



The Rhetoric of Marriage Fragility for Lack of the Romantic in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* (1922)

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Abstract – *The Circle* is a play about a family whereby the son goes through the same experience as his father. His mother leaves his father because she believes that her husband does not avow her enough romantic feelings, and as history is never a singular experience, the same thing happens to the son because his newly-wedded wife also leaves him because she realizes that her husband does not show her openly enough romantic affections. Through sociocriticism, this article intends to show that perhaps through the depiction of these social realities, the author is trying to mock some so-called values of his modern society, this society which thinks that marriage should be solely based on romantic feelings and not other thing else, material wealth for instance. This article backs therefore the intention of the author that if marriage should fail because of disavowed romantic affections, it is not also possible that romantic feelings alone give marriage a happy ending. The long life of a married couple, I believe just as the author does, takes more than just romantic feelings.

Key Words: rhetoric, marriage, fragility, romantic.

Résumé – *Le Cercle* est une pièce de théâtre au sujet d'une famille dans laquelle le fils fait la même expérience que son père. En effet, sa mère abandonne son père parce qu'elle juge que ce dernier ne lui exprime pas suffisamment d'affections romantiques, et comme l'histoire se répète parfois, la même chose arrive au fils parce que sa femme récemment épousée le quitte aussi dans les conditions similaires parce qu'elle croit que son mari ne lui témoigne pas assez son affection amoureuse. Alors, cet article en s'appuyant sur la sociocritique, projette de montrer comment l'auteur à travers la peinture de ces réalités, essaie de narguer quelques-unes des soi-disant valeurs de la société moderne anglaise, cette société qui pense que le mariage devrait être basé uniquement sur les sensations romantiques et non autre chose, telle que la richesse matérielle. Cet article soutient donc l'intention de l'auteur qui pense que si le mariage devrait échouer à cause des soi-disant affections romantiques, il ne serait pas aussi possible que ces soi-disant sensations romantiques permettent à elles seules un aboutissement heureux à un mariage. La longévité du mariage telle que je l'aperçois à travers le prisme de l'auteur, ne dépend pas que d'affections romantiques.

Mots clés: rhétorique, mariage, fragilité, romantique.

1. Introduction

By definition, marriage is a legal union or relationship between two people especially a man and a woman for a domestic and social life together. Therefore, marriage means rights and duties for both the two partners; wife and husband are entitled to many responsibilities. For the survival of their union both husband and wife have to contribute. Man has to play his part; the woman as well. The woman should view man as the sole linchpin who should play a pivotal role for the long life of their relationship. One should not limit the

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success of a couple life to the mere expressions of sentimental feelings knowing that the latter can be deceptive because they depend on the mood of the individual and on the spur of the moment. Besides, there are many more challenges within a marital union. A responsible man is not simply the affection-giver, but a man who shows a sense of responsibility in everything that is part and parcel of marital life.

On these grounds, this article purports to delve into the realities of a couple life showing how Maugham makes a mockery of modern English marriages that disintegrate and collapse on the pretexts of lack of romantic affection on the part of the husband towards his wife. Sociocriticism appears to be the most suitable critical tool for the purpose. In fact, sociocriticism is a sociological literary theory concerned with the study of the relationship between people living in group as is the case of a marriage whereby husband and wife are called to be together and also share things together.

2. A Short-lived Marriage between Father and Mother for lack of the Romantic in Maugham's *The Circle*

In this work specifically, the romantic is concerned with the fact of showing strong feelings of love or avowing one's affectionate loving relationship to his love partner, husband or wife. So defined, the romantic is dearly valued in love relationships, every person in love would feel proud when he or she is constantly praised by his or her partner in love through sweet and loving words. These words like you are beautiful, I love you, etc. can really boost love fibers between people in love. The romantic can really improve love atmosphere in a couple. But what if the man involved in a love relationship with a woman with whom he is tied by the sacred bonds of marriage, does not have the sense of the romantic?

Here, in Maugham's play titled *The Circle*, a young man about thirty-five is complaining to his newly-wedded wife that his mother has abandoned him and his father at the age of five to follow a married man she claims loves her more and romantically appreciates her more. The following conversation between Arnold the young man and his newly-wedded wife Elizabeth informs us therefore:

Arnold. I don't bear malice, but the fact remains that she did me the most irreparable harm. I can find no excuse for her.

Elizabeth. Have you ever tried to?

Arnold. My dear Elizabeth, it's no good going over all that again. The facts are lamentably simple. She had a husband who adored her, a wonderful position, all the money she could want, and a child of five. And she ran away with a married man.

[...]

Elizabeth. Perhaps your mother couldn't help herself - if she was in love?

Arnold. And had no sense of honour, duty, or decency? Oh, yes, under those circumstances you can explain a great deal. (*The Circle, First Act*)



In the conversation here above Arnold is blaming his mother for having deserted him and his father for a married man she believes shows her more love affections. One can see that Arnold's wife Elizabeth is trying to support the runaway mother, because for her the mother might have felt that Arnold's father does not love her much, the reason why she ran away. The rhetoric the playwright is making use concerns specifically the presentation of facts to the audience so as to force a position on them. Indeed, the dramatist has nothing against the romantic dimension in a married couple, but when the reader follows his argumentation close behind, he will come to realize he condemns Arnold's mother's behaviour. In fact, he lets the reader know that the runaway woman is legally married, has a child of only five years old and lacks nothing by her husband, yet she decides to flee to a man, not a single man, a man already married for the simple reason that the latter adores her, praises her, appreciates her more than her legal husband can do. What a scandal! What a stupidity! What an irresponsible woman! The reader can exclaim. Due to the ways the facts are presented by the dramatist the audience cannot but blame the woman's attitude. It means that the playwright has the power of persuasion; he uses the rhetoric to deconstruct the so-called social values. The author does not share the social view that marriage be compulsorily based on the romantic; how can the lack of the romantic impede the fulfillment or the success of a marriage! Is marriage a mere toy or doll to play with on romantic grounds? Marriage, does it not bear a sacred and divine sense of responsibility? Are human beings to play with it? These are the rhetoric questions the author put across for his audience to reflect upon.

As a victim of his mother's foolish behaviour, the playwright gets Arnold to totally disagree with his mother whom he considers to be devoid of the sense of honour, duty, and decency. He even goes far as to disown her as his mother:

Arnold. I can't look on her as my mother.

Elizabeth. What you can't get over is that she didn't think of you. Some of us are more mother and some of us more woman. It gives me a little thrill when I think that she loved that man so much. She sacrificed her name, her position, and her child to him. (*The Circle, First Act*)

[...]

Arnold. You can imagine what a boon it was to the British public. They hadn't had such a treat for a generation. The most popular song of the day was about my mother. Did you ever hear it? "Naughty Lady Kitty. Thought it such a pity ..."
(*The Circle, First Act*)

Through his character Arnold, the author employs irony to reinforce his rhetoric about romanticism in a marriage. Note the use of the terms 'boon' and 'treat' in the conversation above. Actually, the term 'boon' has to do with something that is very useful and makes one's life much easier or better whereas the term 'treat' denotes an event that gives one a lot of pleasure and is usually unexpected. Thus, if both words are semantically considered as such,



then it is clear that they are out of place; they are misused by Arnold because a situation that he is condemning cannot please the English society at large. It means that the author wants the audience to consider the opposite of these words. Therefore, Arnold is using these words ironically to mean the opposite of what they really mean. This rhetoric figure of speech is used to enhance the author's criticism and amuse the audience because the behaviour of Arnold's mother can shock, scandalize and embarrass the reader. So, in order to spare the shock, embarrassment and the scandal to the audience, the playwright rhetorically creates comic effects through the use of irony.

Before the advent of the modern era, which is the era of Arnold's parents, women were said to be materialistic because they were entitled to odd jobs and were obliged to run after wealthy gentlemen to improve their living conditions. But since the First World War, women have access to decent job opportunities as men and can therefore stay economically independent. This situation of the modern woman pushes her to go beyond material requirements. The traditional society used to see the man as the family breadwinner and the woman as the home caretaker who should be submissive to man's domination. However, the modern and also whimsical woman challenges these traditional norms and obligatorily demands her man to prove her his love on a regular basis through words of adoration, praise and worship as if love were food to eat and drink to take in. Maugham rhetorically questions this reverse of situation, this liberty of the modern woman who fails to be grateful to history.

As Archie K. Loss would write about the relationship between Maugham's male and female characters:

The characters of *The Circle* (with the exception of Teddie) are both titled and wealthy. Money is important to them, but as a means to maintain their way of life, not as an end in itself. The male characters are not, for the most part, financiers or men on the way up the ladder. They are at the top, or near it, and trying to stay there. Their careers, if they have visible ones, are in the respectable professions or in politics, but their careers are not of first importance in these plays: the focus is rather upon their personal relationships, the comedies reaching their points of crisis over decisions to marry or not to marry, to leave one's spouse or stay. Although the wives and mistresses of these plays are concerned with romantic intrigues and assignations, as well as with the right hat or gown, they are on the whole more important than the males. The focus of the plays is on their reactions and development, and they determine the course of events more than the male characters do. Maugham's comedies, in short, reflect in their characters as in their structure most of the qualities of the English drawing-room comedy.¹

¹ Archie K. Loss. "W. Somerset Maugham." *W. Somerset Maugham*. Archie K. Loss. Ungar, 1987. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Roger Matuz and Cathy Falk. Vol. 67. Detroit: Gale, 1992. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 28 July 2015.
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Through this quotation, Loss remarks that the material wealth is no more a problem to Maugham's modern female characters, they have it already, their men are well-to-do people; what worries them much, is love affections; they feel more concerned with romantic intrigues and assignations. If the English traditional woman was economically under privileged, the modern English woman as far as she is concerned, her problem is elsewhere in the realms of romantic passion and not in materialistic pursuit.

As if the parents' bitter experience was not enough, Maugham allows the son and the daughter-in-law to go through the same human dilemma showing metaphorically that bad habits are corrosive and compel history to be repetitive. And if a generation does not stop such bad habits, they will make life a vicious circle as we are going to witness it in the following point with Arnold and his wife Elizabeth who reiterates her mother-in-law's vicious behaviour which took place thirty years ago.

3. A Short-lived Marriage between Son and Daughter-in-law for lack of the Romantic in Maugham's *The Circle*

About three years ago, Elizabeth was legally married to Arnold Champion-Cheney, a new member of parliament. Despite the fact that she is already married, she is in love with the much less wealthy, but romantically much more aggressive Edward Lutton also known as Teddie, a planter who hopes to make his fortune in the Federated Malay States. Elizabeth must ultimately choose between the loveless security of her legal relationship with Arnold, and the much more exciting, though much more insecure and illegal alliance with Teddie. For Arnold, the situation is especially painful, because thirty years earlier his mother Lady Kitty left his father for Lord Porteus and has not been back to see him since.

Arnold at first completely resists Elizabeth's declared intention to leave him, then, prompted by his father who speaks from his own experience, tries to make Elizabeth feel so guilty about her immoral decision so that she will desist. Ultimately however, the affection that Elizabeth feels for Teddie is great enough to overcome any scruples she may have, and, aided and abetted by the lovers of an older generation, that is her parents-in-law, she and Teddie escape into the night to begin their own romantic adventures together. Indeed, the romantic relationship between Elizabeth and Teddie starts lightly as a mere joke, the conversation below is much telling about that:

Teddie. ... Do you know that I'm awfully in love with you?

Elizabeth. [*Gravely*] I wasn't quite sure. I wondered.

Teddie. And you? [*She nods slowly*] I've never kissed you. (*The Circle, First Act*)

Elizabeth. [*Affectionately.*] You're a dear old thing, Teddie.

Teddie. You know, I don't really know how to make love, but if I did I couldn't do it now because I just want to be absolutely practical.



Elizabeth. [*Chaffing him.*] I'm glad you don't know how to make love. It would be almost more than I could bear.
 Teddie. You see, I'm not at all romantic and that sort of thing. ...
 Elizabeth. [*With a break in her voice.*] You owl!
 Teddie. ... I love you, I love you, I love you.
 Elizabeth. [*In a sigh of passion.*] Oh, my precious! (*The Circle, Second Act*)

The excerpt above testifies that Elizabeth was an easy prey for Teddie who is living momentarily with them in Arnold's house. She is falling into temptation without any resistance; Teddie is easily buying her love sentiments through a few romantic words: "I love you, I love you, I love you." Though Teddie claims ironically not to be romantic, he is winning Elizabeth's heart through a strong use of romance. Strategically, Teddie is letting Elizabeth understand that he is more romantic than her legal husband. Teddie is taking advantage of the woman's Achilles' tendon or weakness, which is her fondness for the romantic exaltation. Knowing this weakness of Elizabeth, Teddie will not give her a chance to resist, as a bait he rains showers of romantic praise on her weak psychology to hook her, to ensnare her in adulterous rings. Let us see how romantic he is:

Teddie. You see, it's not just because you're awfully pretty that I love you. I'd love you just as much if you were old and ugly. It's you I love, not what you look like. And it's not only love; love be blowed! It's that I like you so tremendously. I think you are a ripping good sort. I just want to be with you. I feel so jolly and happy just to think you are there. I'm awfully fond of you.
 Elizabeth. [*Laughing through her tears.*] I don't know if this is your idea of introducing a business proposition. (*The Circle, Second Act*)
 [...]
 Teddie. ... But after all there's only one thing that really matters in the world, and that's love. I love you. Chuck all this, Elizabeth, and come to me.
 Elizabeth. Are you cross with me? (*The Circle, Second Act*)

This conversation shows that Teddie's strategy is working wonderfully on the weak character of Elizabeth who is yielding already. If Elizabeth herself claims that Teddie is being business-like in love matters, she herself becomes a business commodity to be bought by romantic trite and tact. Elizabeth is irresistible before Teddie's romantic output, she will even say: "Elizabeth. Isn't it fun being in love with someone who's in love with you?" (*The Circle, Second Act*) She believes that unlike her legal husband Arnold, Teddie appears to be a good match for her, because while Arnold is romantically shy and timid Teddie is romantically aggressive and outspoken. Her mother-in-law whose case she was defending before Arnold her husband, is now trying hard as an experienced runaway woman, to warn her about the dangers of running away from a husband to another man. Yet, she will not listen:

Lady Kitty. One says that when one's sure of a man's love, but when one isn't any more
 - Oh, it's so different. In those circumstances one's got to keep a man's love. It's the only thing one has.
 Elizabeth. I'm a human being. I can stand on my own feet.
 Lady Kitty. Have you any money on your own?



Elizabeth. None.

Lady Kitty. Then how can you stand on your own feet? You think I'm a silly, frivolous woman, but I've learned something in a bitter school. They can make what laws they like, they can give us the suffrage, but when you come down to bedrock it's the man who pays the piper who calls the tune. Woman will only be the equal of man when she earns her living in the same way that he does.

Elizabeth. [*Smiling.*] It sounds rather funny to hear you talk like that.

Lady Kitty.

Lady Kitty. A cook who marries a butler can snap her fingers in his face because she can earn just as much as he can. But a woman in your position and a woman in mine will always be dependent on the men who keep them.

Elizabeth. I don't want luxury. You don't know how sick I am of all this beautiful furniture. These over-decorated houses are like a prison in which I can't breathe. When I drive about in a Callot frock and a Rolls-Royce I envy the shop-girl in a coat and skirt whom I see jumping on the tailboard of a bus.

Lady Kitty. You mean that if need be you could earn your own living?

Elizabeth. Yes.

Lady Kitty. What could you be? A nurse or a typist. It's nonsense. Luxury saps a woman's nerve. And when she's known it once it becomes a necessity.

[...]

Lady Kitty. It breaks my heart to think that you're going to make the same pitiful mistake that I made.

[...]

Lady Kitty. Look at me, Elizabeth, and look at Hughie. Do you think it's been a success? If I had my time over again do you think I'd do it again? Do you think he would?

Elizabeth. You see, you don't know how I love Teddie. (*The Circle, Third Act*)

Lady Kitty. And you think I didn't love Hughie? Do you think he didn't love me?

Elizabeth. I'm sure he did.

Lady Kitty. Oh, of course in the beginning it was heavenly. We felt so brave and adventurous and we were so much in love. The first two years were wonderful. People cut me, you know, but I didn't mind. I thought love was everything. It is a little uncomfortable when you come upon an old friend and go towards her eagerly, so glad to see her, and are met with an icy stare. (*The Circle, Third Act*)

Through the mother-in-law Lady Kitty's tirade above against her daughter-in-law Elizabeth's idea of elopement with her lover, the reader understands that Elizabeth has become stubborn, headstrong, hardened and turns a deaf ear on any piece of advice. She will not listen to her mother-in-law, who has already had the same experience in the past without good results. She even reveals this immoral and stupid agenda to her husband Arnold who finds her behaviour foolish and rightly treats Teddie of ungratefulness because he gave him a roof and now he is taking his wife of loose morals away. The conversation between husband and wife goes:

Elizabeth. I've fallen desperately in love with him, Arnold.

Arnold. Well, you'd better fall desperately out.

Elizabeth. He wants to marry me.

Arnold. I daresay he does. He can go to hell.

[...]

Arnold. It shows that he's a mean skunk to take advantage of my hospitality to make love to you.

[...]

Elizabeth. I've been in love with Teddie ever since I knew him.

Arnold. You never thought of me at all, I suppose.

Elizabeth. Oh, yes, I did. I was miserable. But I can't help myself. I wish I loved you, but I don't.



Arnold. I recommend you to think very carefully before you do anything foolish.
(*The Circle*, Second Act)

The dialogue above shows that any attempt of Arnold to dissuade and redeem his lost wife is vain and worthless. She has already made up her mind, nothing can refrain her from achieving her dirty goal. She is blinded by Teddie's deep sense of romantic language and charming wooing and courtship. Inevitably, there is going to be a repetition of history, son and daughter-in-law are making parents and parents-in-law's life a complete and full circle. As Moses writes: "We assume that the play will indeed prove to be about human nature's repeating itself: we assume that Elizabeth and Teddie will re-enact the lives of Kitty and Porteous: the close of *The Circle*. ... [Maugham] rounds out his vicious ring of action by making human nature repeat itself."²

Admittedly, in *The Circle*, we see a repetition in family history, with the development of the second occurrence merely an echo of the first, while all the time the consequences of the first are visibly presented to us like a doom. In fact, Maugham presents the elopement of Elizabeth and her lover Teddie as a doom because it takes place symbolically in the night. And everybody knows that the night which implies darkness is always associated with evil and lawlessness. According to *The Dictionary of Symbols*³, darkness and night can connote gloom or evil. So, for Maugham there is no hope for these illegitimate and illegal young lovers who run away in the night.

This tendency of a recurring scenario has also been noticed by Jacky Martin who comments: «L'idée d'une récurrence cyclique des conduites humaines semble avoir séduit les plus désenchantés.»⁴ [The notion of a recurring cycle of human behavior seems to have seduced the most disillusioned (critics).]

Louis Kronenberger, writing in 1952, describes *The Circle* as a 'demonstration' that is "Euclidean, with its proof of how two triangles are equal in all respects. He goes on to label the substance of *The Circle* as aphoristic."⁵ John Gassner, in his widely used textbook *A Treasury of the Theatre* (1963), offers a more balanced interpretation of the play by recognizing 'the importance of character in any situation.' But Gassner still holds that "the idea of the play ... [is] the cycle of romantic passion and the inability of one generation to learn

² Montrose J. Moses, ed. *Dramas of Modernism and Their Forerunners*. Boston: Little Brown, 1931, p. 416.

³ J. E. Cirlot, ed. *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Second Edition. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 76.

⁴ Martin Jacky. «*The Circle* de S. Maugham: Critique des illusions et illusions de la critique », *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens: Revue du Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Victoriennes et Edouardiennes de l'Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier*, pp. 9-10, 1979, p. 10.

⁵ Louis Kronenberger. *The Thread of Laughter: Chapters on English Stage Comedy from Jonson to Maugham*. New York: Knopf, 1952, p. 297.



from the experience of another.”⁶ Similarly, M. K. Naik, writing in 1966, insists that in *The Circle* “the wheel [of romantic human passion] comes full circle. ... So, Mrs. Elizabeth Champion-Cheney runs away with Edward Luton or Teddie knowing that Lady Kitty and Lord Porteous have ruined their lives by eloping. The theme is really tragic, but its tragical possibilities are not developed, except for the pathos of the incident in Act III, where the old lovers, realizing the waste of their existence, forgive each other. ... The prevailing mood [of the play] is sardonic.”⁷

Anthony Curtis has seen a double meaning in the title: “These people belong to the world of a professional elite. ... The title means not only that the wheel has come full circle but that we are here inside a charmed circle of power and influence whose members are prey to the pettiest of private motives.”⁸

4. Deconstructing Marriage Fragility without the Romantic in Maugham's *The Circle*

The Circle, however, has been generally interpreted by some critics not as another attack by Maugham upon the complacency and smugness of conventional social attitudes, but, surprisingly, as a denunciation of the romantic delusions of people whose passions rule their sense of conventional propriety. Thus Richard A. Cordell writes: “It is not a soothing, pleasant comedy. At times it is disturbing, almost painful. The acid of its truth and of its anti-romanticism eats into us ... the ending is neither moral nor romantic.”⁹ Through this quotation, Cordell gives us a sense that *The Circle* is an anti-romantic plea, Maugham is making an urgent request to the modern society to renounce to the expression of some liberties in a domestic life situation.

Christopher Innes rightly argues that in *The Circle*, Maugham denounces the loss of traditional values by the English in early twentieth century. Therefore, the tension in *The Circle* “is characteristic of the era, reflecting the draining of Victorian confidence over the first decade of the century and the loss of traditional moral standards following the devastation of the First World War.”¹⁰

For me also, a minute examination of *The Circle* shows that Maugham is in fact ridiculing the earnest yearning for the romantic in modern marriage relationship. On the surface, the title implies that the younger generation is

⁶ John Gassner, ed. *A Treasury of the Theatre from Henrik Ibsen to Eugene Ionesco*, Third College Edition. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963, p. 666.

⁷ M. K. Naik. *W. Somerset Maugham*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966, p. 68.

⁸ Anthony Curtis. *The Pattern of Maugham*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974, pp. 118-19.

⁹ Richard A. Cordell. *W. Somerset Maugham*. New York: Nelson, 1937, p. 208.

¹⁰ Christopher Innes. *Modern British Drama - The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 254.



repeating the disastrous experience of the older, where the decay of passion into indifference has made their sacrifice of social position worthless, and the action brings out the notion of circularity. A horrible past is being relived. The author creates a situation whereby two families belonging to two successive generations, experience the same romantic scandal to no avail. Lady Kitty breaks away from her husband Champion Cheney in search of romantic love that proved to be short-lived. Cyclically, Elizabeth her daughter-in-law will follow her close behind in search of the same ideal, that is romantic love. However, Lady Kitty informs her daughter-in-law out of experience that she will regret for leaving her husband, because romantic love is fleeting, it does not last forever. So, the message Maugham has for his modern English society which requires that romantic love is vital for marriage relationship, is that every romance is of transient nature. For Maugham, love withers and wastes away; love gets rusty and moldy but what remains is the sense of duty and responsibility in marital union, which materialism can reinforce and strengthen. To maddeningly and blindly run after romantic love is to run after the wind. Claiming that love is everything and materialism is nothing, is according to Maugham a big lie, an escape from reality. It is a well-known fact that very few women chose their love partners on the basis of romantic love, whereas most of women value material wealth more than anything in marriage relationship. It is common to hear a woman saying 'I marry a man because of his pocket and not because of his attractive physical appearance or let alone because of his deep sense of humor and romance.' And this is the message Maugham intends to get across by ironically deconstructing romanticism in terms of marriage relationship. This is the reason why Lady Kitty warns her daughter-in-law Elizabeth out of a bitter experience:

Lady Kitty. It breaks my heart to think that you're going to make the same pitiful mistake that I made.

[...]

Lady Kitty. Look at me, Elizabeth, and look at Hughie. Do you think it's been a success? If I had my time over again do you think I'd do it again? Do you think he would?

Elizabeth. You see, you don't know how I love Teddie. (*The Circle, Third Act*)

Lady Kitty. And you think I didn't love Hughie? Do you think he didn't love me?

Elizabeth. I'm sure he did.

Lady Kitty. Oh, of course in the beginning it was heavenly. We felt so brave and adventurous and we were so much in love. The first two years were wonderful. People cut me, you know, but I didn't mind. I thought love was everything. It is a little uncomfortable when you come upon an old friend and go towards her eagerly, so glad to see her, and are met with an icy stare. (*The Circle, Third Act*)

Lady Kitty. Are you shocked? One sacrifices one's life for love and then one finds that love doesn't last. The tragedy of love isn't death or separation. One gets over them. The tragedy of love is indifference. (*The Circle, Third Act*)



Laddy Kitty is clear to her daughter-in-law that she herself, has abandoned her legal and legitimate husband to run after love without any reward, her reward is purely a punishment, she has reaped what she has sown, she has sown love to reap misery, shame and disgrace. And this will probably be the lot of Elizabeth if she refuses to listen to her mother-in-law. As Lady Kitty infers, the beginning of romance is charming and heavenly but the end is catastrophic and miserable. Indeed, every sin appears charming and tempts at the beginning but in the end it brings nothing but sorrow and death. Even, Elizabeth's legal husband she is trying to leave warns her: "Arnold. My poor child, I'm so afraid you'll be unhappy. I'm so afraid you'll regret. Elizabeth. You must leave me to my fate." (*The Circle, Third Act*)

In *The Circle*, Maugham has it that adultery not only becomes the fulfillment of romantic idealism, but the audience is maneuvered into a false position that exposes conventional prejudices. These are initially confirmed by Maugham's caricatured presentation of the elderly divorcees as worn-out roué and scarlet woman who is 'dyed red hair and painted cheeks', a couple who exemplifies the dictum that 'there is no more lamentable pursuit than a life of pleasure'. Maugham lets the reader realize that the elderly divorcees' sacrifice of their social position on the altar of romance has been worthless because their passion for each other has vanished. This reality apparently undermines the earlier idealistic vision of Arnold's young wife 'My heart ached for that poor lonely woman. ... When you've loved as she's loved you may grow old, but you grow old beautifully. ... She had the world at her feet ... And she gave up everything for love'--and sets up her father-in-law, the original wronged husband, as a voice of reason to identify with--'I never heard that she was lonely, and she certainly isn't poor ... how you let your imagination run away with you!' Yet all those too obvious sentimental clichés become justified in her own elopement, which is presented as the action of 'a woman of courage and endurance and sincerity', while the rational observer is revealed to be incapable of emotion, fundamentally dishonest and finally foolish. Elizabeth initially thought that her mother-in-law's elopement with her lover made her happy, but it is not true, it is a mere illusion, the reality is quite different.

Alan Reynolds Thompson refers to *The Circle* as "one of bitter philosophical irony."¹¹ And this is true; Maugham creates ironies of various kinds to deconstruct the place of the romantic in marriage relationship. Maugham attacks the modern English social perspectives concerning marriage relationship questioning man's authority and dangerously give liberties to women.

¹¹ Alan Reynolds Thompson. *The Dry Mock*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948, p. 42.



Gilbert Wakefield, reviewing the play in the *Saturday Review*, called it a 'cynical romance' and expressed the belief that Maugham was mercilessly satirizing the "life endured by all who sacrifice the comfort and security of dull respectability for the glamour and illusion of romantic love."¹²

Besides, to reach his goal, Maugham subtly lends his views about the present-day English social perception of marriage union to Lady Kitty, whereby there are echoes here and there about gender equity, that the woman is entitled to the same rights as a man. On these grounds, Lady Kitty warns her daughter-in-law against the danger of falling in the traps of the society about gender equity. The mother-in-law lets her daughter-in-law understand that gender equity is a mere *trompe-l'oeil*, a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal with no meaning. For Lady Kitty, the society which claims that both men and women are equal, is giving economic power to men; only men are the absolute masters of economic sectors. How can a woman then stand on her feet and claim her independence, her freedom to desire and require idealistic love from her husband? How can a baby who is always resting on the knees of its mother and always breastfed by the latter, oblige her to smile to it all the time against her own will? For Lady Kitty, as long as a woman will financial depend on her husband, she cannot force him to smile to her romantically all the time. For Lady Kitty, her daughter-in-law Elizabeth is quite dreaming, harboring illusions when trying to yearn for a romantic husband:

Lady Kitty. One says that when one's sure of a man's love, but when one isn't any more

-Oh, it's so different. In those circumstances one's got to keep a man's love. It's the only thing one has.

Elizabeth. I'm a human being. I can stand on my own feet.

Lady Kitty. Have you any money on your own?

Elizabeth. None.

Lady Kitty. Then how can you stand on your own feet? You think I'm a silly, frivolous woman, but I've learned something in a bitter school. They can make what laws they like, they can give us the suffrage, but when you come down to bedrock it's the man who pays the piper who calls the tune. Woman will only be the equal of man when she earns her living in the same way that he does.

Elizabeth. [*Smiling.*] It sounds rather funny to hear you talk like that.

Lady Kitty.

Lady Kitty. A cook who marries a butler can snap her fingers in his face because she can earn just as much as he can. But a woman in your position and a woman in mine will always be dependent on the men who keep them.

Elizabeth. I don't want luxury. You don't know how sick I am of all this beautiful furniture. These over-decorated houses are like a prison in which I can't breathe. When I drive about in a Callot frock and a Rolls-Royce I envy the shop-girl in a coat and skirt whom I see jumping on the tailboard of a bus.

Lady Kitty. You mean that if need be you could earn your own living?

Elizabeth. Yes.

Lady Kitty. What could you be? A nurse or a typist. It's nonsense. Luxury saps a woman's nerve. And when she's known it once it becomes a necessity.

[...]

¹² Gilbert Wakefield. "Mr. Maugham's Apology", *Saturday Review*. London: CLI, 1931, 459.



Lady Kitty. It breaks my heart to think that you're going to make the same pitiful mistake that I made.

[...]

Lady Kitty. Look at me, Elizabeth, and look at Hughie. Do you think it's been a success? If I had my time over again do you think I'd do it again? Do you think he would?

Elizabeth. You see, you don't know how I love Teddie. (*The Circle, Third Act*)

Through the voice of Lady Kitty, Maugham challenges the so-called modern realities of his modern English society. For Kitty a rich woman can resist a rich man, but a poor woman has no choice, but to submit to the whims, mood and temper of her husband; this is the crude reality, anything else is mere folklore. Gender equity is a fangled name forged by the rhetoricians or politicians to confuse and confound the fools. The romantic, yes! But in which society! A society ruled by male norms! Only, a man can have to make a choice; for a woman to chose what she wants in a capitalistic male society, is not for now. The society whereby a woman will insists on marrying a man of her likes in terms of romance is yet to come. For today's capitalistic world, men are busy; they have no time for cradling, rocking, soothing and lulling their wives all the time.

According to Carroll Camden, in the Elizabethan society there were four reasons for marriage: avoid fornication (conformity), mutual society (companionship), procreation, and the continuance of the life of the church (another aspect of procreation).¹³ The similarity is at once apparent as is the omission of confinement. To both the Elizabethan man and woman marriage was an "interruption of freedom."¹⁴ It means that marriage far from being a playground, a doll house, an institution for hedonism and mere pleasure is a sacred institution of seriousness, duty and high sense of responsibility. Innes argues that for Maugham, "the world is turning the corner and we can all look forward to better times in the future. This old England of ours isn't done for yet and I for one believe in it and all it stands for..."¹⁵ In a word, modern values should not subdue our traditional moral values.

5. Conclusion

The article has delved into the relationship between husband and wife in marital life situation through the characters Maugham creates in his play titled *The Circle*. The article has condemned the fact that two marriages fail in the play for the simple reason that the men involved in the marital relationship were not able to sing their passionate feelings for their women. I have shown how the

¹³ Carroll Camden. *The Elizabethan Woman*. Houston: The Elsevier Press, 1952, p. 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 82.

¹⁵ Christopher Innes. *Modern British Drama - The Twentieth Century*. Op cit, p. 261.



author makes a satirical mock of this irrational behaviour of women whereby the daughter-in-law refuses to learn a lesson from the experience of her mother-in-law making this ignominious scandal about romantic idealism cyclic, from father to son and from mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law. The study has demonstrated that the failure of the parents' marriage and that of the son and daughter-in-law on the basis of romantic passion is a mere alibi; for me the real reason should be elsewhere in the vicinity of woman frailty and loose morals. Women should avoid such deadly temptations which result from human nature as a general rule. The analysis comes thus to the conclusion that the disavowed romantic affection of the husband toward his wife is not enough to discontinue a marriage because marriage is a sacred social contract which means much more than the mere expression of love feelings. Marriage far from being a playground remains a place of self-sacrifice and not self-indulgence. It is therefore inadmissible and quite irresponsible for a woman to run away from her husband who toils day and night through all the hustle and bustle of life to care for her just because her man is incapable of singing sweet love words in her ears all the time. It is commonly acknowledged that all men are not of the same temperament, let alone romantic. While some men are always uptight and serious others are always passionate, easy-going and sympathetic. So, it results from my analysis that it is good for a husband to regularly avow his love feelings for his wife, but the failure or incapacity of the man to do this should not jeopardize and compromise a marital union. It is said that life is struggle, and if this is true to life, then how can women be always expecting men to be laughing with them all the time? How can a warrior on a battle field be cheering and merrymaking all the time instead of concentrating seriously on the danger hanging around him?

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