The Business of Art: The Construction of a Writer's Professional Identity in *Cakes and Ale*

Lou Yu
School of International Studies, Zhejiang University
Yuhangtang Rd. 668, Xihu District, Hangzhou, 310058, China
Email: 593125124@qq.com

Abstract W.Somerset Maugham's novel *Cakes and Ale* portrays the interwar London literary society and examines four British writers and their struggles to define their professional identities in the early twentieth century. The novel interrogates the ethics of biographical writing, questioning whether moral flaws should be revealed in a biography. By juxtaposing writers who champion unvarnished truth against those who favor protective silence, Maugham reveals the complex negotiations required for artistic survival amid the commercialization of literature. Through the lens of early twentieth-century literary marketization, this paper analyzes how institutional forces of modern literary patronage and the demands of mass readership shape a writer's professional identity. It also examines how professional writers negotiate the tensions between intellectualism and commercialism as competing forces in constructing an ideal professional identity. Given Maugham's success in balancing quality and popularity, his insights could provide crucial guidance for contemporary writers negotiating market demands, artistic autonomy, and ethical duty.

Keywords *Cakes and Ale*; literary market; professional identity; art; commerce

Author **Lou Yu** is PhD student at the School of International Studies, Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310058, China). Her main research interests include English and American literature, feminist literature, and the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism.

Introduction

Over a literary career spanning six decades, W. Somerset Maugham crafted the persona and lifestyle of a celebrity author. While his works remain widely read, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. Edmund Wilson critiqued Maugham's stories, stating: "They are readable—quite entertaining [...] These stories are magazine commodities—all but two of them came out in the *Cosmopolitan*—on about the same level as Sherlock Holmes" (326). David Daiches, a contemporary of Wilson, contended that Maugham wrote primarily for money: "Maugham's works are treated as entertainment rather than profound or original interpretations of the human condition" (256). In 1986, Joseph Epstein posed the question "Is it all right to read Somerset Maugham?" to explore the gap between Maugham's enduring popularity and his marginalization within academic circles. Given that the prevailing academic view of Maugham's works remains largely dismissive, one might ask: Is it all right to study Somerset Maugham? Regarding the divide between the public favour and the neglect of the intelligentsia, Maugham acknowledged his stylistic limitations but added: "The critic I am waiting for is the one who will explain why, with all my faults, I have been read for so many years by so many people" (qtd. in Epstein 1). Does a writer's ability to entertain readers, achieve public popularity, and attain commercial success necessarily come at the expense of artistic quality? Or can art survive only at the expense of commerce?

In his 1930 novel *Cakes and Ale*, subtitled *The Skeleton in the Cupboard*, Maugham explores the construction of a writer's professional identity against the backdrop of early twentieth-century literary marketization. The novel centers on a key question: Should "the skeleton in the cupboard" be exposed in a biography? Alroy Kear, a bestselling writer, is commissioned by the second wife of the late writer Edward Driffield to undertake the task of composing the biography. Kear opposes revealing the true or immoral aspects of the great writer's life, arguing that readers care little for truth and insisting on marketable and economically viable narratives. In contrast, William Ashenden—a young writer and longtime friend of Driffield and his first wife, Rosie—refuses to participate in the project, believing the biography should expose "the skeleton in the cupboard" for art's sake. The question of whether to reveal this hidden truth becomes a lens through which Maugham examines the negotiation between art and commerce in a professional writer's career. How do intellectualism and commercialism influence the construction of a writer's professional identity? By analyzing the four writers' ethical choices in *Cakes and Ale*, this paper explores Maugham's critical insights into the construction of a writer's professional identity amid the shifting literary and social landscapes in twentieth-century Britain. As one of the century's best-selling British writers, Maugham shows an acute awareness of market dynamics ahead of its time. His reflections on a writer's professional identity hence deserve critical analysis.

From "Cultural Legislators" to "Cultural Producers": Identity Transformation of the Professional Writer in the Early Twentieth Century

Adam Smith introduced the concept of "the invisible hand" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*[1] and later in *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*[2] to highlight the power of the market. This concept marks a shift away from the stigmatization of market activities. Literature, "historically bound to the extension of market rationality," had been deeply shaped by the processes of commodification that emerged in the eighteenth century (Breitenwischer et al. 3). Griffin noticed that the symbolic center of literary culture shifted from the court to the burgeoning literary marketplace of the book trade.[3] Stover hence pointed out, "With the decline of patronage, writing to earn a living was no longer a gaucherie but a necessity. New markets and an expanding public meant greater rewards. The literary profession had been born" (75). As the eighteenth century progressed, it witnessed "the emergence of modern authorship," where writers transitioned from being "a financially independent gentleman amateur" or "a dependant of the patronage system" to "a proud and respected professional man or woman" who directly deals with booksellers and aspires to earn a living through their writing (Griffin 132). According to Ian Watt, the emergence of the literary market was closely tied to the rise of the novel, exemplified by authors like Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson.[4] Reinfandt argued that Defoe and Richardson were acutely aware of the rise of the literary market and recognized the necessity to make their works salable. Defoe, for instance, "clearly panders to the marketplace by first insisting on the tale's spectacular and entertaining qualities" (3), while Richardson attracted readers to Pamela more with "the promise of an interior view of a young woman's mind and boudoir than by the morals of Virtue Rewarded" (4). With the advent of new printing technology, the rise of magazines, and the labor division among publishers, retailers and printers, novels were further marketed as literary commodities by writers like Charles Dickens and George Eliot during the Victorian era. Historically, the market had been seen as the opposite of literature, and businessmen as the antithesis of artists. As Halsey observed, "The artist, literary or otherwise, places a high value on the aesthetic, symbolic, emotional and personal experiences of life. His outlook is quite a different from that of the businessman who is concerned with the more practical, material aspects. This difference puts the artist in fundamental opposition to the business ideology" (397). However, with the rise of the literary market, professional writers increasingly began to engage with writing as a business.

---

[1] See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, London: HG Bohn, 1853, p. 264.

[2] See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, BOOK IV*, London: T. Nelson and Son, 1873, p. 184.

[3] See Dustin Griffin, "The rise of the professional author?" *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, edited by Michael F. Suarez, SJ and Michael L. Turner, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 132.

[4] See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964.

In the early twentieth century, the British literary market matured and expanded significantly. The implementation of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) on January 1, 1900, along with improvements in copyright law, led to increased profits for everyone involved in the publishing industry.[1] Economic democracy paved the way for the rise of mass culture, as the classes "make cultural demands which their formerly marginal position did not permit" (Feldman 339). The primary supporters of writers evolved from the aristocratic, upper, and middle classes in the eighteenth century to a rising middle class in the nineteenth century, and finally to the common reader amid the emergence of mass culture in the twentieth century. As a result, the early twentieth century witnessed the rise of a new generation of professional writers who transitioned from crafting works for a narrow circle of readers to producing literature for a broader, more diverse readership. Among them was Somerset Maugham, who, along with his contemporaries, took up literature as a viable profession. These writers capitalized on the opportunities presented by the growing commercialization of literature, leveraging expanded readerships and improved legal protections to establish successful literary careers. In the meantime, they were confronted with the challenge of balancing artistic value with the demands of a market-driven industry. Professional writers, therefore, often found themselves in a state of conflict—they had to weigh commercial considerations against artistic pursuits, maintain independence while collaborating with various stakeholders, and cater to as well as enlighten the reading public. Writers, once revered as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley 70), were increasingly expected to become "simultaneously an artist and an impresario, an aesthete and an entertainer, a thinker and a businessman" (Brier). The expanding literary market and reading public provided writers with an economic foundation, while simultaneously triggering an identity crisis as they struggled to reconcile their artistic autonomy with commercial pressures. This challenge was not unique to Maugham and his contemporaries; it remains a pressing issue for writers today.

---

[1] See Christoph Reinfandt, "The Present in Perspective: Mapping the Literary Market Today," *The Literary Market in the UK,* 2017, pp. 1-18.

In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham examines how different writers navigate the ethical dilemma through four characters. Jasper Gibbons and Edward Driffield illustrate the influence of modern literary patronage, particularly through the figure of a literary hostess, Mrs. Barton Trafford. Alroy Kear, by contrast, embodies the influence of a reader-driven market, where his success depends on catering to public tastes and market trends. William Ashenden, Maugham's fictional persona, offers a more reflective perspective on negotiating the tension between art and commerce as a professional writer. By comparing and contrasting the artistic and commercial approaches of these writers, Maugham explores the ethical principles professional writers should uphold in creating, sustaining, and expanding the literary marketplace.

Constructing a Writer's Professional Identity Under Modern Literary Patronage

Literary patronage has long been a significant force in shaping the production and reception of literature. In the traditional patronage system, a "gift economy" facilitated reciprocal exchange between patrons and clients: writers received financial support and social recognition, while patrons enhanced their reputations for liberality, enlightenment, or magnificence, thereby gaining cultural capital in the exchange.[1] Historically, literary patrons symbolized aristocratic culture and stood in opposition to the market. According to Van den Braber, the primary distinction between traditional and modern patronage lies in the increasing dominance of the market.[2] Before 1850, "patronage operated as a system for funding in a literary field that was not yet (fully) market-centred" in Britain (46). As the literary market became more commercialized, patrons began to assist authors in managing relations with the public, critics, and various social circles, with an aim to "construct a commercially viable career in a relatively safe, semi-private environment" (53). In the modern patronage system, "its nature and function changed: it became a safety net for those authors who could not or would not rely on the market because, for example, they were not interested in capturing a large audience or because they looked down on established tastes" (46). Van den Braber analyzed three patronage models in the nineteenth century: one led by a writer-patron, another by a writer-beneficiary, and a third by a salon hostess offering a platform to authors. In *Cakes and Ale*, Mrs. Barton exemplifies the third model. As a literary hostess in early twentieth-century London, she extends patronage to two writers—Jasper Gibbons and Edward Driffield. The ups and downs of their literary careers under her patronage reflect the role of modern patronage in shaping a writer's professional identity. For Gibbons, patronage leads to both celebrity and obscurity, with his professional and personal life manipulated by the patron. "She nobbled Jasper Gibbons" (*Cakes and Ale* 141). As Ashenden the narrator observes:

---

[1] See Helleke Van den Braber, "Reciprocal Interactions and Complex Negotiations: Three Nineteenth-century Models of Patronage," *European Journal of English Studies,* vol. 21, no. 1, 2017, pp. 43-60.

[2] Ibid. P. 46.

> She had him to lunch to meet the right people; she gave At Homes where he recited his poems before the most distinguished persons in England; she introduced him to eminent actors who gave him commissions to write plays; she saw that his poems should only appear in the proper places; she dealt with the publishers and made contracts for him that would have staggered even a cabinet minister; she took care that he should accept only the invitations of which she approved; she even went so far as to separate him from the wife with whom he had lived happily for ten years, since she felt that a poet to be true to himself and his art must not be encumbered with domestic ties. (141)

Gibbons' failure to construct a writer's professional identity can be attributed to two main reasons. First is his inability to adapt to the public side of a literary career. "He had never been accustomed to having money to spend, he was quite unused to the lavish entertainments that were offered him, perhaps he missed his homely, common little wife" (141). His discomfort in social settings highlights a deeper struggle: the tension between the private space of writing where a poet finds material and creativity, and the public space of being a public figure. Second, Gibbons' inability to respond to criticism constructively further contributes to his downfall. When his third book fails, critics land harsh criticism on him: "The critics tore him limb from limb, they knocked him down and stamped on him, and [...] then they lugged him round the room and then they jumped upon his face" (142). Instead of handling the criticism with resilience—or even indifference—Gibbons turns to alcohol for comfort and descends into self-destructive behavior that eventually leads to his arrest. In his literary memoir *The Summing Up*, Maugham suggested that "authors are unwise who do not read criticisms. It is salutary to train oneself to be no more affected by censure than by praise; for of course it is easy to shrug one's shoulders when one finds oneself described as a genius, but not so easy to be unconcerned when one is treated as a nincompoop" (158). Treated as a nincompoop and abandoned by Mrs. Barton, Gibbons fails to construct a writer's professional identity under patronage. His failure to cope with the pressures of public exposure and criticism leads to his descent into obscurity.

In the case of Driffield, when Mrs.Barton employs the same strategy on him, he handles it more adeptly than Gibbons. Driffield's success and failure as a man of letters is deeply intertwined with patronage. His literary career can be divided into two phases: the first, when he works without a patron in Blackstable, and the second, when he collaborates with Mrs. Barton in the London literary circle. Ashenden attributes Driffield's artistic success to his early environment in Blackstable, where he remained close to life and wrote without restraints. There, he was exuberant, fun-loving, and enthusiastic. He chose writing as a profession and married his first wife, Rosie, a barmaid, at a time when Victorian morality deemed both decisions indecent. With Rosie, he had contact with a lifestyle untrammelled by conformity, codes, and inhibitions, which infused energy into his writing. Ashenden believes that this unconventionality produced works of the highest quality and value. Driffield's professional identity during this phase is shaped primarily by literary factors. A case in point is the controversy surrounding his novel *The Cup of Life*. A particular scene in the book—"The scene of the child's death [...] and the curious incident that follows it" (170)—sparks a sudden storm of criticism. This scene challenges Victorian readers' expectations, defies the sensibilities of conservative critics, and conflicts with prevailing social norms. Unlike Gibbons, who crumbles under critical scrutiny, Edward remains indifferent to criticism and simply responds, "They say it isn't true [...] They can go to hell. It is true" (171). His unwavering conviction in his artistic judgment highlights his resilience and his ability to stand by his work despite external pressures. Ashenden considers *The Cup of Life*, "though certainly not the most celebrated of his books, nor the most popular, is to my mind the most interesting" (170).

In the second phase of his career, Driffield's artistic decline—and his rise to great literary fame—coincides with the support of Mrs. Barton and the system of literary patronage she represents. Under her patronage, his artistic value diminishes from excellence to mediocrity, while his literary fame is inflated by non-literary factors, and he becomes a "Grand Old Man of English letters" (109). Leaving Blackstable and losing Rosie result in the loss of a vital source of inspiration and the authentic touch of life essential to his artistic creation. Ashenden notes that Driffield's engagement with the London literary circle leads to a decline in his creative spirit: he loses more of his animal spirits and gradually takes on an artificial role. At this stage, Driffield's professional identity is shaped primarily by non-literary factors. While his closeness to literary and social elites brings him fame and recognition, it also distances him from the raw, unfiltered experiences of life that once fueled his creativity. The very patronage that elevates his public standing simultaneously undermines the depth and originality of his work.

Through Gibbons and Driffield, Maugham illustrates how professional writers may become trapped by worldly success, "for it may very well cut the author off from the material that was its occasion. He enters a new world. He is made much of. He must be almost super-human if he is not captivated by the notice taken of him by the great and remains insensible to the attentions of beautiful women" (*The Summing Up* 129). Maugham is not opposed to writers achieving success, but he emphasizes that they should remain cautious of its potential consequences. Compared to Gibbons, Driffield does succeed in constructing a professional identity; however, this identity is largely shaped by non-literary factors. Under the protection of patronage, his professional identity is formed more through external promotion and manipulation than through artistic authenticity and literary autonomy.

The modern literary patronage system fosters literary coteries which, in Maugham's view, constrain the development of a writer's professional identity. While this system may serve as a form of resistance to the market in the name of artistic integrity, it does not always facilitate the creation of genuine art. In fact, it might isolate writers from a conducive writing environment, from real life, and from an understanding of the reading public. In the era of commercialization, literary patronage itself is increasingly shaped by market forces. As moderators of literary coteries, patrons like Mrs. Barton function more as speculators—those who "buy in the open market" (*Cakes and Ale* 141) and seek to "back a winner" (143)—than as genuine mentors committed to nurturing struggling writers. Under such a patronage system, the relationship between patron and writer becomes central to the construction of the writer's professional identity. However, this relationship is not always equitable or harmonious. McCabe argued that literary patronage often reflects a broader social and political structure driven by systemic inequality.[1] This dynamic places writers in a precarious position, dependent on the shifting interests and preferences of their patrons. Samuel Johnson famously criticized this imbalance, describing a patron as "one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached the ground, encumbers him with help." Johnson's metaphor underscores the inherent power disparity in patronage, where support often comes too late or with strings attached, leaving writers vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. As André Lefevere noted, patrons are "powers (including people and institutions) that can promote or hinder the reading, writing, or rewriting of literature" (15). In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham exposes how the patron-writer relationship can instrumentalize writers and stifle their creative autonomy. Gibbons represents a parasitic dependency on literary patronage: as a hanger-on in literary circles, he is crushed by public pressure and ultimately loses his voice. Driffield, by contrast, becomes ensnared in the literary fame that patronage affords him. Once a bold, unconventional realist, he is rebranded by the literary establishment into a respectable monument—stripped of the vitality and flaws that once defined his work. He becomes a symbol constructed by literary circles: discussed by intellectuals as a marker of taste, yet largely irrelevant to the reading public. As Maugham observed, "The writers who delight a clique and never reach the great public will never delight posterity, for posterity will never hear about them" (*The Summing Up* 132). Through Gibbons and Driffield, Maugham critiques patrons who act as market-driven speculators and writers who retreat into literary coteries under patronage. He condemns such coteries for fostering literary pretension rather than cultivating authentic creativity.

---

[1] See Richard Anthony McCabe, *"Ungainefull Arte": Poetry, Patronage, and Print in the Early Modern Era*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Constructing a Writer's Professional Identity in a Reader-driven Market

In the early twentieth century, the commercial expansion of the book trade created an alternative economy centered on the relationships between authors, publishers, and readers. As the power of the aristocracy declined and the influence of capitalism grew, literary patronage shifted from social elites and professional critics to the common reader. The purchasing power and cultural participation of a broader reading public enabled writers to survive independently, no longer reliant on the support of a narrow circle. This shift granted writers greater autonomy, as they were no longer bound to cater solely to the interests of a select few who supported their literary ambitions. At the same time, however, a wider readership brought new challenges. Writers had to navigate both literary and non-literary considerations on their own, long before the advent of modern literary agents. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, professional authors were expected to become "jack of all trades," mastering not only the craft of writing but also the complexities of publishing, marketing, and cultivating public relations.

At the very beginning of the novel, Ashenden introduces how Kear climbs up the literary ladder as a professional writer. Kear's success rests on four key factors: political background, the themes of his writing, public relations, and literary positioning. First, Kear's background plays a crucial role. Having studied at Oxford and served as a private secretary to a politician, he gains early access to the "great world" (14) of high society, which provides him with rich material for his writing.

Second, the themes of his works reflect his keen sensitivity to contemporary trends. In his early novels, he draws extensively from his experiences in upper-class circles, skillfully portraying "viceroys, ambassadors, prime ministers, royalties, and great ladies" in a tone that is "friendly without being patronizing and familiar without being impertinent" (*Cakes and Ale* 14). As public interests shift, Kear adapts by focusing on the "spiritual conflicts of solicitors, chartered accountants, and produce brokers" (ibid.), ensuring his work remains relevant. Third, Kear maintains close relationships with fellow writers, critics, and readers. With fellow writers, he sends copies of his first novel to the leading writers of the day, presenting his work as a tribute to those he admires. This gesture, combined with his generous praise of their work, earns him goodwill and support within literary circles. He also actively participates in literary organizations and delivers lectures on the merits of younger writers, further solidifying his reputation as a generous and engaged member of the literary community. With critics, when confronted by negative reviews, he invites reviewers to lunch, where his charm and hospitality often persuade them to soften their views or reconsider their opinions. By the time his next novel appears, critics are inclined to see it as a significant improvement. With common readers, Kear undertakes successful lecture tours across the United States and Great Britain, later revising his talks into published volumes. His willingness to speak publicly on diverse topics—from politics to the role of women in the home—helps make him a familiar and trusted public figure. Finally, Kear's literary positioning is central to his professional success. Aware of his limitations, he readily acknowledges that he is not a great novelist: "All I want people to say is that I do my best. I do work. I never let anything slipshod get past me. I think I can tell a good story and I can create characters that ring true" (C*akes and Ale* 17). These strategies make Kear "an example of what an author can do, and to what heights he can rise, by industry, commonsense, honesty, and the efficient combination of means and ends" (24). Kear's identity as a professional writer aligns with that of a businessman; he writes for the market and treats his novels as commodities crafted to meet consumer demand.

As a businessman, Kear approaches Driffield's biography as an opportunity to craft a narrative that aligns with public expectations and maximizes commercial profit. Specifically, in handling "the skeleton in the cupboard," he refuses to include any controversial elements in the biography, fearing how the public might react to the truth:

> It would be rather amusing to show the man with his passion for beauty and his

> careless treatment of his obligations, his fine style and his personal hatred for soap and water, his idealism and his tippling in disreputable pubs; but honestly, would it pay? (*Cakes and Ale* 117)

Driven by the pursuit of profit and public recognition, Kear epitomizes the commercialization of literature, constructing his professional identity through astute navigation of the literary market. This approach reveals an ethical dilemma central to literary commercialization: the tension between the autonomous and heteronomous sectors, as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu. In other words, it is a negotiation between art and commerce. Cox pointed out that the market has assumed the role of an unchallenged god in modern society, shaping politics, ethics, and personal values.[1] Cultural production both thrives and suffers under market forces. On the one hand, the rise of the literary market enables economic sustainability for professional writers. As Stover stated, "There are no authors without readers, and no professional authors without paying readers" (75). The market also facilitates the democratization of culture. Benjamin, argued that mass reproduction technologies emancipated art from elite control by making cultural works more accessible, though he cautioned that this progress came with certain aesthetic compromises.[2] Both Kear and Maugham benefit from the rise of the literary market. As Leavis observed, the emergence of "worthless fiction" resulted from a division in the previously unified literary marketplace: common readers read common novels, while more sophisticated turned to works labeled as literary or classic.[3] "The insatiable demand for fiction—now the publisher's mainstay—had to be satisfied by the second rate" (Leavis 132). By supplying what the market demands, these so-called "second-rate" writers achieve commercial success rarely attained by their "first-rate" counterparts. Thus, so-called "worthless fiction" gains cultural worth by satisfying the desires of common readers and the needs of the market.

On the other hand, the excessive reliance on market mechanisms raises significant concerns for cultural production. It can lead to the erosion of artistic autonomy, as writers prioritize market trends and profit over creative freedom. It may also result in cultural homogenization, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued through their concept of the "culture industry"—the systematic transformation of art into standardized, predictable commodities designed for mass consumption.[1] Kear's approach to the literary market emphasizes commerce over art. His writing reflects a deliberate effort to align with prevailing public sentiments, as Ashenden teasingly observes:

---

[1] See Harvey Cox, *The Market as God*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

[2] See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London: Penguin, 2008.

[3] See Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, London: Chatto And Windus, 1939, p. 133.

> his sincerity is stamped on every one of their multitudinous pages. This is clearly the chief ground of his stable popularity. Roy has always sincerely believed what everyone else believed at the moment. When he wrote novels about the aristocracy he sincerely believed that its members were dissipated and immoral, and yet had a certain nobility and an innateaptitude for governing the British Empire; when later he wrote of the middle classes he sincerely believed that they were the backbone of the country. His villains have always been villainous, his heroes heroic, and his maidens chaste. (*Cakes and Ale* 21)

The problem with Kear's art is that it "is calculated to give the public what it wants—not the real novelist, whose creative power will always be masked by the puzzling incongruities of his actual existence, but the figure that literary society demands, free from complexity, contradiction, and indecorousness" (Palmer 58). Featuring flat characters and safe ideas, Kear's works reinforce existing beliefs, offer comfort through predictability, and sacrifice the potential to challenge or expand the intellectual horizon. While the market exerts considerable influence on writers, writers' artistic choices and ethical stances, in turn, shape the literary market and the intellectual climate of society. Kear's market-driven approach—treating literature as a standardized product at the expense of artistic individuality—leads to artistic mediocrity. When the popularity of such works overshadows quality works in the market, it creates the phenomenon of "bad money driving out good," resulting in a cultural environment dominated by widespread artistic mediocrity. Consequently, literature risks losing its vital role as a powerhouse for societal change.

Kear's professional identity reflects the erosion of professional ethics in the face of commercial pursuits. As many opportunities as the literary market offers, it also imposes significant challenges. The task, then, is neither a naïve rejection nor an uncritical embrace of the market, but rather a form of "resistant negotiation"—leveraging market forces while subverting their exploitative tendencies. This balancing act continues to challenge cultural producers. Like Kear, Maugham is acutely aware of his public image and actively works to expand his reputation and book sales. He is not blind to the harsh realities of the literary market: "Every year, hundreds of books, many of considerable merit, pass unnoticed. Each one has taken the author months to write; he may have had it in his mind for years" (*The Summing Up* 123). Therefore, "It is not unnatural that he should use whatever means he can to attract the attention of the public," and due to "the stress of circumstances," a writer might "yield to the demand of the public" (ibid.). Maugham does not oppose writing for money, asserting that a writer's motive is irrelevant to the reader: "[...] for the reader has nothing to do with the motive for which the author writes. He is only concerned with the result" (ibid.). Instead, he maintains that financial success can provide writers with two key benefits: "One, the more important by far, is the freedom to follow his own bent, and the other is confidence in himself" (*The Summing Up* 130). Yet Maugham also cautions against the dangers of success, warning: "The writer is wise then who is wary of success. He must look with dread on the claims that others make on him because of it, the responsibilities it forces on him, and the hindering activities that it brings in its wake" (ibid.). While a professional writer should respect market rules and adopt a pragmatic outlook, this does not mean that they should uncritically follow market trends or exploit them for purely material gain. Kear fails to balance market demands with artistic integrity and achieves popularity at the expense of artistic quality; in Maugham's view, this does not constitute the ideal professional identity of a writer.

---

[1] See Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Noeri, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Reconstructing a Writer's Professional Identity in the Modern Literary Market

Driffield's retreat from the literary market and Kear's active engagement with it highlight an ethical dilemma for professional writers: Can one construct an ideal professional identity at the intersection of commercial pragmatism and artistic authenticity? Ashenden, a persona of Maugham, "struggles to escape fake intellectualism, pseudo-art, and social narrow-mindedness" (Palmer 55). As Palmer argued, this is "a struggle to free himself from a drive for success that would deny happiness and true creativity" (57). In this sense, a writer's professional identity is shaped not only by how they choose to write, but by how they choose to live. Therefore, when faced with the question of whether to expose "the skeleton in the cupboard" in Driffield's biography, Ashenden refuses to take part in a project that serves not the interests of art, but rather Kear's desire to profit through falsification. He believes the biography would be better if it depicted Driffield "warts and all" (*Cakes and Ale* 117), and explored the artistic value of an imagined reality firmly rooted in the richness of lived experience. Kear's omission of "the skeleton in the cupboard" reveals his shortsightedness and social narrowness, as "her [Rosie's] flagrant though harmless promiscuity hardly fits the narrow conventions of the biography Kear intends to write" (Palmer 59). Ashenden—or Maugham himself—adopts a long-term perspective instead, recognizing that readers and values evolve over time. As Ashenden sees it, "It may be that another generation, accommodating itself more adequately to the stress of life, will look for inspiration not in a flight from reality, but in an eager acceptance of it" (*Cakes and Ale* 105). History has shown this to be true: "It is strange (and instructive) to read now the book that created such a sensation; there is not a word that could bring a blush to the cheek of the most guileless, not an episode that could cause the novel reader of the present day to turn a hair" (171). Kear's approach of tailoring art to suit the sensibilities of the present is therefore problematic. As public tastes evolve, his works risk being discarded by future generations. In contrast, literature that endures often speaks to universal human experiences through the specific lens of its historical moment.

Given the shifting interests and sensibilities of readers, writers should prioritize cultivating individuality over chasing fleeting trends. Maugham warns against writers financing their careers through journalism, as journalism and reviewing "kill the individuality" (*The Summing Up* 125) by promoting impersonal, generalized perspectives and mechanical reading habits that erode a writer's unique voice and vision. Individualistic works require time to produce, may not immediately resonate with the public, and may not always endure. Yet these are often the works that leave a lasting impact. As Maugham pointed out:

> originality should not at first be welcomed. In this perpetually changing world people are suspicious of novelty and it takes them some time before they can accustom themselves to it. A writer with an idiosyncrasy has to find little by little the people to whom it appeals. Not only does it take him time to be himself, for the young are themselves only with timidity, but it takes him time to convince that body of persons, whom he will eventually rather pompously call his public, that he has something to give them that they want. (*The Summing Up* 124)

In *Cakes and Ale*, the depiction of Rosie underscores Ashenden's pursuit of individuality in art. Kear refuses to reveal the truth about Rosie, fearing it might upset readers and be rejected by the market. In contrast, Ashenden chooses to present the authentic Rosie—her genuine character and the significant role she plays in inspiring Driffield. Her candid sexual openness and zest for life, qualities rarely found in literary circles, become vital to writers like Driffield, Ashenden, and

Maugham himself.

In reconstructing a professional writer's identity, Ashenden strives to navigate a delicate balance: engaging with market forces while safeguarding artistic individuality. This effort reflects Maugham's philosophy that art should entertain readers and inspire the right action. The concept of entertainment, often misconstrued as pandering to popular taste, in fact represents a deep understanding of market demands, the needs of the reading public, and the ethical duty of the writer. From the early days of his career in theater, Maugham recognized the value of entertainment, asserting, "It is the public that pays, and if it is not pleased with the entertainment that is offered it, stays away. A play does not exist without an audience [...] A play that does not appeal to an audience may have merits, but it is no more a play than a mule is a horse" (*The Summing Up* 90). In his view, entertaining the public is not an artistic compromise but a skilled craft requiring both technique and talent. As Maugham defended, "The critics accused me of writing down to the public; I did not exactly do that; I had then very high spirits, a facility for amusing dialogue, an eye for a comic situation and a flippant gaiety [...] They were designed to please and they achieved their aim" (*The Summing Up* 84). If the philosophy of art for entertainment emphasizes a reader-centered approach, the concept of art for right action underscores the ethical duty of the writer. Maugham stated that, "The value of art is not beauty but right action", emphasizing that "art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach man humility, tolerance, wisdom, and magnanimity" (214.). The value of art should thus be measured not only by its market appeal, but also by its ethical impact on individuals and society. In reconstructing his professional identity, Ashenden rejects Driffield's isolation from the literary market and distances himself from Kear's excessive commercialization, which reduces literature to a mere pursuit of fame and profit. Instead, he strives to negotiate a balance between art and commerce through individualistic works that not only entertain but also inspire the right action.

Conclusion

A writer's professional identity is inherently shaped by his attitude toward the literary market; their choices to accept, reject, or negotiate with market forces are integral components of that identity. In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham explores how a writer engages with the literary market to construct his professional identity in the early twentieth century. Gibbons and Driffield exemplify how modern literary patronage fosters coteries that promote elitism and literary pretensions by alienating writers from the broader market and general readership. Kear epitomizes the excessively commercialized professional writer—one who exploits the market for financial gain at the expense of artistic value. Ashenden, Maugham's persona, underscores the necessity of navigating a delicate balance between art and commerce

In Maugham's narratives, balancing popularity and quality is not a zero-sum game but a crucial endeavor in constructing a writer's professional identity. Without popularity, sustaining a livelihood as a professional writer becomes unfeasible; without quality, achieving long-term professional growth is unattainable. This dual focus aligns with Maugham's artistic philosophy of "art for entertainment" and "art for the right action." Entertainment reflects a respect for the literary market, advocating for cultural products that fulfill the needs of the common reader. The right action emphasizes the ethical dimension of the literary profession, highlighting that art should contribute to societal development. Constructing a writer's professional identity, therefore, requires a careful balance among economic viability, literary merit, and ethical responsibility, addressing a writer's obligations to the common reader, literary critics, and society at large. Through his portrayal of the four writers in *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham conveys his ethical stance: that the business of art and the art of business should be carefully balanced in the construction of a writer's professional identity..

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin, 2008.

Breitenwischer, Dustin, Philipp Löffler, and Johannes Völz. "How to read the literary market: An introduction." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik,* vol.69, no.1, 2021, pp. 3-8.

Brier, Evan. "The Literary Marketplace." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2017. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/literature/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-113> (accessed April 1, 2025).

Cox, Harvey. *The Market as God*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016.

Daiches, David. *The Present Age in British Literature*. Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1958.

Epstein, Joseph. "Is it all right to read Somerset Maugham?" *Quadrant*, vol.30, no.6, 1986.

Feldman, Edmund Burke. "The Artist and Mass Culture." *College Art Journal*, vol.18, no.4, 1959, pp. 339-344.

Griffin, Dustin. "The Rise of the Professional Author?" *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, edited by Michael F. Suarez, SJ and Michael L. Turner. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

Halsey, Van R. "Fiction and the Businessman: Society through all its Literature." *American Quarterly*, vol.11, no.3, 1959, pp. 391-402.

Horkheimer, Max, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Noeri. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Redwood: Stanford UP, 2002.

Johnson, Samuel. "Letter to the Earl of Chesterfield." February 7, 1755. Harvard Library. Available at: <https://library.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/static/onlineexhibits/johnson/dictionary/3_4.html> (accessed April 2, 2025).

Leavis, Q. D.. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto And Windus, 1939.

Lefevere, André. *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. Bingdon: Routledge, 2016.

Maugham, W. Somerset. *Cakes and Ale*. London: Penguin, 1948.

Maugham, W. Somerset. *The Summing Up*. New York: Penguin, 1946.

McCabe, Richard Anthony. *"Ungainefull Arte": Poetry, Patronage, and Print in the Early Modern Era*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016.

Palmer, R. Barton. "Artists and Hacks: Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol.46, no.4, 1981, pp. 54-63.

Reinfandt, Christoph. "The Present in Perspective: Mapping the Literary Market Today." *The Literary Market in the UK*, edited by Amrei Katharina Nensel and Christoph Reinfandt. Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, 2017, pp. 1-18. Available at: <https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10900/74765/The%20Literary%20Market%20in%20the%20UK%20PDF%20for%20Publication.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed April 2, 2025).

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays*. London: Dodo Press, 2008.

Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, *BOOK IV*. London: T. Nelson and Son, 1873.

Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: HG Bohn, 1853.

Stover, Dave. "The Commercialization of Literature: Authors and Readers in Eighteenth Century England." *The Mirror-Undergraduate History Journal*, vol.6, no.1, 1986, pp. 70-80.

Van den Braber, Helleke. "Reciprocal Interactions and Complex Negotiations: Three Nineteenth-century Models of Patronage." *European Journal of English Studies*, vol.21, no.1, 2017, pp. 43-60.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: U of California P, 1964.

Wilson, Edmund. "The Apotheosis of Somerset Maugham." *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.