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## *Short Stories*

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## Post-reading Activities

### Creative response

Imagine that you are going to make a film of this story. Re-read the two different versions of the fatal meeting between Leslie and Hammond (pp. 176-84 and 214-5). In your film, will Leslie tell the story twice as she does here, or will the murder be shown? If you choose the latter, will you show both versions or only one? Which one? Discuss your decisions with your companions.

### Characters

- Which of the following is, in your opinion, the most sympathetic character in the story?
  - Leslie Crosbie
  - Robert Crosbie
  - Geoff Hammond
  - Mr JoyceGive reasons for your choice.
- Bearing in mind the contrast between her behaviour in prison and the revelation at the end of the story, do you find the characterisation of Leslie credible?



### W(illiam) Somerset Maugham (1874-1965)

A doctor by training, Maugham originally made his reputation as a playwright, but subsequently turned to novels and short stories, a number of which are set among the British residents in distant countries such as India, Samoa and Malaysia. His plots are clever and his ability to evoke the atmosphere of his exotic settings is outstanding; one of his short stories, *Rain*, is especially memorable and has been filmed several times. *The Letter* draws on the same gifts which made *Rain* so successful. Maugham spent the last forty years of his life on the French Riviera, where he lived with his secretary and companion, Gerald Haxton.

## Pre-reading Activities

1. Do you write letters? To whom? In what circumstances?
2. This story is set in Singapore; its protagonists are British colonialists. What, in your opinion, are the advantages and disadvantages of living in an expatriate community?

## Activities while Reading

### Section I: from the beginning to “capable of such determination” (p. 173)

#### Style and narrative technique

1. The first paragraph of the story presents a contrast between ‘outside on the quay’ and ‘inside the office’. What are the main differences?
2. Maugham does not tell the reader immediately why Robert Crosbie looks so distressed. What is the effect of this?
3. Read Crosbie’s words from “‘It is damnable’” (p. 171) to “‘I think it’s awful to keep her in prison all these weeks’” (p. 172). What do you think Mrs Crosbie is accused of? Quote from the text to support your answer.

#### Metaphors

Two metaphors are used in this section to refer to Hammond. What are they? What do they have in common?

Outside on the quay<sup>1</sup> the sun beat fiercely. A stream of motors, lorries and buses, private cars and hirelings,<sup>2</sup> sped up and down the crowded thoroughfare,<sup>3</sup> and every chauffeur blew his horn; rickshaws threaded their nimble path amid the throng,<sup>4</sup> and the panting coolies<sup>5</sup> found breath to yell at one another; coolies, carrying heavy bales,<sup>6</sup> sidled along with their quick jog-trot and shouted to the passer-by to make way; itinerant vendors proclaimed their wares. Singapore is the meeting-place of a hundred peoples; and men of all colours, black Tamils, yellow Chinks, brown Malays, Armenians, Jews and Bengalis, called to one another in raucous tones. But inside the office of

1. *quay* [ki:] : place where boats load and unload.
2. *hirelings* : people who are paid for a particular service.
3. *thoroughfare* : busy road.
4. *threaded ... throng* : moved in and out of the crowd in an agile manner.
5. *coolies* : in some Eastern countries, unskilled workers paid a very low wage.
6. *bales* : bundles of cloth.

Messrs.<sup>1</sup> Ripley, Joyce and Naylor it was pleasantly cool; it was dark after the dusty glitter of the street and agreeably quiet after its unceasing din.<sup>2</sup> Mr Joyce sat in his private room, at the table, with an electric fan turned full on him. He was leaning back, his elbows on the arms of the chair, with the tips of the outstretched fingers of one hand resting neatly against the tips of the outstretched fingers of the other. His gaze rested on the battered volumes of the Law Reports which stood on a long shelf in front of him. On the top of a cupboard were square boxes of japanned<sup>3</sup> tin, on which were painted the names of various clients.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

A Chinese clerk, very neat in his white ducks,<sup>4</sup> opened it.

"Mr Crosbie is here, sir."

He spoke beautiful English, accenting each word with precision, and Mr Joyce had often wondered at the extent of his vocabulary. Ong Chi Seng was a Cantonese, and he had studied law at Gray's Inn.<sup>5</sup> He was spending a year or two with Messrs. Ripley, Joyce and Naylor in order to prepare himself for practice on his own account. He was industrious, obliging, and of exemplary character.

"Show him in," said Mr Joyce.

He rose to shake hands with his visitor and asked him to sit down. The light fell on him as he did so. The face of Mr Joyce remained in shadow. He was by nature a silent man, and now he

1. *Messrs.* ['mesəz] : (business language) the plural of 'Mr'.
2. *din* : loud, continuous noise.
3. *japanned* : covered with a special shiny black paint.
4. *ducks* : (here) cotton trousers.
5. *Gray's Inn* : one of the law societies, based in London, to which English lawyers must belong.