A minor classic from the wide-open pre-Code era, "The Narrow Corner" is one of those curious films that is so good that one just cannot understand either its obscurity or lack of reputation; nobody seems to have heard of it except those of us who saw it originally and never forgot it. Not that it is a filmic classic; Alfred E. Green has always been a good and under-rated director, and this film is well up to standard, but it scores primarily on its literary merits; both those of Maugham's original (published in 1932) and of Pscreen's incredibly faithful and creative screenplay. Absurd though the suggestion may be, it is hard not to criticize any original that has been cut and make it - the screenplay even seems to be an improvement on Maugham! Some of the rich pieces of characterisation, and the choicest, gutsiest lines that seem so "typically Maugham" aren't to be found in his original novel at all; but are brilliant extensions. And they work doubly well because the film is so flawlessly cast; the Dudley Digges, Arthur Hohl and William V. Mong roles could almost have been written by Maugham with those players in mind. The original novel, true, is given more to philosophising than melodrama, and most of it, in typical Maugham style, is told only in the past tense, in the course of ultra-detailed conversations between the young hero and the doctor, the potential representation of himself that Maugham worked into most of his stories. Even when there is a logical place (and need) for straightforward descriptive narrative, Maugham gives us a literary fadeout, and then recounts what happened in still another conversation. The book is thus read quickly and easily, but without the excitement of the strong story reaching its full potential; also a major portion is devoted to the young hero's reluctant affair with the wife of a political leader, sequence handled effectively in the film in one short but brisk flashback. Book and film are alike and fast-paced, plays up the limited action content, as well as making the most of the exotic locations (Catalina Island doubles very well for Malay) it may suggest the assembly-line "popularising" of a great literary work, but this is far from the case. It's one of the most faithful and effective of all Maugham adaptations. The ending admittedly is a compromise, a typically happy Hollywood fadeout as opposed to the book in which the amoral heroine is just discarded, and the hero meets an amassing, wrongly described, and meaningless death off-screen -- or rather, off-page. Yet it doesn't really seem to matter: the book's tragic ending had no more significance than the film's happy one and thus it hardly rates as a betrayal. Characters take over from plot anyway, and it has been a long time since we saw a movie with so many rich, marvellously acting and flawlessly acted portraits, and with such a perfect extension of Maugham's bare-bones dialogue into a series of pithy and sometimes eye-brow-raising lines.

From 1915 to date, there have been more than 30 movie adaptations of Maugham's novels and plays, two of them ("Bain" and "Of Human Bondage") having been filmed three times each, a number of others ("The Doctor's Dilemma", "The Letter", "The Narrow Corner") rating two versions, and most of the others ("The Magician", "The Razor's Edge" etc.) being filmed once only. The second version of "The Narrow Corner" -- like the second version of last week's "Five Star Final" -- was made only three years later as a routine "B" 2nd feature under the title "Isle of Purry", and like the remake of "Five Star Final" also starred Humphrey Bogart!