

Salvatore

by W. Somerset Maugham

1. (a) Critically analyze the short story 'Salvatore' by Maugham.

Answer: 'Salvatore' by Maugham is written in the style of a parable, which aims to dictate a very important lesson of life. Initially hesitant of being able to hold the attention of his readers, Maugham by the end of the story was satisfied by his attempt to have etched the character of Salvatore, a man who was blessed with the quality of "goodness, just goodness."

Maugham chose a simple narrative to describe the very ordinary life and circumstances of the protagonist, Salvatore, an Italian fisherman. In a chronological progression, the writer has sketched a biography of Salvatore with all the ups and downs of a normal human life. Nothing fantastical or intriguing, Salvatore's life could be a mirror of our own. Family responsibilities, falling in love, a broken heart and acceptance of reality, all of them are markers of Salvatore's uneventful life.

Yet, he is different from the rest of us and this is distinctively brought out in all the trials of his life. His stoic acceptance in the phase of the challenges in life is what sets him apart from others. His ethics and righteousness always helped him make the decision that served him well in the long term.

Salvatore never dwells in self-pity. Though his life never worked according to his plans yet he lived it to the fullest due to the strength of his character. He did not sit over the rejection of the girl he loved and moved on in life to marry Assunta, who was elder to him and not as beautiful as the girl he loved, but Assunta loved him and that was enough. By adjusting to situations and nurturing his goodness every time, he was able to enjoy life and make the most out of it. By the end of the almost fairytale-like narrative without the magic or unrealism they are normally served with, Maugham told us the life and times of a man who held on to his goodness and made the most out of the cards that were dealt with him. Maugham holds Salvatore as an example of pure radiance and selflessness and as someone who should be emulated in dealing with the trials and tribulations of life.

(b) What qualities of Salvatore did the author admire?

Answer: W. Somerset Maugham created a character who is too good to be true. Such people are difficult to find and through the literary style of the parable, Maugham dictates a lesson on the goodness to his readers. He admired the protagonist's goodness through the various incidents that had occurred in his life. The story begins with the author describing the simple life that Salvatore lived and aspired for. He wished to work hard as a fisherman and marry his sweetheart.

Life offered Salvatore a rude shock in the form of the chronic illness that he acquired while serving in the army in China. Despite suffering from physical ailments, Salvatore saw the

brighter side of the things. He never relinquished hope for better things in his life and this is admired by the author.

Salvatore was a responsible man. He took care of his younger brothers and was a responsible father to his kids. He loved them and provided them with gentle care. He may have been vulnerable to emotions yet he wasn't overwhelmed by them. He was a man who loved unconditionally. The rejection of his sweetheart and her refusal to marry him does not evoke any harsh response from him. He wished her well in life and decided to move on. His innate goodness and good manners allowed him to live a contented married life with Assunta.

He was modest and did not wish to have accolades heaped on him. He was self-sufficient and was not afraid of hard work. He worked in the vineyards as well as a fisherman to support his family. He hoped to provide support to the family and did not shy away from the toil, despite his illness.

The author appreciated and admired all these qualities of Salvatore and considered them as his strengths which allow him to rise from the ordinary and hold the attention of many readers. His goodness, just goodness made him an extraordinary human being in the eyes of the writer.

(c) Whom did Salvatore agree to marry and why?

Answer: Salvatore wished to marry his childhood sweetheart, but she later refused to marry him as he had acquired a chronic illness which rendered him weak and unable to provide her a comfortable. Salvatore was dejected by the refusal but wished the lady well and decided to move on in his life. When his mother proposed to him the idea of marrying Assunta, Salvatore did not hesitate to move ahead in his life. He may not have liked Assunta initially and called her an 'ugly woman' but he was aware of her feelings for him. Dejected in love himself, he understood the pain unrequited love carries and agreed to marry her. On the other side, Assunta brought with her the prospect of financial security. She had two vineyards that he could take care of. His parents approved of the alliance and Salvatore couldn't ask for anything more to move on in his life. Salvatore was complacent and desired a simple life. Thus, Assunta fitted into the scheme of his life and marrying her worked for him well.

2. (a) With reference to the story "Salvatore" elucidate how Salvatore contracted the chronic illness? What was its impact on his life?

Answer: Salvatore had a simple life. Born into a family of fishermen, he was destined to follow them in their footsteps. However, life for Salvatore wasn't simple as he embarks on a journey to hold onto his goodness in the face of adversities in life.

He was conscripted in the naval force of King Victor Emmanuel. It was an obligation that he could not escape before he settled down. Salvatore was sad to leave his home and life

behind, yet he took the prospects of his new life in his stride, awaiting his return to his fiancée.

Salvatore, in the course of his army routine, reached China, where he was afflicted by a debilitating disease and had to be admitted to a hospital in the distant country. Salvatore had contracted a virulent strain of rheumatism and was advised to avoid heavy manual work for the rest of his life. The disease was a blow to Salvatore that brought manifold changes in his life. Salvatore, the pragmatic and optimistic man, refused to brood over his misfortunes of ill health and instead considered this disease to be a harbinger of relief from the duties of the army. He was a home-sick and love-sick young man and yearned to go back to his native land. The prospect of meeting his love and starting a new life with her had made him ecstatic to the point of ignoring the chronic illness he had contacted.

However, Salvatore's happiness was short-lived. Upon returning, he realized the changes that rheumatism would bring to his life. Salvatore's fiancée refused to accept him as he was crippled and could not work hard enough to earn a living. She stood by her family's unanimous decision to marry someone else who would be fit to be the bread earner of the family.

Salvatore was heartbroken and wept in his mother's bosom' but he was not bitter and held no grudges against the girl for not marrying him. He moved on with his life and married Assunta, a woman older to him and in his words, 'ugly, but she loved him and offered him the happiness of domesticity.

(b) Describe Salvatore's life after he married Assunta. What was their relationship like?

Answer: Salvatore married a young woman named Assunta. Though she was elder to him and, according to Salvatore, ugly, yet he agreed to marry her because he realized that she loved him. Having suffered the pangs of heartbreak himself, he did not wish Assunta the same. Moreover, his mother informed him of the money that she would bring along with her after the marriage which could ease their life.

After marriage, Salvatore gave himself completely to the domestic way of life. With the money brought by Assunta, they bought a fishing boat and rented a vineyard. They lived in a tiny white-washed cottage in the middle of their vineyard. Assunta was a good woman who took care of her husband well. Salvatore lived the life of a hard-working fisherman; he went for fishing and sold the catch to earn his livelihood. On days he could not go fishing, he worked in the vineyard from dawn to dusk, with a short break in the afternoon.

Salvatore wasn't completely free from his chronic illness. Rheumatism often returned to harangue him, making it very hard for him to work. He would then lie on the beach, smoking cigarettes and gazing at the sea. Assunta bore him two sons and he was a doting father to them, spending quality time with them on the beach.

Salvatore's relationship with Assunta developed after marriage. He might have not loved her but he definitely began to respect her for the care and love she provided to him.

(c) Salvatore's "goodness, just goodness" was admired by the author. Why?

Answer: W. Somerset Maugham created a character who is too good to be true. Such people are difficult to find and through the literary style of the parable, Maugham dictates a lesson on the goodness to his readers. He admired the protagonist's goodness through the various incidents that had occurred in his life. The story begins with the author describing the simple life that Salvatore lived and aspired for. He wished to work hard as a fisherman and marry his sweetheart.

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Long Questions and Answers

1. "I wonder if I can do it", is the author's opening comment of the story, Salvatore'. What was the author unsure about? What does the conclusion of the story prove?

Answer: Somerset Maugham seems doubtful of whether he can achieve the impossible of generating interest in his readers to read about the events in the life of an ordinary man. No

heroics, no revenge, no quarrel only unadulterated goodness. The author seemed unsure of capturing and sustaining the attention of the readers during the narrative of an uneventful life lead by an extraordinarily good man. His endeavours prove fruitful as he sketches a picture of a man who remained true to his heart in the phase of all adversities in life.

Maugham describes the life of Salvatore, from teenage to adulthood. He invites our attention to a fifteen-year-old boy's lust for life. It can be any boy living on a pristine island, revelling on the shimmering shore and amidst the waves, watching the sunshine and birds in the sky.

We can also identify with the boy's sense of responsibility towards his family, his teenage crush and the sadness of leaving his native island and his lady love. What we may not be able to identify, is his calm acceptance of his affliction, the rejection he faces in love life, and his lack of grudges towards life or people who have hurt him.

It is the very best that makes him a hero in our eyes. It is Salvatore's goodness that makes him one of the most memorable characters in English literature. Apart from the character, the beautiful portrayal of the idyllic island remains in our mind as a calm background, providing strength and sustenance to the protagonist.

And yes, the writer has certainly been able to revert our attention throughout the narration. In other words, he has fulfilled his intention of portraying a picture that will linger in our memories for days to come.

2. Attempt a character sketch of Salvatore.

Answer: Salvatore is a wonderful human being with pure goodness in his heart. By tracing the events that happened in his life and his response to them, the author helps us to draw a picture of this very lovable character.

Salvatore is fifteen when the author meets him. The boy's pleasant face, laughing mouth and carefree eyes reveal his endearing nature.

Even if he has lots of fun, he does not neglect his duties of helping his father by looking after his younger brothers with care and strictness wherever required. Amidst all this, he falls in love with a lovely girl. His love is pure, strong and lasting. But he has to cross a hurdle before he can marry her. It is with a heavy heart that he leaves the place and the people he loves, to join the navy.

For a young man who is as free as a bird, it is heartbreaking to live in a busy and friendless city. He misses the silence and the calm of his fairytale island and feels terribly homesick.

He pours out his passion for the love of his life in ill-spelt words, saying how he longs to go back to her. He endures his sadness and loneliness with grit and determination like a true soldier. His training takes him to many places till he falls ill with rheumatism and is hospitalized for months. "He bore it with the mute and uncomprehending patience of a dog". He becomes happy on hearing when he is declared unfit for further service as it means going back to his island, the people he loves, and the girl with 'forest pool' eyes.

To the utter disappointment of the eager lover, when he reaches his island, the girl he loves is not among the crowd waiting for him. Later, when the girl rejects him by saying that he can no longer work like a man, he returns home with the look of a beaten dog but never utters a harsh word against her. Such is Salvatore, who cannot bear any grudge or lodge a complaint in his heart.

The young man has concern and respect for his mother and thus marries an older woman of his mother's choice. He proves to be a complete family-oriented man, who goes for fishing in the boat and works in his vineyard, which he gets at the time of marriage. He is a great father to his children, rearing them tenderly and gently. He exhibits a child-like glee: his laughter is like the laughter of an angel. His eyes are as candid as his child's.

At the end of the story, we get the portrait of a common man with heroic qualities. He is not a celebrated hero with extraordinary swordsmanship or battle-scarred countenance but just an unsung hero who exhibits admirable stoicism, an unquestioning calmness, an uncomplaining acceptance of adversities, coupled with a strong sense of responsibility, and a genuine love for all. But above all, he possesses the rarest, the most precious and the loveliest quality that anyone can have—"goodness, just better".