scene such as Isabel breaking off her engagement with Larry gives good example of this method. We learn of the broken engagement through comments made by Elliott and a conversation Mr. Maugham himself has with Isabel. Isabel explains that Larry needs time to "loaf" and so decides to go to Paris. She tries to convince him that his plans to loaf are misguided. "Let's be sensible. A man must work, Larry. It's a matter of self-respect. This is a young country and its a man's duty to take part in its activities" (46). Mr. Maugham later comments to us on Isabel's conversation, making Isabel's motives less pardonable than they might at first appear. "Isabel had been brought up in a certain way," he tells us.

She did not think of money, because she never had known what it was not to have all she needed, but she was instinctively aware of its importance. It meant power, influence and social consequence. It was the natural and obvious thing that a man should earn it. That was his plain life's work. (49)

When Elliott explains the whole situation to Mr. Maugham he believes that Larry must be wanting to "sow some wild oats" before settling down to work; this could be his only motive for going to Paris. We learn from this scene that Larry's society sees money and a good job as most important. Larry's refusal to accept this importance must, they rationalize, be result form another motive. They fail to believe Larry when he tells the "money just doesn't interest me" (46). As the novel progresses, he moves further and further away from their ideas and they work harder and harder to grasp what

they believe are his mistaken ideals. We quickly discover that Isabel and Elliott will always retain their materialistic mentality and that however much Larry is a part of their lives, he will always dwell outside their society.

Ironically, the attention Larry receives from Mr. Maugham is but another means by which to focus on society. Larry serves as a constant contrast to the society from which he originates. He serves as an even more powerful contrast, as does Sophie, because he is really not part of that society. Mr. Maugham tells us that Larry's parents died and that he was raised by a friend of the family who lives in Isabel's neighborhood; Sophie's situation was much the same. Watching how Larry and Sophie function in Isabel's society we gain a better sense of what that society demands.

When returning from the films to the novel, in no place is the effect of Mr. Maugham's absence and Larry's elevation in role greater felt than in the narrative; and, understandably, in no place do these changes do more to destroy Maugham's intention in the novel. In both films, particularly Byrum's, we receive only bare essentials of the story. What is lost to filmviewers who have not read Maugham's novel are classic scenes like Elliott's stories of the great societies of Paris and the Riviera in which he moves, or Maugham's conversation with Suzanne Rouvier (a character neither film includes) concerning the four or five years of Larry's life where none of the main characters has any contact with him. Most tragic of all, viewers get only the generic, sanitized version of Larry's personal discoveries in India and elsewhere. The effect of these deletions holds true for most novels turned into films: many details and intricacies are lost. In Maugham's case specifically, characters and relationships suffer.

Arguably, both films succeed without Elliott's stories, Suzanne's conversation, or Larry's complete story. Although Byrum's film is somewhat detached in spots, neither film story is difficult to follow. Most of the characters, while their roles are minimized, are true to Maugham's description and function in the events of the story in the same way in both novel and films. Maugham's brilliant characters and dialogue even bring some quality moments to both films. For those who demand of their films the essence and focus of their narrative sources, unfortunately, both films can be nothing other than disappointments. Focusing on Larry, pinning down a message for Larry's search, and trivializing the other characters in the novel speaks nothing for the films other than that they denied both Maugham and his audience the story they deserve. In taking the narration of the story from Mr. Maugham the films refuse us more than story; they deny us the opportunity to let Mr. Maugham be our guide to reaching conclusions of our own.

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