

On *Liza of Lambeth*

“... One mustn't be too 'ard on 'em.”

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I

Liza of Lambeth was published in 1897 when William Somerset Maugham, aged 23, was qualified as a doctor at St Thomas's, the teaching hospital situated on the south embankment of the River Thames. This is his first published novel,¹⁾ and, as it has been said, this first novel seems to have every element of the author Maugham — a novelist and dramatist. Dramatic or theatrical elements are shown in Liza's colourful appearance at the beginning of this work²⁾ and common people's witty conversation in cockneyism is shown all through this novel.³⁾ This novel, however, has more realistic and ingenuous descriptions than the works written in his later years.⁴⁾ In addition, this story suggests us his view of woman in embryo.

While reading this novel, we have two questions:

First, why is Liza attracted to Jim Blakeston, who is “about forty,” (ch. III) though she is courted by Tom who is young enough to “appear almost boyish” (ch. II)? Since Tom is depicted to have “a frank and pleasant look mingled with a curious bashfulness that made him blush when people spoke to him” (ch. II), he impresses us favourably. Liza, however, rejects Tom. Her behaviour looks perverse and hard to understand. What makes Liza love Jim Blakeston, instead of Tom?

Second, Liza's love and death make us feel something profoundly concerning the reality of life though her death is regrettable itself. Why does this work make us feel in such a way?

II

In order to consider the first question we should notice the incipient events concerning the love between Liza and Jim Blakeston. First, she is forced to “jump shrieking into his arms,” and he, “lifting her up to him, had imprinted two sounding kisses on her cheeks” (ch. I). These forced kisses seem to make a great impact on her though she swears at him with a “quite unprintable” (chap. I) expression, because she blushes when she mentions the man who kissed her in the street during supper on the same evening. Besides, “feeling a certain exquisite sense of peacefulness which she was not used to” (ch. II), she enjoys the quietness of the same evening. She becomes quite romantic after the first kisses:

It seemed so tranquil and still; the silence filled her with a strange delight, she felt as if

she could sit there all through the night looking out into the cool, dark street, and up heavenwards at the stars. She was very happy, but yet at the same time experienced a strange new sensation of melancholy, and she almost wished to cry (ch. II).

Although the author doesn't describe her state of mind explicitly, it's easy to surmise that she is charmed by Jim greatly enough to make a decision and she rejects Tom who comes up to her then saying "I'm not worth troublin' abaht" (ch. II).

Another proof of her enchanted state of mind is seen on the morning of the picnic. She really wants to go on the picnic with them, especially when she knows Jim is also going, but, due to her decision, she can't announce her wish to go; "She was not sorry that she had refused Tom's invitation, but she did wish that she had conscientiously been able to accept it" (ch. IV). Eventually, enticing Tom to urge her into participating in the picnic, she reluctantly (ostensibly) agrees to go. Her affection for Jim kindles during the picnic; she is impressed by Jim's enjoyable behaviour and skillfulness at playing games as compared to the clumsiness of Tom. In addition, the event on the "brake" (ch. IV) on their way home seems to stir up her desire for "strong man's caresses" (ch. V):

Then slowly she felt Tom's arm steal round her waist, cautiously, as though it were afraid of being there; this time both she and Tom were very happy. But suddenly there was a movement on the other side of her, a hand was advanced along her leg, and her hand was grasped and gently pressed. It was Jim Blakeston. She started a little and began trembling so that Tom noticed it, and whispered:

"You are cold, Liza."

"Na, I'm not. Tom; it's only a sort of shiver that went through me" (ch. V).

The author writes shortly before the caresses of Tom and Jim; "... Liza as she looked up at the heavens, felt a certain emotion, as if she wished to be taken in someone's arms, or feel some strong man's caresses; and there was in her heart a strange sensation as though it were growing big" (ch. V).

III

The progress of love between Liza and Jim is rather formulaic: Jim invites and forces her to enter the theatre; after the play was over, he tempts her to drink; and on their way home, by giving her "a violent, swinging blow in the belly" (ch. VII) makes her surrender her chastity to him. Maugham, however, explains her state of mind: "She felt very happy" (ch. VIII) the next morning, and the two begin dating:

Thus began a time of love and joy. As soon as her work was over and she had finished tea, Liza would slip out and at some appointed spot meet Jim. Usually it would be at the church, where the Westminster Bridge Road bends down to get to the river; and they would go off, arm in arm, till they came to some place where they could sit down and rest. (ch. IX)

But their happiest time doesn't last long. They meet some people from Vere Street while

dating, and naturally the rumour spreads; neighbours begin to cast a cold eye at her, and some young men even hurt her feelings with bawdy and insulting remarks. They must face the reality of illicit love even though they try to forget it. Jim, with tears standing in his eyes, would say; "I'd give somethin'," ... "if we could be together always" (ch. IX). Then Liza, though she is much younger, would encourage him; "Never mind, old chap!" Liza would answer, herself half crying, "it can't be 'elped, so we must jolly well lump it." But they can't do anything to get out of the difficulties they have fallen into.⁵ As dreary autumn comes, it is too cold for them to stay on the grass and they have to stroll along the Embankment, or sit on a bench for a long time. In November, to get rid of the chill from the wet mud, they would go into the third-class waiting-rooms at Waterloo or Charing Cross stations. Although Maugham writes that they feel happiness together, under such a condition, "their minds were troubled, and they felt heavy, sad and miserable" (ch. X).

And besides, a threat lurks. Sally warns her:

Say, Liza, tike care of yerself!"

Tike care of meself—why?" asked Liza, in surprise.

"Yer know wot I mean."

"Na, I'm darned if I do."

"Thet there Mrs. Blakeston, she's lookin' aht for you."

"Mrs. Blakeston!" Liza was startled.

"Yus; she says she's goin' ter give you somethin' if she can git 'old on yer. I should advise yer ter tike care" (ch. XI).

Liza is originally a high-spirited girl enough to grapple with boys playing cricket. But she is now "a coward". "She could not help thinking of her enemy's threat; it got on her nerves and she hardly dared to go out for fear of meeting her" (ch. XI). Her cowardice comes from her feeling that she has misconducted herself with a man who has a wife and children; accordingly she loses courage to fight against Mrs. Blakeston. But, of course, she can't do without going out of her house. On a Saturday afternoon, when Liza was coming home from work, she sees Mrs. Blakeston and is forced to fight in the street with many onlookers around, who dare not help Liza out, but even instigate the two to fight more fiercely. Jack London reports in *The People of the Abyss*, an essay written through author's own seven weeks' experiences in the slums of London's East End, on "a free-for-all, rough-and-tumble fight" waged by women.⁶ The situation described in the essay is just the same as the one in *Liza of Lambeth*. The fight, which causes Liza to miscarry and die, has a certain actuality.

IV

The reader regrets her death deeply, and then wonders why she chose Jim instead of Tom. Considering the process of love between Jim and Liza, we notice that, from the very beginning, Liza is under irresistible conditions; she has no choice but to yield to him: his first kisses; his caresses on the "brake"; going theatre with him (she is completely fascinated by the play); and

drinking with him, after which he forces her to surrender her chastity to him by an act of violence; "... closing his fist gave her a violent, swinging blow in the belly" (ch. VII).

Strangely, however, Liza doesn't repent nor bear a grudge against him at all; the morning after her surrender to him, she even feels "very happy" (ch. VIII). The author describes as follows:

She stretched out her legs and gave a long sigh of delight. Her heart was full; she thought of Jim, and the delicious sensation of love came over her. Closing her eyes, she imagined his warm kisses, and she lifted up her arms as if to put them round his neck and draw him down to her; she almost felt the rough beard on her face, and the strong heavy arms round her body (ch. VIII).

Here we the reader feel her attitude is unrealistic. But it is possible to think that her happy state of mind reflects author's view of woman. Maugham must have regarded Liza (as a representative of women) as a being that has certain tendencies: first, since Liza is "about eighteen" (ch. I), she is physically mature enough to be interested in making love as a grown-up woman. In addition, Liza is innately tractable, and governed by old notion of femininity⁷⁾ even though she is depicted as being a tomboy or strong-minded. For example, though she shed tears as she is forced to enter the theatre, "she felt very relieved and happy"(ch. VII) to do so. Also, she has been thirsty for paternal affection since she lost her father long time previously and lived with an unreliable mother. Jim Blakeston's eldest daughter Polly is nearly Liza's age, and subconsciously she must have sought paternal support or protection though she is depicted as being superficially independent and strong-minded.

Therefore, considering her state of mind, it's natural that Tom's love for Liza ends in failure; Tom lacks in forcefulness, self-confidence, or tactfulness unlike Jim Blakeston. He is diffident and bashful. Moreover, he is liable to be ruled by emotion, now downcast, and now sulky. For example, on the picnic, when Liza saunters with Mr. and Mrs. Blakeston intending to stay away from Tom, he sulkily marches off into the midst of the forest in a fit of jealous anger. But it's natural for a young man to have a tendency to be emotional, and his behaviour is not to be blamed at all. She seems too young to understand his true worth. Sally urges Liza to marry Tom saying "Yer know, Liza, you'd better tike Tom; 'e ain't a bad sort" (ch. VI). Tom even shows his loyalty to her. After the street fight with Mrs. Blakeston, Tom leads her to her home. On the way following words are exchanged:

"They've all rounded on me except you, Tom. I'd 'ave done better if I'd tiken you when you arst me; I shouldn't be where I am now, if I 'ad."

"Well, won't yer now? Won't yer 'ave me now?"

"Me? After wot's 'appened?"

"Oh, I don't mind abaht thet. Thet don't matter ter me if you'll marry me. I fair can't live without yer, Liza—won't yer?"

She groaned.

"Na, I can't, Tom; it wouldn't be right."

"Why not, if I don't mind?"

"Tom," she said, looking down, almost whispering, "I'm like that—you know!"

"Wot d'yer mean?"

She could scarcely utter the words—

“I think I’m in the family wy.”

He paused a moment; then spoke again.

“Well—I don’t mind, if yer’ll only marry me.”

“Na, I can’t, Tom,” she said, bursting into tears; “I can’t, but you are so good ter me; I’d do anythin’ ter mike it up ter you” (ch. XI).

By his words the reader knows that he loves Liza truly. Moreover, when she is in agony with the miscarriage, Tom is the first visitor to inquire after her. The more we learn of Tom’s true and deep love for Liza, the more we feel sincere regret about her choice and death. We the reader have seen Maugham’s reasons why she chose Jim in spite of Tom’s favourable personality, and they remind us of sad realities of life. In the descriptions of Liza’s fate, we feel the author’s incipient viewpoint on woman and recognition of the absurdity of life.

V

The colourful appearance of Liza is Maugham’s creation. The scene easily reminds us of a stage; boys playing cricket, wives with babies,⁸⁾ and boys and girls dancing to the tune played by an Italian organ-man⁹⁾; then the heroine Liza appears in her brilliant dress.

“Oo, Liza!” they called out. “Look at Liza; oo, I sy!”

It was a young girl of about eighteen, with dark eyes, and an enormous fringe, puffed-out and curled and frizzed, covering her whole forehead from side to side, and coming down to meet her eyebrows. She was dressed in brilliant violet, with great lappets of velvet, and she had on her head an enormous black hat covered with feathers.

“I sy, ain’t she got up dossy?” called out the groups at the doors, as she passed.

“Dressed ter death, and kill the fashion; that’s wot I calls it” (ch. I).

Due to the dramatic appearance of Liza as well as her dancing, the reader is drawn into the world of the novel, and made interested in her background. Other dramatic elements are shown in the forms of witty conversations in cockneyism, repetitious recitation of swearwords by kids, and the street fight waged between Liza and Mrs. Blakeston. These dramatic elements make the work vivid and entertaining. Maugham, who innately had a dramatic temperament, might have adopted dramatic techniques unconsciously.

VI

Liza lives in a district of Lambeth located in the south of London, where mainly the lower class people lived in those days. W. S. Maugham studied medicine at St. Thomas’s Hospital which is close to the district and often made house calls there during his internship; he was so familiar with the district and its people.¹⁰⁾

The author describes Vere Street, Lambeth so vividly:

This Saturday afternoon the street was full of life; no traffic came down Vere Street, and the cemented space between the pavements was given up to children. Several games of cricket were being played by wildly excited boys, using coats for wickets, an old tennis-ball or a bundle of rags tied together for a ball, and, generally, an old broom stick for bat.... Worst off of all were the very young children, for there had been no rain for weeks, and the street was as dry and clean as a covered court, and, in the lack of mud to wallow in, they sat about the road, disconsolate as poets. The number of babies was prodigious; they sprawled about everywhere, on the pavement, round the doors, and about their mothers' skirts (ch. I).

Realistic descriptions of lower class life is shown on some phases. Firstly, Liza, Sally and other neighbours work in factories; they have to be in the factory by a fixed time even when they have been out late the previous night drinking.

"I wish I 'adn't drunk so much beer," added Sally, as a pang shot through her head.

"Oh, you'll be arright in a bit," said Liza. Just then they heard the clock strike eight, and they began to run so that they might not miss getting their tokens and thereby their day's pay; they turned into the street at the end of which was the factory, and saw half a hundred women running like themselves to get in before it was too late.

(chap. VI)

They are careless about their untidy appearances; it is to procure the day's pay that counts. They are trained to get to the factory by eight o'clock.

Secondly, liquor is what features largely in the life of the lower class people. For example, Liza's mother Mrs. Kemp earns "a little extra to supply herself with liquor" by "charing and doing such odd jobs" (ch. II), and she even suggests to Liza that she should drink from the bottle as she complains of a severe headache which may have been caused by the brawl. Liza's life might have been saved if only Mrs. Kemp could have acted more properly.

Thirdly, violence is often seen in the lives of the lower class people. Liza is surprised to know that Harry hits Sally when he gets drunk:

"I didn't know 'e was like that!" said Liza.

"Didn't yer? I thought the 'ole street knew it by now," said Mrs. Cooper indignantly.

"Oh, 'e's a wrong 'un, 'e is."

"It wasn't 'is fault," put in Sally, amidst her sobs; "It's only because 'e's 'ad a little drop too much. 'E's arright when 'e's sober" (ch. X).

Violence at home, and violence in the street are too often triggered by intoxication. Liquor and violence mar the matrimony of Sally and Harry. This holds true for almost all the lower class families.

Maugham describes the sordid facts of the common people's life he witnessed. There were many alcoholics in lower class people, and Mrs. Kemp represents the situation. A realistic way of description prevails in this work. Although we notice dramatic techniques in this work, as stated above, as in the scene of Liza's appearance, realistic description resumes when Liza comes home. We see her mother grumbling or complaining of her "rheumatics" (ch. II). Despite

a pension large enough to keep her from starvation, she always complains and is even liable to pilfer money from Liza. They are forced to live in such conditions. Poverty hardens people's hearts and minds; sipping brandy near the death-bed of Liza, Mrs. Kemp and Mrs. Hodges are talking about profane or discreet things. Even while Liza is suffering death agonies, they are discussing which undertaker is the best, and whether Liza is insured or not.

VII

The indiscreet conversation makes us feel more sympathetic towards Liza, for she has lived and is going to die among such ignorant and imprudent people. And Tom's last remarks of proposal make us feel regret about her fate. Jim, who comes to her deathbed on the verge of her death, asks her to forgive him. But he can't get forgiveness from Liza. She is unconscious now. That means there is a grave responsibility he has to take from now on till his death. Jim is not described as a total villain but as a common man who has many children to feed. He has an ordinary wife who is worn out taking care of children. He also must have been worn out working in order to feed the large family, and feared the lurking of old age. In order to escape the sordid reality, and enjoy the youthfulness of Liza, he approaches her casually. But inevitably he becomes sexually involved with Liza.

As stated above, Liza, being immature spiritually, is thirsty for paternal protection, and makes a wrong choice. At first she does not expect to get sexually involved with him either. But physically she is mature enough to respond to his caresses, and she, too, seeks him. Of course, Liza can't understand the true reasons why she is charmed by Jim Blaskeston as a woman who is not used to reflect on what she has done without knowing she is drawn to Jim by the longing for strong paternity. But Jim wakes her up to be aware of her sexual feelings as a young woman. Eventually she conceives only to be killed. She is trapped. Sex has such a vital and grave function. Liza has to atone for the wrong choice by her death. Jim can't even atone for his making a toy of sex (= life); he has to suffer as long as he lives.

From the experiences of "the job" which lasted "nearly twenty years" (chap. XII), Mrs. Hodges says as a midwife; "Still, one don't like 'em ter die, even if they are thet (= prostitute). One mustn't be too 'ard on 'em" (ch. XII). These insightful and benevolent words make us realise that every human being has a right to live, and the death of Liza shows us clearly and impressively that sex and life are one thing and we should treasure the life we have. Through Mrs. Hodges words Maugham described the significance of sex and the true worth of life. He had realised the deep meanings of sex and life by his experiences as a young medical student.

Liza of Lambeth has two characteristics; the dramatic and realistic. Dramatic elements supply the work with colour, vividness and entertainment. Realistic descriptions show us the grave realities of life and make us consider what life is, and even lead us to feel something profound during and after reading this novel. The combination of two elements raise the worth of this work. Young Maugham's natural and genuine view of life works positively in writing his maiden work.¹¹⁾

Notes

- 1) Anthony Curtis, Somerset Maugham (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), p. 50. Originally Maugham called this work *A Lambeth Idyll* with a touch of irony. And the success of this story let the author form a determination to be a writer.
- 2) Ibid., p. 62.
- 3) Anthony Curtis and John Whitehead ed., *W. Somerset Maugham* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1987), p. 22.
- 4) Richard Cordell, *Somerset Maugham* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1961), pp. 19–21., pp. 114–5.
- 5) Maugham vests Liza with wholesome and sympathetic personality; she can't forsake her suffering mother, nor can she destroy Jim Blakeston's family seeking her own happiness. Such a kind of personality enhances Liza's tragedy, and therefore, enhances the value of this work as a work of art.
- 6) Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (Newyork: Macmillan, 1903), pp. 50–53.
- 7) In chapter IX, there is an explanation on Liza having "old-fashioned prejudice" as follows: The female cyclist had almost abandoned Battersea for the parks on the other side of the river, but often enough one went by, and Liza, with the old-fashioned prejudice of her class, would look after the rider and make some remark about her, not seldom more forcible than ladylike.
- 8) op. cit., Jack London, p. 43.
- 9) Ibid., p. 274.
- 10) op. cit., Anthony Curtis, pp. 48–50. Anthony Curtis explains that young Maugham was greatly influenced by Guy de Maupassant, the French realistic writer.
- 11) op. cit., ed. Anthony Curtis and John Whitehead, p. 22.

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