The Man with the Scar by W. Somerset Maugham

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In The Man with the Scar by W. Somerset Maugham we have the theme of perception, curiosity, love, connection, loss, identity and struggle. Taken from his Collected Short Stories collection the story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed narrator and after reading the story the reader realises that Maugham may be exploring the theme of curiosity. The narrator having noticed the General’s scar is curious as to how the General has gotten the scar. There is a sense that the narrator suspects that the scar may be a war wound or at least that is the perception of the narrator (and the reader). It is as though the narrator considers that the General due to his previous occupation must have received his scar through battle. This could be important as Maugham may be highlighting how an individual can be misled by their perceptions. What they perceive may not necessarily be true. Which is very much the case in the story. The fact that the General also kills his wife may seem shocking to some readers. However it is possible that Maugham is highlighting the fact that the General wanted to remain with his wife after his death and as such killed her through love.

It is also interesting that the government General considers the General’s act of killing his wife to be honourable. It is as though this act connects both men. Something which may have seemed impossible considering that both men were on opposite sides of the war. The fact that the General loses so many matches in the card game prior to his expected execution may be symbolically important. It is possible that Maugham is using the matches to highlight the sense of loss for the General. Not only has he been captured but he is due to lose his life. In essence the General has been defeated. This sense of defeat within the General is also noticeable while he is living in Guatemala. The General sells lottery tickets that nobody will buy and is also reliant on others to supply him with alcohol. The fact that the General drinks his whiskey in one go might also be important as there is a sense that he may be trying to numb his pain. Not only is the General defeated as an army officer but he has also lost his wife and he has to live his life without her.

The scar itself may also be symbolically important as though the General received it by accident. It does in many ways serve to represent the struggle that the General has had to endure. It is as though the General has been marked not only by the scar but by his circumstances. If anything there is a sense that the General is not really living his life. His past appears to be controlling his future. Having been beaten in the war the General seems to remain beaten in life. There is also a sense that the General is disconnected from those around him. Though as readers we only get a brief insight into the General’s daily activities (selling lottery tickets). The fact that nobody buys a lottery ticket suggests that the General is disconnected from others. It is also possible that the General is unable to adapt to the circumstances he finds himself in. It may also be important that the General’s story is known by the narrator’s friend. As it is possible that the General felt the need to tell someone about his life. Such was the burden that the General was carrying.

The fact that the General is seen to move about the bar without staying in the one place could also be important as Maugham may be suggesting that the General is unsettled. He has gone through not only a war but also the loss of his wife. It is possible that the General’s identity has taken a knock. Where once he had purpose this is no longer the case. If anything the General may be lonely. He is living a life that he may not necessarily want to live. He has no friends or at least none are mentioned in the story and he is exiled from the country he was fighting for. In reality the General is not the same man he was when he was fighting in Nicaragua. The best that he can hope for is to make a living selling the lottery tickets and receiving free drinks from those who might know his story and who know how deep the General’s struggle is. At the end of the story the reader (and the narrator) realise that the General is not who he appears to be. Which plays very much on the theme of identity. The narrator had a perception of the General but could never imagine just how difficult life was for him. It is as though the General is a shell of the man that he once was. Having lost not only his battle for his country but his wife too.