

Buried among the yellow men: death in an English short story

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Abstract. This paper is about W. Somerset Maugham's short story *The Taipan*. I identify two ideas that the story seems to be based on, some related strengths, but also a slight weakness.

Draft version: Version 2 (May 27th 2022, minor change, "Now the question...").

Two ideas. What should we make of W. Somerset Maugham's short story *The Taipan*? I guess the author had two initial story ideas, which he then synthesized and elaborated and even twisted. I warn readers that my statement of these ideas gives away some of the plot:

- i. The idea of a psychologically accurate story of an Englishman planning to stay overseas, within a British community there, but then, confronted with vulnerability that brings him closer to death, longing to return to the familiarity of England. (*The realist idea.*)
- ii. The idea of a story about a man who observes a grave being dug and wants to know whose grave that is and it turns out to be his own grave. (*The gothic idea.*)

I assume both ideas are Maugham's and shall comment on both below.

The realist idea. How to compete with stories about an individual approaching death? Or, if compete is the wrong word, what can one add to such literature? The first idea, of making use of British communities overseas and an Englishman's experience of approaching death abroad, solves that problem. It seems an obvious move, but it is also possible that such obvious moves are not made, and not especially unlikely. If a class have read a few canonical stories about individuals approaching death and you ask them to write their own, maybe no one has this idea.

Maugham's elaboration of the first idea is to take an ambitious, skillful, successful, practical, proud, and bossy man who moved to China from England thirty years ago and send him through a transformative experience. Here is the story's second sentence:

He was number one in the not the least important branch of the most important English firm in China. He had worked his way up through solid ability, and he looked back with a faint smile at the callow clerk who had come out to China thirty years before.

And here is what we are soon told:

He was not a mean man, and as long as his mother lived he had made her an allowance; but when the time came for him to retire he had no intention of going back to England; he had seen too many men do that and he knew how often it was a failure. He meant to take a house near the race-course in Shanghai...

But this is him towards the end of the story:

He wanted to go home. If he had to die, he wanted to die in England. He could not bear to be buried among all these yellow men. He wanted to be buried at home, not in the grave he had seen that day. He could never rest there. Never.

To begin with, he strikes me as broadly liberal, especially by the standards of the time (though it may not be politically wise to admit that). He is happy to live abroad and his interests are in pursuing rank within a business organization or set of them, not massacring the natives or turning them into textbook British citizens. He is not on a civilizing mission, beyond preventing the massacre of his own people. But by the end, he is closer to our preconceptions of a little Englander, terrified of all that is foreign, an impression which goes against his previous plans and actions. Along the way, we learn that the impression does actually fit with some aspects of

his life: in particular he has never got to know the Chinese and is prejudiced in his interactions. But what is it that moves him from one set of plans to another? The question brings us to the second idea.

The gothic idea. The discussion of the first idea above makes the material sound like prestigious psychologically realist literature. It is about human character and its development. It is not backing down against the forces of Tolstoy and Chekhov, who have occupied a literary capital of this deathly topic. But this second idea sounds as if it comes from the historically less prestigious genre of the gothic. It is a great plot idea and has the simplicity and memorability of some frightening tales.

But Maugham does not handle this idea in the simple way I have presented it. The main character of the story has an experience of seeing a grave dug by some Chinese, but it is unclear whether a grave is actually being dug or not. When he makes inquiries over whose grave it is, no one confirms that a grave was being dug, which leaves him with the question of whether his experience was a hallucination. The question troubles the character. At the end of the story he dies, and it is natural for a reader to imagine that there was indeed this grave and this is where he is going to be buried, but the words of the story are also consistent with holding that it was a hallucination.

A hybrid. I think the story has some value as a genuine hybrid, merging together realist and gothic influences. It brings together two very good ideas, related to each influence, and is well-crafted. Nevertheless, it suffers from at least one weakness, though I shall engage in some scene setting before identifying it.

This insular? Despite the final paragraphs, this is not a Little Englander. People we give this label to are troubled by all things foreign and also do not think that Britain, or England,

should be so involved with other countries. They are unlikely to stay abroad for long or plan to never return. But the main character has some qualities in common with that type. He also has some qualities in common with imperialists who believe in a hierarchy of societies and aim to improve the native, though he does not seem to care for the aim himself. One of the interests of the story is how we place such a person. Here is a quotation from when he experiences the grave being dug:

Though he had been so long in China he knew no Chinese; in his day it was not thought necessary to learn the beastly language, and he asked the coolies in English whose grave they were digging. They did not understand. They answered him in Chinese, and he cursed them for ignorant fools.

Now the question of how to place him, in relation to familiar types, probably cannot be dissociated from the question of how realistic this portrait of a person is. We turn to our experiences of people. A doubt I have about the realism of the story is to what extent one can sustain this level of insularity for thirty years abroad in China. Is he not going to learn local swear words at least, if not from the Chinese directly then from friends? Is he not going to hear local songs which stick in his mind? When he goes to the club, does he not find friends who are becoming more Chinese – their expressions, their pronunciation? Leaving aside language, he is a high achieving man and proud of this. Don't the Chinese show him someone as if to say, "We've got a person as good"? I suspect it is likely for there to be some rivalry on these lines. He is doing well within his community, but, after all this time, is he not faced with the question of his standing in the foreign culture he has encountered?

He fits a certain image of an Englishman abroad, who returns home uninfluenced by foreign customs – a man who cannot in this way be "diluted" – but the story deals with his inner

experiences. Like others, I suspect this kind of image to usually be deceptive. (A quotation from elsewhere is pointed: “We must assume, therefore, that the apparent insularity is more the result of the chronicler’s narrow vision than that of his subjects.” Lewis 1975: 25.) Outside of very extreme cases, these are people who are more receptive than they come across and it takes some effort to maintain that image. By the way, Maugham refers to the main character as “The Taipan,” the use of a Chinese term presumably being a piece of mockery. I suspect his caricaturing instincts have triumphed over his realist ones, regarding insularity, but note that Maugham paints a similar portrait of insularity in another story, namely “The Consul,” and there seems to be some substance in the theme not learning Chinese, despite the circumstances.

Gravediggers. The grave digging scene makes me think of *Hamlet*, but there is not a touch of Hamlet about this fellow! Was the aim to subject him to experiences that result in a Hamlettian richness of wit and instability, but instead he just totally changed his plans and died? “Don’t try to turn this into that!” is, one might speculate, the conclusion from Maugham’s experiment on the previously solid figure. Anyway, it is something else that draws my attention. We do not know anything of what these gravediggers say. I imagine: “I have seen this man for years, he looks healthy but he’ll be dead soon.” There’s an experience of such people suddenly dying and the enigmatic Other detects this in advance.

Second-rate? A compilation of Somerset Maugham sketches and stories set in China contains an introduction, in which the assessment of a critic is conveyed: “I have never been able to convince myself that he was anything but second-rate.” (Wilson, quoted in Lethbridge 1985: v) The introduction goes on to say that Maugham’s short stories, at least, are still much admired. I am not sure if slight modifications to overcome the weakness identified would have helped cross this story over into the first-rate, in the eyes of the critic quoted. Even without the

modifications, it still shows mastery over the short story form and I like the roughly Cartesian structure of doubts about perceptual experience and then a reconception of the self. By the way, the version of the story in this volume merges several of the paragraphs, compared to a version I earlier read. What happened to those carefully separated and reader-friendly paragraphs opening the story?

Reference

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