

Kaliyaganj College B.A. 3rd Year English Hons.

Paper 6, Modernist Period, Unit 6

Somerset Maugham: THE LOTUS EATER

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The Lotus Eater is one of the finest stories written by Somerset Maugham, an acknowledged master in the field of English Short Stories. The title and the background harks back to the description of the Lotus land in *Homer's Odyssey*. The Lotus Land is a land of enjoyments, ease and inhabited by the lotus people who ate the lotus flower and spent their time in rest and peace. After wandering for nine days on the surface of a storm tossed sea Ulysses and his companions, while returning from Troy after burning the city, set foot on the tenth day on a beautiful island where lived a strange people who fed on the Lotus fruit that made them forgetful, dreamy contented, lethargic in nature. Some companions of Ulysses ate the fruit as a result of which they became lazy and dreamy and gave up all intention of going back home to their native land Ithaca after hard rowing across a turbulent sea. The men did not want to continue their journey, fight the waves and the turmoil of life but spend the rest of their lives in peace and rest and ease in the land of the Lotus Eaters.

Somerset Maugham's Short story presents the amazing life and actions of a modern Lotus eater **Thomas Wilson**. Wilson came to the land of Capri during one of his holidays and fell in love with it. Possessed by the charm of the land, he decided to give up everything and spend the rest of his life in care free bliss in Capri. Most people lead humdrum, dull, routine bound lives that circumstances thrust upon them. It is not often that one finds a man who has boldly taken the course of his life into his own hands. Thomas Wilson was such a man. This is the reason why the writer Somerset Maugham was curious to meet him.

Wilson was a bank manager but he gave up his job where he had been toiling all his life and collecting all his dues, ammunities, made for the land of his dreams, his lotus land, Capri. The unusual thing had been done by Wilson. At the age of 35, Wilson bought an annuity for 25 years and did not seem to care for what he would do after that. At writer's suggestion his friend asked Wilson to have a drink with them at Morgano's. Thomas Wilson's shirt and trousers were much creased and none too clean. He wore a pair of old rope-soled shoes. His face indicated that he was good looking in his youth. They sat in a garden. After the drink, Wilson got up and left the place. They met Wilson again at the Baths of Tiberius. While the writer's friend was swimming, Somerset Maugham talked alone with Thomas Wilson. Wilson told him that he had been living in the place since 15 years.

Page2 He further stated that he fell in love with the place at the first sight. Wilson had a similarity with the fictitious story of the German who came here to have lunch and a look at the Blue Grotto but stayed forty years. **Sybaris** and **Crotona** are the names of two Greek cities. Sybaris is famous as a city where people enjoyed to the fullest pleasures and joys of life. Crotona was the city where the people lived an industrious and laborious life of hard work and toil. In their Next meeting, Somerset Maugham and Thomas Wilson climbed a mountain and then got back by nightfall to an inn to dine and drink. Wilson expressed his views that leisure was the most priceless thing a man can have and most men don't even know that it is something to be aimed at. They work for work's sake without realizing that the only object of work is to obtain leisure. The beautiful and peaceful scenery had a firm hold on him. After all he had no one dependent on him. His wife and daughter were already dead and his uncle had settled in Australia before his birth . there was, no reason why he should not do exactly what he wanted. He had been working since at the age of 17. Wilson's return to London might make him change his mind. In this way, he foolishly wasted one full year. The beautiful scenes of Capri began to haunt him. The only thing that bothered him was whether he was justified in not working like others. But the reading of a history book By Marion Crawford helped Thomas Wilson helped him to drive away all his hesitations.

Money was a real difficulty. The Bank gave him gratuity instead of pension.. With this, the sale of his house, and his savings he bought an annuity for 25 years and came back to Capri. He was 35 years then. Already he had spent 15 years.he thought that his annuity would bear his expenses up to sixty. 25 years, according to him , was a long time . Many people die before that. After 25 years of perfect happiness one ought to be satisfied and stop continuing it.

It was 1913, a year before World War 1st. The World went on in an easy, comfortable way. No one could have imagined that anything shattering might happen to disturb the calmness of human existence seriously. But the First World War brought many changes. My friend had moved to a smaller place for which the Writer had to put up at a hotel when after 13 years Somerset Maugham, the writer went to Capri again. From his friend the writer knew the very sad and grim story of Wilson after spending 35 years. Wilson's plan had a flaw in it. After 25 years of perfect happiness Wilson would gradually lose his strength. As he grew impotent, he could not make up his mind and postponed the suicide from day to day. His landlord gave him notice to leave the house unless he paid the arrears of rent before a certain date. He managed to hang on this way for over a year. Then there was no one to lend him money any more. The day before this he tried to commit suffocate himself by closing the door and the window and lighting a brazier of charcoal. Next morning Assunta who still acted as his servant found him in a senseless state but alive because the room was airy. It looked as though at the last moment he had suffered from a certain infirmity of purpose, Wilson was taken to the hospital where he

Page3 recovered. However, because of charcoal poisoning he was no longer in his right mind. When the writer's friend went to see Wilson, Wilson looked at him in a funny way.

Assunta allowed him to stay in their wood shed and share their meals. This she did because Wilson was all along a good master and a good tenant. The writer's friend told Somerset Maugham that his room was icy cold in Winter and terribly hot in Summer. His food was quite rough. He further told that Assunta's husband grudged the cost of his keep and made him fetch water and clean the cowshed., " **It looks pretty rotten**"..... " **He brought it on Himself, He's got what he deserved**" according to the writer Somerset Maugham and his friend.

Thomas Wilson was suffering mentally. Two or three days later while the writer and his friend were walking along an olive grove, the writer's friend suddenly drew the writer's attention to Wilson's presence nearby. Out of the corners they saw Wilson was hiding behind an Olive tree. While they passed, Wilson made a scamper, running hastily in fear. He died last year after enduring a hard life for six years. He was found one morning on the mountain side lying quite peacefully. " **perhaps he died of the beauty of the sight.**" Wilson's end was also in harmony with his love of a dreamy life. This is the final observation of the writer Somerset Maugham on the death of Wilson amidst the splendour of the most beautiful sight in Capri. His body was found one morning on the mountain side where he obviously went to see those two great rocks called **Fraglioni** bathed in the splendour of the full moon. In spite of the fact that Wilson had to face great suffering in his last, this final comment seems full of sympathy and presents the serenity of his death. As the writer notes, perhaps the excessive beauty coupled with the loneliness of the setting had struck him dead. All these characteristics of Wilson clearly show that the title of Maugham's present story is correctly chosen and apt.

Somerset Maugham's **The Lotus Eater** is a wonderfully tragic tale of a protagonist who takes the reign of his life in his own hands and meets his doom in the end. Possessing all qualities of a good story like brevity and unity of action, a novelty of theme, peculiarity in the main character and a symmetrical pattern with a dramatic end, this a short story is unique in itself, and should be marked very high in the lineage of short stories. Very similar to the character Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's tragedy by the same name, the character of Wilson would not qualify as a tragic one simply because his tragedy is not the result of a purgation of pity and fear. Undoubtedly Wilson generates sympathy, admiration to

Page 4 a certain extent but because he was fully aware of his fate after 25 years while choosing his life of ease and languor, Wilson is not a conventional tragic hero.

Assignments

Answer any TWO of the following Questions:-

1. How is the title applicable to the main character of This short story The Lotus Eater?
(10 Marks)
2. What was extraordinary about Wilson? Is there any moral lesson in the story?
(5+5 Marks)
3. Who was the Lotus Eater? Why did he choose this way of life? (5+ 5 Marks)
4. Describe the narrator's relationship with Thomas Wilson in Somerset Maugham's The Lotus Eater? (10Marks)

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