

THE PHYSICIAN WRITING

The Soul All Raw: Physician-Patient Encounters in the Writings of W. Somerset Maugham

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Ido not know a better training for a writer than to spend some years in the medical profession. The doctor, especially the hospital doctor, sees it [humanity] bare.”¹ Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), a novelist, playwright, and short story writer, wrote this passage almost twenty years after certifying as a medical doctor and then abandoning the profession to pursue writing. Despite his short-lived medical career, this accomplished author acknowledged that medicine had allowed him to witness almost every human emotion, and although he did not pursue the practice of medicine, his experiences during his training as a young medical student in 19th century England were reflected in several of his literary works. Maugham’s writings contain depictions of doctors, patients and their relationships with each other. His reader receives a privileged glimpse of one man’s experiences with the patients he served.

One of Maugham’s (1874-1965) most popular novels, *Of Human Bondage*,² casts a truly clinical eye on humanity. *Of Human Bondage* is a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel that recounts the intellectual and emotional development of Philip Carey, a shy medical student with a clubfoot. In the passages that follow, Philip is a clerk on the outpatient ward at a large medical teaching hospital. He is shadowing an attending on his afternoon rounds with several other young medical clerks. The group delivers tragic news to a young woman and her sister, and the encounter is described.

“She hasn’t got it, doctor, has she?”

“I’m afraid there’s no doubt about it.”

“She was the last one. When she goes I shan’t have anybody.”

She began to cry, while the doctor looked at her gravely...The girl turned around and

saw her sister’s tears. She understood what they meant...The two stood for a minute or two, crying silently, and then the older, forgetting the indifferent crowd that watched them, went up to her, took her in her arms, and rocked her gently to and fro... (p. 400)

Philip, in addition to the tragedy that he is witnessing, acknowledges the human condition and the inability of medicine to cure all ailments. A labourer, as a result of his medical condition, is told to quit his livelihood:

“You ought to get some very much lighter job.”

“There ain’t no light jobs in my business.”

“Well if you go on like this you’ll kill yourself. You’re very ill.”

“...If I don’t work who’s to keep the wife and kids?”

The man took his letter with the useless prescription written upon it and walked out. The doctor might say what he liked. He did not feel so bad that he could not go on working. He had a good job and he could not afford to throw it away.

“I give him a year,” said Dr. Tyrell. (p. 401)

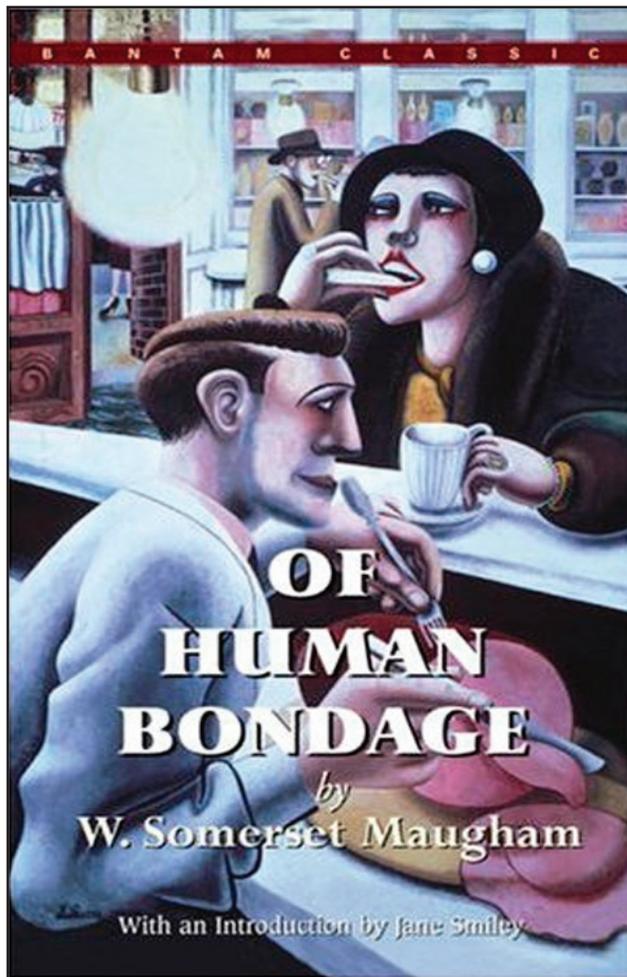
Comedy is also present, and the medical reader may be reminded of his or her own medical training. In the novel, Philip and the other medical clerks obediently trail the doctor as he sees patients, applying their stethoscopes when asked, sometimes “two on the chest and three on the back at one time as the patient sat looking embarrassed but somewhat pleased to be the centre of attention.” (p. 398)

However, the humour or tragedy of the physician-patient encounter does not overshadow an important

observation made by the main character. During these rounds, it seems to Philip that

[h]e [Philip] alone of the clerks saw the dramatic interest of those afternoons. To the others, men and women were only cases, good if they were complicated, tiresome if obvious; they heard murmurs and were astonished at abnormal livers; an unexpected sound in the lungs gave them something to talk about. But to Philip there was much more. He found an interest in just looking at them [the patients], in the shape of their heads and their hands, in the look of their eyes and the length of their noses. You saw in that room human nature taken by surprise, and often the mask of custom was torn off rudely, showing you the soul all raw...There was neither good nor bad there. There was just facts. It was life. (p. 399-402)

Maugham's observation, that in illness, people sick and fearful, discard conventional masks and reveal their true-selves, is significant. But although human nature may be displayed before you, if you do not have the eyes to see it you will learn nothing. Literature by physician-writers, like Maugham, reminds us to us to take notice of things that we may not have otherwise seen.



REFERENCES

1. Maugham, W. Somerset. *The Summing Up*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1939, p. 64.
2. Maugham, W. Somerset. *Of Human Bondage*. Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1969.



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