



# IJEAST

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF ENGINEERING APPLIED SCIENCE  
AND TECHNOLOGY



**VOLUME :**  
Special Issue

**Print / Issue Publication Date: 15-Sep-2020**



**ISSN : 2455-2143**



Indexed In



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# THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY IN THE NOVEL “THE HERO” BY W.S. MAUGHAM

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**Abstract**— The article deals with the analysis of the problem of individual and society in the novel “The Hero” by an English writer William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965). The aim of the research is to analyze the problem of individual and society and other social and ethical problems that W. S. Maugham puts forward in his novel “The Hero, and to investigate specific features of the writer’s philosophy and literary style.

The method of analyzing literary texts has been used together with the principles of interpretation and stylistic analysis, the method of comparative historical research and the method of typological analysis have also been applied. The materials used include novel “The Hero” and the books on Maugham’s creative activity and biography.

The results of the study show that Maugham approached the problem of individual and society in his own way. His heroes choose escapism as solution to the problem. Maugham also succeeded in showing the significance of the conflict for modern society. The works of novel are at some degree publicistic, and they contain sociological reflections, arguments and philosophical views. Maugham discusses the essence of an individual, his social function and other aspects of life of an individual and society. The contribution of W.S. Maugham to the reflection of social problems in English literature cannot be exaggerated as he was among other adherents of realism who raised many social issues in his works.

**Key words**— *individual, society, conflict, escapism, isolation, insulation, conventions*

## I. INTRODUCTION

W.S. Maugham (1874-1965) is a popular British writer, playwright, short story writer and the author of numerous travel books as well as books on literature. His works are popular among wide public, because of his style of narration which is clear and simple, the engaging story and the fact that he avoids moralizing. Hastings (2012), in her famous book “The Secret Life of Somerset Maugham” states, that he was known everywhere for his superb short stories and for his novels, the immensely acclaimed, *Of Human Bondage* becoming one of the most widely read works of fiction of the twentieth century. And analyzing creativity of Maugham as a story-teller, poet and literary critic Paul David wrote, Maugham has all of the traditional tricks of the story-teller, as well as some peculiar to himself – the appearance indirectness of movement which reveals its self retrospectively as the covering of the shortest distance between the necessity points, the judiciously placed parenthesis to provide breathing spells, the seemingly complex weaving backwards and forwards, which makes for a much speedier narrative than would a direct approach (Jonas, 1954) Maugham allows the reader to draw conclusion himself and intends to entertain the reader rather than teach him what is right or wrong. While reading his works we come across the problems and issues and they relate not only to the group of people, but for the whole humanity. In his works he many times mentions the importance of freedom for an individual. He is interested in people who shape their own life and live it the way they want. Among Maugham’s most popular novels are “The Moon and Sixpence”, “Of Human Bondage”, “The Razor’s Edge” and “Cakes and Ale”. Maugham’s heritage still raises people’s interest and his works have been translated in many languages and widely read even these days.

## II. DISCUSSION

### **The Hero – Different James Parson**

In this article we will analyze the problem of individual and society in Maugham’s novel *The Hero*. This

novel was published between 1900-1901. The novel shows the dynamics of the relationship between individual and society, the change in person's character and views as a result of war, it touches upon some social problems and conflict that arise as a result of isolation and insulation of British middle-class society. Biographer Jeffrey Meyers (2004) states that Maugham's first work after returning to London was *The Hero*.....a novel with a suburban setting. It begins with the return of a disillusioned wounded soldier from the Boer War in South Africa (still being fought from 1899 to 1902, as Maugham was writing). The bitter struggle with a fierce guerilla enemy forms the topical background to the hero's revulsion against his family values and customs. Maugham Encyclopedia by Rogal (1997) states that, in challenging the inadequacy of the Edwardian code and the individual's inability to challenge it, as well as attacking the isolation and insulation of British provincial middle-class society during a time of national crisis, Maugham puts his foot into the waters of social and even political criticism.

The story starts with Captain James Parsons' return home after fighting in the wars in India and Africa for five years. He has been awarded Victoria Cross for the attempt to save another subaltern. In his hometown Little Primpton, people meet him as a hero and he becomes the pride of his parents Colonel Richmond Parson and Mrs. Frances Parsons. But when he breaks the engagement with Mary Clibborn, who waited for him for all those years, the hero-worship is over and very quickly James Parsons is not hero anymore and everybody considers him vain and arrogant. Even his parents can't understand his argument that he can't marry without love.

James can't forget Mrs. Pritchard Wallace with whom he fell in love when he was in India. She was a married woman and her relationship with him was just a mere flirtation. But James' feelings towards her are real and now that he knows what real love was, he has to break his engagement with Mary.

But when he gets enteric fever and she nurses him devotedly, he proposes again and again accepted (Meyers, 2004). But soon James realizes that it was a mistake and feels trapped. He sees no way out but committing a suicide. He shoots himself no longer able to stand the conflict with society and to bear emotional turmoil that is caused by the feeling of duty, the bitterness of unrequited love and ignorance and narrow-mindedness of people around him.

### **Individual and society**

The dynamics of the relationship between individual and society is put in the following way. The main hero lives in accordance with the rules and conventions of his society and is brought up to follow the rules. The main hero leaves the society for a long time and discovers that there are other rules

and values. Upon returning to his hometown a conflict arises between his individual views and the demands of the society. The main hero for some time chooses conformism as a solution to the problem. Soon he realizes that his views and needs are not compatible with the rules of the society and chooses escapism as a solution and commits a suicide.

In order to show the reasons of conflict Maugham gives a thorough description of the society of Little Primpton, people's lifestyle and habits. He describes the daily routine of the Parsons family and through this shows the monotony of their existence. They don't want change and are content with what they have and who they are. Maugham describes how Colonel Parsons and his wife wait for the arrival of their son. Colonel reads the newspaper and his wife knits socks. We can observe the same picture at the end of the novel. They are described doing the same work. Every Sunday they all go to church.

Dogmatism and limited worldview make them intolerant to new ideas. Even the books they read as *Sorrows of Satan*, *Master Christian* and *Barabbas* revolve around religion. They consider these books better than the works of Shakespeare because the books they read bring up true Christians. The Vicar Mr. Jackson thinks that literature should serve noble aims of church and teach to be submissive to authorities. Maugham criticizes this lifestyle and calls the people of Little Primpton *dogmatic machines*.

*They walked round and round in a narrow circle, hemmed in by false ideals and by ugly prejudices, putting for the love of God unnecessary obstacles in their path and convinced that theirs was the only possible way, while all others led to damnation. They had never worked out an idea for themselves, never done a single deed on their own account, but invariably acted and thought according to the rule of their caste. They were not living creatures, but dogmatic machines.*

Maugham shows the aggravation of the conflict between an individual and society through the reaction of society when James breaks the engagement with Mary. All who considered him to be the national hero and praised his bravery and modesty, instantly change their attitude towards him. Colonel Parsons who was so much proud of his son and was grateful to him because he brought family honor back, is very disappointed and considers this act not honorable. Mrs. Jackson, the Vicar's wife now considers James arrogant and tells that she did not like him from the very beginning. She considers him cruel and wicked and thinks he did not deserve the Victoria Cross. The people of Little Primpton criticize the one whom they raised to the pedestal of fame themselves. They criticize his appearance, education, his family, manners and say that he has no virtue. The Vicar Mr. Jackson dedicated

his sermon to James' act attacking him in his speech about vanity, arrogance and wrongdoings. Alluding to James, he says that a brave act can be carried out by anyone, but living modestly, with honor and fulfilling one's duty is much harder. Maugham shows how the society punishes the one who diverts from its rules with his ironical description.

*They had all been a little oppressed by the greatness which, much against his will, they had thrust upon the unfortunate James. They had set him on a pedestal, and then were disconcerted because he towered above their heads, and the halo with which they had surrounded him dazzled their eyes. They had wished to make a lion of James, and his modest resistance wounded their self-esteem; it was a relief to learn that he was not worth making a lion of. Halo and pedestal were quickly demolished, for the golden idol had feet of clay, and his late adorers were ready to reproach him because he had not accepted with proper humility the gifts he did not want. Their little vanities were comforted by the assurance that, far from being a hero, James was, in fact, distinctly inferior to themselves. For there is no superiority like moral superiority. A man who stands akimbo on the top of the Ten Commandments need bow the knee to no earthly potentate.*

For the first time Maugham pays attention to the frustrating influences of environment as well as to those of an individual's irrational desires (Woodburn, 1946). Maugham draws a psychological picture of James Parsons and describes him reserved, shy, unsociable and undecisive. He is torn between his wishes and his duty. He is very sensible to the reaction of others and always tries to avoid hurting anyone.

### James and the war

Even though James has completely changed after the war, he still keeps his views and emotions under control not to hurt his parents. His views about war are also completely different from those of his parents and Little Prampton community. He sees a real life in the battlefield and a provincial life in England with its canons and rules stifle him. His speech about war contrasts with the views of others in his community who think that war is the medium for the expression of noble traits of people. He says,

*War is the most splendid thing in the world. I shall never forget those few minutes, now and then, when we got on top of the Boers and fought with them, man to man, in the old way. Ah, life seemed worth living then! ...I shall never forget the exhilaration of it, the joy of thinking that we were getting our own again. By Gad, it beat cock-fighting!*

James criticizes sentimentality of people and their loyalty to false ideals and inability to face reality. He considers war as the condition of existence.

*D'you know, I've got an idea that there's too much pity in the world. People seem to be losing their nerve; reality shocks them, and they live slothfully in the shoddy palaces of Sham Ideals. The sentimentalists, the cowards, and the cranks have broken the spirit of mankind. The general in battle now is afraid to strike because men may be killed. Sometimes it is worth while to lose men. When we become soldiers, we know that we cease to be human beings, and are merely the instruments for a certain work; we know that sometimes it may be part of a general's deliberate plan that we should be killed. I have no confidence in a leader who is tender-hearted.*

His words particularly hurt his father, because compassion was the reason of the death of many soldiers under his command during the war against Indian rebels. Colonel Richmond Parsons believed that being kind to enemy would be returned with kindness. On the contrary it resulted in many deaths from the British side and he was asked to leave the service. That's why James' receiving the Victoria Cross was very important for him and he hoped that the honor of the Parsons family would be regained. Maugham shows the incompatibility of an individual with the society which does not satisfy his intellectual needs. For example, James is taken aback by Colonel Clibborn's foolish ideas about war. He does not understand how the person who has spent the whole live in military service but has no idea about basic principles of military actions.

Maugham gives a detailed description of emotional state of James. He feels as if he is in the cage, and he yearns for Orange Republic where he served. He could feel free there. The conflict between him and his parents depresses him, and he suffers greatly because of this. They don't understand that James can't marry without love, because for them duty and honor are important than feelings. But the main torment for James is his indecisiveness. Inside of him there is a conflict between his reason and duty. He constantly thinks whether he acted right and what would happen if he acted differently. Maugham compares uncertainty with a devil that curled up in his heart.

*James asked himself a hundred times a day whether he had acted well or ill; and though he forced himself to answer that he had done the only possible thing, deep down in his heart was a terrible, a perfectly maddening uncertainty. He tried to crush it, and would not listen, for his intelligence told him clearly it was absurd; but it was stronger than intelligence, an incorporeal shape through which passed*

*harmlessly the sword-cuts of his reason. It was a little devil curled up in his heart, muttering to all his arguments, 'Are you sure?'*

At some moment James is tired of being in conflict with the society and himself. Disapproval of his parents and society, emotional distress temporarily quiet down his reason. He wants to make his parents happy and be free from emotional torment. He chooses conformism and proposes to Marry again. Maugham shows how hard it is for an individual to go against the current and not always one can tolerate emotional torment.

But soon James realizes his mistake and understands that if he acts as others want he will lose himself. More and more he feels the gap between his views and the views of Mary, his parents and Little Primpton community. He knows that there is no use to fight with them and prove that they are not right and does not want to live their way. And presently James found that his father and mother were striving to draw him back into the prison. Unconsciously, even with the greatest tenderness, they sought to place upon his neck again that irksome yoke which he had so difficultly thrown off.

As in many works by Maugham the freedom of an individual is in the first place. His heroes try to escape from the society that limits his freedom. The word freedom has been mentioned several times in the novel by the author and we can see the author's standpoint here.

*Ah, that was what he desired, freedom—freedom to feel that he was his own master; that he was not enchained by the love and hate of others, by the ties of convention and of habit. Every bond was tedious. He had nothing to lose, and everything to win. But just those ties which every man may divide of his own free will are the most oppressive; they are unfelt, unseen, till suddenly they burn the wrists like fetters of fire, and the poor wretch who wears them has no power to help himself.*

James searches the ways to gain freedom and sees no way out but suicide. When Mary's father invites him to hunting, James sees it as a perfect chance. He shoots himself while cleaning the gun. This seems a rather extreme method of emancipation, but Maugham's concern is to show the inadequacy of the prevailing code as well as the individual's inability to challenge it (Morgan, 1980)

### III. CONCLUSION

Maugham intentionally chose the name *The Hero* for his novel. There is a vivid irony in it. The hero turns into a villain, the fame turns into a contempt. Maugham sarcastically

describes the attitude of the people of Little Primpton towards Captain Parsons. The conflict between individual and society in the novel "The Hero" by W.S. Maugham is solved through suicide, as the main hero is weak willed and indecisive to fight. Even though a new spirit was born in him, his upbringing makes him incapable of standing his ground. The Hero may not be as famous as other epic writings of Somerset Maugham, but it clearly depicted the issue of the individual and the society.

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2455-2143