



STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

Of Human Bondage by Somerset Maugham

About the Book

An obsessive love affair provides the pivot of this powerful evocation of a young man's progress to maturity in the years before the First World War.

Discussion Questions

1. When Mr. Perkins, the headmaster of King's School, tries to persuade Philip to go to Oxford, we are told that Philip "felt himself slipping. He was powerless against the weakness that seemed to well up in him" (p. 81). Is Philip's refusal to be ordained or to at least go to Oxford a weakness or a strength?
2. While Hayward believes in "the Whole, the Good, and the Beautiful" (p. 112), Weeks, defining himself as a Unitarian, says he "believes in almost everything that anybody else believes" (p. 114). How do these two outlooks compare with each other and with Philip's interpretation, at the end of the novel, of the Persian carpet design as a metaphor for the meaning of life?
3. After realizing that he no longer believes in God, why does Philip say to himself, "If there is a God after all and He punishes me because I honestly don't believe in Him I can't help it" (p. 119)?
4. When Philip starts to see how reality differs from his ideals, the narrator says that the young "must discover for themselves that all they have read and all they have been told are lies, lies, lies; and each discovery is another nail driven into the body on the cross of life" (p. 121). Why does Maugham use a religious image associated with Christ's suffering to describe the suffering of disillusionment?
5. When discussing Philip's initial disillusionment, the narrator says, "The strange thing is that each one who has gone through that bitter disillusionment adds to it in his turn, unconsciously, by the power within him which is stronger than himself" (p. 121). What is this power?
6. After Philip leaves Heidelberg, why does the narrator tell us that Philip "never knew that he had been happy there" (p. 130)?
7. Why does Philip subject himself with masochistic obstinacy to Mildred's cruelty?
8. Do Philip's life choices reflect Cronshaw's theory about pleasure being the only motive for human action?
9. Why is Philip happy when he casts aside his desire for happiness?
10. Why does Philip think of "the words of the dying God" (p. 604) as he forgives humanity's defects, Griffiths's treachery, and Mildred's cruelty?
11. Why does Maugham end the novel with Philip and Sally's engagement?
12. Does Philip ever rid himself of idealism?
13. At the end of the novel, are we meant to think that Philip has found the freedom he has been looking for?

About the Author

William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris to British parents on January 25, 1874. There are many parallels between his life and that of his protagonist in *Of Human Bondage*. Like Philip Carey, Maugham lost both his parents at an early age and was sent to live with his uncle (a vicar) and aunt in England. As a boy at King's School in Canterbury, Maugham suffered from bullying and the insensitivity of others. A severe stutter hampered him socially, and he retreated into his studies. Rather than finishing school and continuing on to Oxford, Maugham rebelled against his guardian's wishes and, like Philip, spent time as an unregistered student at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Returning to England, Maugham entered St. Thomas's medical school to appease his aunt and uncle, but he had already decided he would be a writer. He earned a medical degree but never practiced. His first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, was published in 1897, the same year he graduated.

Maugham's writing career spanned sixty-five years, during which time he was quite prolific. Although he began as a novelist, his first popular success was as a dramatist. Maugham quit writing plays, however, when contemporary preferences in the genre changed, deciding to concentrate on novels and short stories instead. Among Maugham's many works, *Of Human Bondage* (1915), *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), *Cakes and Ale; or, The Skeleton in the Cupboard* (1930), and *The Razor's Edge* (1944) are considered his greatest. Maugham died in France in 1965.