



DUALITY OF MAN AS A THEME IN SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S *THE RAZOR'S EDGE*

S. Karanan*

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Annamalai University

The Razor's Edge is a novel by William Somerset Maugham published in 1944. Its epigraph reads: "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path of salvation is hard". It is taken from a verse in the Katha -Upanishad.

In the novel, the "snobbery" and "money" and duality of people are the recurring themes. In Larry's conversation with Maugham, the narrator, Larry talks about the necessary existence of evil to balance out the good. It is an idea exemplified by several characters. No one is hundred percent good or bad because they are human beings and not Gods.

Isabel the heroine and her uncle Elliot illustrate the idea of duality of people. Elliot, as Maugham states, is a total snob. He exists to attend social functions and climb social ladders. Elliot also possesses a good heart. Maugham goes at great lengths describing his friend's elitism and vanity, but he also mentions his good nature. He is wealthy, with an apartment in Paris and a house on the Riviera. Maugham explains that money is not his obsession. For forging social relationships with the rich and socially connected is. His manners and personality make him one of the most popular members of Parisian high society.

Elliot lavishes gifts on people because he wants to curry their favours, but Maugham notes that he keeps giving people gifts even after they are no longer necessary. In the beginning, Elliot cooks up a plan to help Isabel forget Larry. He tells Mrs. Bradley that they should go to London for the rest of the season. There they will meet more rich and important people, and Isabel can be introduced to young- rich men.

Later Elliot grows annoyed with the blurring social differences he witnesses in London, Paris, and America. He gets very angry when a boorish American insults him without his knowledge and he laments when America become middle class when a taxi driver calls him brother. He also switches over religions, becoming a catholic because of its better social connections. As he gets older, Elliot continues his snobbish ways. He throws parties and

socializes despite being sick. When he dies, he asks to be buried in a Count de Lauria costume that leaves him looking ridiculous. Maugham calls him a pathetic figure.

Despite all of Elliot's faults, he also demonstrates a tender and generous nature. When his sister, Mrs. Bradley dies, Elliot goes to Chicago and takes care of all arrangements. Also after the stock market crash, he offers his apartment to his niece, Isabel, and her family. However there are two sides of Elliot's generosity. When he takes his sister and Isabel around London to give them a good time, Maugham believes it is because of kindness and also a way to show off. He gives Isabel his apartment, because he cannot bear his niece living on a plantation with only a "few" servants. A snob and good-hearted person, Elliot is a perfect example of the duality of man, a theme Maugham explores throughout the novel.

Isabel turns out to be the character with the most debatable morals. Based on appearance, she seems to be a successful, happy woman. She marries Gray whom she does not truly love, though.

When the reader is first introduced to Isabel, she is a vivacious, charming, slightly overweight girl genuinely with her fiancé. At the end of the novel Isabel is arguably the character with the most questionable morals. She does not marry for love. She is a bit of a snob, and her actions lead to the dissolution of a marriage and Sophie's death.

Earlier, however, Isabel chooses a wealthy life over true love, Larry. Her feelings for Larry never totally go away and as she admits this to Maugham. This leads to a trap that she sets for Sophie. Sophie is an old friend who has turned to drugs, alcohol and sex after the death of her family in a car accident. Larry asks her to help people, and Isabel becomes furious. She sabotages the marriage by tempting Sophie with vodka, and Sophie is eventually found murdered after she falls in a prey to her old living. Instead of apologizing for her actions, Isabel is happy and planted the vodka in Sophie's bag and she even says she would do it again. She grows to be a beautiful woman with a successful husband and all the riches she wanted. She is also cold in heart and never ends up with the true object of her love, Larry.

Another character that embodies the theme of "the duality of people" is Sophie. In Sophie, Maugham introduces a character whose true nature is never clearly defined. She seemed a normal loving wife before the car accident, but she turns to the dark side of life afterward. She is always a bad person inside. Isabel thinks that, while Larry remembers the sweet, sensitive girls that used to read poetry. Interestingly Maugham notes how Sophie looks plain when they first meet at a dinner in Chicago, and yet looks attractive when she is drunk and wearing too much of make up at the seedy bar in Paris. Later she looks unattractive at a lunch while trying to kick out her drug and alcohol habit, but she looks attractive again when Maugham runs into her in Toulouse, where she has taken up her old- destructive ways. It's as if the "evil" part of Sophie's life makes her happy, while the "good" makes her plain and unattractive. Like others, Sophie is good and bad. Duality is just more obvious in her than in others.

Kosti is the latest character to exemplify the theme of the duality of man. Kosti is a large brute, who cheats at cards and immediately plans on seducing Becker's wife. At the same time he is also a student of philosophy. Whenever Larry brings up Kosti's love for philosophy, Kosti changes the subject and refuses to talk about it. Also Kosti's true background is not clear. Kosti

says that he is an ex-military officer who upset his superiors and was forced to flee. Other workers at the camp say he was thrown out for his behaviour. Thus Isabel, Elliot, Kostis and Sophie are victims of a dual vision of good and bad.