

# Heavy or Light: Makeup as an Ethical Choice in *The Razor's Edge*

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**Abstract:** Somerset Maugham, a late Victorian British writer, examines in the early twentieth century how female identity is shaped by the daily routines of face painting. In his depiction of women's makeup, Maugham surveys the relationship between identity construction in literary characters and their body representations. Taking makeup as an analytic subject, this paper studies the three changes in the heroine Sophie's makeup styles and the three constructions of her ethical identity from the perspective of ethical literary criticism and the social constructionist views of the body. Through makeup narratives embodying body representations, Maugham probes deep into the tensions between the old and new moral codes, and explores the possible harmony between body and spirit, which provides inspiration for the construction of female identity in the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** *The Razor's Edge*; makeup; body; ethical identity

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**标题:** 浓与淡:《刀锋》中的妆容选择与女性身份建构

**内容摘要:** 作为后维多利亚时代的英国作家,早在 20 世纪初期,萨默塞特·毛姆便思考着日常妆容背后隐含的女性身份建构问题。通过对不同女性的妆容描写,毛姆体现了文学人物的身份建构与身体表征的紧密关联。本文以小说《刀锋》中三位女性角色的妆容为研究对象,以文学伦理学批评和身体社会学为批评视角,重点阐释了苏菲在妆容方面的三次改变,体现了她对其伦理身份的三次重构。通过体现身体表征的妆容叙事,毛姆展现了旧道德与新道德的冲突,身体与精神的统一,为 20 世纪的女性身份建构提供了借鉴和启迪。

**关键词:**《刀锋》; 妆容; 身体; 伦理身份

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## Introduction

While the spotlight of *The Razor's Edge* (1944) is usually shed on Larry Darrell and his spiritual journey to a life worth living after the World War I, the female characters and their struggle in the post-war society equally deserve our attention. Among the three main female characters, Sophie is the least noticeable. As an upper-class lady, Isabel grabs our attention with her stunning beauty and luxurious lifestyle, while Suzanne, a French model, lures us to spy into her love affairs with one artist after another. There seems nothing special or important about Sophie. Sophie, depicted in the very first chapters of the novel, fades away quietly as the novel involves more interesting characters and juicy stories. In the latter chapters, when the reader as well as her friends meet her again, her innocence is completely gone and she is labeled as a slut by Isabel and her group because of her sluttishness in appearance, vulgarity in language, inappropriateness in behavior, and nonconformity in mind. Still Maugham the writer, through the mouth of Mr. Maugham the narrator, fervently defends Sophie against the harsh criticism landing on her. He makes Sophie an admirable object for Larry who barely admires anything or anyone worldly. In Larry's words, "She had a lovely soul, fervid, aspiring and generous. Her ideals were greathearted. There was even at the end a tragic nobility in the way she sought destruction" (Maugham, *The Razor's Edge* 239). Larry's high opinion of Sophie forms a sharp contrast with the vulgar image of Sophie viewed from Isabel and her upper-class circle. Why is there such a contrast? What is so detestable and in the meantime admirable about Sophie? What is Maugham's ethical message to his reader through Sophie's change?

Sophie's ethical identity is visually manifested in her face. In contrast to Isabel and Suzanne who deliberately paint their faces in a light style, Sophie is heavily painted. Inspired by Bryan Turner's social constructionist views of the body, this paper sees body not as the natural base of society but the outcome of social forces and relations. Turner's notion of a "somatic society"<sup>1</sup> means a society in which major social and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it. As an important showcase of body, face is born natural. Yet a woman's decoration of her face suggests the effects of nurture and culture. Face painting is thus representative of the changing aesthetic and moral attitudes. A woman's face is expressive of her soul, and her soul is indicative of a value she identifies with. A face painted in diverse colors and styles offers wider space for

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1 See Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, Newbury Park: Sage, 2008.

translating personal stories and investigating moral beliefs. Moreover, Maugham, aware of the significance of a character's appearance, claims in his literary memoir *The Summing Up* that "the physical traits of a man influence his character and contrariwise his character is expressed, at least in the rough, in his appearance" (215). The portrayal of his characters' external traits is hence indicative of their internal qualities. Therefore, the questions are: What is the writer's intention of assigning different styles of makeup to different female characters? What does the surface of heavy or light makeup tell us about the soul of these characters?

This paper reads the practice of face painting as an ethical choice employed to expose the conflicts between different moral codes in Western societies in the early twentieth century. As a means to an end, the choice of makeup is ethically loaded. As opposed to an aesthetic judgment, an ethical insight into a painted face is focused on the dynamics between makeup and morality which underpins the daily routines of face painting. Though this study dwells on the surface of a painted face, it goes deeper into the questions the theory of ethical literary criticism, proposed by Nie Zhenzhao, is invested in: What is the ethical environment during the decade following the end of World War I? What ethical identities do the three women construct or deconstruct through the ethical choice of makeup application? How are conflicting moral codes presented, analyzed, and tackled in response to the social problems of the time? These questions will guide us to interpret and understand Maugham's ethical stance in the post-war world.

### **Ethical Environment: A Post-war World Caught Between Old and New Moral Codes**

Nie Zhenzhao states the significance of ethical environment in literary criticism as follows: "A premise for literary interpretation is to understand literature based on the ethical environment and the ethical context of its particular historical period" ("Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" 191). We can better understand the ethical choices made in the context by looking at the ethical environment of the early twentieth century. In analyzing the sexual revolution in modern English literature, Glicksberg claims that "no playwright better illustrates the revolution effected in moral values in the twentieth century than Somerset Maugham" (61). By placing the main setting of *The Razor's Edge* in Chicago and Paris after World War I, Maugham undoubtedly keeps in mind the trials and tribulations of the era filled with the war effort, post-war disillusion, and the great depression followed by a second world war. The vast economic, political, and social changes are accompanied by wide-reaching modifications in moral attitudes and beliefs. As a result, the world is caught between the old and new moral codes.

Makeup provides a window into the moral landscape of the era. Drew-Bear, an expert on performing arts, identifies the relationship between physical characteristics and moral expressions by arguing that “what they wore on their faces conveyed moral implications” (23). The moral message of a painted face, however, has long been negative. Biblical denunciations of lavish appearance combined with “attacks on make up and elaborate dressing” in classical tradition have produced “a cosmetic theology” that links painted women with demons and barbarians (Tuke 107). The Victorian morality, with its emphasis on womanly purity, unsurprisingly embraces the “cosmetic theology”. As a late Victorian writer, Maugham is not unfamiliar with this “cosmetic theology” and describes the panic about the use of cosmetics among Englishwomen. He introduces this phenomenon in his novel *The Merry-Go-Round*:

The average Englishwoman who paints her face, characteristically feeling it a first step in the descent to Avernus, paints it badly. She can never avoid the idea that cosmetics are a little wicked or a little vulgar, and a tiny devil, cloven-footed and betailed, lurks always at the bottom of her rouge-pot. (95)

Influenced by this moral code, a natural mode is morally approved and ugliness is considered as a “moral virtue” (Angeloglou 95). The absence of makeup, or the avoidance of a overly painted face, is viewed as a moral virtue because it serves the interests of capitalist economy. As Max Weber sees it, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism require individuals to practice “asceticism”. In the Victorian era, self-discipline and self-restraint were deemed key factors for securing industrial wealth, traditional success, and cultural confidence. Light makeup, not too much to lose self-discipline and not too bare to decrease sex appeal, serves as a symbol of such discipline and restraint, and signifies the transformation of the internal body “into the orbit of everyday asceticism” (Turner 148). Isabel and Suzanne, apply makeup strategically with an aim to marry their way into the upper class and construct the ethical identity of a high-class lady. They are what Susie Orbach and Kim Chernin call girls “subject to a socialization process geared to achieving success in marriage markets” (qtd. in Shilling 58). A girl’s body becomes an important site of such socialization.

In the meantime, a new world and a new morality are born as a result of World War I. Historian van Loon observed the emergence of a new spirit in which women were “to breathe and to be masters of their own minds and bodies” for the first time in history. Women who used to be confined in the domestic sphere contributed to the war effort and earned themselves income as well as a taste of freedom.

Consequently, the old moral code stressing that “women were the guardians of morality” (Allen 88) became increasingly out-dated, and the images of Victorian and Puritan were despised as “old ladies with bustles and inhibitions” (Allen 112). To be modern, to smash conventions, and to be devastatingly frank became the new trend for some young women. It was under this trend that highly visible cosmetics, partly thanks to the standardized production, reentered the mainstream. While the old morality holds that the obsession with cosmetics signifies “the absence of work and the ability to consume conspicuously” (Turner 148), the new morality stands against asceticism and supports a woman’s newfound freedom. A woman’s face covered with heavy makeup seems to convey a different voice in the early twentieth century: They want to live a different life from their mothers. It is in this belief that some women stop painting rigidly to please men and start painting freely to please themselves. Sophie and her free use of cosmetics exhibit a woman’s adventure in pursuit of bodily autonomy and spiritual independence in the Roaring Twenties.

Such is the ethical environment of the post-war Western society where the old and new moral codes run neck to neck, and conventionality and nonconformity go side by side. Through makeup narratives, Maugham invites us to revisit the Roaring Twenties, re-evaluate the contrasting moralities in his time, and study their influences on women’s face and soul, and body and identity in *The Razor’s Edge*.

### **Light Makeup for A Chic Style: An Ethical Choice for Social Identification**

The Victorian moral code denounces makeup as vulgar and molds many women into a certain pattern. Isabel and Suzanne are among those who fit their physical appearance and social behavior into the pattern approved by the accepted social mores. On the surface, they paint and present their faces light in tone, soft in color, and chic in look. With this chic style deliberately cultivated by techniques such as makeup, they aim to construct the ethical identity of a high-class lady. For them, a conventional upper-class life is worth all their bodily and mental efforts. Their daily subscription to makeup suggests their belief in the congruity between appearance and class. Underneath their lightly painted faces, Maugham shows how a body indiscriminately subject to social mores can lead to an unfulfilled life.

Isabel, an American girl born rich, applies makeup to transform her ethical identity from a chic-less girl to “the smartest kept woman in Paris” whose “wonderful chic” she admires, because chic suggests expense, taste, and circle (*The Razor’s Edge* 168). Since chic is best presented in an effortless, not hard won, manner, Isabel carefully cultivates “a look of perfect spontaneity” from the way she moves her hand to the color she puts on her face (*The Razor’s Edge* 139). Makeup hence becomes

an instrument to cultivate chic and join a circle. Back in America, Isabel used to be fresh and natural with “her radiant health, her playful gaiety, her enjoyment of life, the happiness you felt in her” (*The Razor’s Edge* 22). After four months of seeking and nurturing a chic style in Paris, Isabel successfully turns herself into “a work of conscious art that had been years in the making” (*The Razor’s Edge* 139). Mr. Maugham, a family friend of hers, is struck by the change in her appearance:

There was not a line on her forehead or under her hazel eyes, and though her skin had lost the fresh bloom of extreme youth, its texture was as fine as ever; it obviously owed something now to lotions, creams and massage, but they had given it a soft, transparent delicacy that was singularly attractive. Her thin cheeks were very faintly rouged and her mouth was painted with discretion. (*The Razor’s Edge* 138)

Isabel’s chic style takes a lot of work and is largely owed to the skincare products and makeup skills. Her creation of a soft glam makeup look, the “no makeup” makeup look, grasps the core of a chic style—a “careless confidence” as well as the essence of the Victorian morality (*The Razor’s Edge* 138).

This ethical identity, on the other hand, influences the way she manages and presents her face. With the upper-class identity, Isabel takes care to look, speak, and act in accordance with her respectable title. In a scene where she gets emotional thinking of how she gives up Larry, Isabel makes sure to keep tears off her face, avoiding damage to her perfect aristocratic appearance. As Mr. Maugham ironically observes:

She began to cry and, thinking it would do her good, I let her be. [...] Presently Isabel took a handkerchief from her bag and a mirror and, looking at herself, carefully wiped the corner of her eyes. [...] She powdered her face and painted her lips. (*The Razor’s Edge* 210)

Powdering her face and painting lips immediately after crying seem to suggest the hypocrisy of her tears. The very act of checking her makeup can be read as a form of surveillance. As Bartky argues: “The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day [...] has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance” (80). Isabel, the wife of a wealthy businessman, conducts a self-surveillance of her makeup to ensure that how she looks represents who she is. Makeup hence becomes “a

strategy of self-manifestation” (Whigham 33). Whigham notices that in Elizabethan courtesy literature, the use of cosmetics by female and male courtiers reflects “the ostentatious practice of symbolic behavior taken to typify aristocratic being” and “to express their privileged positions and their ostentatious courtly values” (33). Isabel’s makeup shares a similar purpose, for it aims to manifest her ethical identity as a high-class lady. To achieve an upper-class lifestyle, Isabel has to endure its social control over her body.

However, Isabel’s ethical choices of creating a light makeup look, cultivating a Parisian chic style, and constructing an upper-class identity, come at a price. The Victorian morality doesn’t encourage expression of the true self. In choosing her life partner, she cannot afford to follow her heart. Between Larry the poor and Gray the rich, while her heart goes for Larry, she sacrifices her real cravings to marry Gray. Larry, who refuses to settle down with any respectable professions and profitable businesses, cannot promise her a promising life. In contrast, Gray and his family business are her best chance to stay in the upper class and enjoy a comfortable life. Isabel admits that marrying Gray is a sensible choice “from every practical standpoint, from the standpoint of worldly wisdom, from the standpoint of common decency, from the standpoint of what’s right and wrong” (*The Razor’s Edge* 94-95). Yet her instinctual cravings remain unfulfilled. Mr. Maugham once witnesses Isabel’s explicit expression of her sensual desire for Larry, which is “animal rather human” (*The Razor’s Edge* 189). He observes that: “her beautiful features [...] assume an expression of such unbridled sensuality. [...] The beauty was stripped from her face; the look upon it made her hideous and frightening” (*The Razor’s Edge* 189). At that point her decent makeup fails to conceal her strong yearnings. In Nie Zhenzhao’s theory, Isabel is “a new Sphinx possessing both the features of human beings and those of animals” (“Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 91). Nevertheless, Isabel is sober enough not to act upon her inner desires, which may ruin her ethical relationship with Gray and deprive her of a respectable ethical identity as well as a luxurious lifestyle. To further satisfy her desire for possessiveness, Isabel sets a trap, lures Sophie into booze, and ruins her marital union with Larry. After all, Sophie, a morally fallen woman, constitutes a threatening force to their circle. It is thus revealed that beneath Isabel’s beautiful features and decent makeup hides an unfulfilled desire and a selfish heart. In her painted face, Maugham sees a socially privileged woman’s hypocrisy, spiritual emptiness, and lack of empathy.

Suzanne is different from Isabel in that she is born underprivileged, yet she shares the same aspiration to crawl into the upper class. Her body hence becomes an

admission ticket to the selected circle. Without Isabel's natural beauty and entitled blood, Suzanne applies makeup to turn herself from nobody to somebody. Makeup becomes an instrument to conceal ugliness and create beauty for her. Her beauty is carefully fabricated by her efforts of applying makeup to underplay her demerits and highlight her strength. As Mr. Maugham notices:

She had a small square face, with very prominent cheekbones vividly rouged, and a large mouth with heavily painted lips. None of this sounds attractive, but it was; it is true that she had a good skin, strong white teeth and big, vividly blue eyes. They were her best features and she made the most of them by painting her eyelashes and her eyelids. She had a shrewd, roving, friendly look and she combined great good nature with a proper degree of toughness. (*The Razor's Edge* 171-172)

For Suzanne, beauty itself is not an end but a means to an end—a secured life. Makeup serves as a weapon for her to attain beauty, attract suitors, and achieve security. Between the lover for artists and the wife of a rich old widower, though she enjoys her freedom to play around, she chooses to settle down with the widower. The presence of vivid lines, heavy lip, and eyeliner agrees with her former ethical identity of a model and lover for artists. In consideration of her growing age and the future of her daughter born out of wedlock, Suzanne quits her modeling career, climbs up the social ladder by marrying Monsieur Achille, and constructs a new ethical identity of “a distinguished artist” and “a woman of property” (*The Razor's Edge* 311). For constructing this identity, her heavy makeup is strategically replaced by a light look, one that is morally approved and favored by the upper ranks. The first time Suzanne meets her potential prey Monsieur Achille, “she had dressed very quietly, and she felt as she looked at the women around her that she could pass very well for a respectable married woman” (*The Razor's Edge* 176). The quietness of her manners and the lightness of her makeup suggest her identification with the feminine ideal of Victorian morals.

With Suzanne's construction of a respectable ethical identity comes a loss of her much-enjoyed liberty and an everlasting anxiety of losing her husband to a girl of twenty for he is “at a dangerous age” and she “shall never see forty again” (*The Razor's Edge* 309). Suzanne counts on men to provide for her and thus becomes “a body designed to please or to excite” (Bartky 80). She weaponizes her body through makeup to charm men into taking care of her worldly needs. Makeup hence becomes “a form of obedience to patriarchy” (Bartky 80). To be accepted by a

cultured community, she voluntarily accepts its control over her body. In Suzanne's painted face, Maugham sees an underprivileged woman's ambition to climb the social ladder as well as her surrender to the patriarchal order.

Isabel and Suzanne's ethical choice of light makeup is closely entangled with the ethical identity of an upper-class lady they crave to construct. The Victorian value of feminine purity and the Victorian ideal of "the angel in the house" have molded their faces into a certain pattern that allows them to gain the upper hand in the marriage market. Whether it be Suzanne's claim that "marriage still remains the most satisfactory profession a woman can adopt" (*The Razor's Edge* 309) or Isabel's uncle Elliot's assertion that "a marriage arranged with proper regard to position, fortune and community of circumstances has every advantage over a love match" (*The Razor's Edge* 34), they hold on to the old-fashioned view that for women success in life depends on marriage and marriage depends on money. Maugham finds such a view stifling. With the cultivation of socially approved beauty and the indiscriminate acceptance of social mores, what is at stake is a woman's agency over her body and soul. Maugham shares this view with his modernist peers, such as Virginia Woolf who claims that the conventional idea of "living for other, not for ourselves" is intended for "timid natures who dare not allow their souls free play" (qtd. in Himmelfarb 93). If free play of one's body is restricted, free play of one's soul suffers correspondingly. Though Isabel and Suzanne achieve worldly success, spiritually there remains a spot unfilled.

### **Heavy Makeup for A Free Soul: An Ethical Choice for Self-fulfillment**

The new morality, defined by liberalism and individualism, questions the Victorian morality and changes the way cosmetics are perceived and used. Emphasizing physical features is no longer seen as being as selfish or evil as it once was. The stress on the invisibility of makeup gives way to highly visible cosmetics, such as red lipstick and dark eyeliner. Sophie wears heavy makeup to match her free soul, an ethical identity she performs devotedly. Her defense of heavy makeup is indeed her defense of bodily autonomy and spiritual independence and her defiance of the Victorian morality. Underneath her heavily painted face Maugham sees her motifs filled with dignity and integrity.

Sophie's first ethical identity, a modest, freckled, serious-faced, and idealistic child who loves books, is accompanied by a look of innocence. When Isabel and her mother were "out being social" (*The Razor's Edge* 198), Sophie and Larry used to "read poetry together under the elm tree that there was in that skinny brat the seed of spiritual beauty" (*The Razor's Edge* 296). An extensive reading about the conditions

of the working classes and seeing the situation in Chicago inspired her to become a social worker. She was found “writing savagely in free verse about the misery of the poor and the exploitation of the working classes” (*The Razor’s Edge* 199). Larry was deeply moved by “her desire for sacrifice” and impressed by “a lovely purity and a strange loftiness of soul” (*The Razor’s Edge* 199). Later Sophie married Bob, a lawyer who didn’t make much money, and their marriage became “quite a joke in Chicago” (*The Razor’s Edge* 196) because they are soul mates rather than yoke mates. For her, love outweighs economic benefits in making a match. Due to their committed relationship, when a motor accident took away her beloved husband and their baby, Sophie “didn’t care what became of her and flung herself into the horrible degradation of drink and promiscuous copulation to get even with life that had treated her so cruelly” (*The Razor’s Edge* 198). After the accident, Sophie’s makeup has changed from light to heavy, and her ethical identity undergoes the first reconstruction from an innocent child to a wanton woman.

The upper-class circle, shaped by Victorian values, associates Sophie’s heavy makeup with moral degeneration. Her heavy makeup forms so sharp a contrast with her previous image of innocence that “Isabel was staring at her blankly, Gray had a sullen frown on his face and Larry gazed as though he couldn’t believe his eyes” (*The Razor’s Edge* 192). They uncomfortably notice that “She was outrageously made up, her cheeks rouged to the eyes, and her eyelids, upper and lower, heavily blued; her eyebrows and eyelashes were thick with mascara and her mouth scarlet with lipstick. Her hands, with their painted nails, were dirty” (*The Razor’s Edge* 193). This image has challenged the conventional morality of feminine purity and incurred the wrath of the cultured community. Isabel refers to Sophie as “that drunken slut” (*The Razor’s Edge* 205), considers her evil in nature, and urges others to waste no pity on her just because she loses her husband and child. The upper-class circle is less sympathetic to her suffering and more concerned with her misconduct. Sophie’s heavy makeup becomes an easy target in the eyes of Victorians who consider the use of paint immoral, for the old morality intolerantly includes “painted woman,” “public woman” and the woman who “loses her character” as sexually immoral women (Anderson 2).

Maugham, on the other hand, reads Sophie’s heavy makeup as a physical indicator of her noble soul in pursuit of bodily autonomy and spiritual freedom. While the upper class regards Sophie’s painted face as a manifestation of her tainted soul, Mr. Maugham views her aggressive look not as a sign of moral degeneration and finds her heavily painted face “not without lure” (*The Razor’s Edge* 220). He empathizes with her tragic loss which is almost “the end of the world” to her and

understands her painted face as a coping mechanism, a self-expression, and most importantly a vigorous revolt (*The Razor's Edge* 198). Sophie wears heavy makeup to hide her deepest sorrow and to express her attitude that "Life's hell anyway, but if there is any fun to be got out of it, you're only a god-damn fool if you don't get it" (*The Razor's Edge* 224). Mr. Maugham defends Sophie's right to wear heavy makeup, weave her own pattern of life, and perform the ethical identity of a free soul. Heavy makeup functions as an instrument to heal a broken heart while light makeup only leads to constraint in her case.

To further justify Sophie's choice of heavy makeup, Maugham arranges a second change of her makeup from heavy to light and a reconstruction of her ethical identity from a wanton woman to a decent lady. Her once "outrageously painted" face is replaced by a "drab" look when Sophie enters into a relationship with Larry (*The Razor's Edge* 212). Larry's attempt to save Sophie out of a troubled life renders her a new ethical identity as his fiancée, and this role brings out a new look of light makeup:

She was letting her hair go back to its natural colour and it had the slatternly look that hair has when it has been dyed and left to grow. Except for a streak of red on her lips she had no make-up on. Her skin was rough and it had an unhealthy pallor. I remembered how vividly green her eyes had looked, but now they were pale and gray. (*The Razor's Edge* 213)

Is losing strong colors on her face a gain of purity and morality for her soul? Mr. Maugham's response to the new face shows the opposite, for the unnatural twist against Sophie's nature proves a failure. Gone are her vivid green eyes and heavy makeup, so is her spirit. It's true that with the new face she loses sluttishness, but it's also true that "something had died in her" (*The Razor's Edge* 214). Being Larry's fiancée puts her to "a strain greater than she could support" (*The Razor's Edge* 214), and she just can not see herself "being Mary Magdalen to his Jesus Christ" (*The Razor's Edge* 220). Larry's unconditional love as well as the Victorian morality is what Orbach calls "a subtle tracery of outside urgings which works on us, creating a new and often dissatisfied relationship with our bodies" (2). The transformation that has changed the way she looks, dresses, speaks, and behaves fails because it suggests a morality she cannot make peach with.

Unwilling to be bridled or tamed into a virtuous woman, Sophie makes a last-minute exit from the upcoming marriage, returns to her "troubled" life, retreats to her ethical identity of a free soul, and resorts to heavy makeup for a self-expression

and revolt. For a third time, Sophie changes her makeup from light to heavy and reconstructs her ethical identity of a free soul. She is once again heavily made up, wears bright colors, and puts on casual slacks. Only in this way can she “feel alive again” (*The Razor’s Edge* 222). In a way heavy makeup satisfies her cravings for freedom while light makeup suppresses her bodily and spiritual needs. In Sophie’s painted face, Maugham sees her moral courage to stay true to her nature and to take control of her body.

Sophie’s ethical choice of heavy makeup and ethical identity of a free soul can be read as her revolt against the Victorian morality. As the Victorian morality sees it, Sophie’s heavily painted face, her refusal to Larry’s marriage proposal, and engagement in promiscuous copulation are but evidence of moral degradation. She is in deep trouble and she is able to get out of this trouble so long as she paints her face decently, represses her urges to drink, and remarries a decent guy like Larry. However, she refuses to reduce marriage into a mere trade-off of material needs. She cherishes Larry’s love too dearly to take advantage of his good intentions. She refuses to hurt others to save herself; therefore, she voluntarily destroys herself and gets to reunite with her beloved ones. In this sense, Sophie takes a higher moral ground than anyone else. Instead of moral degeneration, Sophie represents what it means to be a moral being in an age of moral confusion. What the Victorian morality despises in her are exactly what Maugham admires about her—courage, generosity, and individualism. She has the moral courage to stay true to her nature, shows true generosity to others, and represents individualism and self-adjustment in a decade of “materialism, greed, conformity, and general silliness” (Reeves 88). Through the portrayal of the three women’s makeup, Maugham laments how the Victorian morality molds people into a similar pattern, drives them into an endless pursuit of wealth and success, and reduces marriage into a mere transaction. The differences between Sophie, Isabel, and Suzanne lie in their attitude towards body and their identification with conventional morality. In contrast with Isabel and Suzanne, Sophie determines to have more control over her body and less identification with social mores. As a result, while her worldly life reaps sparingly, her spiritual life reaps more generously.

### Conclusion

When Susan Suleiman states that “the female body has occupied a central place in the Western cultural imagination” (1), she reminds us of the importance of female body as a source for cultural, literary, and social studies. While body remains an underrated subject in Victorian culture, it becomes a vital area of discussion and

exploration for writers at the turn of the century. As a consumer society came to replace an industrial society, body becomes not only speakable but an important companion to spirit. In Maugham's literary narratives, his characters' identity construction is closely related to their body representations. A woman's body externalizes her identity and contrariwise her identity is expressed in her body. Makeup styles, therefore, become essential indicators of one's lifestyle, value orientation, and ethical stance. In *The Razor's Edge*, heavy and light makeup is employed to investigate the problem of body and spirit in the early twentieth century. The bodies of Isabel and Suzanne are controlled by the Victorian values. Their lightly painted faces aim to construct the ethical identity of high-class ladies and to achieve success in the marriage market. On the contrary, Sophie refuses to give up her control of her body, paints her face heavily, revolts against the Victorian moral code, and constructs an ethical identity of a free soul. While the bodies of Isabel and Suzanne defend the Victorian morality, Sophie employs her body to criticize and challenge the old morality and its restrictions imposed on women.

Like Larry, there is something about Sophie that speaks for Maugham's ethical stance. She is a telling example of what Maugham tries to tell his reader: Don't let go of control over your body. One who takes control over her body takes her life in her hands. Self-fulfillment can hardly be realized without bodily autonomy. As Beauvoir famously claims: "The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project" (73). Such autonomy needs to be earned, for temptations and restrictions on body operate in all forms, function in all ways, and exert influence to varying degrees. Therefore, when deciding to paint or not, heavy or light, you should find your own voice among all the voices around you. Nevertheless, Sophie could have exercised better control over her body to revolt and express. To engage in booze and promiscuous copulation, to release without due attention to self-control, and to go to extremes, are not revolt for the better but loss of control. Unsurprisingly yet lamentably, her way of controlling her body destroys her body, and a free soul becomes a lost soul in the end. A real and meaningful revolt, or liberation, requires deeper reflections of life so that ethical harmony "between man and man, man and society, or man and nature" can be expected (Nie Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 88). Since body is the only place we have to live, we need to take better control and care of body if we want to live better lives.

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