

# For Services Rendered Study Guide

## For Services Rendered by W. Somerset Maugham

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# Introduction

When *For Services Rendered* opened at the Globe Theatre in London in 1932, Somerset Maugham had been heralded as the most successful playwright in England. Maugham was praised for his adept storytelling skills, which had entertained audiences for thirty years. This night, however, English audiences were not prepared for the anti-war focus of his new play, and, as a result, it closed after just seventy-eight performances.

Appreciation for the play has grown over the years since its first production. Now *For Services Rendered* is acclaimed as one of Maugham's best plays. The story, which so shocked early audiences, focuses on the devastating effects of World War I on an English family. As Maugham chronicles the damaged lives of each member of the Ardsley family and their friends, he presents a scathing indictment of the war and the governments that convince young men to sacrifice their lives in the name of glory.

## Author Biography

William Somerset Maugham was born on January 25, 1874, in Paris, France. Maugham's father, Robert, worked for the British Embassy as a solicitor. After the deaths of both of his parents within two years of each other, the eleven year-old Maugham was sent to Kent, England, and raised by his uncle, a reverend in a local vicarage, and his wife. Maugham had a difficult time at King's School in Canterbury due to a persistent stammer and his small stature, which made him painfully shy. In 1890, at sixteen, he began studying philosophy at the University of Heidelberg.

After returning to Kent a few years later, he started writing but decided to go into medicine to pay the bills. He trained for six years at St. Thomas's Hospital in London where he worked as a midwife for working-class mothers. After he earned his medical degree in 1897, he gave up the profession and turned to writing full-time, gaining confidence from his initial literary success. His first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, which reflected his work as a midwife, was published that same year along with short stories that appeared in *Punch* and other journals. He continued writing after he moved to Paris but lived in poverty there until his literary reputation began to grow after the production of his first play, *Lady Frederick*, in 1907, and four other plays the following year.

After Oscar Wilde's infamous trial in 1895, Maugham became much more secretive about his own homosexuality. In 1915, he married Syrie Wellcome, an interior designer with whom he had a child.

During World War I, Maugham served with a Red Cross ambulance unit and as a medical officer. He later served with British Secret Service in Switzerland and Russia. During World War II, Maugham served with the British Ministry of Information in Paris. His play, *For Services Rendered*, was a scathing attack on the English government's treatment of war veterans. In 1916, he met Gerald Haxton, an American ambulance driver, and despite his marriage to Wellcome, the two became lovers and companions for the next thirty years. Maugham and Wellcome divorced in 1929.

After the war years, Maugham's overwhelming success as a playwright, novelist, and travel writer, which made him one of the world's richest authors, afforded him a lavish lifestyle. He entertained royalty and the wealthy in his villa in southeast France, once owned by Leopold II, and amassed a fortune in art. He died in Nice, France, in 1965.



# Plot Summary

## Act 1

The entire play takes place in the home of Leonard and Charlotte Ardsley, situated in a small country town outside of Canterbury, England. One afternoon, Mrs. Ardsley takes tea with her son Sydney, who has become blind as a result of war injuries. She tells him that her daughter Ethel has arrived and that her husband, Howard, will pick her up later. The two discuss Howard's drinking problem and his relationship with Ethel.

Ethel arrives with Gwen, a family friend, whose pitying tone toward Sydney becomes quite annoying. Mrs. Ardsley's younger daughters, Lois and Eva, soon come in from playing tennis with Wilfred Cedar, Gwen's husband, and Collie Stratton, another family friend. As Eva leaves to get the maid, the others discuss the fact that Eva never got over losing her fiancé during the war. Gwen makes ignorant remarks about class in front of Ethel, who has married beneath her, and the others upbraid Gwen for it.

Wilfred decides to stay and play another game of tennis and talks Gwen into leaving him there, which she reluctantly agrees to do. Sydney tells the others how much he appreciates how well Eva takes care of him. Collie and Wilfred discuss Lois's limited marital prospects in the small town. Collie admits that he is having financial problems with his auto business and asks Wilfred for a loan, but Wilfred refuses.

After Wilfred leaves, Eva appears with tea and they discuss her care of Sydney. She tries to encourage Collie to find a wife, but he rebuffs her suggestion. Leonard arrives; he offers his sympathy and advice about Collie's financial problems. After the rest leave, Mrs. Ardsley discusses her medical problem with her brother, a doctor.

When they are alone, Wilfred tells Lois that he is "crazy about" her and suggests that she run off with him. Lois refuses his advances, insisting that he is old enough to be her father. Howard arrives and, after quickly assessing the situation, tells Wilfred to leave Lois alone. When Gwen appears, Wilfred becomes livid, calling her a fool for her jealousy and insisting that she leave immediately. After Howard falls into a drunken sleep, Ethel tries to defend him to Eva. Eva soon leaves to play chess with Sydney, a game she admittedly loathes.

## Act 2

Eva gets increasingly agitated as she and Sydney argue while playing chess until finally, she throws all the pieces on the floor. Eva declares that she does not want to be his caretaker any longer and is sick of "being a drudge." Mrs. Ardsley tries to get Eva to sympathize with Sydney's situation, but Eva cannot, insisting that she has already given enough to the man that she loved. Eva fears that she will never have another opportunity for marriage. After she rushes out of the room in tears, Sydney tells his mother that he understands Eva's feelings and does not blame her for them.



Gwen arrives and tells Mrs. Ardsley that she thinks her husband is in love with Lois. Mrs. Ardsley advises her to ignore him and says that nothing will come of it. Lois soon appears wearing a pearl necklace that she claims is fake, but that Gwen suspects is real. Her mother tells Lois that she thinks she needs a rest at her aunt's for a week or two. Later, Lois confronts Wilfred about whether the pearls he gave her are real. When he admits that they are, Lois insists that she cannot accept them, but he soon changes her mind. He confesses his love again and asks her to run away with him.

Lois tells Ethel of Wilfred's proposal and Ethel tries to talk her sister out of it. Their conversation shifts to Ethel's relationship with Howard, who Lois says is "common." Ethel admits that she had a strong physical attraction for him when she met him and that she fell in love with him. Lois concludes that she is not as romantic as her sister. She tells Ethel that she will not run away with Wilfred but admits that "it's rather exciting to have the chance."

Later that afternoon, Ardsley informs Collie that Collie will most likely be sent to jail for the bad checks that he wrote on his overdrawn account. Collie complains that a naval hero should not be treated so poorly and asks Ardsley for his help. Ardsley insists that there is little that he can do.

After Ardsley leaves, Eva appears and begs Collie to let her help him by lending him money. Collie refuses, noting the impropriety of her offer. Eva admits her feelings toward him and suggests that they become engaged, which would make it easier for him to accept the money. When Collie rejects her, suggesting that some day she will find someone that she "really like[s]," Eva is humiliated. Collie apologizes and leaves.

When Lois later criticizes Howard's drinking, he admits that he likes "to have a good old laugh now and again," but that Ethel does not. Howard tells Lois that she appears to be "a bit of a devil" and asks for a kiss. Ignoring her protests, he kisses her, which makes her furious. He tries to convince her that she is "missing out" and invites her up to his farm. His obvious desire for her makes her pause, but Mrs. Ardsley's appearance breaks the tension. When Mrs. Ardsley tells her daughter that she has made arrangements for her to visit her aunt, Lois agrees.

## Act 3

Later, Wilfred confronts Lois, begging her not to leave, but she refuses. He convinces her to keep the pearls and insists that he would do anything for her. The others come in and discuss Lois' trip when Ardsley bursts in and tells them that Collie has shot himself. Eva breaks down, blaming all of them for not trying to save him, and insists that she and Collie were engaged.

When Lois and Howard are left alone, Lois admits that she is attracted to him. Later Sydney expresses guilt over Collie's fate and blames the government for not taking care of the men who served in the war. When his father tries to defend the country, Sydney argues that men were sacrificed to the government's "vanity, their greed, and their

stupidity" and that patriotism and glory are "bunk." Howard admits that he enjoyed the war since it was more exciting than his life now.

Mrs. Ardsley's doctor tells Mrs. Ardsley that she needs an operation or she will not live more than a few months. Realizing that she has cancer, Mrs. Ardsley refuses. Mrs. Ardsley concludes that the knowledge that she is going to die gives her "a funny sort of thrill" because she is now free.

Gwen appears and informs Mrs. Ardsley that Lois and Wilfred are running off to London. She begs Lois not to go, insisting that she will never give her husband a divorce. Lois later admits to Ethel that she does not love Wilfred, but she enjoys having power over him. Eva walks into the room, drugged, and announces that Collie is coming. In the final scene, Ardsley appears, telling his family how wonderful it is to have them all together and praises England "and all it stands for." The play closes with Eva singing "God save the King," "in a thin and cracked voice," which horrifies everyone.



# Characters

## Charlotte Ardsley

Charlotte is sympathetic and sensitive to her family's and friends' troubles. She understands that Esther married Howard because they were in love. Open and willing to accept change, she admits that she thought class divisions would ease after the war.

Charlotte's love for her husband has prompted her to shield him from harsh realities like her illness. She tries her best to protect her family but is tired and so feels a giddy sense of freedom when she knows she will soon die.

## Eva Ardsley

Eva has accepted her role as Sydney's caretaker and also helps run the house since her mother is in ill health. Sydney suggests that she likes being a martyr, claiming, "it's jam for Evie to have an invalid to look after." He insists that "Nature destined her to be a saint and it's damned lucky for her that I'm around to give her the opportunity of earning a heavenly crown."

Sydney, however, recognizes only one of his sister's motivations. Helping others does give her a purpose in life, but she increasingly resents the fact that she has no other options. She desperately wants a husband and children.

## Leonard Ardsley

Leonard "always looks at the bright side of things," but only so that he does not have to get involved with painful truths. Mrs. Ardsley notes that "he can never see further than the end of his nose" and explains that she "always had to take care that he didn't trip over the obvious and hurt himself."

He is initially sympathetic to Collie's dilemma, but his limited sympathy does not prompt him to take any measures to help him out. He refuses to blame the government for the war or its consequences, excusing their neglect of men like Collie when he insists "the nation can't afford itself the luxury of supporting an army of officers it has no use for."

## Lois Ardsley

Lois has become hard and selfish as a result of her limited prospects. Even though she does not love Wilfred, she is excited by the drama of running away with him. She never considers the suffering she will cause Gwen, or her sister, as she contemplates an affair with Howard. Her sisters' bleak lives frighten Lois and prompt her to think only of herself.





## Sydney Ardsley

Sydney has adapted to his blindness with a combination of sardonic wit and sympathetic understanding of other's limitations. He uses his wit sometimes at his own expense, such as when he tells his mother that she must console herself by thinking that she has a hero for a son. The war, however, has embittered Sydney. He argues that he and others who served "have had our chance of making a good job of life snatched away from us."

Claiming a certain hardness, Sydney argues that suffering has not ennobled him. He cynically wonders what Eva would do without the family to wait on, suggesting that she wants to be made a saint. Yet, Sydney sympathizes with those around him. He is gracious when an annoying Gwen pities him, and he expresses sorrow when he learns of Collie's suicide. Recognizing that his disability is hard on others.

## Ethel Bartlett

Ethel is a decent, proud woman. She holds onto romantic memories of how much she and Howard were in love when they first met. Her common sense forces her to recognize the tensions in her marriage, but she refuses to complain, insisting that she has done her best. Her selflessness prompts her to blame herself for breaking class rules, claiming that their marriage has been harder on Howard than on her.

## Howard Bartlett

Howard drinks too much and tries to appear grander than he is, but his speech gives him away. He tells Wilfred that he was an officer and a gentleman and warns, "don't you forget it." Tired of being thought of as common in comparison to a lady like Ethel, Howard tries to seduce Lois because she has "a bit of devil in her."

## Gwen Cedar

Gwen is "desperately hanging on the remains of her youth," especially since she has a philandering husband. Trying too hard to ingratiate herself with others, she is annoyingly sympathetic to Sydney. She also lacks tact, as when she blurts out in front of Ethel, "it's always a mistake to marry out of one's class." She hovers over her husband and spies on him, desperate to do anything she can to prevent him from leaving her.

## Wilfred Cedar

Wilfred is a selfish and cold-hearted man who thinks nothing of hurting or humiliating Gwen in front of her friends. He admits to Collie that he made a good deal of money in the market and now he's "going to live like a gentleman." Yet, when Collie asks to



borrow money in order to keep from being sent to prison, Wilfred refuses, insisting, "I'm not made of money, you know. . . . I haven't got more than I can spend." He will soon pay a good deal of money for pearls, but only to satisfy his lust for Lois. When Lois asks what would become of Gwen if Wilfred left her, he responds, "Oh damn Gwen. I can only think of myself."

## **Collie Stratton**

Collie commanded a destroyer for the British Navy during the war but has been unable to adequately support himself in the years after. He is an honest man who has no business sense. Although he writes bad checks, he believes that he will somehow get the money to pay them off. He admits, "I'd had it drummed into me for so many years that nothing is impossible in the British Navy. It was hard to give in while I still had some fight in me." His pride prevents him from accepting Eva's offer of money, and he is too decent to take advantage of her feelings toward him. He treats Eva kindly and gently as he refuses her.



# Themes

## Hypocrisy of War

Maugham reveals the hypocrisy of governments that recruit young men to fight wars for the honor and glory of their country. Sydney explains how Englishmen initially believed that "every sacrifice was worth it." At the end of the war, they were convinced that those who died did not do so in vain. Men "who were broken and shattered . . . were buoyed up by the thought that if they'd given everything they'd given it in a great cause."

Yet, Sydney insists, these men were "the dupes of the incompetent fools who ruled the nations." They were, he concludes, "sacrificed to their vanity, their greed, and their stupidity." He worries that "they'll muddle us all into another war," and declares that if they do, he will go out into the streets and yell, "it's all bunk what they're saying to you, about honour and patriotism and glory, bunk, bunk, bunk." Maugham shows how these men have been abandoned by their government and stripped of their glory, as they struggle to endure the physical and economic hardships as a result of the war. Sydney must endure his blindness and his total dependence on his family. After his celebrated service in the British navy, Collie has been left no options other than to try to make his small business succeed. When it fails, he sees no recourse for himself except suicide.

## Class Consciousness

The rigid British class system in this era restricted the lives of the upper and lower classes. Men and women who married beneath their class brought shame to their families and tensions to their marriages. Gwen accurately captures the conventional attitude toward such arrangements when she notes, "It's always a mistake to marry out of one's own class. It's never a success." Ethel's marriage to the drunken, philandering Howard proves her point. When she married a tenant farmer, she embarrassed her family who have watched her "grow old and tired and hopeless." And her husband, who has grown tired of always looking up to his wife, now looks elsewhere for a bit of "fun."

## Sexism

The rigid class system, coupled with an endemic sexism, severely limits the options for women in the play. Howard reflects the traditional attitude when he declares, "no place like home, and home's a woman's place." Eva is trapped in her home, relegated to the traditional role of caretaker as she devotes long hours attending to Sydney. Her only hope for escape, as is the case for all of the women in the play, is through marriage. When all of her avenues for escape are cut off after Collie's suicide, Eva's mind cracks. Ironically, sexist attitudes also ruin Collie when he refuses Eva's offer of help because he cannot accept money from a woman.



Lois is not forced into marriage in order to escape the limiting life in the country, yet the only other option available for her is to accept Wilfred's invitation to run off to London with him. Facing the reality of life for aging women, she agrees to this arrangement because she does not love Wilfred. If he leaves her for a younger woman, she will not be heartbroken.

Gwen's life will be destroyed when Lois runs off with Wilfred, for as she recognizes, she is "too old to be left alone." She, like Ethel, accepts her husband's philandering because she has no other choice. At fifty, Gwen is too old to find a new husband, and so she must do everything she can to try to hold on to him, including humiliating herself by begging assistance from others.

# Style

## Suspense

Maugham's plots follow the traditional characteristics of a well-made play, with a clear pattern of conflict, climax and resolution. Often his plots focus on secrets that are eventually revealed by the end of the play. Suspense is heightened as the audience waits for the secrets to be revealed. *For Services Rendered* follows this pattern. There are two main secrets in the plot: Mrs. Ardsley's cancer and Lois's relationships with both Wilfred Cedar and Howard Bartlett. While Mrs. Ardsley's secret does not produce much conflict in the play, Lois' does: the play ends with her decision to run off with Cedar and perhaps enter into a sexual relationship with Howard, her sister's husband, which will affect her sister, Cedar's wife Gwen, and the reputation of Lois's family. The other conflict in the play, which centers on the relationship between Eva and Collie, ends in tragedy when Collie kills himself and Eva loses her sanity.

## Irony

Maugham employs irony in his characterization of the blind Sydney, who can "see" much more clearly than any of the other members of his family. He understands the sacrifices that Eva is making and does not blame her for her outbursts, and he alone knows that his mother is dying from cancer. Sydney also has a clear vision of the hypocrisy of his government when he insists that he and men like him "were the dupes of the incompetent fools who ruled the nations," that they were "sacrificed to their vanity, their greed, and their stupidity." Ironically, Sydney's father is blind to the reality of the horrors of war that surround him. He claims, "we none of us have anything very much to worry about" and not "very much to complain of," in front of his daughter, whose mind has been destroyed by the deaths of the two men she loved.



# Historical Context

## World War I

World War I was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The conflict started a month later when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Soon after, other European countries made their own declarations of war. Britain entered the war on August 4 after Germany began its invasion of France. The war between the allied powers (France, Russia, Britain and the United States) and the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) raged until 1918. The number of total casualties is extraordinary, estimated at 10,000,000, of which approximately 750,000 were British.

After a short postwar period of economic prosperity, unemployment in England increased as returning soldiers looked for work. In 1921, the number of unemployed men increased to 2,000,000. That number rose to 3,000,000 by 1932.

In the aftermath of World War I, British society went through a period of change. Traditional beliefs in God, country, and humanity were shaken as the British people faced the devastation of a war of this magnitude. The feelings of confusion and dislocation that resulted led to a questioning, and often a rejection, of conventional morality and beliefs.

## World War II

The world experienced a decade of aggression in the 1930s that would culminate in World War II. This second world war resulted from the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. These militaristic regimes gained control as a result of the economic depression experienced by most of the world in the early 1930s, and from the conditions created by the peace settlements following World War I. The dictatorships established in each country encouraged expansion into neighboring countries. In Germany, Hitler strengthened the army during the 1930s. In 1936, Benito Mussolini's Italian troops took Ethiopia. From 1936—1939, Spain was engaged in civil war involving Francisco Franco's fascist army, aided by Germany and Italy. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria, and in March 1939, Germany occupied Czechoslovakia. Italy took Albania in April 1939. One week after Nazi Germany and the U.S.S.R. signed a Treaty of Nonaggression, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. On September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany after a U-boat sank the British ship *Athenia* off the coast of Ireland. Another British ship, the *Courageous*, was sunk on September 17. All the members of the British Commonwealth, except Ireland, soon joined Britain and France in their declaration of war.



## Critical Overview

When *For Services Rendered* opened at the Globe Theatre in London in 1932, audiences were not prepared for its anti-war focus. As a result, the play closed after just 78 performances. As Ted Morgan argues in his biography on Maugham, the play is "an indictment of a whole nation. . . . The patriots and promise-makers, the apostles of a better world, were shown up as rogues and hypocrites."

Anthony Curtis, in his introduction to the play, writes that "the London critics damned it with qualified praise." He cites one such critic, Charles Morgan, writing anonymously in *The Times*, that "Mr. Maugham has given us an enthralling theatrical entertainment, if nothing more." Curtis notes that in *The Spectator*, Peter Fleming concluded that Maugham tries too hard to blame the war for all of the problems that the characters face. Fleming writes that,

if the war decreed that Mrs. Ardsley should find post-war life a sad and silly business, no longer in the best of taste, it is not the war's fault that she must shortly leave it."

Other reviewers were much more harsh. Curtis quotes enraged novelist Cecil Roberts who ranted in his article, "Should Maugham Get Away With It?" for *The Daily Express*, "It is worse than a bad play. . . . It is a play of malevolent propaganda against those who live with courage and hope." Yet in response, Wimbledon tennis champion Bunny Austin wrote an eloquent defense of the play to the paper a few days later. Some reviewers, like Desmond MacCarthy in the *New Statesman* and John Pollock in the *Saturday Review* considered it to be his best play.

The play's reputation has increased since its first production. Curtis notes that its 1979 production by the Royal National Theatre was hailed by many in the press as Maugham's "theatrical masterpiece." He adds, "At this distance of time, the play appears as a microcosmic image of what Auden later described as 'a low dishonest decade.'" M. K. Naik, in his study of Maugham's work, finds "a greater mellowness; and the awareness of the graver issues of life" than in Maugham's previous work. Laurence Brander, in his guide to Maugham, insists that the play "was much too accurate a picture to be a success on the stage" and concludes, "It is a bitter picture of a macabre world which is realized in this very expert piece of writing."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1





# Critical Essay #1

*Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins focuses on the damaging effects of war and social class on the women in Maugham's play.*

Ted Morgan argues, in his biography on Maugham, that *For Services Rendered* is "an indictment of a whole nation." He claims that Somerset Maugham exposes "the patriots and promise-makers, the apostles of a better world" as "rogues and hypocrites." Maugham does this by showing the devastating effects of the war on an English family. Sydney Ardsley's heroic actions during World War I earned him the Military Cross but little else. Blinded in the war, Sydney is confined to his home and must depend on his family's kindness and care, since the government has turned its back on him and the other soldiers who bravely fought for their country. As Sydney notes, everything continues the way it had before the war, "except that we're all broke to the wide and a few hundred thousand fellows like me have had our chance of making a good job of life snatched away from us." Another fellow like him, Collie Stratton, is driven to suicide after his business fails and he sees no hope for the future.

The most dramatic effects of the war are seen on the men in the play, but Maugham also illustrates the damage done to women. Through his chronicle of the lives of the three Ardsley sisters and their friend Gwen, Maugham illustrates how the war, exacerbated by the rigid British class system, affected in more subtle, but no less destructive, ways the women who were left behind.

Eva Ardsley becomes the most tragic figure in the play. The thirty-nine year old woman is restless and haggard when she first appears. The combination of class and war has severely limited her chances for happiness. Eva has never gotten over the death of her fiancé, who was killed in the war. Her mother explains, "in a place like this she could hardly hope to. By the end of the war there were very few young men left. And girls were growing up all the time." In a culture that revered youth and beauty, Eva did not have much opportunity to find a suitable husband, which was the goal for every woman in that era. Another man had been interested in her, but she rejected him because he was not of her class. Women like Eva were under pressure not only to marry but to marry well.

Since she has no husband and no immediate prospects, Eva has accepted the role of her brother's caretaker, playing endless hours of chess with him, which she admittedly loathes. She concludes that looking after Sydney helped her to bear the loss of her fiancé. Yet she has not given up her dream of some day marrying, for society has convinced her that "it's a woman's province to have a home of her own and children to look after."

Eva has adopted the role of saint, since she had little opportunity for anything else, claiming that she is glad to do what she can "to make life a little easier" for Sydney. Sydney argues that Nature destined her for sainthood and decides "it's damned lucky



for her that I'm around to give her the opportunity of earning a heavenly crown." Yet Sydney ignores the social pressures that have encouraged Eva to take on this role and that have left her no other options.

Eva is unable, however, to maintain her saintly demeanor as she recognizes the bleak future that lies ahead of her. During the chess game with Sydney, she fires back after Sydney criticizes her moves with, "good God, don't I spend my life looking ahead. And a damned cheerful prospect it is." Her frustration rises until she scatters the pieces on the floor and declares, "why should I be sacrificed all the time?" In her anger, Eva blames Sydney for her limited prospects, exclaiming "it's monstrous that he should try to prevent any one else from having a good time." Yet, it is not Sydney who is making Eva unhappy; the war and the rigid social mores that have determined her place have taken away her future.

Making one last attempt to secure herself a husband, Eva suggests to Collie that they marry, which would help him out of his financial difficulties. Ethel has encouraged the match, concluding, "even a marriage that isn't quite satisfactory is better than not being married at all." Collie rejects Eva, assuring her that some day she will find someone that she "really like[s]," and Eva is humiliated. Yet later, when her father tells her that Collie has killed himself, she passionately defends him, insisting that they were engaged. She reaches the point of hysteria when she claims that marrying Collie was her "only chance" and damns them all.

Ethel, the oldest daughter, has succeeded where her sister failed. She has married and has children, but her situation has not brought her happiness. The war has hurt her family financially, as the government has not lived up to its promise to support the country's tenant farmers. As a result, she and her husband work long hours in order to survive.

Ethel's marriage to a working-class man has brought shame to her family and resentment from her husband. Her mother admits, "When all that slaughter was going on it seemed so snobbish to object to a man because he was just a small tenant farmer." But Gwen's insensitive comment reflects more accurately the rigid attitudes of the British class system: "It's always a mistake to marry out of one's own class. It's never a success."

Ethel tries to convince everyone of her happiness, insisting that she has "nothing to complain of," but she reveals her true feelings when she breaks down as she watches her drunken husband sleep. She later admits that life as a tenant farmer's wife has been difficult and that sometimes his commonness upsets her. After acknowledging that it would have been better for Howard to marry in his own class, she reveals, "that's why I feel I must always have patience with him." Howard suggests the cause of his drinking when he concludes that Ethel is too good for him. He acknowledges that he is "only a common farmer . . . only . . . you don't always want to be looking up to your wife, do you?" As a result, he looks elsewhere to Lois, whom he considers more fun than his wife.



Gwen's suffering results from her husband's philandering. At fifty, she is "desperately hanging on to the remains of her youth," knowing that she is "too old to be left alone." In a frantic attempt to hold onto her husband, Gwen humiliates herself as she begs Mrs. Ardsley to persuade Lois not to run away with him. Mrs. Ardsley tries to comfort Gwen by telling her that "men of that age are often rather taken by bright young things" and suggests that "a sensible wife just shrugs her shoulders and laughs. Her safety is that the bright young things look upon her husband as an old fogey." Gwen, however, takes little comfort in her words, recognizing that her husband's wealth and her age put her in a vulnerable position. "I'm old and he's all I've got," she insists. "I'm too old to start fresh." Her only recourse is to threaten a scandal if Lois runs off with Wilfred.

Lois appears to have more prospects than her sisters because of her youth and beauty, but her choices are also limited and not very appealing. As Wilfred concludes, "girls nowadays who live in the country have to take what they can get." There are few options for a woman who cannot afford to live in the city. Lois admits that Wilfred is old enough to be her father, but she considers taking him up on his offer to run off with him since she sees no other way to get out. Recognizing the war's effects, she complains "the chances are that it'll go on like this till we're all weary old women." When Ethel tries to discourage her, she insists, "I'm getting on you know. . . . What have I got to look forward to exactly? Getting jumpy like Eva or making the best of a bad job like you?"

Lois considers Wilfred a safe prospect since she does not love him and therefore will not suffer if he eventually leaves her for a younger woman. Watching Ethel "grow old and tired and hopeless" has frightened her and prompted her to settle for Wilfred. She admits that she is going to leave with Wilfred because of what his money will bring her: "freedom and opportunity." As a result of her limited choices, Lois has become "hard and selfish."

By the end of the play, Lois prepares to run off with Wilfred and perhaps engage in an affair with Howard, which will further damage the lives of Ethel and Gwen. Eva has lost her sanity, evident in her announcement to the family that she and Collie are to be married. The savage irony of Eva's deranged song at the end of the play offers a fitting testament to the men and women whose lives have been destroyed by the first World War.

**Source:** Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *For Services Rendered*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

## Topics for Further Study

Write a screenplay based on one act of the play. What problems would you face if you were to make a film version of the play?

Research the English class structure in the years following World War I. How difficult was it to move from the lower to the upper classes? Consider economic as well as social factors.

Investigate women's roles in England after the war. What kind of opportunities, if any, did they have outside the home?

Investigate the English government's treatment of veterans after World War I. What kind of support did they offer them?



# Compare and Contrast

**1930s:** After WWII, there is a response to the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. Over two hundred countries band together to fight the militaristic expansion in Europe.

**Today:** The United States and Britain, along with thirty-three other countries, invade Iraq in 2003. The initial motive for the invasion is the assumed threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Several coalition allies pull out of Iraq as weapons of mass destruction are not found.

**1930s:** Britain follows America into the Depression, with approximately 3,000,000 unemployed in Britain by 1932.

**Today:** Economic policies, like unemployment compensation, are in place in England. These policies are designed to prevent the country from falling into a severe economic depression, like that of the 1930s.

**1930s:** The "New Woman" comes to describe women who challenge traditional notions of a woman's place, especially the roles of wife and mother. These challenges are seen as a threat to the fabric of the British family.

**Today:** Women have the opportunity to work inside or outside of the home, or both. However, those who choose to have children and a career face difficult time-management choices balancing work and home schedules.

## What Do I Read Next?

*The Sun Also Rises* (1926), by Ernest Hemingway, focuses on a group of disillusioned Americans living in Paris after World War I.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) focuses on the devastating effects of World War I on an Englishman.

In his most famous work, *Of Human Bondage* (1915), Maugham incorporates autobiographical elements in his chronicle of a young man's lonely life.

Nigel Viney collects compelling, artistic visions of war in his *Images of Wartime: British Art and Artists of World War I* (1992).

## Further Study

Cordell, Richard A., *Somerset Maugham: A Biographical and Critical Study*, Indiana University Press, 1961.

Cordell presents insightful analyses of Maugham's work, including his plays.

Curtis, Anthony, *The Pattern of Maugham: A Critical Portrait*, Hamilton, 1974.

Curtis concludes that Maugham's work is an accurate reflection of British society during the war years.

Loss, Archie K., *W. Somerset Maugham*, Ungar, 1987.

Loss sheds light on Maugham and his work.

Sanders, Charles, "W. Somerset Maugham," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 10, *Modern British Dramatists, 1900—1945*, edited by Stanley Weintraub, Gale Research, 1982, pp. 22—42.

Sanders presents a comprehensive overview of Maugham and his plays.

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Curtis, Anthony, "Introduction," in *W. Somerset Maugham: Plays: Two*, Methuen, 1999, pp. xiii—xxix.

Maugham, W. Somerset, *For Services Rendered: A Play in Three Acts*, Heinemann, 1932.

Morgan, Ted, *Maugham: A Biography*, Simon and Schuster, 1980.

Naik, M. K., *W. Somerset Maugham*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1966.