

Destigmatization Leads to Purity—The “Pure Slut” in Maugham’s Works

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William Somerset Maugham is a famous British novelist and playwright. He has written many works in his life with distinctive characterization, and the female images he portrays are extremely controversial. Taking Sophie in *The Razor’s Edge* and Rosie in *Cakes and Ale* as examples, this paper analyzes the images of “pure sluts” created in Maugham’s works: They are regarded as degenerate and contemptible by the social mainstream of the era because of their “promiscuity”. However, their behavior is not evil, but the result of free option and personality liberation. This kind of freedom and liberation removes the moral judgment meaning of “slut” and makes them get rid of the stigma of “slut” label.

Keywords: Maugham, *The Razor’s Edge*, *Cakes and Ale*, female

Introduction

Maugham has always been famous for his plump and spicy portrayal of characters. His female characters are numerous and distinctive, which has attracted the research of many scholars both domestic and abroad. These studies mainly focus on the living conditions and concepts of women in the patriarchal society in Maugham’s works and the symbolic meanings of the female images.

There are some studies of the image of women who seem to exhibit some rebelliousness in breaking free from the shackles of marriage, but remain only on the level of consciousness, not allowing them to live truly independent lives in Maugham’s works. Lv Peiai and Liu Hui (2022) analyzed Kitty in *The Painted Veil* as a female image who is dependent on love and fortune of male in the patriarchal society. Although at last she “awakes”, Kitty’s awakening and freedom are not autonomous and thorough. She awakens the feminist consciousness but does not act on it, and therefore remains dependent on patriarchy as she is formed to do.

There is also a kind of female image portrayed in Maugham’s works which has been studied a lot: seemingly free from moral shackles and having free choice, but still remaining an identity objectified by male. Yuan Quan and Huang Jian (2019) analyzed Wilkinson in *Of Human Bondage* as an image of this kind. Although she shows her freedom of love and desire, she is still just regarded as a vessel of male’s desire and abandoned by male. Women are mostly in a passive state of acceptance in sexual relations. R. Kalpana (2021) argued that some women in Maugham’s short stories conform to their own desires and break free from the shackles of traditional family responsibilities, which does not actually enhance their social status. The lack of a worthy target choice actually makes their lives worse, and the resistance therefore remains a failure.

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The mainstream of research on female characters in Maugham's works tends to be negative, believing that the females in Maugham's works are not really free from the shackles of the patriarchal society: Their thoughts and destinies are controlled by the patriarchy. However, this essay puts forward the image of "pure slut", which explains that these female characters in Maugham's works who are denounced as depraved and evil by the society indeed break the moral shackles of patriarchy and have the freedom to choose their own fate.

Sophie in *The Razor's Edge*

The Reason Why Sophie Is Called "Slut"

The concept of "slut" is emphasized in the subsequent description of the views of people representing the mainstream values of society at that time on Sophie. Isabel, a formally educated woman, follows a step-by-step process set by society, whose point of view on Sophie can be seen as a miniature of the society. She believes that Sophie's "fall" cannot be attributed to external causes, but from her internal "evil": Fall can only be produced by evil, and any misfortunes and disasters can only be used as an excuse. The reason she declares Sophie "bad" is that "She's soused from morning till night. She goes to bed with every tough who asks her" (Maugham, 2000b, p. 221). Aside from Isabel, the police who handles Sophie's death has a similar assessment of Sophie:

It appears that the woman Macdonald had a very bad reputation. She was a drunkard, a dope fiend and a nymphomaniac. She was in the habit of sleeping not only with sailors off the ships, but with the riffraff of the town. (Maugham, 2000b, p. 312)

It can be seen that "promiscuity" is the expression of "depravity" considered by the mainstream of society at that time. Sophie's "depravity" is completely the result of her own choice in the eyes of Isabel, who disdained her misfortunes, and the police, who knew nothing about her misfortunes. Therefore, it can be concluded that the promiscuity, which is not forced by external forces but conforming to one's own will, and is not passive but active choice, is the reason why the mainstream society at that time labeled Sophie as a "slut".

Argument for Sophie's Purity in the Work

After learning the tragic experience that Sophie's beloved husband and child died in a car accident, Maugham, the narrator in the novel, expressed his understanding of Sophie's changes: She used to be happy and "decent", but when the accident took away her happiness, her life suddenly lost all support, "She'd lived in heaven and when she lost it she couldn't put up with the common earth of common men, but in despair plunged headlong into hell" (Maugham, 2000b, p. 212). When Isabel calls Sophie "bad" because she "goes to bed with every tough who asks her", Maugham argues that such behavior is only a "bad habit", and it's not proper to call a person "bad" because of a "bad habit". "Quite a number of highly respected citizens get drunk and have a liking for rough trade. They're bad habits, like biting one's nails, but I don't know that they're worse than that" (Maugham, 2000b, p. 212). He believes that a person "who lies and cheats and is unkind" is a villain, and that acts such as promiscuity have nothing to do with moral turpitude. Although Maugham does not explicitly mention "purity", his decriminalization of Sophie's promiscuity is a defense of Sophie's purity in the mainstream social concept that promiscuity is moral corruption.

Rosie in *Cakes and Ale*

The Reason Why Rosie Is Called "Slut"

As the protagonist of *Cakes and Ale*, Rosie is also full of "pure" and "dissolute" contradiction. When the

narrator Ashenden asks Mary-Ann, the maid, why Rosie has a bad reputation, the maid reasons:

There wasn't a man who come in to 'ave a drink that she didn't carry on with. No matter who they was. She couldn't stick to anybody, it was just one man after another. They tell me it was simply 'orrible. (Maugham, 2000a, p. 58)

It can be seen that Rosie's indiscriminate choice and frequent change of partners are one of the reasons why her behavior is controversial. And after Rosie abandoned her husband Edward and eloped with her lover, one of Edward's friends directly defined Rosie, "My dear Edward, let us face the fact: your wife was nothing but a common strumpet" (Maugham, 2000a, p. 157).

In fact, her indiscriminate choice of partners, frequent changes, and infidelity to marriage can all reflect that for Rosie, the status of love in the relationship related to sex is declining. In other words, Rosie can have sexual relations with others without love, which gives people the impression that she is heartless, unrighteous, and indulged in carnal desires. A woman who cheats on her partner because she loves someone else is considered immoral, but not a slut; and when she had sex with anyone who had no emotional basis, it seemed to society at the time to be no different from a prostitute, and even more aggressive, which is why she was considered a "slut".

An Argument for Rosie's Purity in the Work

From the perspective of the narrator Ashenden, there are two reasons to defend Rosie's "purity": simple motive and kind nature. Rosie has many lovers, but not with any ulterior motives. She sympathizes with people who have nothing but to enjoy the happiness brought by each other.

When she liked anyone it was quite natural for her to go to bed with him. She never thought twice about it. It was not vice; it wasn't lasciviousness; it was her nature. She gave herself as naturally as the sun gives heat or the flowers their perfume. It was a pleasure to her and she liked to give pleasure to others. It had no effect on her character; she remained sincere, unspoiled, and artless. (Maugham, 2000a, p. 182)

Such feelings are purely spiritual, not materialistic or utilitarian, and do not cater to any earthly values. The pursuit of such pure spiritual feelings also confirms Rosie's purity. The unprincipled promiscuity in the eyes of the secular public is also Rosie's behavior of wanting to give more love and make more people happy, which is rooted in her kind nature. Driven by her good nature, she never hesitates to do the behaviors that make her reviled. She does not care about prejudice, gains, and losses, but just doing what she wants to do, which also reflects the purity of Rosie.

The Interpretation of "Pure Slut"

Purity: As the Opposite of Filth

When putting forward the concept of "pure slut", it is necessary to make clear the respective meanings of "slut" and "purity", as well as the unity of opposites between these seemingly contradictory concepts. That is to say, for the image of "slut", "purity" is not absolute, but relative.

The stigmatized nature of "slut". First of all, as for the concept of "slut" in the era of Sophie and Rosie, it has been concluded in the previous discussion that women are "actively promiscuous". However, if the subject of such behavior is male, the appellation is more neutral, mild, and non-insulting, such as "playboy". It can be seen from this that the word "slut" is not a simple "behavior-result" appellation, but an unequal and stigmatizing word for women. Simone de Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex* (1953, p. 583), "All women who serve as sewer to the shining, wholesome edifice where respectable people have their abode". Her explanation of this conclusion can be simply summed up as: When a man and a woman do something against the moral norm together, the man

can be spared his noble image, while the woman needs to be blamed for it. Under this double standard of social identity, women who are afraid of condemnation are bound more and more tightly in strict standards. Those women who are not afraid of condemnation do "deviant" things and become what people call "sluts". It can be said that the essence of the word "slut" is not the shame of women, but the failure of social discipline, which covers up and tries to consolidate its own violated authority by stigmatizing the women who perpetrate such transgressive behavior.

"Purity" means destigmatizing. As mentioned above, "purity" is the relative concept of "destigmatization" as opposed to "slut". As to the absolute concept, *Oxford Dictionary* still defines the "morally good" meaning of "pure" as "without evil thoughts or actions, especially sexual ones". Purity still refers to morality, and morality is ultimately justified by physical chastity, which falls back into the unjust system of social identity described in the previous paragraph. Therefore, discussing the absolute meaning of "purity" will inevitably fall into the cycle of self-proving innocence in the unfair evaluation system. The discussion of "purity" is intended to strip the element of moral judgment from it and desexualize it, so that "purity" is no longer a word that reinforces the unequal social identity standard, but a truly equal, unbiased, spiritual, and unadulterated definition. This is why "purity" is "purity". As for the nature of the stigma attached to "slut", the relative meaning of "purity" is to destigmatize women who are labeled "sluts" because of their "promiscuity": True purity is spiritual and non-judgmental, not about sexual or double moral standards.

The Meaning of the Image of "Pure Slut"

Maugham emphasized in the novel that Sophie and Rosie both have the characteristics of kindness, and this evaluation is only one of the most easily accepted reasons to excuse their "slut" identity. In fact, Maugham also expressed in the book that they did not care about this "whitewashing". Between marrying Larry, who praises her as "noble", and ending her sobriety, Sophie chooses the latter. The former represents her being accepted by mainstream values, while the latter represents the way she really wants to live her life. Sophie and Rosie have similar opinion on life even though their life paths are very different. They all express this life philosophy by a simple sentence: Sophie says, "Life's hell anyway, but if there is any fun to be got out of it, you're only a god—damn fool if you don't get it" (Maugham, 2000b, p. 240). Rosie says, "We shall all be dead in a hundred years and what will anything matter then? Let's have a good time while we can" (Maugham, 2000a, p. 150). This is the real reason Maugham wants to convey about their choice: After a short life, all standards and evaluations disappear, and the joy of choosing to live according to our own ideas is the real life we experience.

The "pure sluts" are not afraid of the term "slut" because it does not make them any different from others. Their attitude towards themselves, towards life, and towards others has not been changed by such a derogatory term. Some hate them, some love them, some revile them, some praise them, but they ignore the judgment, whether positive or negative: They live not for the judgment of society, but according to their own ideas and desires. This is not a trivial individual choice, but a courageous act of breaking the social shackles as a member of a social group. As women, their fearlessness of gossip has the significance of liberation and revolution of female thought; as a human being, their attempts to discover the true meaning of life are thought-provoking and push people to think about freedom and values. The destigmatization of "sluts" is not only the liberation of women—so that women do not have to lose themselves for the constraints of social evaluation, but also the ideological liberation of those who are bound by social standards, sacrifice their own wishes and freedom in ignorance or compromise, and live a standardized life regulated by the social value system.

Conclusion

Maugham has made a definition in *The Summing Up* that the meaning of life lies in goodness. And as for the meaning of goodness, he explains: "It may be that in goodness we may see, not a reason for life nor an explanation of it, but an extenuation" (1951, p. 191).

In this indifferent universe, with its inevitable evils that surround us from the cradle to the grave, it may serve, not as a challenge or a reply, but as an affirmation of our own independence. It is the retort that humour makes to the tragic absurdity of fate. (p. 191)

Goodness is forgiveness and self-forgiveness, preserving one's own independence, humor against the tragedy of fate—goodness has nothing to do with morality. The subject of life is everyone's self; its meaning should naturally be defined by each individual. Pay attention to the heart, and follow one's heart; only in this way can people find their own meaning of life.

Destigmatizing is what theorists are supposed to do. Inspiring or guiding everyone to live a good life of their own is exactly the ultimate significance of literature and literature research.

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