



# The Theme of ‘Escape’: Intertextuality and Compositional Contrast in Somerset Maugham’s Selected Short Stories

Armél Mbon

Parcours-type: Langues et Littératures, Université Marien NGOUABI, Brazzaville, Congo.

Received: 07 Aug 2023; Received in revised form: 09 Sep 2023; Accepted: 18 Sep 2023; Available online: 25 Sep 2023  
©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— This work analyses the contrast created in William Somerset Maugham’s literary composition, with reference to the theme of ‘Escape’. Escape is, indeed, a recurrent theme in such Maugham’s short stories as ‘The Escape’, ‘Mabel’, ‘A Friend in Need,’ ‘The Taipan’, ‘The Verger’, and others. The analysis thereof unfolds through the scrutiny of two samples of these short stories videlicet ‘The Escape’ and ‘Mabel’. In real life, it happens to us to escape either from a country, a nightmare, a delicate financial situation, a mediocre existence, or else. Likewise, in fiction, Roger Charing and George escape from Ruth Barlow and Mabel, the ladies they are engaged to before the wedding days respectively in ‘The Escape’ and ‘Mabel’. This escape, an interconnection between these stories, is prompted by their sudden falling out of love, which is inexplicable in the narrators’ words, because as Blaise Pascal thinks, the heart has reasons that reason itself knows nothing about. Apart from this common denominator, the two stories contrast sharply at different levels of their components as setting, characters... To investigate this contrast, owing to the economy and simplicity of the storytelling that characterise a short story, these stories require close scrutiny and textual approach.

**Keywords**— escape, intertextuality, contrast, components, short story.

**Résumé**— Ce travail analyse le contraste créé dans la composition littéraire de William Somerset Maugham, en se référant au thème d’ « Evasion ». L’évasion est, en effet, un thème récurrent dans les nouvelles de Maugham comme *The Escape*, *Mabel*, *A Friend in Need*, *The Taipan*, *The Verger*, et bien d’autres. L’analyse de ce thème se déroule à travers l’examen de deux échantillons de ces nouvelles à savoir *The Escape* et *Mabel*. Dans la vie réelle, il nous arrive d’échapper soit à un pays, à un cauchemar, à une situation financière délicate, soit à une existence médiocre. De même, dans la fiction, Roger Charing et Georges s’échappent de Ruth Barlow et Mabel, les dames auxquelles ils sont fiancés avant les jours de mariage respectivement dans *The Escape* et *Mabel*. Cette évasion, interconnexion entre ces histoires, est provoquée par leur rupture de l’amour soudaine, ce qui est inexplicable dans les propos des narrateurs, car comme le pense Blaise Pascal, le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ignore. En dehors de ce dénominateur commun, les deux histoires contrastent fortement à différents niveaux de leurs composants tels que le cadre spatio-temporel, les personnages... Pour étudier ce contraste, en raison de l’économie et de la simplicité du récit qui caractérisent la nouvelle, ces nouvelles nécessitent un examen attentif et une approche textuelle.

**Mots clés**— évasion, intertextualité, contraste, création, composants, nouvelles.



## I. INTRODUCTION

Romance as a love affair, especially a relatively brief and light-hearted one, is characteristic of William Somerset Maugham’s short stories, especially ‘Mabel’ and

‘The Escape’. These love affairs are short-lived since male lovers embark on a lasting escape either physically or mentally. The reason of such male misbehaviour in love affairs is due to the fact that “As lovers, the difference between men and women is that women can love all day

long, but men only at times" (Maugham, 1919, pp.224-225). Owing to the theme of 'escape' common to both stories, there is a great likelihood that Maugham might have divided the whole story into two parts with different titles. These short stories complement each other, albeit not over the same year. They nonetheless follow a chronological order of publication, 'Mabel' in 1924, and 'The Escape' in 1925.

In 'Mabel', George and Mabel are engaged and going to get married in six months. Unfortunately, such unexpected and sad events as Mabel's father's death, the war, George's posting to a district unsuitable for a white woman, push back the day of their wedding. Seven years later Mabel finds George. Attempting several times to hide in different countries, George is being chased by Mabel and must surrender and marry her. The following story, 'The Escape', is about a wealthy man named Roger Charing who falls in love with Ruth Barlow, a woman who is twice a widow. After some time, they start to think about marriage. Then suddenly Roger falls out of love, and embarks on everlasting hunting of a suitable house, the condition for their conjugal life. This leads Linares (1992, p.104) to state that "Maugham's heroes always escape from their environments."

However, despite these similar points, in labouring the point 'escape', the author creates a sharp contrast over these stories. With this focal point of 'escape', how is the contrast created in both stories? Setting (the setting being one of the major components of a story) these stories in different spaces and times is the first element of this contrast. Other components of a story would most likely differ from one another as we move from 'Mabel' to 'The Escape'.

Somerset Maugham (qt. Epstein, 1989, p.185) once wrote, "The critic I am waiting for is the one who will explain why, with all my faults, I have been read for so many years by so many people." It is crystal clear that it is hard to find such a critic as evidenced in the following reviews of Maugham's short stories. Even though they find something to cavil about, which would be obvious, they would not certainly be able to explain why, with all his faults, Maugham has been read for so many years by so many people, nor would this work claim it could do so. Each of the review below has at least something to raise and discuss about 'Mabel' and 'The Escape'.

Jaine Chemmachery's thesis, "*Spatial, Temporal and Linguistic Displacement in Kipling's and Maugham's Colonial Short Stories*" defended in 2023 at Université Paris 1 – Sorbonne as well as Aris Harahap's paper "Modernism in "Mabel" and "The Rocking-Horse Winner" published in 2020 discuss Maugham's short stories with

reference to Modern times. The review of a writer like Maugham is the discovery of the imagery his short stories are pervaded by. In 'Mabel' and 'The Escape', he makes a remarkable use thereof. Hence, in "An In-depth Analysis of the Manifestation of Emotions and Ideas through Similes in Short Stories by Somerset Maugham" published in 2013, Zhala Rahimi, carries out an in-depth analysis of the similes employed by Somerset Maugham in his short stories to see the objects and phenomena he has employed to create the similes and exercise the desired emotional feeling, cognitive orientation, and interpretation on the side of the readers.

The shaping of a text's meaning by another text, either through deliberate compositional strategies such as quotation, allusion, calque, plagiarism, translation, pastiche or parody, or by interconnections between similar or related works perceived by an audience or reader of the text known as intertextuality, is an issue addressed in 2010 by Viorica Condrat in "Intertextuality in William Somerset Maugham's Short Story "A Friend in Need". Through the theme of 'escape', such a relationship is synoptically clear in 'Mabel', 'The Escape', and the like. In the abstract of this paper, she (p.97) defines intertextuality as "the generally accepted term denoting the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of texts." To distinguish between these stories and bring out the contrast created in their composition beyond their similarity, their in-depth analysis is thus required.

A short story is based on the following components: setting, plot, conflict, character, point of view, and theme. The scrutiny of these features and their elements in Maugham's 'Mabel' and 'The Escape' reveal as many similarities as dissimilarities.

#### A. Setting

To start off with these components, the time and location in which these stories take place display similarities as well as dissimilarities. The similar point between 'Mabel' and 'The Escape' is that in both stories the historical period, time of day, or year is not specified. Neither are the weather conditions. As these stories begin, there is no mood or atmosphere. However, regarding the location, if in 'Mabel', George escapes from Mabel through the Far East countries ((Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, China), in 'The Escape', this escape takes Roger Charing farther. First, he spent a year travelling round the world as this is shown in flashback; yet, he escapes by not moving, which sets the whole story in London in contrast to 'Mabel'. With such stories taking place in various locations, it is hard to tell what the daily life of the characters is like or whether the stories contain local colour. What is at least worthy of note is that from the outset

of these stories, Maugham's writing focuses on the customs of their characters and place. The characters in both short stories enjoy drinking and playing bridge together. Such reunions during which these love affairs are raised, can be considered as the first sequence of the plot known as the exposition.

### B. Plot

In accordance with the five stages of Freytag's Pyramid, from the introduction to the denouement passing through the rising action, climax, and falling action, there is no significant difference in Maugham's short stories. All the five elements of the plot are each at its place. However, there is a difference in the way Maugham arranges events to develop his basic idea of escape; in fact, from the climax, we readers wonder what will happen next, whether the conflict will be resolved or not. The main difference in Maugham's composition is at the stage of denouement. Indeed, contrastingly, George and Mabel marry; surprisingly, Roger and Ruth never marry. The latter outcome would probably continue to stir up conflict between readers who side with Roger and those who side with Ruth.

### C. Conflict

The conflict in 'Mabel' and 'The Escape' is a conflict that does not say its name because soothed by love. It is of two types: external and internal. As external, it involves all lovers. In both stories, male lovers struggle with forces outside their selves. As internal, they struggle within their selves; George and Roger seek each to make some decision and get rid of their lovers, but cannot. They are somewhat trapped by love and look hypocrite. It is a classical conflict regarding its dimension. George and Roger struggle against such a powerful circumstance of life as love. This conflict has also a psychological dimension since these male lovers struggle with themselves, ideas of right or wrong, or choices. They are about to choose divorce, but out of shame, fail to do it.

### D. Characters

Characterisation being the information the author gives the reader about the characters, Maugham reveals his characters in several ways. In 'Mabel' and 'The Escape', men and women are life-like. Yet, male characters are developing-dynamic, and have many sided personalities that change, 'for better or worse', in the course and by the end of the story. The phrase 'for better or worse' is put in brackets as it appeals to each reader's response to the behaviour of George and Roger. Contrary to their lovers, Mabel and Ruth are characterised as static stereotypes, as they have one or two characteristics that never change and are emphasised. They are portrayed as women of strong character albeit what happens to them. As they seldom come

singly, misfortunes have come into Mabel's life as evidenced in these lines:

They became engaged when he was home on leave, and when he returned to Burma it was arranged that she should join him in six months. But one difficulty cropped up after another; Mabel's father died, the war came, George was sent to a district unsuitable for a white woman; so that in the end it was seven years before she was able to start. (p.18)

Likewise, Ruth is described as a woman on whom many misfortunes fall. It reads that:

She was apparently one of those unfortunate persons with whom nothing by any chance goes right. If she married a husband, he beat her; if she employed a broker, he cheated her; if she engaged a cook she drank. She never had a little lamb, but it was sure to die. (p.32)

At variance with their fiancés, they are decisive in matters of love. They may, as long as it takes, risk their lives in order to get they want notwithstanding obstacles. They are resilient, patient, and determined. For Harahap (2020, p.5), Maugham did not treat Mabel as a woman who is a 'womanly woman' in the story. Instead of presenting Mabel as a weak character and inferior to male characters, Maugham presented her as a strong character and equal to male characters mainly George. In doing this, Maugham created her able to travel across some places in Asia alone chasing George which George believed she will not make it. But, she does make it.

There is, however, something missing in Maugham's depiction of Mabel on her first mention or appearance in the story, a thing for which he caught up a year later with Ruth in 'The Escape'. Mabel is not characterised in full detail, but Ruth is. Ruth is metaphorically portrayed as having "the patience of an angel", which could also be applied to Mabel despite the seven years of difficulties. As Rahimi (2013, p.17) thinks, "the language utilized by Maugham is richly figurative and among the figures of speech he resorts to similes and metaphors stand out." In fact, coupled with Maugham's naming of this character, this metaphor finds its rationale in the Bible verse in which Ruth replied to Naomi, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1: 16). On their physical appearances, Ruth the Moabite's and Ruth Barlow's determinations are alike and equal. Yet, we do not know much about Mabel's physique in relation to Ruth's. This may make room to speculations about the reasons of George's escape from her.

Physically, Ruth could not give reasons either to Roger or to readers to justify the escape from her. Indeed, the narrator says, "Ruth Barlow had a gift (or should I call it a quality?) that renders most men defenceless, and it was this that dispossessed Roger of his commonsense, his prudence and his worldly wisdom" (p.30). She would have lost her burst of beauty through her repeated mourning, but she remained as beautiful as ever. What she could be blamed for is another part of her behaviour. According to Kate May (2023, para. 7) :

The metaphor "the gift of pathos", the epithets "splendid dark eyes", "the most moving eyes", "big and lovely eyes" give us understanding of the author's attitude to that woman. But according to the narrator's opinion, Ruth was a two-faced woman of few ideas: he called her stupid and scheming. The epithets "stupid", "scheming", the simile "as hard as nails" give us full comprehension of her image.

#### E. Point of View

The angles from which Maugham's short stories are told are of various types. They are told in the first person, sometimes by the protagonist, sometimes by a character who interacts closely with the protagonist or other characters, that is the narrator in this case. As Chemmachery (2023, p.4) expresses, "In Maugham's short fiction, the narrator often delegates the power of narration to an intradiegetic narrator," that is he is inside (intra) the narrative (diegetic). There is no contrast at this stage since "I" is used in the introductory lines of 'Mabel' and 'The Escape' in which there are respectively thirteen and six occurrences of this first personal pronoun. At the outset of 'Mabel', we read these lines:

I was at Pagan, in Burma, and from there I took the steamer to Mandalay, but a couple of days before I got there, when the boat tied up for the night at a riverside village, I made up my mind to go ashore (...) There was a man sitting on the veranda and as I walked up he nodded to me and asked whether I would have a whisky and soda or a gin and bitters (...) I never knew his name, but when we had been chatting a little while another man came in who told me he was the secretary, and he addressed my friend as George. (p.16)

As it can be seen, there is an excessive use of the first-person pronoun in this opening paragraph of 'Mabel', which means that we as readers see the story through this person's eyes as he experiences it and only know what he knows or feels. Such is the same in the introduction of 'The Escape':

I have always been convinced that if a woman once made up her mind to marry a man nothing but instant flight could save him (...) I have only once known a man who in such circumstances managed to extricate himself. His name was Roger Charing. He was no longer young when he fell in love with Ruth Barlow and he had had sufficient experience to make him careful; but Ruth Barlow had a gift (or should I call it a, quality?) that renders most men defenseless, and it was this that dispossessed Roger of his common sense, his prudence and his worldly wisdom. (p.30)

As we can notice, Maugham's narration in both stories starts with this first-person point of view, and then switches to other persons. Harahap (2020, p.4) writes, "Until this point, the story is narrated in first-person point of view with the unnamed character as the narrator but when the story of George and Mabel is told, it changes to a third person point of view." The comment Condrat (2010, p.100) makes on Maugham's short story 'A Friend in Need', could be applied to 'Mabel' and 'The Escape'. They are polyphonic narrations by different voices. From the very first paragraph, as she comments, Maugham uses different pronouns such as: 'I', 'we', 'they' and 'you'. The first-person personal pronoun is the narrator, the author's mouthpiece. He bridges the gap which might exist between him and his reader with the help of the inclusive pronoun 'we', making the reader contribute his own experience to the narration.

In both stories, Maugham also uses two main types of omniscient point of view: omniscient limited and omniscient objective. In fact, through omniscient limited, the author tells the story in third person using such pronouns as he and she. We know only what the character knows and what Maugham allows them to tell us. We can see the thoughts and feelings of characters if the author chooses to reveal them to us. Through omniscient objective, it appears as though a camera is following the characters, going anywhere, and recording only what is seen and heard. There is no comment on the characters or their thoughts. No interpretations are offered. We as readers are placed in the position of spectators without Maugham there to explain. Hence, in front of George's and Roger's falling out of love, we have to probe into their minds and interpret this situation on our own.

As we move down with these stories, we obviously realise this shift from the first-person point of view to third-person point of view. Harahap (2020, p.4) adds that "the story of George and Mabel which is told in third person point of view replaces the first-person point of view from the unnamed character that appears first in the story."

## F. Theme

The controlling idea in these stories is the escape. In 'Mabel', George is busy escaping. He escapes physically and his escape is over when Mabel meets him. In 'The Escape', Roger does not move anymore. His escape is no longer physical, but mental (Roger being in a single setting), and it is shown in flashback. His mental escape starts when Ruth meets him. The central insight in this short story is one of the elements of the paratext. The first contrast created in these short stories is a paratextual one, not because the titles as one of the paratextual components are different, what they must be, but because 'Mabel' is an eponymous heroine, and would have deserved it had the two stories to be compared. When it comes to see these two gentlemen behave in such ways after dating their ladies, this gives good reasons to Mrs. Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919, p.88) to declare, "Now I am well aware that pettiness and grandeur, malice and charity, hatred and love, can find place side by side in the same human heart."

## II. CONCLUSION

All things considered, the review of Maugham's two short stories 'Mabel' and 'The Escape' reveals a remarkable interrelationship. They are related to each other through the theme of 'escape'. The protagonists George and Roger in both stories, escape from their ladies with the sole difference by the denouement; George and Mabel marry, but Roger and Ruth do not, creating thereby a sharp contrast. Such a contrast is justified by two reasons. The first is linked to the avoidance of all compositional monotony and triteness, the second to human nature; in fact, even married, man always tends to escape his wife. Such escape is more mental than physical as seen with Roger.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Chemmachery, J. (2023). *Spatial, Temporal and Linguistic Displacement in Kipling's and Maugham's Colonial Short Stories*. Université Paris 1 – Sorbonne.
- [2] Condrat, V. (2010). Intertextuality in William Somerset Maugham's Short Story "A Friend in Need." *Limbaj si Context; Balti*. Vol. 2, Iss. 2, pp.97-126.
- [3] Epstein, J. (1989). Is It All Right to Read Somerset Maugham? *Partial payments: essays on writers and their lives*. New York: Norton.
- [4] Freytag, G. (1900). *Freytag's Technique of the drama: an exposition of dramatic composition and art*. An authorized translation from the 6th German ed. by Elias J. MacEwan. Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co.
- [5] Harahap, A. M. (2020). Modernism in "Mabel" and "The Rocking-Horse Winner." *Language Research in Society (LaRSo) Journal*. Volume 1, Issue 1.

- [6] Linares, F. S. (1992). *W. Somerset Maugham and a philosophy of life*. Durham theses, Durham University. <http://ethese.dur.ac.uk/5735/>.
- [7] Rahimi, Z. J. A. (2013). An In-depth Analysis of the Manifestation of Emotions and Ideas through Similes in Short Stories by Somerset Maugham. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.3, No.3. pp.14-19.
- [8] Maugham, S. W. (1989). *The Escape and Other Short Stories*. Paris : Librairie Générale Française.
- [9] \_\_\_\_\_. (1919). *The Moon and Sixpence*. New York: The Modern Library.
- [10] May, K. (2023). "The Escape" by S. Maugham." (<https://kspu.academia.edu>).