

Liberty Versus Licence in Somerset Maugham's

"The Verger"

I first wrote about this many years ago while still at school. Its message was very much embedded in me and gave some resonance to what I had already begun to realise. No doubt, we could wish to do many things but were limited to what we could do by our own nascent abilities, but in many other ways, what others in authorised positions allowed us to do. Authoritarianism is another subject that I could brew on at length but that may take away from what I think Maugham's writing conveys.

It was his short story *The Verger* that presented me with a nuanced exploration of the tension between liberty and licence. The gentleman who was central to his story, Albert Edward Foreman, was illiterate but a dedicated verger who showed a passion for his church and the overall preparedness of the grounds and its presentation to its congregation. But through a twist of fate his life changed course, and he was transformed into a businessman of merit. Maugham's narrative underscores how personal freedom could be stifled by imposed authority, but can, nevertheless, lead to success in other fields of endeavour through a nascent strength of character.

The story begins with Albert's dismissal from his long-held position as a verger due to his illiteracy. The church authorities, under the guise of administrative necessity, impose a rigid rule that disregards his years of loyal service and his ability to perform his job superlatively. This was an example of an entity, the church in this instance, exercising *licence* (unregulated power), by enforcing a standard that, while seemingly reasonable, ignored individual merit. *This moment highlights the potential for institutional authority to become oppressive rather than liberating.*

However, Albert's response embodies *liberty*, the exercise of freedom but without despair and turning an adverse situation into an opportunity. Keeping his eyes open while pondering his future, he sees the chance of providing a much-needed service in his neighbourhood. With the savings he had accrued from his more-or-less ascetic existence, he establishes a successful business providing him with the wherewithal to expand his services to other neighbourhoods. And this became such as to come to the attention of his bank manager.

The bank manager approached Albert, as he was concerned about the considerable amount of money Albert had deposited with him but at a relatively low rate of interest. In fairness he suggested to Albert that he invest it in something that could give him a better rate. It was during that conversation that he became astonished that such a wealthy man was illiterate. *This reflected the social expectation that literacy determines success as mirrored by the church's rigid rule.* Albert's success, however, was a testament to the power of individual agency over societal prescriptions, emphasising that liberty, when exercised wisely, can triumph over imposed limitations. The final sentences of Maugham's essay give a compelling reflection on the importance of innate characteristics of an individual rising to the fore when societal imposition would attempt at inhibiting that person's wishes, and regardless of the unexpected outcome, still admit to what one's heart really would have desired. These lines are:

The Bank Manager: 'And do you mean to say that you've built up this important business and amassed a fortune of thirty thousand pounds without being able to read or write? Good God, man, what would you be now if you had been able to?'

Albert: 'I can tell you that, sir,' said Mr Foreman, a little smile on his still aristocratic features. 'I'd be verger of St Peter's, Neville Square.'

In my lifetime, I have met and read of many who would fit in this framework and who through authoritarian limitations have risen in wealth and stature in accord with social expectations, even though their true desire was to remain in a much humbler occupation and enjoying a much different lifestyle. A famous example of this from my reading would be the quotation attributed to Einstein of his wish to have been a plumber to afford him a greater degree of independence; no doubt from the shackles of societal demands on his intellect.

Maugham's Verger was not a prescribed text when I was at High School but probably should be today!

It is a short and fascinating read:

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Maugham_The_Verger_0.pdf