

# **The Razor's Edge Study Guide**

**The Razor's Edge by W. Somerset Maugham**

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# Plot Summary

*The Razor's Edge* follows the spiritual and physical journey of Larry Darrell, a sensitive, intelligent young man who refuses to conform to the prevailing social norms of post-World War I America. Instead of marrying a rich, pretty Chicago girl, he goes to Paris searching for answers to questions about man, God and the meaning of life. This leads to stops in Germany, Spain and India, the latter destination finally answering some of his questions through the teachings of Eastern spiritual men. While Larry is traveling and searching for answers, his former fiancée, Isabel, marries someone because of money instead of love, and she must deal with the effects of the stock market crash. They meet up again in Paris, completely different people. Larry has found peace, while Isabel, a socialite more interested in money than love, eventually moves back to the U.S. to live a prosperous but spiritually shallow life. W. Somerset Maugham is the author and also a character in the novel, inspiring the conversations that drive the novel's narrative. Maugham's elitist friend Elliott, opportunistic French artist Suzanne Rouvier and tragic addict Sophie drop in and out of the story, each playing an important role in the process.

The novel opens with narrator and author W. Somerset Maugham admitting his apprehension at writing a story that doesn't have a clear ending and that takes place over a long interval. In the end, however, *The Razor's Edge* delivers a compelling narrative that follows American Larry Darrell's search for the answer to basic human questions about life and man in post-World War I America.

Maugham, who takes an active role in the novel, meets Isabel and her fiancée, Larry, at the house of Louisa Bradley, a rich widow who is having her house redecorated. It's a redecoration that everyone agrees is needed except for Larry, who tells the group, including Maugham's friend and Mrs. Bradley's brother, Elliott, an elitist snob with a generous heart, that the only thing that matters is Mrs. Bradley's opinion. It's the first sign that Larry is not like the others. Soon after, he and Isabel decide on a separation of two years, which Larry will use to search for answers to questions about life while living in Paris. They're questions that Larry started asking after a fellow pilot was killed in World War I, an incident that he does not like to talk about.

In Paris, Larry declines Elliott's invitations to join the social elite and spends his time reading books. After the two years are nearly up, Isabel and her mother come to Paris to confront Larry about his plans. Once again, he declines to join their world and asks Isabel to travel around Europe with him, despite their limited financial means. She declines, essentially choosing money over love.

After the breakup, Larry spends the next ten years traveling through Europe starting with a mining community in northern France, before working at a farm in Germany, visiting Spain and studying under a Yogi in India. In India, Larry finally finds answers to some of his questions about life. They're also answers that he failed to find at a monastery and in the Christian church. Also in India, he experiences a spiritual



awakening while observing the sunrise over a mountain lake. Satisfied that he has learned enough, he returns to Paris.

In Paris, Larry meets up with Isabel, Maugham and Elliott. Isabel has married Gray Maturin, Larry's former best friend and the son of a wealthy Chicago broker. It's a marriage she admits is based on her desire to live the good life more than true love. After several years of material bliss, the couple loses nearly everything after the stock market crash of 1929 and moves into Elliott's Parisian apartment. After a chance meeting with Maugham, Larry rejoins his old friends, who are taken aback by his changed personality. He tells them he has found peace and no longer needs money or other material things. Apparently, Larry has also picked up the power to heal, curing Gray's migraine headaches after engaging him in meditation exercise.

While Isabel still has feelings for Larry, the general harmony is broken by the reappearance of Sophie MacDonald, an old friend from Chicago. She lost her husband and baby in car accident and ended up in Paris as a drunk and a drug addict, sleeping around with dangerous, random men. Shockingly, Larry asks her to marry him, a proposal driven by his need to help her. The proposal enrages Isabel, who purposely sabotages the marriage by tempting Sophie, who has been trying to kick her habits, with a bottle of vodka. She disappears and is later found murdered in Toulouse.

In between Sophie's relapse and her death, Elliott dies of old age in his house on the Riviera. It's a sad death. Having surrounded himself with rich people and expensive things, Elliott passes away alone, buried in a ridiculous old aristocratic costume. Maugham calls it a wasted life.

On the way back to London after Maugham's friend's death, he pays a visit to Isabel to confront her about Sophie. After first denying it, she admits to planting the vodka and tells Maugham she would do it again. Apparently, Isabel never got over her love of Larry, a love that caused her to commit a ruthless act of sabotage.

Following Sophie's burial, Maugham says goodbye to Larry for the final time. Larry tells him that he plans on giving up his monthly veteran's check and preaching his newfound spirituality in America. Afterward, Maugham admits losing touch with Isabel and Larry, but he imagines, in their own way, they each got what they wanted. Isabel, who moved to Dallas after Gray got a job in the oil business, probably lived the life of an upper-class socialite, hosting parties and living in a large, expensive house. Larry, whose only desire was knowledge and peace, is probably living a simple life back in the U.S., poor but happy.



# Chapter 1 (sections i-v)

## Chapter 1 (sections i-v) Summary

The author opens by stating his misgivings about writing the story he is about to narrate. The reason for writing the story is so that his friend's biographers will have some useful information to work with. At first, he states he hasn't invented or embellished anything, before taking that back and stating that he changed names and wrote the conversations in his own words to the best of his recollection. The conversations he wasn't around to listen to, he wrote based on how he thought the conversation would have gone. The author then admits that part of his reservations about writing the novel is that he is writing about an American, and writing about people from another country is almost impossible because a foreigner can never fully understand the effects of growing up in another country.

The story starts with the narrator meeting Elliott Templeton for lunch in Chicago. Elliott is an American living in Paris whose social skills enable him to become one of the most popular members of Paris high society. He is a snob, but he is also a kind, witty, intelligent man. Along with making friends to climb the social ladder, he has also converted from Episcopalian to Catholicism to ingratiate himself with additional social groups. He meets the narrator at his hotel and tells him they are going to have lunch at the home of Louisa Bradley, a member of Chicago's elite, her daughter Isabel and a renowned decorator, Gregory Brabazon.

At the lunch, Elliott and the narrator meet Laurence "Larry" Darrell, Isabel's fiancé. Isabel gets Gregory to admit that the furniture in her mother's house, while expensive and impressive, looks awful. Laurence tells Isabel that if it makes Mrs. Bradley happy, they should leave her alone. Isabel then gives some background on Laurence. He was a fighter pilot in the war, going to Canada to enlist before he was eighteen years old. Elliott later tells him that Laurence is twenty years old and not looking seriously for a job. The author mentions that Laurence probably needs a break after the war. After visiting an art gallery, Elliott and the narrator depart with plans to meet Mrs. Bradley at her home the following evening.

## Chapter 1 (sections i-v) Analysis

Right away, the narrator introduces the novel's structure, a unique style that involves him talking directly to the reader and telling the story as a long recollection. In the first sections, the voice shifts from first person to second person to third person.

The reoccurring theme of snobbery and money is introduced, along with the theme of the duality of people. Elliott is a snob who makes friends and is nice to people for his own social gain. However, as Maugham comments, he's also a kind-hearted person. Along with Elliott's snobbery, Maugham makes his first criticism of the Catholic Church,



claiming that Elliott changed religions because of the better social contacts he would make.

Larry's true character is also hinted at. While everyone else is criticizing Mrs. Bradley's furniture, Larry says it doesn't matter what the furniture is like if she's happy. It's the first sign that he's not like everybody else.



# Chapter 1 (sections vi-x)

## Chapter 1 (sections vi-x) Summary

At another dinner party the following night, the author is seated next to a young, shy woman named Sophie, who gives him a brief bio of all of Isabel's friends seated at the table. One of her friends, Gray Maturin, is the son of a millionaire broker. He's also best friends with Larry and secretly in love with Isabel. After the dinner, the adults gather and discuss the subject of Larry's future. Mrs. Bradley, Elliott and Dr. Nelson, Larry's guardian, agree that Larry needs to find a career. They learn that Gray's father has offered Larry a job, but they're not sure if he'll take it. Dr. Nelson notes that Larry has changed since he has been back from the war. Something happened, but Larry won't discuss specifics with anyone.

The next day, the narrator runs into Larry at the club he is staying at while in Chicago. They talk for a bit. Larry tells the narrator that after the war he didn't want to go to college because he wasn't interested in what they would teach him. He tells the narrator that he's not sure what he wants to do. The only thing he really wants to do is "loaf." The narrator leaves Larry reading a book on psychology and sees him in the same spot after lunch. Later that evening, Larry is sitting in the same chair, reading the same book.

The narrator and Elliott meet Gray and his father Henry for lunch the next day. The narrator is touched by the close relationship between father and son. The pair then goes over to Mrs. Bradley's house. Mrs. Bradley arranges for Isabel and Larry to have a picnic lunch together, during which Isabel must finally confront Larry about his future. Afterward, Isabel goes to her room and doesn't come down. Her mother goes up and tells everyone that she is crying. Larry has told her that he is going to Paris for two years to get away from everything. They are still engaged and plan to marry when he returns. Elliott, the narrator and Mrs. Bradley don't approve. In passing, Elliott mentions that Mrs. Bradley is his sister, and Mrs. Bradley calls the narrator Mr. Maugham, officially identifying the author as the narrator.

A few days later, Maugham goes to say goodbye to Mrs. Bradley, and he runs into Isabel, who asks him to have an ice cream soda with her. Isabel opens up to him and gives him the details of their picnic talk. At the picnic, Isabel tells Larry that he must choose a career. He says he doesn't want to do anything. He tells her that all he wants to do is loaf, and Isabel cries. He tells her that the war changed him and that one of his best friends was killed trying to save his life. When pressed for more details, Larry tells her that he'd rather not talk about it. It's Isabel who brings up the idea of going to Paris, and he agrees that it would do him some good. Larry used to visit Paris on leave during the war and says there was always something about Paris he felt would clear his mind.

Maugham then skips ahead and tells the reader a war story that was relayed to him by an acquaintance of Larry while he was in Paris. Larry made friends with an Irishman who everyone called Patty. He was a loud, boisterous pilot who took Larry under his





wing. During a reconnaissance mission, Larry came under fire, and Patty shot down the German pilot firing at Larry. In the process, Patty was injured somehow. When they landed, Patty stood up and said, "Well, I'm jiggered," and then fell back dead.

## Chapter 1 (sections vi-x) Analysis

These sections are rife with foreshadowing. First, there's the story about Larry's dead war friend. Obviously, it had a serious effect on him, and since Maugham is talking to an acquaintance of his ten years later about it, his death is obviously something that will have some significance later. Larry also says that there was always something about Paris that intrigued him.

The first sign of Isabel's complex relationship with Larry, another reoccurring theme, is touched upon. She loves him; yet, it's Isabel who suggests that he go to Paris. Despite his desire to leave her for two years, she wants to stay engaged to him, which seems odd to her mother, uncle and Maugham.



## Chapter 2 (sections i-v)

### Chapter 2 (sections i-v) Summary

In June of the following year, Maugham sees Elliott for the first time since Chicago. He asks about Larry, and Elliott tells him that he had big plans for Isabel's fiancy but that he was rebuffed. First, he asked Larry to meet several well-to-do people for dinner and drinks, but Larry said he didn't have any evening clothes. Later, Larry declined lunch, telling Elliott he doesn't eat lunch. Angry and insulted, Elliott says he is done with Larry. Later, Maugham unexpectedly runs into Larry while at a party. They agree to meet for lunch. At lunch, however, Larry reveals very little. He tells Maugham that he spends his time loafing and reading.

The following spring, Mrs. Bradley and Isabel arrive in Paris, ready to begin a long vacation in Europe. Mrs. Bradley tells Elliott that Isabel and Larry are still engaged, and Elliott tells them about Larry's behavior. Mrs. Bradley, who has since contracted a mild form of diabetes, confesses that they took their vacation early so that Isabel could confront Larry about his plan to live in Paris for two years and then return to Chicago to get married. Elliott disapproves, but he is cordial when Larry joins them for lunch. At a dinner party, though, Elliott arranges for Larry to sit next to an older Parisian woman, trying to set up an affair. The woman says it doesn't happen because Larry is in love with Isabel and didn't catch on to her flirtations.

Mrs. Bradley asks Isabel if she has spoken to Larry about his future plans. Isabel says no but agrees to broach the subject with him. After lunch, the couple goes back to Larry's hotel room, a rundown, sparsely decorated place that Isabel finds unappealing. She finally asks him about coming back, and he tells her there is no way he will. He is trying to find answers to philosophical questions about God and the soul. She asks him how long this will take, and he says five or ten years.

Larry tells her that they can live off the \$3,000 a year he gets from the government and that they can travel Europe having fun and adventures. She doesn't want to live on such modest means. Isabel tells him that she is a normal girl and wants to have fun, wear fancy clothes and have nice things. Unable to convince him to come back to Chicago, they agree to break off their engagement. Isabel is a little disappointed that it happens without much emotion.

Isabel returns to the house where her mother is staying and walks in on a tea party attended by rich, high-society people. She looks at the way they are dressed and listens to the way they talk, realizing that this is what she wants. She believes this is the best way to live. After the tea party breaks up, she tells her mother and Elliott about Larry. Elliott is delighted, while Mrs. Bradley asks if the breakup happened because of her. Isabel says no.



## Chapter 2 (sections i-v) Analysis

For the first time, the theme of Larry's spirituality is touched upon. During his breakup conversations with Isabel, he tells her about the all the unanswered questions he has about God, life and the soul. It's clear that his friend's death has had a deep impact on him. Larry also says the quest to answer those questions might take five or ten years, foreshadowing a long spell in Europe for him.

The theme of a person's true nature, such as if Elliott is good person or a snob, is touched upon with the choices Isabel makes. She says she loves Larry and was willing to give him two years in Paris to sort out his thoughts. Yet, when it comes to choosing Larry and a life of adventure, but meager means, she chooses the safe and stable life of an aristocrat. "I'm just a normal girl," she tells him. Later, at the tea party filled with rich people, Isabel can't help but feel that this is the best way to live. She has made her choice: money over love.



## Chapter 2 (sections vi-vii)

### Chapter 2 (sections vi-vii) Summary

Elliott cooks up a plan to help Isabel forget about 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. To make the change of cities seem more reasonable, Elliott tells Mrs. Bradley that one of the top diabetes specialists lives in London, and it would benefit her to visit him. They all agree it would be a good idea. Before Maugham leaves for the Far East, they have a final lunch together. Larry comes to the lunch, and the ex-couple get along as though nothing has happened.

Back in London, Maugham meets the Bradleys and Elliott for dinner. Elliott tells him that the Bradleys will soon be booked up for the rest of the season with social events that he has arranged. Elliott has been extra kind and attentive to the Bradleys, and Maugham gives his theory as to why: Elliott wants to get Isabel's mind off of Larry, and he wants to show off all his connections.

At one dinner party, Maugham runs into Isabel, who tells him that she would like to meet for lunch to talk about something as they did over the ice cream soda. They agree to have lunch at a hotel in the English countryside. There, Isabel opens up and tells him about the conversation she had with Larry that led to their breakup. Maugham tells her that it sounds like Larry has some unresolved issues with the war and that he's looking for answers about God. He says that there are a lot of people who decide to forego the accepted way of life for a spiritual journey but that only a few succeed.

Isabel admits that she still has strong feelings for Larry. She tells Maugham about the couple's final night in Paris when they went drinking and dancing. Isabel says she concocted a plan to seduce Larry and tell him she was having his baby, forcing him to come back to Chicago. At the last moment, though, she changed her mind and kissed him goodnight. She tells Maugham that the reason she didn't go along with his plan to travel Europe on a meager budget was because she was scared. He tells her the hurt feelings will subside when she gets back to Chicago.

### Chapter 2 (sections vi-vii) Analysis

The theme of the duality of people comes up again in regards to Elliott. His plan to show Isabel and Mrs. Bradley around town is the result of his feelings for his sister and niece. As Maugham comments, though, it's also partly so that Elliott can show off his rich friends and connections.

Isabel's personality also raises more questions about her true nature. She loves Larry, but she almost went through with a plan to try to trick him into marrying her and moving back to Chicago, deciding at the last moment not to seduce him. She also tells

Maugham that the reason she didn't go with Larry is because she was scared. Earlier, though, she said it was about money.



## Chapter 3 (sections i-ii)

### Chapter 3 (sections i-ii) Summary

Maugham tells the reader that for ten years after Isabel and Larry's breakup, he has seen neither. He asked Elliott, who he still saw frequently, about Larry, but while some people remember seeing him or meeting him, no real news was heard from him. Maugham also looked for Larry when he visited Paris, going to the restaurants and neighborhoods Larry used to frequent. Maugham then tells the reader what happened after Larry's breakup through the words of Larry, who, Maugham says, told him the story years later. Maugham says he is relating the story now because it better fits in with the story chronologically.

Larry, now assuming the narrator position, tells Maugham that he leaves Paris because he is tired of books and is ready for something new. He leaves for a coal-mining town in northern France near the Belgium border called Lens. He finds work and takes a room at a widowed mine worker's house, where he meets a fellow lodger, Kosti, a large, brutish Pole who also works in the mine. They soon become friends, and Larry learns that Kosti, despite his appearance, is well educated. Kosti reveals that he was an officer in the Polish army but was forced to flee after a failed coup attempt.

The work is grueling, but Larry adapts. He becomes a miner's helper and ends up teaming with Kosti. Later, Larry is switched to the mine's mechanic after a fixing a delivery truck. Kosti is upset that Larry leaves the mine, but they continue as friends. While playing cards, Larry learns that Kosti is a card shark. He cheats, but even though Larry watches him closely, he cannot figure out how Kosti is cheating. During this time, Larry learns that Kosti has studied philosophy, an erudition that shows itself only when Kosti is drunk.

Suddenly, one day, Kosti decides to leave the mine and look for farm work in Belgium and Germany. Larry agrees to go along. They walk into Germany and, after several failed attempts, find work at a farm. Becker, the man of the house, his wife, Frau Becker, and Becker's widowed daughter, Ellie, who has three small children, occupy the farm. Almost immediately, Kosti starts to make his move on the wife, a former housekeeper. Larry objects but soon finds that Frau Becker is interested in him. One night, asleep in the hayloft, a woman climbs into bed with Larry, and they have sex. He assumes it is Frau Becker, but later he realizes it was Ellie.

Larry then abandons the farm and Kosti, setting out on foot before daybreak. He settles in Bonn, Germany, where he stays off and on for a year. When Larry finishes his story, Maugham asks Larry if he learned anything from his travels. Larry answers, "Yes." Knowing better, Maugham declines to press any further.



## Chapter 3 (sections i-ii) Analysis

The reader is forced to follow along with Maugham's unorthodox structure. Talking directly to the reader, he narrates a conversation he has with Larry nearly ten years after his breakup with Isabel. This foreshadows several things. Firstly, Larry doesn't just disappear. Somewhere down the line, Larry and Maugham meet and talk again. Also, Larry's statement about needing five or ten years in Europe to sort out his questions seems accurate.

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's also a student of philosophy. Whenever Larry brings up Kosti's take on philosophy, Kosti changes the subject and refuses to talk about it. Also, Kosti's true background isn't clear. Kosti says 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 behavior. Which is it? Is Kosti good or bad? Again, as with Isabel and Elliott, it's not clear.



## Chapter 3 (sections iii-v)

### Chapter 3 (sections iii-v) Summary

After detailing Larry's life in the years immediately after his engagement is called off, Maugham switches the focus to Isabel and Mrs. Bradley. The following June after her split with Larry, Isabel marries Gray Maturin. With her brothers unable to attend, Uncle Elliott volunteers to give her away. The wedding is a hit in the local papers, and Henry Maturin buys the young couple a house, which is decorated by Gregory Brabazon, Mrs. Bradley's decorator. In the years that follow, Isabel has two daughters, and Gray is made a partner in his father's booming brokerage business.

Things are changing, however. Elliott finds that more and more of his Parisian contemporaries are moving back to England or leaving their houses to their children. Much to Elliott's dismay, the class lines are starting to blur in London, with women inviting writers and artists into their circles. In Paris, rich foreigners who speak French with a bad accent or associate with what Elliott feels are the wrong kinds of people are replacing the old rich. In one instance, Elliott is insulted by an up and coming American socialite in London, and no one seems to care when Elliott tells them that the American doesn't come from a respected lineage.

In the summer of 1929, after souring on London and Paris, Elliott moves to the French Riviera just as it is becoming a popular summer resort. Elliott has made money with the help of Henry Maturin's investment advice, and he buys a house on the Riviera. Elliott becomes one of the Riviera's most popular socialites. He entertains royalty and church leaders at his home. He also wisely donates money to the local church and the local bishop notices. Keen to show off his house to his sister, Elliott writes to Mrs. Bradley and invites her to the Riviera. She declines because of health reasons, but Isabel says she would love to visit the following summer along with her husband, who could use a holiday. The section ends with Maugham informing the reader that the stock market crashes the following October.

Maugham then details the fallout from the crash. Henry Maturin loses everything and dies of a heart attack. Gray Maturin, who was involved in stock speculation on the side, also goes broke. Gray must sell his father's houses and his house, and Isabel must sell her jewelry. The only thing left is a plantation the family owns in South Carolina, used for duck hunting. Elliott tells Maugham he is not badly hurt by the crash, and Maugham says he loses some money but survives much better than most.

The Riviera is suffering, with houses being sold and the casinos losing business because of the crash, but Elliott buys a new car and doesn't make any changes to his staff or lifestyle. Maugham learns how Elliott survives. During a visit to Paris, Maugham accompanies Elliott to the tailor, who is making Elliott new undershirts and boxer shorts. Maugham catches a glimpse of the boxer shorts, and they have a count's crown embroidered on them. According to Elliott, his donations to the Catholic Church have led





to his being named a count. His close relations to the church also make him privy to their financial advice. They tell him when the market is about to crash, and he listens to them, selling all his stocks before the crash and actually making a lot of money.

Soon after, Mrs. Bradley dies, and Isabel and Gray are forced to move into the plantation in South Carolina. Elliott says he will not have his family living in those conditions, and he invites Gray and Isabel to live in his Paris apartment. They accept, and Maugham closes the chapter by saying that Elliott might be a snob but that he's also a very kind and caring person.

### **Chapter 3 (sections iii-v) Analysis**

The irony is that Isabel doesn't stay with Larry because she is afraid they will be poor. She marries Gray Maturin, and the stock market crashes. Isabel, the girl who wants nice things and a rich life, is forced to move to a plantation in South Carolina. Of course, she's still better off than most people, but her immediate plans of becoming a member of the rich high life are on hold.

Elliott exemplifies the themes of the duality of people and Maugham's views on religion again. He allows Isabel and her family to live in his Paris apartment, partly because of his kindness and partly because he doesn't want to see his niece living on a plantation with only a "few" servants to help them. Elliott's boxer shorts are also interesting, thematically. He tells Maugham that he doesn't like to tell many people about his being made a Count, but anyone who would put a crest on boxer shorts obviously considers it important. Elliott being made a Count also touches on Maugham's apparent view of Christianity. Elliott isn't a deeply religious person, but because he gives money to the Church, he is rewarded with a high position.



## Chapter 4 (sections i-iv)

### Chapter 4 (sections i-iv) Summary

Two and a half years after the stock market crash, Isabel and her family are living in Elliott's Paris apartment. Maugham, in Paris on other business, stops by for tea. It has been ten years since Maugham has seen Isabel, but she has not lost her beautiful features. In fact, she has lost weight and is even more beautiful. While waiting for her husband to return from golf, Maugham meets Isabel's children, eight-year-old Joan and six-year-old Priscilla. Isabel tells Maugham that the years after the crash were difficult but that she would have stayed on the South Carolina farm if not for Gray. Asked if she regrets not marrying Larry, Isabel tells Maugham that Gray has been a wonderful husband and very kind to her and the children. When Gray arrives, Maugham is taken aback by the contrast in the way the years have treated him. While Isabel is even more beautiful, Gray has gained weight and has a receding hairline. Maugham continues to see Isabel and Gray three or four times a week and comments on how much he enjoys their company.

While at a cafe that he used to frequent as a youth, Cafe Du Dome, a bearded, disheveled man says hello to Maugham. Maugham doesn't recognize the man, who turns out to be Larry. Gray asks him about the crash, but Larry says that because the U.S. government guaranteed his money, he didn't lose anything. Larry says that he has been in India and heard from Dr. Nelson, who has since died, about Isabel's marriage to Gray.

Larry asks about Elliott, and Maugham says that for the first time in forty years, Elliott is not spending the spring in Paris. He is in the Riviera. Now seventy, Elliott worries about his health. He sees a doctor twice a week and grows frustrated that the crowd he associates with is full of "old people." Larry then asks about Gray, and Maugham tells him that Gray is struggling to find himself in Paris. Larry says he would like to see them, but Maugham tells him that he should clean himself up if he doesn't want to scare the kids. Maugham invites Larry to dinner, but he declines with thanks and leaves.

Maugham tells Isabel and Gray that Larry plans to visit, and they are delighted. After several days of waiting, they grow frustrated before Larry finally shows up on the fourth day. Asked why he didn't come sooner, Larry tells them Maugham told him to clean up, and he responded by flying to London to buy a new suit. Maugham comments that Larry has cleaned up very well. In contrast to Gary, he looks young and trim and has retained his attractiveness. Still, Maugham says, while Larry is cordial and friendly, he seems aloof.

Later, when the four go out to dinner, Isabel asks what Larry has been doing all these years. He is vague, but he says he has spent time in Italy, Spain and the East. Pressed for more information, he says that he visited with spiritual Yogis and learned Hindu, one of a half dozen languages that he has learned. Also, Larry lived on a Yogi's compound



along a lagoon and lived in a hut. While Larry is telling Maugham about his whereabouts since they last saw him, Gray seems uncomfortable and gets up to have a drink. Maugham notices that Isabel is looking intently at Larry, almost in a proud motherly way. Larry goes on to say that what attracted him to the Yogi was that he seemed saintly. Asked what he gained from his time in India, Larry responds, "Peace." Abruptly, he gets up, says good night and goes home.

## Chapter 4 (sections i-iv) Analysis

Another reoccurring theme in the novel is physical beauty and how different people become more or less attractive based on their circumstances. As an example, when Maugham sees Larry shaven and well-dressed, he remarks that he looks twenty-five. Unconcerned with money and having spent his time searching for spiritual fulfillment, Larry's good looks are symbolic of his kind and peaceful soul. Gray on the other hand, who has based his life on working and making money, has grown heavier and less attractive. Interestingly, though, Isabel looks even more beautiful after her family's financial problems, losing weight and growing into a beautiful woman.

The theme of Larry's spirituality comes up again. He tells the group about the Yogi he met and how he felt he was saintly. He also says he gained peace from his time in India, something the Isabel and Gray have not found in their world of money and ambition. Gary is so unable to understand Larry that he gets up from the table for a drink.

There's also irony in regards to Larry's finances. He has never cared about money, and he doesn't base his life on being rich. As a result, he isn't affected by the crash, and since the government guarantees his soldier's pension, he's better off than many of the rich people back in America, such as Isabel and Gray.



## Chapter 4 (sections v-ix)

### Chapter 4 (sections v-ix) Summary

The four arrange to go out to dinner, but when Maugham arrives, Gray is suffering from a migraine headache, the same malady that has kept him from finding work. Larry arrives and asks if he can try to help. First, he puts a coin in Gray's hands and tells him to grip it tightly and not let go. Larry starts to count to twenty-four, and when he gets to nineteen, the coin falls out. Next, Larry says that Gray's right arm will rise when he counts to twenty-four. Gray's arm goes up, and he looks like someone in a trance or walking in his sleep. Finally, Larry tells Gray that he will go to sleep, and when he wakes up his headache will be gone. It works. Asked if he learned that in India, Larry says yes. Larry tells Gray that he didn't do anything, and that Gray cured himself. At dinner that same night, Larry jokes around more than usual, and Maugham suspects it is to get the group to forget about his healing demonstration. When Isabel pleads for Larry to try and cure Gray for good, he agrees to come back the next day. Larry starts coming over regularly, curing Gray's headaches when they flare up.

Maugham and Isabel get into a discussion about why Larry never gives out his address and why he seems detached. Maugham says that maybe it's as simple as "goodness." This leads Maugham to ask Isabel if she still loves Larry. She says yes but that she married Gray because she had to marry someone. She again says how good Gray has been to her and that she would never divorce him. In addition, Gray is a good lover and is still as passionate now as when they were first married. Maugham and Isabel then get into a discussion about the true meaning of love, and Maugham asks Isabel if she thinks Larry was ever really in love with her. She says yes. She then says that she believes Larry is a virgin. Maugham disagrees, and when Isabel says her woman's intuition tells her that Larry is a virgin, he says he doesn't trust a woman's intuition.

Maugham then reintroduces Suzanne Rouvier, the woman who tells Maugham about Larry's war story and brush with death. Suzanne was a farm girl who moved to Paris with her artist lover at fifteen years old. She then spent the next several years moving from one lover to another, all artists. Eventually, she settled down and became a mistress to a businessman from Lille who would come to Paris once or twice a month. He set her up with an apartment, an arrangement that worked out well for both.

A week after meeting Larry unexpectedly, Maugham is having dinner with Suzanne, who originally met Maugham through a common artist friend. While having dinner, Larry walks past and says hello to Suzanne. He sits down, has a quick dinner and then says goodnight.

Suzanne then tells the story of how she knows Larry. Six or seven years earlier, Suzanne is recovering from a bout with Typhoid that has left her thin and weak. She runs into Larry, whom she knows through an artist friend, and he offers to take her out to the country where they can spend a long holiday. She takes her daughter, Odette, and



they spend an idyllic time in the small town, swimming, boating and reading. During this time, Larry unexpectedly tells her the story about his best friend dying while saving Larry's life during the war. When Suzanne grows stronger, she makes love to Larry as a way to repay him. She notes that he never makes a pass at her, though, She always initiates any physical intimacy. Then, one day, Larry tells her he has to leave and kisses her and her child goodbye. He also gives her 12,000 francs.

Suzanne, like Isabel, says she cannot understand Larry and his tendency to disappear so quickly. Maugham says that Larry does things for the love of a God that he does not believe in. Suzanne tells Maugham he has had too much to drink.

## Chapter 4 (sections v-ix) Analysis

Larry's spirituality takes a turn for the supernatural with his healing powers. In a theme that Maugham will explore later in the novel, Maugham makes some kind of connection between Larry and Jesus, although it's more through Larry's Eastern teachings than Christianity. Larry heals Gray, somehow making his arms move. Later, when Isabel and Gray are talking about Larry's peculiar behavior, Maugham says it's because of Larry's goodness. Larry's healing powers are also evident in subtler ways with Suzanne. She's sick after her bout with Typhoid, and Larry's kindness in taking her to the country aids her recovery. In addition, there's no expectation of sex in return for his kindness, another example of his inherent kindness.

The theme of Isabel's true feelings on love is brought into focus during her conversation with Maugham. She admits that she's not really in love with Gray, and she still harbors feelings for Larry. Ironically, while Larry doesn't seem to need sex, a passionate love life is one of the reasons Isabel gives for staying with Gray. Isabel's belief that Larry is a virgin is also peculiar. She seems unwilling to accept that, if Larry is unable to have that kind of relationship with her, he could have a physical relationship with anyone else. Perhaps she is unable to accept that he might care for anyone else, as well.



## Chapter 5 (sections i-ii)

### Chapter 5 (sections i-ii) Summary

In spring, Maugham, Isabel, Gray and Larry regularly go out together, visiting parts of the French countryside as Maugham admits to dawdling over his work. Gray's health improves, and he no longer suffers from headaches. On the way back from one of these trips, Gray and Larry are in the front of the car, and Larry drapes his arm across the top of the driver's seat. Maugham looks over at Isabel and notices that she is motionless and staring at Larry's hand and wrist. She has a strange look about her. Her breathing is heavy, and she wears a "mask of lust." Isabel suddenly snaps out of it and, in a strange voice, asks for a cigarette. When the car arrives back in Paris, Maugham observes Isabel latch onto Gray's arm and imagines an amorous night, although Maugham believes her affection is owed to someone besides Gray.

On Maugham's last night before leaving Paris, Isabel asks him to take the four to some of the "tough joints" in Paris for a change of pace. They go to bars frequented by gangsters, scantily clad women and other ragged characters. At their third stop, a cafe on Rue de Lappe, a band is playing, and people are dancing in drunken revelry. Suddenly, they hear an American woman. She walks over and says hello. It's Sophie MacDonald, the shy girl who sat next to Elliott some twelve years ago during a dinner in Chicago. She is drunk and joins them. They talk for a bit, and when a man tries to drag Sophie away, Gray stands up and threateningly tells him to leave. He complies. After a glass of champagne, Sophie tells them to come back and that she's here every night. Isabel asks to leave.

Stopping for food on the way home, Isabel and Gray tell Larry and Maugham Sophie's tragic story. Sophie married Bob MacDonald, and the couple was madly in love. After giving birth to a daughter, they never went out with any of their friends, opting to stay home with each other and the baby. Then, while driving home one night, they were hit head-on by a drunk driver, killing her husband and baby. Devastated, Sophie turned to drinking and sex with random men. Eventually, her in-laws grew tired of her behavior and sent her to live in Paris. In telling the story, Isabel says she has no sympathy for how Sophie turned out. She says that lots of people suffer tragedies but don't turn to alcohol and sex to curb their pain.

Larry, who has largely been silent through the whole incident, finally speaks. He says that when they were younger, Sophie and he were friends. She used to read and write poetry, and they used to read to each other. Larry says that when he came back from the war he and Sophie spent a lot of time together. Maugham notices that Isabel looks irritated the more Larry talks about Sophie. She asks Larry why he was friends with her, and Larry says both came from modest backgrounds, which gave them something in common. Larry wonders where that little girl that used to read poetry has gone. Isabel says she wants to go home, and they all leave.



## Chapter 5 (sections i-ii) Analysis

Again, Isabel's true feelings for Larry are obvious. The feelings she has for Larry go beyond fondness; there's a true sexual attraction that has a physical affect on her. It's Gray, however, who will be the beneficiary of these feelings. The sex they apparently will have that night is symbolic of the way that Gray's entire relationship with Isabel is based on Isabel's inability to have Larry.

Like Elliott's snobbery and kindness, Sophie continues the theme of duality and the good and bad in all people. Sophie is a relatively normal person until the accident that kills her husband and child, when she becomes a drunk, drug addict and sexually promiscuous. Isabel contends that she was a bad person all along. Larry wonders what happened to the sensitive girl that used to like poetry. He doesn't judge Sophie; he wants to understand her.

Also, notice how Maugham finds Sophie oddly attractive despite her bad makeup and inappropriate dress. Earlier in the novel, when they are seated together during a dinner back in Chicago, Maugham commented that Sophie is a plain looking girl with a small chest. Is she attractive now because she's being true to herself, just like Larry is attractive after his travels and Gray is unattractive without a job?



## Chapter 5 (section iii-v)

### Chapter 5 (section iii-v) Summary

Stopping at the Riviera, Maugham visits Elliott. Elliott's health is fading, but he still manages to make the party and social circuit. Elliott complains about the state of Europe and says the U.S. is becoming "middle-class." Maugham comments that Elliott is a pathetic figure, who can't stop going to parties even though he is sick, simply because he is afraid of not being important anymore.

After spending the summer in the Riviera, Elliott and Maugham drive up to Paris, and when Elliott drops Maugham off at his hotel, he finds a note waiting for him from Isabel. The note says that something "terrible" has happened and to come at once. Maugham goes to Isabel's apartment, and she tells him that Larry and Sophie are to be married. She says that Larry looked Sophie up after they saw her at the bar, and Larry got a doctor for her to help her stop drinking.

Isabel is furious and says that somebody must do something to stop the wedding because she is sure Sophie is a bad person and will hurt Larry. Maugham disagrees and says the marriage could work out. Isabel says she didn't sacrifice so much so that Larry could end up with someone like Sophie. Asked what she sacrificed, Isabel says she sacrificed Larry so that she wouldn't be in his way. Maugham says that she sacrificed Larry for a diamond ring and mink coat. Isabel responds by throwing a plate at Maugham. Isabel yells at Maugham to get out and that she never wants to see him again. Maugham starts complimenting Isabel on her looks, and she starts to calm down. She tells Maugham that she wants him to talk to Larry, but Maugham says that will do no good.

Maugham then explains that Larry, like Jesus Christ, is obsessed with self-sacrifice. He says that it's part of Larry's travels and search for peace all these years. He convinces her that no one will be able to change his mind and that she should reach out to Larry and Sophie. She agrees, and they all agree to meet for lunch. In passing, Maugham notices a strange look in Isabel's eyes and wonders if she is hatching some kind of nefarious scheme. Isabel promises that she is not.

Two days later, Isabel, Gray, Maugham, Elliott, Larry and Sophie sit down for lunch. Isabel keeps the conversation going, although Sophie doesn't speak much, and Maugham remarks that she looks to be going through some sort of withdrawal. He also comments that although she's not wearing bad makeup and not dressed shabbily, as she was at the bar, she looks less attractive. During lunch, Elliott orders a Polish vodka that Isabel tries and cannot stop gushing about. Elliott agrees to send some to her apartment. After lunch, Isabel takes Sophie to a dress show.





## Chapter 5 (section iii-v) Analysis

Earlier, Isabel is in denial about Larry's sex life and a little annoyed when he speaks fondly of Sophie, but after learning Larry is planning to marry Sophie, she erupts in anger. It's more evidence that Isabel simply cannot stand the idea of Larry being with somebody else, especially someone like Sophie who Isabel considers a bad person. When Maugham tells her that she gave him up for money, it seems that she's not just angry at him. She might be angry at herself, too.

Maugham then touches on themes of Larry's spirituality and beauty. Like Jesus, Maugham argues, he has a need to help people. This explains his relationship with Suzanne Rouvier. In terms of beauty, Sophie looks attractive when she is drunk in the bar, but now that she has cleaned herself up, Maugham notices how plain and unattractive she looks at lunch. If being true to yourself makes you attractive, then perhaps Sophie really is a bad person, as Isabel suggests.

Foreshadowing upcoming events, Maugham notices a strange look in Isabel's eyes. Although she denies that she is concocting some scheme, Isabel appears overly enthusiastic about the Polish vodka.



## Chapter 5 (section vi)

### Chapter 5 (section vi) Summary

Two weeks later, Elliott visits Maugham in London and tells him that Larry and Sophie never got married. Elliott says that Sophie disappeared after she was supposed to meet Isabel at her apartment. Isabel was late, and when she finally got to her apartment, Sophie was gone. They looked for days, but they couldn't find her. Larry didn't talk about it, and Isabel said it was probably for the best because he didn't really love Sophie anyway.

Maugham would not see Isabel for another year, staying in London until Christmas before going to the Riviera to work on his novel. During this time, Elliott, whose health is declining, tries to get him out to the parties. Maugham instead works on his novel, and when he finishes a rough draft he decides to celebrate by sailing up the coast.

While stopping in Toulon, Maugham sees Sophie sitting in a cafe. Sophie tells him the story of her disappearance. While waiting for Isabel at her apartment, she spots the Polish vodka that Elliott has sent over and that they talked about during lunch. Unable to control herself, she finally takes a drink, then another. Soon, she has finished the entire bottle. After feeling terrible because of her alcohol and opium withdrawal, drinking the vodka marks the first time in a long while that she feels good. Afterward, she goes to Hakim's, an opium parlor, and stays there for days, smoking and having sex with random men. She then takes the train to Toulouse. She has been there since. With easy access to opium because of Toulouse's port, Sophie has no trouble getting men and drugs, and she seems happy. Maugham also remarks that despite looking a bit rough, Sophie looks attractive.

### Chapter 5 (section vi) Analysis

Despite being back on drugs and sleeping around with dangerous men, Sophie looks attractive, continuing the theme of true beauty being a result of being true to oneself. Earlier, at lunch with Elliott and the Maturins, Sophie looks pale and plain, signs of withdrawal from alcohol and drugs. As she tells Maugham, it's only after she drinks the Polish vodka that she feels good again.

What's not known is what is behind the Polish vodka suddenly appearing in Isabel's apartment. Maugham notices a strange look in Isabel's eyes when planning the lunch with Sophie, and Isabel seems overly taken with the Polish vodka. Taking Isabel's earlier remarks about how much she is against Larry and Sophie's wedding, it's easy to guess that she has something to do with Sophie's temptation.



## Chapter 5 (section vii-ix)

### Chapter 5 (section vii-ix) Summary

Shortly after Maugham runs into Sophie, he returns to his house on the Riviera only to find a note from Elliott's manservant, Joseph. The note says Elliott has fallen ill and wants to see him. Maugham finds Elliott bedridden but in good spirits. A week later, Maugham sees Elliott at a lunch party. Elliott looks awful, and a short time later his doctor orders him not to leave his room. Maugham starts to visit Elliott three or four times a week, and Elliott complains about all the parties he is missing.

The best party of the season, though, is coming up, to be staged by Edna Novemali, an American who married an Italian prince. To Elliott's dismay, he has not been invited to the party. Maugham tells Elliott he couldn't have gone anyway, but Elliott is still insulted and angry. Furthering the insult, Paul Barton, the American who insulted Elliott years ago in London, asks Elliott if he can wear his Count de Lauria costume to the party. Elliott says that proves the lack of an invitation is not an oversight. He says he'll never let Paul Barton, whom he considers a crass person symbolic of the worsening social scene, wear his costume. Elliott goes on to say that he hates them all and that he never should have left America, and he starts to cry.

Maugham, who takes pity on Elliott, then tries to get Elliott invited to the party. First, he meets Edna for lunch at her house and mentions, casually, that Elliott is thinking of wearing his costume to the party. Edna says that Elliott is not welcome and that he is a "bore, a snob and a scandal monger." Undeterred, Maugham sneaks into Edna's secretary's room to steal an invitation, but he finds the secretary working on the party. He tells her the truth, and because Elliott has been kind to her, she purposely looks out the window while Maugham steals an invitation.

Elliott is happy to receive the invitation, but his health turns for the worse. Finding him unconscious, Maugham hires a nurse. When it's clear that Elliott is near death, Maugham calls the local bishop so that someone can be sent over to perform the last rights. Instead, because Elliott has donated so much money to the church, the bishop himself comes. Elliott is overjoyed at such an honor. He goes on to say that heaven is going to be like Earth, with separate places for rich and poor. Later, still in bed and near death, he insists on answering Edna's invitation. He dictates his response to Maugham, which tells Edna that he cannot come because he has a previous engagement with God. Elliott's last words are "the old bitch," before he sinks into a coma and dies.

After Elliott's death, Maugham finds Elliott's instruction for his burial. Elliott wants to be buried in his Count de Lauria costume, which he mentioned before but Maugham didn't believe. Maugham and Joseph carry out his wishes, but Maugham comments on how ridiculous Elliott looks and how he wasted his life with such things. Elliott is buried in front of a church that he helped build in Italy. Gray and Isabel attend the funeral.



## Chapter 5 (section vii-ix) Analysis

Earlier, Maugham states how Elliott might have been a snob, but he was a good person. In this section, there is little sympathy showed for him. Maugham criticizes his friend, even in death. He calls Elliott's way of living a wasted life and says that he looks ridiculous in his burial suit, the Count De Lauria costume, symbolic of Elliott's vanity and his insistence on expensive, materialistic things.

In addition, Elliott dies alone and shunted from the elite society that he so hungered to be a part of. Ironically, Edna Novemali calls him a "bore, snob and scandal monger." Elliott has been that way all his life, but in the end, he dies a lonely man. One of Elliott's final conversations with Maugham details his deep-seeded belief in elitism. He actually believes that there are different heavens for the rich and the poor. Even near death, despite all the evidence that his life has amounted to little, he holds on to his snobbish beliefs.

The Church doesn't escape Maugham's criticisms either. Maugham's tone in describing the bishop and his people paints them as a bit out of touch as well. Only because Elliott has donated so much money does the bishop appear. It has nothing to do with whether Elliott was a good person. The bishop even slightly admonishes Elliott's servant because he doesn't bow down quickly enough to kiss the bishop's ring.



## Chapter 6 (sections i-iii)

### Chapter 6 (sections i-iii) Summary

Maugham tells the reader that they can skip this chapter because it is basically a retelling of a long conversation he has with Larry, though it's also the conversation that leads to his writing of his novel. Maugham then gives a brief update on the events after Elliott's death. In his will, Elliott leaves large sums of money to the church, an 18th century pornographic book collection to Maugham and paintings, furniture, his house on the Riviera and the apartment to Isabel and Gray. Having inherited a great deal of wealth, Gray starts to look for work back in the states, while Isabel goes about trying to sell some of Elliott's extensive collection of art and furniture. It has now been three years since they arrived in Paris.

Maugham then shifts the story to how he meets Larry for the final time. Maugham has gone to see *Berenice*, a play by Racine. During one of the intermissions, Maugham goes out for a smoke, and someone taps him on the shoulder. It's Larry. They talk briefly about the play and then agree to get some food and a drink after the play. The conversation turns to Gray and how Larry cured his headaches. Larry says he learned that in India from a Yogi who cured his insomnia. Later, while hiking in the mountains, Larry heals a friend who has hurt his ankle. As he is telling the story of how he learned those healing powers, Maugham's own arm starts to rise in the air. Larry says not to attach any importance to it.

Asked what led him to India, Larry starts in on a recap of his years after his broken engagement with Isabel. He goes to India after living in Europe for five years. He is homesick and takes a job as a deckhand on a luxury ocean liner that is heading to the East. Larry tells Maugham that he likes to work with his hands when his mind needs a rest and tells him about working in a coal mine and at a German farm. Maugham tells the reader that this is the story he wrote about earlier.

Maugham gets Larry talking about his time immediately after leaving the German farmhouse. Larry moves into a boarding house and meets a fellow boarder, Father Ensheim, who turns out to be a Benedictine monk. Father Ensheim doesn't say much to Larry, who spends his time reading philosophy and books on spirituality. They begin talking, and they soon become friends, going on walks and engaging in talks about religion and other deep subjects.

One day, the monk asks Larry if he believes in God, and Larry tells about his experiences in the war. Larry says after his friend died, he cried and started to ask why there was so much evil in the world. He said that's why he started reading. He was trying to find answers to all basic human questions. Father Ensheim then invites Larry to spend some time at his monastery, and Larry eventually agrees. At the monastery, Larry is happy, living a simple life and reading and asking questions of the wise monks.



Larry then tells Maugham about why he has trouble believing in Christianity. He says that the Bible states that man was created for God's glorification. He says Beethoven didn't write music for glorification. He did it because music was in his soul. Then he says it seems odd that the monks would have to ask God for their daily bread. Wouldn't a good father provide for his children, Larry wonders? Then he says that people who commit sin do so because of their environment or their hereditary. Therefore, it seems unfair for God to punish them since he is the one who created those surroundings for them. Finally, Larry says he can't understand why there is so much evil in the world. He wonders why God would go through the trouble of making mankind and then make things difficult for mankind. These are all questions he asks of the monks, who can't give him a satisfactory answer. Larry then leaves the monastery.

## Chapter 6 (sections i-iii) Analysis

Though Maugham tells the readers that they can skip this chapter, it's clear that it's one of the key chapters in the novel. Larry fully explains what led him to his quest for spirituality and his philosophical questions on religion, themes that have run throughout the novel. In discussing his search for the truth, however, the novel levels criticisms against Christianity. Larry asks why God needs to be worshipped and why he punishes them for the evil they commit in a world that he created and that has led them to evil. Larry is questioning some of the basic tenets of Christianity, and he doesn't find any answers.

Larry's role as a spiritual holy man is also touched upon again. Maugham's arms are mysteriously raised by some kind of unseen power that comes from Larry. However, this power doesn't come from a deep Christian faith. It comes from the things he learned in India and the things he learned from Hinduism. Larry is capable of curing people because he was able to clear his mind and soul of selfish thoughts and ambitions, unlike Gray and Isabel Maturin and Elliott.



## Chapter 6 (sections iv-vi)

### Chapter 6 (sections iv-vi) Summary

Larry continues his story, telling Maugham how he goes back to Paris after leaving the monastery with many questions still unanswered. During that spring, he stays at a small French village along a river. Maugham assumes this is the summer he spends with Suzanne Rouvier and her daughter.

After Larry's time at the village, Larry goes to Spain, where visits Seville to learn more about art and see if art can answer some of his questions about the world. Maugham then tells of the time he spent in Seville as a youngster and the beautiful women who live there. Larry says that while there, he meets a beautiful young girl. The girl lives with him under the understanding that she is with Larry only until her boyfriend is released from military service. The girl is a sweet, sexual person, and Larry likes her very much. As soon as her boyfriend returns, she leaves him. After that, he leaves for India.

Maugham then details the late-night crowd in the cafe. There are a couple of Englishmen who eat some sandwiches and then leave, followed by a group of loud, drunk Americans. There is a man that Maugham recognizes as a former banker from the Midwest who doesn't mind that the two heavily made-up, middle-aged women he is with are mocking him and taking advantage of him. He also notices a small man with a beard sitting alone at a table. A woman comes up, and he seems annoyed with her. After she gives the man some money, they argue, and he slaps her. The restaurant manager yells at them, and the woman, who is obviously a prostitute, yells at the manager to mind his own business.

Larry then continues with his story, starting with his arrival in Bombay aboard the cruise liner. While en route to Bombay, an Indian tells him that he must visit the Elephantra caves while in India. Larry visits the caves and is confused by the large sculpture in front of the caves when someone starts speaking to him. It is the Indian fellow from the boat, but now he is in a robe and acting differently. He is quiet and dignified. He tells Larry that the busts are of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Siva the Destroyer, the three manifestations of the "Ultimate Destiny." Larry is confused, and the man tells Larry that he cannot explain the sculpture because a god that can be explained is not a god.

Larry sits and stares at the sculptures and feels some connection to them and to India. Later that day, he walks through a park and gets a sensation that the country has something to give him. He decides not to go back to the boat and finds the swami that talked to him earlier. The swami invites Larry to Benares, and he agrees to come along. He stays there for six months, admiring the locals who bathe in the river and pray as he learns the native language. He tells Maugham about the "Absolute," the Hindu belief that there is no beginning and no end. They believe that everything grows, declines, fades away and then grows again, rekindling the cycle.



Larry and Maugham then engage in a philosophical discussion on the Hindu belief of transmigration, or the same soul passing from body to body. Larry says that it is a way to explain the evil in the world. He says people suffering now might be paying for sins committed in a past life and that good deeds done in the present could ensure a better life in the future. Maugham asks if this belief can affect a person's life, and Larry tells him a story of his Hindu friend. The friend is successful and studies abroad. When he turned fifty, though, he gives it all up to become a Hindu holy man. Asked if he believes in reincarnation, Larry says it's difficult for non-Easterners to believe in it. He says he neither believes nor disbelieves in it. Larry then tells Maugham of a vision he has while in India. While meditating, he sees an old lady from New England, a Jewish man and a 16th-century English sailor. He thinks all are visions of his past lives.

Larry tells Maugham more about the Absolute and about an influential swami he meets. Larry comes across his old swami friend from the boat, who is now a wandering holy man. Larry says he is going to Travancore, an Indian town, and the swami tells him to find Shri Ganesha. This leads to another discussion about the Absolute. Larry says it's impossible to define, but that it is everywhere. It is truth and freedom. Larry then goes into his thoughts on Christianity. He says that Christians are taught that they must have faith in order to be saved. He likens it to pagan Gods that need a sacrifice to keep them happy and alive. Larry says there is no need to worship because God is inside him and everywhere. He says what attracts him to Hinduism is the belief that you can attain reality and salvation through knowledge.

## Chapter 6 (sections iv-vi) Analysis

Unable to find the answers to his questions about man and the soul in Christianity, Larry seems to find them in Hinduism. He can't find the answer as to why there is evil in the world in his time with the monks, but he at least starts to get ideas on its existence through Hinduism.

Also, the people that Maugham finds in the restaurant seem to be symbolic of something. It doesn't seem to be a coincidence that as Larry is talking about the evil and the things that people must suffer through in life, Maugham sees a series of sad and/or low-character people wander in and out of the restaurant. Are these people paying for sins committed in past lives?





## Chapter 6 (sections vii-viii)

### Chapter 6 (sections vii-viii) Summary

Maugham interrupts the story to talk directly to the reader. He is upset because he cannot in words tell the reader the soothing tone of Larry's voice. It is not preachy, but sincere, he says. The reason for the long passages on philosophy and religion, Maugham says, is so that the reader might better understand Larry. Maugham then has another look around the restaurant. It's almost deserted. The loud drunks are gone, as are the prostitutes. The few people that stop by are either coming off working the night shift or on the way to early morning jobs. Maugham states that is one of the strangest situations he has ever found himself in.

Larry continues his story about meeting Shri Ganesha, who turns out to be the Yogi he tells Isabel and Gray about when they are first reunited. Larry arrives in Travancore and seeks out the Yogi, who tells Larry that he has been expecting him. After staring at him for a long time, the Yogi asks Larry what he has come here for. Larry says he wants the Yogi to be his Guru, and the Yogi answers that the Absolute is the only Guru. After slipping into a trance that makes Larry's heart beat quickly, the Yogi invites him to stay at his compound, Ashrama. At the compound, Larry reads and listens to the Yogi talk and give advice. Shri Ganesha is a popular figure, Larry says, with people coming from miles around to listen to him and ask him questions. The Yogi preaches to renounce the self and that wisdom is the key to salvation. Larry says that he is very happy living with the Yogi and that he finally feels that he has found what he was looking for.

Larry then tells Maugham about the moment when he glimpses the Absolute. One of Larry's friends at Ashrama works in the forestry service and allows him the use of a mountain bungalow. Larry goes there several times including once on his birthday after spending two years at Ashrama. During his birthday visit, just before dawn, Larry goes down a clearing overlooking a lake and is overwhelmed by the beauty of the sunrise. All at once, he is no longer confused about anything, and the happiness is so great he feels as though he might die. He falls asleep and awakens at noon.

Maugham asks if it is just some hypnotic episode given Larry's isolation, and Larry says no. Larry isn't sure if it is a glimpse into reality or the Absolute, but he knows it is a significant spiritual event. After his episode, Larry returns to Ashrama and tells the Yogi he is leaving. The Yogi agrees that he has been gone long enough. Larry boards a boat and lands in Marseilles, France.

The conversation continues, with Larry giving his thoughts on why there is evil in the world. He asks that question to the Indian mystics, and the best answer they can give him is that evil is a necessity of good. As an example, they tell him that there wouldn't be mountains if the earth didn't violently collide. Larry admits that this explanation isn't satisfactory, and his way to deal with things is to try to make the best of your situation.



Larry then tells Maugham his plans. He plans on going back to New York in an attempt to spread the knowledge that he has gained in Europe and India. Maugham asks him how is going to live, and Larry says he isn't sure. He plans to stop receiving money from the government, something Maugham advises him against doing. Larry then comes up with the spur of the moment idea to buy a taxi in New York. His plan is to earn just enough money to eat and find lodging, and he can devote the rest of the time to his work. Maugham tells him he's crazy, but Larry just laughs. Larry says the last thing he is doing before leaving is staying with a friend on the Riviera and writing a book. It is now morning, and they have breakfast at the same restaurant. They shake hands and say goodbye, and Maugham goes back to his hotel room, where he falls asleep reading a book.

## Chapter 6 (sections vii-viii) Analysis

The long conversation ends with Larry seemingly getting a hold of some of the basic questions he has been asking about for ten years. Continuing the theme of spirituality and the search for answers, Larry explains the different theories about the need for evil in the world. However, it's interesting to note that in the end, he really doesn't find the answer in Hinduism either. He admits to Maugham that the theories about evil existing because it must balance out the good are unsatisfactory. Ironically, after years trying to find answers to complex questions, Larry's theory is the simple idea of trying to make the best of things.

Larry's glimpse into the Absolute is symbolic of his genuinely good nature. Elliott sees beauty and happiness in money and material things. Isabel seems to be the same way, choosing a safe, wealthy life over love. Sophie finds happiness in drugs and sex. Larry is able to see the beauty in simple things such as the natural beauty of the lake. It's this ability that enables him to be the only truly happy person in the novel.



## Chapter 7 (sections i-ii)

### Chapter 7 (sections i-ii) Summary

Six months after Maugham's long talk with Larry in Paris, the police knock on the door at his house on the Riviera. They want to know if he knows somebody by the name of Sophie MacDonald. The police tell him they have found her floating dead in the harbor, and they need him to identify the body. He tells the police that she is just an acquaintance and wonders why they can't identify her some other way. They tell him that her throat has been cut, and she was found naked. He agrees to go to Toulon the next day.

Maugham meets with a detective in Toulon. The detective tells him that they found a book in her room with his signature on it. After explaining that the inscription is a poem, Maugham gives him a brief recital of Sophie's history. The detective next shows Maugham a picture of Larry and Sophie on a beach. With some hesitation, Maugham tells them about Larry and where he can be found. The detective then tells Maugham that Sophie had a bad reputation as dope fiend and drunkard, and the way she died is not really a surprise. He tells Maugham the woman that ran Sophie's boarding house identified her, but that he wants someone with a more personal connection to identify her for confirmation. The detective asks if Maugham and Larry will foot the bill for her burial, and he agrees.

The next day, Maugham goes back to the police station and finds Larry. The detective tells them that they have answered all his questions and that he believes their stories. He tells them to go have lunch and a drink. Larry and Maugham stop by the mortuary to identify the body and then go for lunch. Larry tells Maugham that he will have to pay for the burial himself because Larry doesn't have any money. Maugham asks him if he has already done away with his government money, and Larry says he has enough to get him home on a ship. Asked what ship, Larry tells Maugham that one of his friends has landed him a job on a ship going to New York. There, Larry tells Maugham he plans on finding a job and starting his new life.

Maugham asks Larry about Sophie, and Larry tells Maugham that he still wishes he had married her. Maugham doesn't understand, and Larry tells him that she was a good person at heart. He tells Maugham that he never imagined that she would grow up to be such a spiritual person and that the thought of marrying her back in Chicago never occurred to him. He tells Maugham that he finished his book and that his copy should be in the mail. After lunch, they attend Sophie's burial and then go their separate ways.

### Chapter 7 (sections i-ii) Analysis

Sophie's life ends as the most complex example of the theme of the duality of man, or the good and evil found in people. Was she a truly bad person? She lived her life badly,



doing drugs and sleeping with random men. However, as Maugham notes, while she is living this way she seems truly happy and attractive. Also, it's ironic that the novel's genuinely good person (Larry) nearly marries the novel's most disturbed character (Sophie).



## Chapter 7 (sections iii-iv)

### Chapter 7 (sections iii-iv) Summary

Maugham plans on going straight to England a few days after Sophie's burial, but he stops in Paris instead to visit Isabel. They decide to meet for dinner, and she tells him there's a lot to talk about. Isabel and Gray are in the process of selling Elliott's possessions. Maugham learns that with the money they make, Gray will be able to start some sort of oil business in Dallas. She tells Maugham that she wants a large house with a garden for Gray and a large living room to throw dinner parties.

Maugham notices Larry's book, and the conversation turns to Toulouse. Isabel asks Maugham if he has seen Larry, and he tells her that he saw Larry at Toulouse. Asked why in Toulouse, he tells her about Sophie's death. She asks if they know who did it, and he says no. He says that he knows who did, though: she did. Isabel tells him that she has an alibi, and he finally tells her about the conversation he had with Sophie the previous year. He accuses her of purposely planting the Polish vodka. He tells her that she cut Sophie's throat as much as anyone else. Isabel denies the charges, but eventually, after questioning, she admits that, yes, she did leave the alcohol there on purpose to test Sophie. She goes on to say that she would do it again. She tells Maugham that Sophie would have made Larry miserable and that somebody had to do something.

Isabel finishes telling Maugham about her scheme and then asks for a drink herself. She pleads with Maugham not to tell Larry or Gray, and he agrees. Maugham tells Isabel that he probably won't see Larry again anyway and tells her about his plan to move to New York. Isabel begins to cry, and Maugham surmises that any notion she had about them getting back together is now gone. To pass the time while Isabel cries, Maugham starts reading Larry's book. To Maugham's surprise, it's about different successful men and rulers from history. Maugham doesn't understand why Larry would write about these men, and then it comes to him that Larry is interested in successful men and what they get out of their lives. Maugham skims through the book and is impressed with Larry's writing style.

Isabel asks Maugham if he thinks any less of her because of what she did. He tells her that he is an immoral person and that even if someone does something he doesn't like, it won't change his opinion of that person. He tells her that she only lacks one thing: tenderness. Before she reacts, Gray walks in, and the subject changes to his business venture in Texas. Maugham tells them that he can't join them for dinner because he has plans with Suzanne Rouvier. When Isabel asks about Suzanne, Maugham tells her it's one of Larry's "gal pals." Isabel gets upset and says that she knows about Larry's sex life and lack thereof. They have one more drink before leaving. As they are walking out, Isabel asks Gray if he thinks she's "hard boiled," and he tells her no. Isabel then sticks out her tongue at Maugham, and he mutters under his breath, "It's not the same thing."



Maugham then tells of the next time he passes through Paris and how he misses Isabel and Gray. He imagines how their life is going in Dallas. He is sure that they have a stylishly decorated house and that they throw elegant dinner parties with good wine and good food. He imagines Isabel is hosting social dances for her daughters, who are fast approaching puberty. Maugham is also sure that Isabel and Gray are as popular as they deserve to be, with Isabel possessing so much charm and Gray being the quintessential "regular guy."

## Chapter 7 (sections iii-iv) Analysis

In the previous section, the true nature of Sophie is examined, and in this one Isabel's nature is considered. She admits to planting the vodka on purpose, and this leads to Sophie's death. This can only lead to the conclusion that Isabel, who chose money over love, is not a good person. Yet, when she asks Maugham if he thinks less of her, he says no. This is confusing because Maugham seems to make the argument that because she is attractive and charming, she can be forgiven for essentially setting up someone's death. How much of the blame can be laid on Isabel, who contrives the environment for Sophie's downfall? How much of the blame can be laid on Sophie? If Isabel is responsible, is she also driven by her environment or circumstances, laying the blame yet elsewhere? Whether Isabel is or is not responsible for Sophie's death, she is responsible for her own action, leaving the vodka out in hopes that Sophie will drink it.

Isabel's actions also provide more evidence for the theme of true love. If she didn't really love Larry, she wouldn't have such strong feelings for him. First, she cannot believe he has had sex, and then she gets upset enough with the idea of his marrying Sophie to sabotage their marriage. When Maugham tells her that Larry has gone to New York, she breaks down and cries. She asks Gray if she is a cold person, and he says no. Maugham's comments make it seem that the reason Gray doesn't think so is because he doesn't really know her.



## Chapter 7 (sections v-vi)

### Chapter 7 (sections v-vi) Summary

Two years after seeing Isabel for the last time, Maugham drops by to see Suzanne Rouvier at her apartment. When he enters, she is wearing a smock with a paintbrush in her mouth. Her living room is filled with paintings, and she tells Maugham that she is going to have a showing at Meyerheim's, a well-respected art gallery. Maugham asks her how she pulled that off, and she tells him that Mr. Achille, her rich married lover, brought some paintings by Meyerheim's.

Suzanne tells Maugham that she is getting married and explains the story behind her suddenly successful art career. Achille's wife, whom he married more for money than love, has passed away. He asked Suzanne to marry him, and she agreed. However, he didn't want to bring her back to his French town of Lille without a good reputation. He arranged an art show for her at Meyerheim, complete with a bribed press ready to give good reviews. She seems very happy at her arrangement, which includes Achille taking care of her daughter. Maugham looks over her paintings and agrees that they do have some artistic value. She tells him that they have gossiped long enough and that she must get back to her art. She asks about Larry and tells Maugham that her gentle friend must be having a tough time in a rough place like America. They kiss goodbye, apparently for the last time.

In the final section, Maugham tells the reader that he has not kept in touch with Larry since they last saw each other in Toulouse. He has no idea if he went through with his plan of buying a taxi or what has become of him. He almost apologizes for ending his story without a happy ending, but then he looks back on events and realizes there is one. He realizes that everyone got what he or she wanted. Suzanne got security; Gray got a well-paying and steady job. Larry found happiness, and Sophie found death. Finally, Isabel achieved good social standing and wealth.

### Chapter 7 (sections v-vi) Analysis

Maugham closes the novel with a look at Suzanne Rouvier, a character that unlike the rest, seems to get what she doesn't really deserve. Suzanne's lover becomes her husband, and he uses money to turn her into an artist. However, she's not really deserving of the attention and credit. Also, she agrees to marry Mr. Achille because he is wealthy and will care for her daughter. She tells him that marriage is a woman's best way to the life she wants. Ironically, this goes against things that Larry has been talking about the entire novel. Regarding the theme of true love, it seems Suzanne hasn't found it either.

Maugham's final passage seems to wrap everything up nicely. He says that everyone has gotten what he or she wanted in the end. But have they? Isabel might be rich and

living a good life in Dallas, but she never got her true love, Larry. Perhaps that is the final example of the good in someone's life being balanced by the bad.





# Characters

## Laurence "Larry" Darrell

From the first time Larry is introduced, he is clearly not like others, an impression that is confirmed by his spiritual journey, which drives the novel. Dr. Nelson brings up Larry after his parents die when he is young. Larry is sent to an elite school where he meets and becomes friends with Chicago's elite. Before finishing high school, however, he goes to Canada, lies about his age and enlists to fight in World War I, where he is made an aviator. During the war, one of his friends, Patty, dies in front of him, an incident that has a deep and lasting impact on him.

Larry moves back to Chicago and becomes engaged to Isabel Bradley, but it's clear he's not like the others in his social group. At a luncheon, where he is first introduced to the reader, he tells Isabel that the only thing that matters is what Mrs. Bradley likes about her house. It's a direct contrast to everyone else's opinions. Later, Maugham notices that Larry spends an entire day in the library reading a psychology book. Mrs. Bradley and her brother, Elliott, are concerned because he has not looked for work since coming back from the war a year ago. Larry says that he's not interested in work and that all he wants to do is "loaf." He then tells Isabel that he needs some time to sort out his thoughts, and they agree to take a two-year break while he goes to Paris.

In Paris, Larry refuses Elliott's invitations to join the elite social class. Instead, he spends his time reading. When Isabel visits almost two years later, he tells her that he's not finished finding the answers to his questions about life and the human soul. He asks her to join him in his quest for knowledge and travel through Europe on meager means. She tells him that she doesn't want that kind of life, and they decide to break up.

After breaking up with Isabel, Larry leaves Paris and begins his travels. He works briefly in a mining village and then leaves for a farm in Germany with a Polish companion, Kosti. After being seduced by the farmer's daughter, he moves to Bonn where he meets a Benedictine monk, Father Ensheim. He visits the Father's monastery and spends his time reading and asking the monks questions. They are unable to satisfy his spiritual question, and he stops off in Spain before going to Bombay, India. There, he finally finds answers to some of his questions. He studies under a powerful Hindu holy man, Shri Ganesha, and has a spiritual moment while staying in a cabin in the mountains. He learns about the Hindu belief of the "Absolute," an idea that says there is no beginning and no end.

Larry embraces these Eastern philosophies and moves back to Paris where he reconnects with Maugham and Isabel, who has moved to Paris with her husband and family after the stock market crash. In Paris, he cures the migraine headaches of Isabel's husband, Gray, becoming friends with both. During this time, he meets Sophie MacDonald, an old friend from Chicago who has fallen into a life of drugs, alcohol and sex after her family was killed in a car accident. Larry asks her to marry him, an act that



Maugham believes derives from his need to heal and help everyone. It's the same need that Jesus Christ had, Maugham tells Isabel. Isabel, still in love with Larry, sabotages the wedding by tempting Sophie with vodka. Sophie suffers a relapse and disappears. The next time Larry sees her is years later, when she is murdered and he must identify her body.

While burying Sophie, Larry meets up with Maugham and tells him his plans. Larry intends to go back to America and teach people the things he has learned in Europe over the past decade. He plans to do it without any money. His only plan is a spur-of-the-moment idea to drive a cab in New York City. After they shake hands goodbye, Maugham never sees or hears from Larry again.

Unlike the others, Larry never has an interest in money. He lives poorly but happily, and Maugham notices that he is quiet but self possessed, with a sense of peace. Physically, he has a wonderful smile and a soothing voice, and he seems to have little interest in sex. Exactly what becomes of him is a mystery, but given his personality and simple needs, Maugham imagines that wherever Larry is, he's happy.

## Isabel Bradley

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

Isabel is introduced to Maugham as Mrs. Bradley's daughter and immediately starts haranguing the visiting interior decorator for his opinion. Maugham also notices that the stares she shares with Larry indicate true love. After she and Larry decide to take a two-year break in order for Larry to sort things out, Isabel seeks out Maugham for a talk. Her relationship with Maugham is crucial to the novel, but it's interesting because they seem to have little in common when they first meet.

Isabel is reintroduced two years later when she and her mother visit Paris. This is where the first questions about her character are brought up. First, she declines Larry's offer to travel around Europe because she doesn't want that kind of life. She chooses money over love. She then confesses to Maugham that she considered seducing Larry and lying about getting pregnant to trick him into coming back to America.

After breaking up with Larry, Isabel marries Gray Maturin and has two daughters. She seems set to live the life she wanted, filled with money, social engagements and fine things. After the stock market crash, however, they are forced to sell most of their things and move to a family plantation in South Carolina. She moves to Paris with her family, after her Uncle Elliott gives them his apartment. Here, she gets reacquainted with Larry and Maugham. She admits to Maugham that she's not really in love with Gray but that she could never leave him because he's a good husband.



In Paris, Isabel clearly still has feelings for Larry, visibly lusting after him at one point and becoming angry when other women in his life are brought up. Larry's love life brings out the worst in her. She purposely leaves a bottle of vodka out to tempt Sophie, a former friend who turned into an alcoholic and drug addict and who Larry is engaged to. Sophie gives in, drinks the vodka and relapses. She ends up going back to her old ways and later gets murdered in a crime the police believe is tied to her relationships with dangerous men. After first denying Maugham's charge that she set Sophie up, Isabel admits it. Moreover, Isabel says she would do it again and that she's happy she did it.

Maugham loses touch with Isabel after their final meeting in Paris, but he imagines she's living the life she always wanted after Gray gets a job in Dallas. He imagines she's still beautiful, lives in a big house, and has all the right friends and hosts to the best parties.

## Elliott Templeton

Elliott is the snob with a heart of gold. Maugham goes to great lengths describing his friend's elitism and vanity, but he also mentions his good nature. Elliott, when the reader first meets him, is described as being in his late fifties, tall and elegant. It is never clearly explained what he does for a living, but Elliott seems to be a collector and trader of antiques and art. Whatever it is, he is wealthy, with an apartment in Paris and a house on the Riviera. As Maugham explains, money isn't his obsession. Forging social relationships with the rich and well connected is. His manners and personality make him one of the most popular members of Parisian high society.

Later, Elliott grows annoyed with the blurring social lines he is witnessing in London, Paris and America. He gets very angry when a boorish American insults him without his knowledge, and he laments about America becoming middle class when a taxi driver calls him brother. He also switches religions, becoming Catholic because of its better social connections. As he gets older, Elliott 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 Elliott's faults, he also demonstrates a tender and generous nature. When his sister, Mrs. Bradley, passes away, he seems genuinely upset. Also, after the stock market crash, he offers his apartment to his niece, Isabel, and her family. However, there are two sides to Elliott's generosity. When he takes his sister and Isabel around London to show them a good time, Maugham believes it's because of kindness and also a way to show off. When he gives Isabel his apartment, it's because he can't bear his niece living on a plantation with only a "few" servants. A snob and good-hearted person, Elliott is a perfect example of the two sides of every person, a theme Maugham explores throughout the novel.



## W. Somerset Maugham

The narrator and author of the novel, Maugham is a main character, yet still manages to stay in the background. The book isn't about him, but it would have been impossible without his inclusion. Interestingly, he is referred to by name just once during the entire novel.

Maugham's personality is what brings about much of the action. He's a talker and a good listener. Isabel asks him for an ice cream soda, which turns into a long, personal conversation - the kind they'll have over the next ten to twelve years at different intervals. His conversation skills also serve him well with Larry. Like every other character in the novel, Larry seems drawn to Maugham and freely engages him in conversation.

Maugham is not there just to talk and listen, though. He is opinionated, intelligent and well read, constantly making references to art and literature. He's obviously a member of the elite class, like his friend Elliott, and he is a bit of an artist and intellectual, like Larry. Despite Isabel's character flaws, Maugham is also quite fond of Isabel for her beauty and vitality.

## Gray Maturin

Maugham refers to Gray as the quintessence of the "regular guy." Gray is a tall, large man with a thirst for work and money. He goes into his father's banking business and is Larry's best friend. He's also secretly in love with Isabel. After Larry and Isabel split up for the final time, he and Isabel become an item and eventually get married.

After the stock market crash, Gray loses everything. They're forced to sell nearly all their possessions and move to a plantation in South Carolina. Gray actually finds peace in South Carolina, but he moves to Paris with Isabel to live in Elliott's apartment. Maugham notes that Gray has gained a great deal of weight in the years after getting married. His face seems redder, and his hair is thinning. Paris doesn't agree with him, and he develops migraine headaches. The headaches are cured by Larry's spiritual healing.

Despite Gray's simple and rough nature, he is genuinely in love with Isabel, even though she reveals she isn't truly in love with him. Maugham notes how sweet and tender he is with his daughters and how much he dotes on his wife. After inheriting money from Elliott after his death, Gray finds work in Dallas and presumably lives the kind of life he has always wanted: working at a good nine to five job, making good money and having a wife and family to come home to.

## Louisa Bradley

Mrs. Bradley, as she is often referred to, is Isabel's mother and the sister of Elliott Templeton. She is a rich widow in Chicago who is getting her house redecorated when



Maugham first meets her. Understandably, she is concerned about Larry's lack of plans for the future and gets Isabel to confront him.

Later, Mrs. Bradley contracts a mild form of diabetes and comes to Paris with Isabel on a long vacation. Once again, Mrs. Bradley gets Isabel to confront Larry. Though she thinks their split is for the best, she asks Isabel if she and Larry split up because of her. Isabel says no. She dies of natural causes later in the novel and leaves her house to Isabel and Gray.

## **Kosti**

A large, brutish ex-military officer, Kosti is Larry's roommate in the coal-mining town near Lens. After spending some time together, Larry is surprised to learn that Kosti has studied philosophy, but he only talks about it when he's drunk. Kosti suggests they leave the town to travel through Germany, where they end up at the farm owned by Mr. Becker. Kosti intends to make a move on Frau Becker before he realizes she is more interested in Larry. After Ellie Becker seduces Larry in the barn, Larry takes off, and Kosti is not heard from again.

## **Father Ensheim**

A Benedictine monk that Larry meets in a German boarding house, Father Ensheim is the first religious person who connects with Larry's search for meaning about the world. He and Larry take long walks together, discussing religion and philosophy. Larry eventually moves into Father Ensheim's monastery, but despite enjoying his time with the monks, they aren't able to satisfactorily answer his questions.

## **Suzanne Rouvier**

An opportunist with a good heart, Suzanne grew up in a small French town before being forced to leave after becoming pregnant. In Paris, she has a series of relationships with painters that she uses to give her a place to stay and live. After she contracts typhoid, she runs into Larry, a friend of one her painter friends. Larry takes her and her daughter to a small French village for the summer. Larry never asks for sex, and it's only after her advances that they sleep together. During this summer, Larry tells her about his friend's death in the war and the impact it had on him. Suzanne eventually marries an older businessman that she has been having an affair with. He sets her up with an art show at a well-respected gallery, complete with bribed journalists to write glowing reviews about her. She moves in with him and takes along her daughter, finally finding a secure and stable life.



## Sophie MacDonald

When Sophie is first introduced, she's a quiet, plain-looking girl at a dinner party. She ends up in Paris, a drunken dope fiend who sleeps around. The change occurred after her husband and child were killed in a car accident. After wearing out her welcome in Chicago, she's sent to Paris by her in-laws. There, she runs into Larry and Isabel. While Isabel dismisses her as a bad person, Larry feels for her. He tells of their relationship when they were kids, reading poetry to each other. Later, Larry asks Sophie to marry him, which infuriates Isabel. Isabel purposely leaves a bottle of vodka in her room to tempt Sophie, who takes the bait and disappears. Maugham runs into her in Toulon, where she has gone back to her drugs and alcohol. She is later found dead, floating in the water, and Larry and Maugham are summoned to identify her body and bury her.

## Shri Ganesha

Larry meets several Yogis and holy men in India, but Shri Ganesha has the biggest affect on him. When Larry meets him, his heart beats violently, and he almost cries. Larry spends months with Shri Ganesha, asking him questions and listening to him speak. During his stay with Shri Ganesha, Larry has his spiritual moment at the lake.

## Dr. Nelson

After Larry's parents died when he was young, Dr. Nelson took him in and raised him. Through Dr. Nelson, Larry joins the elite crowd of Chicago by sending him to an elite school. Through the school, Larry meets Gary and Isabel.

## Patty

A short, red-haired Irishman with no fear, Patty is a pilot in Larry's squadron whose death has a profound impact on Larry's life. During one mission, Larry comes under attack. Patty comes to his rescue, shooting down the pilot barreling down on Larry. It's only when they land that Patty is injured. He says, "I'm jiggered," then falls down and dies. His death leads Larry to ask basic questions about humanity and life, a quest that leads to his long sojourn in Europe and India.

## Frau Becker

Frau Becker is a former servant before she marries Mr. Becker and becomes the woman of the house. She doesn't get along with Ellie, Mr. Becker's widowed daughter, and becomes the object of Kost's eye when he and Larry arrive at the farm. Later, it's clear that she's interested in Larry, but to Larry's surprise, it's not Frau Becker who seduces him in the barn.



## Ellie Becker

Ellie is the widowed daughter of Mr. Becker, the farmer who takes in Larry and Kosti. Ellie teaches Larry to speak German in their off time and appears to have a hatred for Frau Becker, who was a servant before she married the widowed Mr. Becker. Ellie seduces Larry in the barn house. All along, he thinks it is Frau Becker. When he finds out it was Ellie, Larry takes off in the middle of the night, leaving Kosti and the farm.



# Objects/Places

## The Drugstore

Before Maugham leaves Chicago, Isabel asks him to stop for an ice cream soda at a drugstore. Here, she tells him the details of her confrontation with Larry about her future, a conversation that ends with him leaving for Paris. It's the start of a long relationship and many long personal conversations between Isabel and Maugham.

## Lens

After growing tired of Paris, Larry leaves for a coal-mining town near the French city of Lens. He becomes a mineworker and meets Kosti, which leads to his travels in Germany.

## Elliott's Boxer Shorts

While running errands with Elliott, Maugham notices the crest on Elliott's boxer shorts. The crest is a Count's crest, an honor bestowed upon Elliott by the Catholic Church for his donations toward building a new church. Elliott also avoids the stock market crash through his relations with the Catholic Church, because he gets financial advice from the church.

## Count de Lauria

The Count de Lauria costume is Elliott's prized costume. He wants to wear it to the biggest party of the season on the Riviera, a party he isn't invited to. It's also the costume that Elliott asks to be buried in. Maugham comments that it is a silly getup that makes Elliott look foolish.

## Zubrovka

The Polish vodka that Elliott tastes at a luncheon which ultimately leads to Sophie and Larry's breakup is called Zubrovka. Isabel purposely leaves the vodka in her apartment to tempt Sophie, a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Sophie finishes the entire bottle and ends up leaving Larry and moving to Toulouse. She is murdered and thrown into the sea there.





## **Toulon**

Toulon is the French seaside town where Maugham sees Sophie for the first time since she broke off her engagement to Larry. Here, she tells him the story of what drove her away: the bottle of Polish vodka left in Isabel's apartment that inspired the relapse.

## **Hakim's**

The opium parlor where Sophie escapes to after her relapse is called Hakim's. For three days, she does drugs and sleeps with random men there.

## **Brasserie Graf**

The Parisian restaurant where Larry and Maugham have their long conversation about Larry's travels and philosophies is Brasserie Graf. Maugham says that this conversation inspired the book.

## **Alsace**

Alsace is the French province where the monastery that Larry visits is located. Here, Larry spends time reading and asking questions of the wise monks, none of whom give him a satisfactory answer to his religious questions.

## **Elephantra caves**

An Indian passenger on a cruise ship suggests that Larry visit the Elephantra caves. Standing outside the caves, Larry and the Indian meet again. The cave and the Indian man's words eventually inspire Larry to stay in India.

## **The Mountain Bungalow**

While staying with Shri Ganesha, Larry spends a few days in the mountain bungalow of a friend. Here, he has a spiritual episode which briefly gives him clarity and a glimpse of the Absolute.

## **The Absolute**

The Hindu idea of a universal force that has no end or beginning is the Absolute. Larry says it is impossible to define, but that it is truth and freedom.

## **Ashrama**

The compound where Shri Ganesha lives is called Ashrama. Here, Larry has his greatest spiritual awakening by listening to and asking questions of the Yogi.

## **Larry's Smile and Voice**

Over and over, Maugham remarks on Larry's smile and voice. He comments that Larry's smile is beautiful and kind, while the voice, which Maugham says he can't adequately describe, is almost melodic and never makes him sound preachy.

# Social Sensitivity

No novel better illustrates Maugham's lack of social concern than *The Razor's Edge*, a novel that sold more than two and a half million copies in America within a four-year period.

With a detached, urbane, cosmopolitan narrator, the plot ranges over more than a decade, with action occurring in at least three countries. The narrator's chief interest is in seeing what sense a varied set of characters can make of their lives, and in the end their lives do conform to a kind of pattern. While they are affected by events like the Great Depression, these remain subordinate to the narrator's emphasis upon character.



## Techniques

The *Razor's Edge* advances Maugham's art of fiction in two significant ways. He continues to rely heavily on natural dialogue and dramatic encounters, but as he was living in the United States while writing the novel, he makes use of Americans for characters.

Stylistically, this means American speech, just as in *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) his characters spoke Cockney dialect.

Maugham's most ambitious attempt to record American speech is especially apparent in the colloquial expressions of Gray Maturin.

A further development concerns the method of narration. From the early 1920s, Maugham used in his fiction either a character as his spokesman or a character-narrator who closely resembles the author. The third person omniscient thus becomes a first person narrator and at times a participant. In *The Razor's Edge*, this character is "Mr. Maugham," a world-famous writer.

While he does not shape the events, this Maugham persona does involve himself in the story in minor ways, talking with the characters, giving them advice, and discussing their ideas and plans. To the reader, he often pretends to share confidences, as in the novel's first sentence: "I have never begun a novel with more misgiving."



# Themes

## Themes

As in his other works, Maugham develops the existential theme of characters attempting to make their lives meaningful in a meaningless world. In *The Razor's Edge*, the protagonist Larry Darrell forsakes wealth, security, and personal relationships to seek a spiritual meaning in life. Traveling to India, he finds it in the Hindu religion — in the belief in transmigration of souls and in a highly personal mystical experience. When he returns to America, having given up his annuity, he is content to accept the life of an ordinary workingman.

Other characters seek meaning in different ways. Elliott Templeton, a wealthy art collector and consummate snob, remains true to his standards and his Catholic faith and dies in peace.

Buffeted by the depression, Gray and Isabel Maturin find a new start in business and a comfortable social niche in Dallas. Only Sophie Macdonald leads a self-destructive existence that ends in her death, following a trauma that deprived her of the will to live.

## Rejection of Materialism

At heart, *The Razor's Edge* is the story of a young man, Larry Darrell, trying to answer basic questions about life and mankind through knowledge. It's also about taking a different path to modern life, choosing spirituality over money and other material things. In the end, Larry through his independence from shallow desires is one of the few characters that is truly happy and without regret.

One of the first instances in which Maugham, the novel's narrator, notices that Larry is different is when he notices Larry spending an entire day in the library reading one book, a psychology book. Even at twenty, before his travels in Europe, Larry is looking for answers and bucking the status quo. While his friends are getting jobs in banks and other industries, he says all he wants to do is "loaf." Of course, that's not true. He just wants to spend his time reading and studying philosophy in an attempt to answer his questions.

Larry's quest for answers to the basic questions of life stems from the death of his friend and fellow pilot, Patty, during World War I. Larry sees Patty die in front of him, which starts him questioning why there is so much evil and tragedy in the world.

Larry's desire for these answers leads him to Paris, while he leaves Isabel behind in Chicago. He tells her it should only take about two years, but when they meet again he says it might take ten or fifteen. In the end, he is just about right. During their second break up, Larry tells Isabel that they don't need money and that they can spend their time traveling through Europe on meager means. This idea sounds terrible to Isabel, but



to Larry, who doesn't care about money or spiritual things, it's a plan he employs for the next decade. Like his lack of desire to find a job, his willingness to live on little money makes him a unique and eccentric person in the world of people like Isabel and Elliott.

After reading books for years in Paris, Larry's quest for knowledge leads to a meeting with Father Ensheim, a Benedictine monk. Father Ensheim questions Larry about his belief in God. It's a simple question, but Larry says he is not sure, which leads to his joining Father Ensheim's monastery.

Larry doesn't find the answers to his questions in the monastery, which leads to a key message throughout the novel: Christianity does not provide answers. It's a theme that Maugham, through Larry, explores over and over, first with Father Ensheim and then in the novel's sixth chapter, which is basically a nightlong conversation with Maugham at the Paris restaurant. During their long talk, Larry brings up the basic ideas of Christianity and shoots them down, ideas such as the glorification of God and the need for man to overcome evil in a world that God supposedly created.

Only through Eastern philosophies and Hinduism does Larry start to answer some of his questions. He experiences a spiritual kind of awakening at a lake in the mountains. He does this only after studying with an Indian holy man, Shri Ganesha. However, his time in India doesn't answer all of his questions. On the issue of why there is evil in the world, the question that is the catalyst for his ten-year quest, no one gives him a satisfactory answer. In the end, he comes up with his own theory. He tells Maugham that when something is inevitable, to make the best of it.

This spiritual peace has a positive affect on Larry and even gives him healing powers. Unlike Gray and Isabel, who suffered because of the stock market crash, Larry is perfectly happy since his ambitions aren't tied to money. Also, he is able to heal Gray's migraine headaches. This is symbolic of the difference in the old friends. The headaches are a result of Gray's stress over money. They're only cured because Larry has studied and learned from men who preach a simple, spiritually pure life.

In the end, Larry is one of the few characters with a happy ending. Isabel is rich but married to a man she doesn't love. Gray has a good job, but he's spiritually shallow. Elliott dies alone and looking ridiculous by being buried in an expensive but silly costume. Maugham has no idea what becomes of Larry, but he's sure that without a care for money and material things, and with his only desire to learn and spread his teachings, Larry is happy.

## Duality of Man

In Larry's conversation with Maugham, Larry talks about the necessary existence of evil to balance out the good. It's an idea that is exemplified by several of the novel's main characters. No one is a hundred percent bad or good; they're simply human.

Isabel and Elliott exemplify the idea of duality of people. Elliott, as Maugham states, is a total snob. He exists to attend social functions and climb social ladders. Elliott also



possesses a good heart. He lavishes gifts on people because he wants to curry their favors, but Maugham notes that he keeps giving people gifts even after it is no longer necessary. When his sister, Mrs. Bradley dies, Elliott goes to Chicago and takes care of all the arrangements. After the stock market crash, he gives his pricey Paris apartment to his niece, Isabel, and her family. Elliott also finances the building of a church in Italy, a move that leads to his being made a Count. Following his death, Elliott generously leaves works of art, his apartment and his house on the Riviera to Isabel.

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 a man, Gray, whom she doesn't truly love, though. After the stock market crash, she sticks by Gray and helps him keep things together while his business falls into ruin. And as Maugham comments, she seems to be a good mother, and she possesses a charming personality.

Earlier, however, Isabel chooses the promise of a wealthy life over her true love, Larry. Her feelings for Larry never totally go away, as she admits 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 marry him, partly because of his desire to help people, and Isabel becomes furious. She sabotages the marriage by tempting Sophie with vodka, and Sophie is eventually found murdered after falling in with her old crowd. Instead of apologizing for her actions, Isabel is happy she planted the vodka, 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's also cold around the heart and never ends up with the true object of her love, Larry.

In Sophie, Maugham introduces a character whose true character is never clearly defined. She seemed a normal loving wife before the car accident, but she turns to the dark side of life afterward. Was she always a bad person inside? Isabel says yes, 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 makeup at the seedy bar in Paris. Later, she looks unattractive at a lunch while trying to kick 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. It is just more obvious in her than others.

## True Love

In the novel, Gray and Isabel are the only characters who end up married, although they're not genuinely in love with each other. In fact, none of the characters in the novel end up in mutually loving relationship.

Gray and Isabel are the most obvious examples. Gray undoubtedly loves Isabel, as Maugham notes, and always has. However, Isabel doesn't feel the same way about Gray. She admits to Maugham that she marries Gray because she wants a stable,



wealthy life. He's a good husband and a passionate lover, she says, but she doesn't truly love him. The irony is that Isabel has a chance at ending up with her true love, but she forsakes Larry for money. At one point, she admits to Maugham that she's the kind of girl that needs the sidewalk under her feet and shop windows to look into.

Suzanne Rouvier, Maugham's old art friend, also chooses money over love, although she is more practical about it. She doesn't pretend to be in love. She tells Maugham that her marriage to an older widowed businessman is about ensuring a stable life for her and her daughter, Odette. It's almost like a business arrangement.

Interestingly, the main character of the novel, Larry, also fails to fall in love. He tells Maugham that sex has always been a pleasure, not a need. His relationship with Isabel might have been based on genuine feelings, but it's clear that they have a completely different set of ideals, and any marriage probably wouldn't have worked. Larry's two relationships are based more on his desire to help people. He takes Suzanne to a small French town for the summer to help her recuperate from Typhoid. He also asks Sophie to marry him, but it's more about him trying to save Sophie from drugs and alcohol than true love. If anything, Larry's true love isn't a physical person; it's knowledge. It's his books, philosophy and quest for knowledge that Larry is most devoted to. In the end, it's the only kind of love that makes anyone truly happy.



# Style

## Point of View

From the outset, the narrator clearly states that *The Razor's Edge* will not proceed like most novels. The author, W. Somerset Maugham, speaks directly to the readers in the opening passage and tells them that he has misgivings about writing this novel. He claims it is based on real people and actual events, but that the names have been changed and that he has put the conversations into his own words. When he wasn't around for the conversations, he wrote them as he imagined they would have gone. All of this information is given in the first section of the first chapter, which essentially serves as an introduction, although one that is not given a separate section as with most novels.

Because of Maugham's inclusion in the story, the novel exercises every point of view. He talks to the reader in the second person, and his narrative is largely in the first person. By talking directly to the reader, the novel lacks any notion of objectivity. Maugham describes every character's physical person in detail, and in passing, he passes judgment on people, art and just about everything else. In other words, many of the novel's observations are Maugham's opinions. On several occasions, his opinions seem to differ from the facts, such as his admiration for Isabel despite her questionable character.

As Maugham states early in the novel, he has reconstructed conversations in his own words. The conversations, consequently, are a mixture of first-person and third-person accounts. This device allows Maugham to give background information on characters without the use of narrative. Larry and Maugham's long, late-night conversation, for example, gives the reader a chronological account of Larry's travels through the words of Larry.

## Setting

Only a few specific dates and times are given in the novel, but a basic timeline emerges. Maugham meets Elliott and Mrs. Bradley in Chicago in 1919. In Chicago, the reader is told that Larry has been home from the war for a year. The reader is also told that Elliott is in his late fifties. Maugham is middle-aged, and Larry is twenty years old while Isabel is nineteen.

After the action leaves Chicago, the reader needs to pay close attention to follow the timeline. Larry moves to Paris, where Isabel and her mother visit two years later. From Paris, Larry travels through France, Germany, Spain and India. Maugham then tells the reader about the stock market crash in October of 1929, roughly a year before he meets up with Isabel and Larry in Paris. From there, approximately three years pass before



Isabel and her family move back to America, and Maugham and Larry meet for the last time.

Despite Larry's travels, the conversations between him and others that recount his actions take place in only a handful of settings. Larry and Maugham have several conversations in Paris restaurants and in Isabel's apartment. The longest and most detailed conversation takes place between Larry and Maugham over the course of one night at the Brasserie Graf restaurant.

Additionally, Maugham's meetings with Isabel are also largely confined to dinner and her apartment. Other action takes place in the Riviera as Elliott gets older, and when Maugham runs into Sophie MacDonald in Toulouse.

## Language and Meaning

Since the story is told as a narrative, the language and meaning is largely straightforward. As Maugham states in the book's opening, the novel is presented as a chronological series of events. If that's true, then any symbolism or hidden meaning is a result of facts, not the author's work. For example, Maugham states that Gray has gained weight after the stock market crash and looks older. In contrast, Isabel has grown more beautiful, and Larry, who has not been obsessed with money and material things, looks young and attractive after ten years in Europe. Do these physical descriptions say something about the person's true character? If, as Maugham states, everything is simply an account of actual events, then they are simply accurate physical descriptions and nothing more.

In terms of language, the Maugham's opinions and words can seem dated. He makes references to books and art from the 1930s. During one conversation with Isabel, Maugham says Larry is "like Elanora Duse in *La Locandiera*." The reader might have to look up various works in order to understand his meaning. In addition, Maugham sprinkles the novel with French expressions and phrases. Sometimes he translates them, and other times he doesn't.

Additionally, some of Maugham's opinions and other character's words would not seem very politically correct in modern times. Several times, Maugham makes borderline chauvinistic remarks about women. After a prostitute gets slapped by her pimp, the prostitute then yells at someone trying to step in. "Women!" Maugham writes. Later, he says that men know how to mix drinks better than women and that he doesn't trust a woman's instinct. Also, Suzanne Rouvier's character states that marriage is the best way for a woman to become financially secure. Also, Gray uses a racial slur that probably wasn't frowned upon in the first half of the 20th century but that will probably shock the reader.



## Structure

Maugham states that the story is told chronologically. However, several times Maugham informs the reader that a particular conversation happened years later, but is being told at a certain point because it fits in better with the novel's timeline. Later, conversations between characters, such as the long, all-night conversation between Larry and Maugham at a Parisian restaurant, chronicle past events while being told in the present. For example, while Larry is telling Maugham about his time in India, his descriptions take on a narrative form. It's as if Larry has taken over the role of narrator. During Larry's story though, Maugham interrupts to ask questions or make an observation. It's a device that blurs the line between the present and past.

The book itself is broken up into seven chapters. The chapters are roughly the same length, between fifty and sixty pages, and they are broken up into subsections. There is no introduction or epilogue.



## Quotes

"The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard." - Title page.

"I'm like a lost soul in this great city. I promised Louisa to spend six weeks with her, we hadn't seen one another since 1912, but I'm counting the days till I can get a back to Paris. It's the only place in the world for a civilized man to live. My dear fellow, d'you know how they look upon me here? They look upon me as a freak. Savages." - Elliott, pg. 23.

"Wouldn't it be better to follow the beaten track and let what's coming to you to come? And then you think of a fellow who an hour before was full of life and fun, and he's lying dead; it's all so cruel and so meaningless. It's hard not to ask yourself what life is all about and whether there's any sense to it or whether it's all a tragic blunder of blind fate." - Larry, pg. 51.

"Well, I'm jiggered." - Patty, pg. 56

"He said that the world isn't a creation, for out of nothing comes, but a manifestation of the eternal nature; well, that was all right, but then he added that evil is as a direct a manifestation of the divine as the good. They were strange words to hear in that sordid, noisy cady, to the accompaniment of dance tunes on the mechanical piano." - Larry, Pg. 114.

"Come off it Isabel. You gave him up for a square-cut diamond and a sable coat." - Maugham, pg. 224.

"I only wanted to suggest to you that self-sacrifice is a passion so overwhelming that beside it even lust and hunger are trifling. It whirls its victim to destruction in the highest affirmation of his personality. The object doesn't matter; it may be worth while or it may be worthless. No win is so intoxicating, no love so shattering, no vice so compelling." - Maugham, pg. 227.

"Darling, when it came to the point I couldn't see myself being Mary Magdalen to his Jesus Christ. No, sir." - Sophie, pg. 239.

"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." - Sophie, pg. 243.

"Believe me, my dear fellow, there'll be none of this damned equality in heaven." - Elliott, pg. 259.

"It made me sad to think how silly, useless and trivial his life had been. It mattered very little now that he had gone to so many parties and had hobnobbed with all those princes, dukes and counts. They had forgotten him already." - Maugham, pg. 261.



"My dear friend. If I didn't believe in it, life would have no meaning for me." - Hindu friend of Larry, pg. 291.

"The best to be said for it is that when you've come to the conclusion that something is inevitable, all you can do is make the best of it." - Larry, pg. 305.

"You're not a bad woman in your way and you have every grace and charm. I don't enjoy your beauty any the less because I know how much it owes to the happy combination of perfect taste and ruthless determination. You only lack one thing to make you completely enchanting. Tenderness." - Maugham, pg. 333.

# Adaptations

The *Razor's Edge* produced two movie versions (1946, 1984), each with stellar casts featuring first Tyrone Power and Anne Baxter, then Bill Murray and Theresa Russell. The earlier version emphasized Power as hero seeking the true meaning of life, while the 1984 version diffuses the focus from Power to his friends, who undergo a personal crisis of their own. Both versions are reasonably faithful to Maugham's text, except that the cinematic possibilities of the narrative are exploited and developed. In the novel Larry narrates to "Mr. Maugham" his experiences in India, which took him up the Ganges to Benares and farther upriver to the Himalayas. The movies, particularly the 1984 version, exploit this breathtaking scenery to the fullest extent.

(Please see the entries on *Of Human Bondage* and "Rain" for further details on adaptations of Maugham's works.)



## Topics for Discussion

Given Elliott's switch to Catholicism and Larry's lack of answers to his questions in Christianity, is Maugham criticizing Western religions? Give examples from the novel that cast Christianity in a negative light. Conversely, what is the novel's view on Hinduism? Give examples.

Several times during the novel, Maugham makes references to Jesus Christ when talking about Larry and his treatment of others. Explain this connection and how it relates to Larry's healing powers.

Going against common sense, Isabel believes that Larry is a virgin. Why? What is it about Larry that leads her to believe this?

Isabel tells Maugham that Larry truly loved her. She says that she loved him, too. Given how their lives ended up, was their love real? Could a marriage have worked? What would have been the consequences if Isabel joined Larry on his adventures, or if Larry went back to Chicago?

Maugham tells Suzanne that Larry does things for the love of a God that he does not believe in. What does he mean by this, and why does Suzanne accuse of him being drunk?

What does Maugham mean when he mutters under his breath, "It's not the same," after Gray tells Isabel he doesn't think she's a cold person?

Maugham tells the reader that they can skip Chapter 6 because it's not important to the chronology. Is this true? If it's not true, why does Maugham tell the reader this?

## Literary Precedents

The *Razor's Edge* was written during the Second World War, when people were seeking values in a world shaken by cataclysm. Works with a popularized religious theme, like Lloyd C. Douglas's *The Robe* (1942), Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette* (1941), and A. J. Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1941) met with great popular success.

From further back, during the 1920s and 1930s, works like Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and William H. Hudson's *Green Mansions* (1904) developed a kind of dreamy religious aura that made them popular.

Among the books in this tradition, *The Razor's Edge* stands apart, for Maugham makes the mystical experience of his hero Hindu, not Christian.

Larry comes to accept belief in transmigration and believes, although he is not certain, that in India he achieved a genuine mystical experience during meditation. But throughout the novel one encounters the cool presence of "Mr. Maugham" — detached, analytic, and clearly dubious that Larry's experience was authentic.



## Related Titles

Among Maugham's numerous stories and novels, many include the narrative persona, like that of *The Razor's Edge*, or an exotic setting and ironic conclusion like those of "Rain" (please see separate entry). "The Outstation" (1924), a story set in Borneo, narrates the experience of two Englishmen who staff a remote trading post and whose differing values and class backgrounds lead to conflict and strife. In "The Letter" (1926), the wife of a colonial plantation owner murders her English lover, but in a trial is acquitted because the jury believes she acted in self-defense. In "The Colonel's Lady" (1946), an obtuse husband finally recognizes his wife's earlier infidelity but chooses to remain with her because he cannot imagine life without her.

"The Ant and the Grasshopper" (1924) and "The Facts of Life" (1939) deal with young men who reject conventional wisdom and common sense and through their independent spirits come out better than they would have exercising caution. On the other hand, "The Alien Corn" (1931) narrates the tragic story of a young man's ambition to become a concert pianist. Having failed in his sole ambition, he commits suicide. "The Kite" (1947), a similar story of obsession, introduces a hero who goes to prison rather than pay support to his estranged wife, only because he cannot forgive her for breaking his kite.

Among the novels, *Cakes and Ale* (1930) introduces a variety of literary types, including Willie Ashenden, who represents the author. The grand old man of letters Edward Driffield is based upon the character of Thomas Hardy. In *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), the hero Charles Strickland renounces his past in the same way that Larry Darrell does in *The Razor's Edge*. He gives up his career as a stockbroker for that of an artist and succeeds against heavy odds. Like the painter Gauguin, he abandons Europe for the South Pacific. *The Painted Veil* (1925) is a story of adultery among English colonials living in China. The unfaithful wife travels with her physician husband to a remote town stricken by an epidemic, her husband's assumption being that she will die there. Ironically, he suffers this fate instead and she returns unhappily to England.



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