

The Razor's Edge by W. Somerset Maugham

About the author

W. Somerset Maugham was born in 1874 and lived in Paris until he was ten. He was educated at King's School, Canterbury, and at Heidelberg University. He afterwards walked the wards of St. Thomas's Hospital with a view to practice in medicine, but the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), won him over to letters. Something of his hospital experience is reflected, however, in the first of his masterpieces, *Of Human Bondage* (1915), and with *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) his reputation as a novelist was assured.

His position as one of the most successful playwrights on the London stage was being consolidated simultaneously. His first play, *A Man of Honour* (1903), was followed by a procession of successes just before and after the First World War. (At one point only Bernard Shaw had more plays running at the same time in London.) His theatre career ended with *Sheppey* (1933).

His fame as a short-story writer began with *The Trembling of a Leaf*, sub-titled *Little Stories of the South Sea Islands*, in 1921, after which he published more than ten collections.

W. Somerset Maugham's general books are fewer in number. They include travel books, such as *On a Chinese Screen* (1922) and *Don Fernando* (1935), essays, criticism, and the self-revealing *The Summing Up* (1938) and *A Writer's Notebook* (1949).

W. Somerset Maugham became a Companion of Honour in 1954. He died in 1965.

About the book

The Razor's Edge, by British novelist W. Somerset Maugham, was published in London and New York in 1944. Maugham was seventy years old when the book was published, and it was to be the last of his major novels. He was one of the most popular writers of the day, and *The Razor's Edge* was an immediate success on both sides of the Atlantic. More than one million copies were sold within a few years.

The novel spans a period of twenty-four years, from 1919 to 1943, and takes place in many different locations, including Chicago, Paris, London and India. It is a novel of ideas and of character. The main characters are upper-middle-class Americans, although Maugham, in his own person as the writer Somerset Maugham, is the narrator. The principal character is Larry Darrell, a former World War I aviator who is haunted by the fact that his friend was killed in the war

saving Larry's life. Seeking an answer to the question of why evil exists in the world, Larry sets out on a quest that takes him to India, where he studies with a guru and gains mystical illumination. Larry's spiritual approach to life is contrasted with the materialism of the other characters, such as Gray Maturin, who becomes a wealthy stockbroker, and Elliot Templeton, a worldly, superficial man who spends most of his time socializing at upper-class parties.

In his depiction of a young man who rejects the dominant values of American culture and looks to the East for spiritual inspiration, Maugham anticipated the work of the Beat writers of the 1950s and the values of the counterculture of the 1960s.

Discussion Questions

Given Elliott's switch to Catholicism and Larry's lack of answers to his questions in Christianity, is Maugham criticizing Western religions? Give examples from the novel that cast Christianity in a negative light. Conversely, what is the novel's view on Hinduism? Give examples.

Several times during the novel, Maugham makes references to Jesus Christ when talking about Larry and his treatment of others. Explain this connection and how it relates to Larry's healing powers.

Going against common sense, Isabel believes that Larry is a virgin. Why? What is it about Larry that leads her to believe this?

Isabel tells Maugham that Larry truly loved her. She says that she loved him, too. Given how their lives ended up, was their love real? Could a marriage have worked?

What would have been the consequences if Isabel joined Larry on his adventures, or if Larry went back to Chicago?

Maugham tells Suzanne that Larry does things for the love of a God that he does not believe in. What does he mean by this, and why does Suzanne accuse of him being drunk?

What does Maugham mean when he mutters under his breath, "It's not the same," after Gray tells Isabel he doesn't think she's a cold person?

Maugham tells the reader that they can skip Chapter 6 because it's not important to the chronology. Is this true? If it's not true, why does Maugham tell the reader this?