



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Was Uncle Willie a Source for Robin Maugham's "The Servant?"

Author(s): Richard Gill

Source: *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1980), pp. 156-160

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831317>

Accessed: 12-05-2018 22:16 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Modern Literature*

WAS UNCLE WILLIE A SOURCE FOR ROBIN MAUGHAM'S *THE SERVANT*?

W. Somerset Maugham, by his own admission, often based his fictional characters on people he actually knew—the most publicized instance being his satirical portrait of Hugh Walpole as Alroy Kear in *Cakes and Ale* (1930). In turn, thinly disguised representations of Maugham himself are to be found in the novels and dramas of both his enemies and admirers.¹ To avenge Walpole, Elinor Mordaunt, under the pseudonym “A. Riposte,” published *Gin and Bitters* (1931), unmistakably caricaturing Maugham as Leveson Hurler, a successful novelist who travels to remote corners of the world accepting lavish hospitality only to repay his hosts by unscrupulously broadcasting their most private affairs in his fiction.² Decades later, Noël Coward, a lifelong friend, drew upon Maugham’s last years for the probing though not unsympathetic characterization of Hugo Latymer, the aging man of letters in *A Song at Twilight* (1967). There is also the possibility, hitherto unnoticed, that Maugham’s personal life may also have been a source for a novel written by a member of his own family—namely, *The Servant* by his nephew Robin Maugham.

The Servant was published in 1948, and its basic plot is now quite well-known through the film version of the same title (1963) based on the scenario adapted from the novel by Harold Pinter and directed by Joseph Losey.³ Narrated in the first person by Richard Merton, whose initials are the same as the author’s, the novel, like the film, presents a curious psychological struggle for domination between a man and his servant. The title figure, Barrett, is hired by a young, upper-class English bachelor, named Tony, to attend him in his London townhouse. From the first, Barrett appears to be the perfect servant for the well-to-do Tony: he manages the house with aplomb and seems to anticipate his master’s every wish. Before long, the effete, pampered Tony becomes more and more dependent on Barrett, who then begins to emerge as a quietly sinister figure ready to use any stratagem to dominate his master. Even Tony’s fiancée comes to recognize Barrett as a threat, possibly a rival. To undermine her influence, Barrett maneuvers to install his tarty mistress in the house by introducing her as his niece, and then, by having her seduce Tony, he increases his master’s dependence. When the narrator pays his last visit to Tony, there is evidence of still further debauchery, with Barrett obviously procuring girls for Tony’s amusement and his own. Through Barrett’s subtle manipulation and eventual debasement of Tony, the roles of master and servant are finally reversed. At the end of the novel, Barrett has complete control of Tony and his elegant household.

¹ See Robert Lorin Calder, Appendix C, “Five Fictional Portraits of Somerset Maugham,” *W. Somerset Maugham and the Quest for Freedom* (Doubleday, 1972), pp. 290–97.

² For details, see Myrick Land, *The Fine Art of Literary Mayhem* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), pp. 161–79.

³ See, also, Elayne P. Feldstein, “From Novel to Film: The Impact of Harold Pinter on Robert [sic] Maugham’s *The Servant*,” *Studies in the Humanities*, V (#2 1976), 9–14.

Melodramatic as this strange symbiotic relationship between master and servant may seem to be, Robin Maugham himself has stated, rather deliberately, that it is taken from life. "All the four main characters," he writes in his autobiography, "were, in fact, partly based on people who existed in real life. But I took traits from other people I knew, and I changed the external appearances of all the real persons so much that they did not recognize themselves. *But the essential truth of their relationship with each other and with me has remained.*"⁴ He does not disclose who the originals were, but one cannot help wondering why he has placed so much stress on their actuality after admittedly taking such pains to disguise them beyond recognition. Indeed, is this comment with its pointed last sentence, here italicized, really meant to be an invitation to those who are knowledgeable enough to read between the lines and discover his secret? Later, in the same autobiography, it is true, Maugham adds that *The Servant* had its genesis in his own personal encounter with a manservant who came with a house he temporarily rented and who once unashamedly offered his handsome young nephew to him for sexual purposes.⁵ But while this slight experience may have been the germ of the novel, he might also have mentioned the fact that the "essential truth" of the relationship between Tony and Barrett was to be found in a more complex situation even closer to home and of much longer duration, and that was the unusual—some would say, notorious—relationship between W. Somerset Maugham and Gerald Haxton, his secretary and companion for nearly a quarter of a century.

Robin Maugham is, in fact, one of the main sources for the details of this relationship.⁶ He was generally on easy terms with his uncle, and from university days he was a regular guest at the Villa Mauresque, his luxurious home on Cap Ferrat in the south of France. During his visits he came to know Haxton quite intimately, and he observed the two of them together; sometimes he found himself the confidant of one about the other. He has discussed their relationship repeatedly and candidly in three separate books: *Somerset and All the Maughams*,⁷ *Escape from the Shadows*, and *Conversations with Willie*.⁸ As he has revealed, W. Somerset Maugham first met Haxton during the early months of World War I when both of them were serving in an ambulance unit in France. Maugham was then forty; Haxton was a young American in his early twenties. At this time, he was, in Robin Maugham's words, "wayward, feckless, and brave, and Willie was immediately attracted to him."⁹ Soon after the war, Haxton became Maugham's official secretary and traveling companion. He was evidently charming and gregarious, and during their many voyages to the South Seas and the Orient, he brought the shy, reticent Maugham into easy and invaluable contact with a host of people from all walks of life whom he would otherwise have known only from a distance. With an ear for

⁴ *Escape from the Shadows* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), p. 8. The italics are mine.

⁵ *Escape from the Shadows*, pp. 177–78.

⁶ The relationship has also been the subject of Beverly Nichols' *A Case of Human Bondage* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966). Its bearing upon Maugham's peculiar personal psychology as well as his later literary career has been appraised by Calder, pp. 13–14 and 23–25, and Frederic Raphael, *W. Somerset Maugham and His World* (Charles Scribners, 1976), pp. 62–63 and 93–94.

⁷ *Somerset and All the Maughams* (The New American Library, 1966), pp. 36–40.

⁸ *Conversations with Willie: Recollections of W. Somerset Maugham* (Simon and Schuster, 1978), *passim*.

⁹ *Somerset and All the Maughams*, p. 36.

scandal and a gift for picking up interesting characters, Haxton also supplied Maugham with a store of raw material for his fiction. They were together for over twenty-five years until Haxton's death, in 1944, in the United States, where both of them had fled after the fall of France.

Admittedly, in terms of such outward details, the relationship between Maugham and Haxton bears only a slight resemblance to the one between Tony and Barrett in *The Servant*. And there are obvious differences as well. When he met Haxton, Maugham was a mature man and an accomplished author, he had in fact just finished *Of Human Bondage*; Tony is a young man, a law student, without any particular distinction. The rather grotesque Barrett, moreover, lacks the charm attributed to the debonair Haxton. And so on. But if his uncle's relationship with Haxton is to be considered a source for *The Servant*, this does not necessarily imply that Robin Maugham would literally duplicate its surface features (considering his personal involvement, the results would have probably been disastrous for him if he had); in his own words, he would, rather, attempt to render "the essential truth of their relationship" as he perceived it. And this relationship did have questionable and enigmatic aspects that closely correspond to what is dramatized in *The Servant*.

Like Richard Merton with respect to Tony, the friends and admirers of Maugham witnessing this relationship close up were usually dismayed by his strange attachment and even subservience to the younger man. Most of those who have written about Haxton himself state flatly that he was no good. "His reputation was notorious," Robin Maugham recalls, "and his behavior reckless."¹⁰ "He had about him an aura of corruption," Beverly Nichols has written.¹¹ He drank heavily, and he could become wild and violent when intoxicated. In 1915, while on leave in London, he was arrested on a charge of gross indecency. Though he was acquitted by the jury, the judge was convinced of his guilt and made no secret of it.¹² ("That secretary of your uncle's a rum fellow," the judge, Sir Travers Humphreys, said to Robin Maugham years afterward, in 1937. "He's a bad lot, I can tell you that. A bad lot. I can't see what your uncle sees in him.")¹³ A few years later, Haxton was declared an undesirable alien and barred from ever again entering England. According to Robin Maugham, this was the chief reason why Maugham decided to live abroad permanently and to purchase the Villa Mauresque.¹⁴

Just as Barrett manages to come between Tony and his fiancée, Haxton evidently helped to alienate Maugham from his wife, Syrie. To be sure, Maugham's relationship with Syrie, an attractive and fashionable woman, would have been a complicated one even without Haxton. Maugham, as he told his nephew, was a bisexual, if not a homosexual, and he was having an affair with Syrie—then the wife of Henry Wellcome—for several years before meeting Haxton. After she became pregnant and her husband sued for a divorce, Maugham married her in 1916. Syrie proved too demanding and jealously possessive for Maugham, and his ardor cooled. Still, Haxton

¹⁰ *Somerset and All the Maughams*, p. 36.

¹¹ Nichols, p. 19.

¹² *Somerset and All the Maughams*, pp. 36–37.

¹³ *Somerset and All the Maughams*, p. 37.

¹⁴ *Somerset and All the Maughams*, p. 37.

was undoubtedly a factor in Maugham's ambivalence toward her. Whether or not his involvement with Haxton was due to homosexual impulse (the same question could be raised about Tony and Barrett), Maugham left Syrie to travel extensively with his new friend, just prior to and shortly after their marriage. For some years Syrie tried to win Maugham back, but in 1927 she abandoned all hope of reunion, and they were divorced. In Syrie's view, as Beverly Nichols presents it, Haxton had dedicated himself to getting her out of Maugham's life and finally succeeded.¹⁵

The aftermath of Maugham's divorce may not have been quite so melodramatic as what finally prevails in *The Servant*, but life at the Villa Mauresque was apparently at times not unlike the life in Tony's London townhouse. Like Barrett, Haxton catered to his master's comforts. In many accounts, his services seem to be epitomized by the dry martinis he so elegantly prepared for Maugham's enjoyment, but there were evidently other duties less innocent. To quote Robin Maugham, "Willie was now dependent on Gerald not only for the smooth running of the house . . . he depended on Gerald to produce young boys who could creep into the Villa Mauresque by the back door and sleep with him. Gerald was Willie's pander."¹⁶ Moreover, a number of visitors besides Robin Maugham have recorded moments when Haxton obviously enjoyed having the upperhand in a style not unlike Barrett's. Maugham was an internationally celebrated man of letters, yet Haxton was in no way deferential toward him; on the contrary, he frequently took pleasure in humiliating his master in front of his guests—and the otherwise waspish Maugham was servile and submitted.

In fact, two of Maugham's young literary protégés of the years between the wars, Godfrey Winn and Beverly Nichols, have given almost identical impressions of his relationship with Haxton. Winn, writing of one occasion when Haxton disrespectfully taunted Maugham, remembers his own astonishment: "the man who was my literary god, instead of silencing the rebellion from his throne . . . was himself silent and seemed . . . to gaze back in fear."¹⁷ And Winn continues with respect to Haxton: "I began to suspect he had the kind of hold a blackmailer exerts. Was this what was really meant by the expression 'your evil genius'? I balked from recognizing the full implications of a situation that I realize now had its roots in the past rather than the present."¹⁸ At another time when Haxton again behaved unpardonably, Winn reacted to Maugham's plight with the same sense of desperation Richard Merton expresses about Tony in *The Servant*:

I was desperately sorry for him, for the horror he must be feeling, at the ruins and death's head spread out in front of him, no longer able to pretend that it was not so. But what could I say? It would be impertinence to offer advice to someone more than old enough to be my father, whom I had been encouraged to regard as a father-figure concerning my work. All the same I longed to plead with him, to urge him to make this *débâcle* the excuse for a final showdown.

"Get rid of him now," I kept on repeating to myself. . . . "Get rid of him now, before he does you further harm. You can't go on like this indefinitely."¹⁹

¹⁵ Nichols, p. 142.

¹⁶ *Escape from the Shadows*, p. 105.

¹⁷ *The Infirm Glory* (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), p. 264. I am indebted to Calder, p. 24, for information about Winn's book.

¹⁸ *The Infirm Glory*, p. 264.

¹⁹ *The Infirm Glory*, p. 281.

Beverly Nichols, whose book *A Case of Human Bondage* focuses on Maugham and Haxton in order to defend Syrie's reputation, almost echoes Winn: "That the Master's relationship with Gerald was 'abnormal' can scarcely be called in question." But the abnormality, he argues, was more than a matter of homosexuality:

No; his ensnarement by Gerald cannot admit of so crude an interpretation. And "ensnarement," surely, is not too harsh a word to describe an infatuation which caused him to break up his marriage, to become a *déraciné* in a foreign land. . . . There was something akin to black magic in Gerald's domination, something uncanny in the way he caused the Master to dance to his tune—sometimes, quite literally, with a flick of his fingers, summoning him across a crowded room to replenish his cocktail glass, when he knew, and I knew, and everybody else knew, that by obeying him the Master was performing an act of public humiliation, even as he tipped the cocktail-shaker.²⁰

With such independent accounts almost paraphrasing the closing passages of *The Servant*, the possibility of this relationship of dependence and domination being a source for the novel seems all the more likely. Indeed, considering the parallels mentioned, it is difficult to imagine that Robin Maugham could write *The Servant* without having his uncle and Haxton in mind. Certainly, the "essential truth" of their relationship and of the novel itself is the same.

One question remains: how did Somerset Maugham himself react to *The Servant*? Oddly enough, he evidently failed to perceive any connection between his own situation and the one in the novel. What did arouse his hostility toward his nephew was not the novel itself, ironically, but one of its reviews. When *The Servant* was published in the United States, James Stern in *The New York Times Book Review* praised it highly. "Unfortunately," Robin Maugham remembers, "he added the fatal words 'written with a skill and speed the author's uncle might envy.' My publishers used this quote in their advertisements. This enraged Willie, and for two or three years I knew I was out of favor."²¹ Quite consistently, W. Somerset Maugham was more concerned with his literary reputation than with any other matter.

RICHARD GILL
Pace University

²⁰ Nichols, pp. 145–46.

²¹ *Conversations with Willie*, p. 95.