

Decoding Human Behaviour in Relation to Capital: An Analysis of Maugham's *The Ant and The Grasshopper* in Light of Huxley's 'Selected Snobberies'

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2021-09033844

Volume: 9

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 17.03.2021

Accepted: 25.04.2021

Published: 01.06.2021

Citation:

Chakraborty, Keya, and Subrina Islam. "Decoding Human Behaviour in Relation to Capital: An Analysis of Maugham's *The Ant and The Grasshopper* in Light of Huxley's 'Selected Snobberies.'" *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2021, pp. 21-27.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v9i3.3844>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Keya Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7936-0372>

Subrina Islam

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8989-4017>

Abstract

This study aims to show the fictional and philosophical engagement of Aldous Huxley and Somerset Maugham in unveiling human behavior in relation to capital. Huxley in his sarcastic essay *Selected Snobberies* has described the nature, utility, types and sources of snobbish attitude in people. Most often snobbery stems out from an individual's socio-economic situation and his consumerist nature. In the short story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, Somerset Maugham has deconstructed the age old story of Aesop that is universally used worldwide to teach children the basic morality and work ethics. He reveals the peculiar desire of human beings to indulge in consumption in contrast with learned behavior of self-denial. This study focuses on the degenerative tendency that is outgrown in human nature through the analysis of George Ramsay from Maugham's *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. In addition, this study analyses the changing nature of the idealistic tenets pertaining to the changing mode of time and situation. The binary existence of ethical tenets and the allurements of the consumerist world leads to question the value of its palpability, its effect on making people happy or snobbish. Now the fundamental question is how far a human being is capable of learning self-denial. Considering the reality of truth as not one and universal but multifaceted as Chakraborty (2020) claims, both Huxley and Maugham in these two literary pieces are interestingly inquisitive of the modernist ethics and redefine the means of success.

Keywords: Moderns nob, Fable, Work ethic, Modernity, Post modernity, Success

Huxley's works have not been acknowledged till the dawn of the 20th Century because of his exponential philosophy of showing /revealing man's true face. He wanted to change human nature by encouraging people to resist oppression, violence by passive means, with non-cooperation, and with strikes. In relation to that, Huxley overtly deals with social and political issues and introduces a re-definition of and a new outlook on the modern. Huxley's lifelong preoccupation has remained to probe into human behavior and its confrontation with the different facets of truth. To identify human behaviour in association with capitalist ethics, this study examines Huxley's one of the most brilliant essays *Selected Snobberies*, where he sarcastically unveils how snobbery is embedded in human nature from all kinds of perspectives. According to Mirriam Webster, a snob is the "one who blatantly imitates, fawningly admires, or vulgarly seeks association with those regarded as social superiors". The factors that determine what is socially superior are mostly associated with the idea of commodification.

According to many Marxist discourses that include human behaviour, it can be claimed that capitalism has some damaging effects on human psychology. According to Karl Marx as cited in “Marxist Criticism” by Tyson, a product does not only hold its utility value but it also has its own exchange value and sign exchange value. Tyson states in reference with Marxist interpretation, “Commodification is the act of relating to objects and persons in terms of their exchange value or sign exchange value”. For instance, he has further described, if someone commodifies a work of art, he buys it as a financial investment either to sell it later or to impress a certain class or group of people considering the art piece’s exchange value or sign exchange value. When Huxley explains the attitude of the “unplatonian art snobs”, eventually we apprehend the same idea. Commodification also happens when someone wants to structure his relation with those products that help to promote his own advancement financially or socially.

Modernist study is based on abstract and experimental observations and participations of the author. But, according to many critics, the stylistic metaphor cannot be constrained to define modernism. Modernism does not only mean portraying the cruel pictures of the world, the pitiable characters in that cruel world or empathic treatment of the characters torn down by the ups and downs of the world. Modernist writers are concerned with probing the hidden places of psychology. And, Maugham is not an exception in implying the duality in characters that a modern man bears. Maugham has been a tormented individual. He had conflicts over hiding his attractions for men and a feeling of being unloved, leading an unhappy married life. His personal feelings are spilled over into his characters. Hence, this story here chosen has a satiric undertone on the social stumbles and evolutions that human beings have encountered. The ironic laughter at the end of the story lays bare the ostentation of wealth and shallowness of the society. Unlike the abstruse and experimental kinds of literary art of the contemporary modernist authors, Maugham excels in kind of clear, plainly written, straightforward storytelling.

It is found from the biographies written by different eminent writers that later in his life, Maugham took a postmodern turn. This is evident through the metanarrative technique that he employs in his writings. He himself appears in the story and leaves a space for the readers to reflect. This particular device allows him to break the fictional wall by weaving commentary into the narrative without seeming false. The authorial presence in the narrative is a stylistic arrangement where the fiction and fact blend and make room for the readers to get engaged in the presentation of reality. This technique certainly highlights the split in the author’s literary personality, exposing both Maugham’s modernist sensibility and his conventional aesthetic heritage.

We intend to investigate particular discursive themes that are important to understand in relation to perceptions of social justice on the basis of shifting attitudes from modernism to post-modernism regardless of their prevalence. However, the old fable of Aesop has a parallel relation to socialist work ethics - the more you work, the better payment you deserve. But, Marxist philosophies in postmodern time have been distorted immensely as with the passage of time and expansion of mass media and massive scale of production, the old world order has transformed in a great deal. Theorists like Baudrillard come up with the idea of “sign value” of the product and simulation that help to identify the fact that there is no single reality out there.

Postmodernity accepts the plurality of truth which is not one channeled for example “industry is the key to success” no longer remains the only truth and thus, in postmodern time “Grasshoppers” are not sufferers rather in cases they are more successful in many respects. (For example, the youtubers, entertainment industry, celebrities, are regarded more successful than the researchers, scientists, bankers etc.) For Maugham, the retelling of the old moral story of The Ant and the Grasshopper has a very pessimistic ending but it does highlight some instinctive behaviour in human nature, the ambivalence of the completely conformed ethical people in our society and how snobbery controls the action of human beings; be it ethical actions or unethical actions. According to Struhl, “human characteristics, beyond the physical, are determined ultimately by the way

in which work is organized; and, we might add, by the class relations and various other social, political, and ideological institutions that develop through that organization of work. As these change, so does what people incorrectly ascribe to “human nature” also change.”

Keeping in mind the literary significance of Aesop’s fables, Ballard rightly quotes Hanazaki and Patterson, “In many essays and criticisms, Aesop’s fables are analysed as vehicles of commentary on the politics of the time”. The fables became popular with the industrial revolution with the advent of the 18th century. Fables like *Tortoise and the Hare*, *The Ant and the Grasshopper* particularly suit the socialization of self-restraint and a strong work ethic. In Maugham’s hand, the storyline in *The Ant and the Grasshopper* is aligned more with the reversal of this self-restraint and work ethic. Maugham’s discursive and fluent style of narration and the portrayal of the characters which is “largely detached, cool at times slightly cynical” (Octopus & Henimen) conform to his searches for coded ways of communicating with the readers in his own modern outlook.

Maugham begins his story alluding to the older moral story of *The Ant and the Grasshopper* which the narrator of the story was taught from “the fables of La Fontaine” when he was a child. His response to the story as a child was queer. The narrator ironically has always been in support of the “grasshopper”, the one who loves to celebrate life. The narrator, out of his being “deficient in moral sense” could never reconcile to the lesson. Here at the very beginning he points out the basic instinctive drive of human beings or the pleasure principle. In the original fable the ant is portrayed as a very industrious creature who works hard during the summer to save it up for winter whereas the Grasshopper indulges his good times in singing and enjoying the moment which makes him miserable during winter and when the grasshopper comes to the ant for help, the ant responds with arrogance and less sympathy - “You sang. Why, then go and dance.” The narrator also sarcastically remarks - “I sought to express my disapproval of prudence and commonsense”. The old forgotten story returns back with a new meaning when the narrator meets “George Ramsey”, one of the two central characters of the story. George

Ramsey belongs to a reputed family, and is a very hard working lawyer who has never done anything immoral in his life. He has never given importance to his pleasure principles and led a very disciplined family life with a good amount of savings for life after retirement. As it goes in the story,

Poor George, only a year older than his scapegrace brother, looked sixty. He had never taken more than a fortnight’s holiday in the year for a quarter of a century. He was in his office every morning at nine-thirty and never left it till six. He was honest, industrious and worthy. He had a good wife, to whom he had never been unfaithful even in thought, and four daughters to whom he was the best of fathers. He made a point of saving a third of his income and his plan was to retire at fifty-five to a little house in the country where he proposed to cultivate his garden and play golf. His life was blameless.

Of course, this ascetic self-denial and the work ethics of George Ramsey, to a certain extent, have grown a sense of moral superiority in him. We cannot claim that deep down he was not jealous of Tom Ramsey, his younger brother’s carefree life, “He was glad that he was growing old because Tom was growing old too”. George Ramsey’s ethics and practices made him a snob, an arrogant person as the Ant in Aesop’s fable. Apparently, he is a very caring, kind and generous brother as every time Tom makes a nuisance he immediately extends his help to his brother. Most of the time the help is financial but the core question is how much the help was offered purely from brotherly concern and how much the drive is to prove himself superior to Tom. This study examines whether there is a dichotomy embedded in George Ramsey’s benevolent gestures and in the age of capitalism, to what extent human beings can really rise above the system of commodification.

Tom Ramsey’s life, on the contrary, is set on an opposite extreme of George Ramsey’s. Tom, like George, also starts his life in a socially accepted manner. As the narrator says, “He had begun life decently enough: he went into business, married and had two children”. But, suddenly he abandons everything and lives a carefree nomadic life seeking ultimate pleasure for himself in a very much self-centered manner. For Tom, life has been an endless vacation and a lifelong celebration. He follows his instinct and enjoys life to the lees.

Of course, he deviates himself from all kinds of moral strictures, “For twenty years Tom raced and gambled, philandered with the prettiest girls, danced, ate in the most expensive restaurants, and dressed beautifully”. The financial support usually comes from loans taken from friends, gambling and, of course, from his elder brother George who sometimes gives him money with an anticipation of Tom’s finally settling down. In some other instance she appears to be forced to give off the money as Tom often blackmails him. Now, the blackmailing part interestingly reveals another snobbery buried in George’s character which can be termed as “family snobbery. Although Huxley claims in his essay that this type of snobbery is on decline yet it is strongly present in George which Tom takes full advantage of.

Tom, without a qualm, began to blackmail him. It was not very nice for a respectable lawyer to find his brother shaking cocktails behind the bar of his favourite restaurant or to see him waiting on the box-seat of a taxi outside his club. Tom said that to serve in a bar or to drive a taxi was a perfectly decent occupation, but if George could oblige him with a couple of hundred pounds he didn't mind for the honour of the family giving it up. George paid.

A hypocrisy lies in this attitude of George in the sense that doing “real work”, as the jobs are menial, is a greater matter of humiliation for Ramsey family than Tom’s doing unethical activities for both survival and enjoyment. Hence, here we also can see a kind of elitist mindset of George Ramsey which is an integral aspect of modernism.

Tom, on the other hand can be termed as a modernity snob and highly consumerist in nature, who needs a new source of pleasure every day. Huxley defines modernity snobs as the best friends of the industrialists as mentioned in *Selected Snobberies*, “For modernity snobs naturally tend to throw away their old possessions and buy new ones at a greater rate than those who are not modernity snobs”. Tom’s perspective regarding capital is very postmodern in essence, “But he always said that the money you spent on necessities was boring; the money that was amusing to spend was the money you spent on luxuries”. The statement expresses more of Tom’s playful attitude to life and money than his materialistic nature. On the other hand, the

way George Ramsey’s seriousness to a financially secured life is portrayed, it decodes him as a pure materialistic man though his ambition and desires are structured within his moral and ethical boundaries. Until we reach the end of the story the statement of the author- “George was a serious man and insensible to such enticements” comes of as a subtle irony. Tom’s characterization is quite interesting as the readers can easily judge him as an annoying character from distance but when the author brings his focus closer to him, the readers identify Tom as rather a charismatic person as is deployed in the story,

He was a most amusing companion and though you knew he was perfectly worthless you could not but enjoy his society. He had high spirits, an unfailing gaiety and incredible charm. I never grudged the contributions he regularly levied on me for the necessities of his existence. I never lent him fifty pounds without feeling that I was in his deb.

The question that immediately arises in the mind of the inquisitive readers is what the source of the “high spirit” of Tom is. Is it Tom’s innate essential nature or his carefree carnivalesque lifestyle? Or is it, as Huxley terms it, as the modernity snobbery in Tom that keeps him active all the time, and provides him the urge to remain charming enough so that he can easily manipulate others to lend him money? Whatever the reason is, Tom’s playful nature and carefree lifestyle ironically transforms him, if not more, equally as a likable person as George is, “You could not approve of him, but you could not help liking him”.

Maugham’s objective kind of observations, as he remains distant from the happenings of the story and allows the reader to explore and perceive the real hidden meaning underlying the literal presentation of a character, is faithfully evident in the short story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. Hence, his writings start from a character. In *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, he sympathizes with Tom, the rogue and non-idealistic one. About the non-idealistic portrayal of characters, Maugham says in The Preface of *The Painted Veil*, “But in the case the characters were chosen to fit the story I gradually evolved; they are constructed from persons I had long known in different circumstances.”

Towards the end of the story Maugham reveals his artistic genius by reversing the expected

downfall of Tom into making him the owner of all the properties of a rich, quite an aged woman whom he got engaged with a week ago. The woman dies suddenly entitling half a million pound, a yacht, two houses one in London another in the country in name of Tom Ramsey. Maugham subtly plays with the theme of expectation vs reality. George expects, "In four years he'll be fifty. He won't find life so easy then. I shall have thirty thousand pounds by the time I'm fifty. For twenty-five years I've said that Tom would end in the gutter. And we shall see how he likes that. We shall see if it really pays best to work or be idle". In reality, the age old teaching and prediction of the wise ancestors do not befall on Tom instead he actually ends up having more materialistic gain than George. The main revelation comes with the reaction of George who, while sharing the news with the narrator "grew red in the face", "beat his clenched fist on the table" and with a "wrathful" face he utters- "It's not fair, I tell you; it's not fair. Damn it, it's not fair." Tom's sudden materialistic prosperity has done no harm to George's economical/ personal life except for the fact that the reality in which George used to dwell in has been shattered. In the capitalist social structure where George has always been considering himself to be superior to his brother now takes a new turn when Tom has a new surge of fortune. George's ethical ground also gets shaken as he now no longer is proud of himself for living a clean life only because his brother has gone up a few steps forward in social ladder "immorally". George's frustration and anger deflates his high moralistic persona and unveils his deep rooted snobbery about family honour, morality and success. While discussing the cultural effect of capitalism, Fredrick Jameson in his book Postmodernism or the cultural Logic of Late Capitalism says,

We are somehow to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst. The lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together.

Hence, we find a microcosmic representation of this catastrophe in this short story through the portrayal of Tom's rampant way of getting social stability, security and an apparent social acceptance in contrast to the coded ways of prevalent moral values.

Both Huxley and Maugham examine the multiplicities of modern social and political contexts of England and satirize the microcosmic view of western civilization. As Thackeray opines, "a snob is anyone who thinks that anyone – himself or someone else – is superior in a way that demands social recognition". From an egalitarian point of view, Thackeray understands snobbery and opposes it for the sake of humanity. Modernity is a practical and empirical experience that liberates societies from their oppressive "material conditions". Pertaining to snobberies and social status, Huxley is ironical about such modern mentalities. Modern capitalistic behavior brings forth the picture of human beings in a manner as if men are caught in a fix, whether to believe or discard snobberies. Considering this very notion of Huxley, George Ramsay's attitude towards his younger brother affirms this duality in him. The idea of a modernity snob argumentatively is ambiguous. Huxley, in his essay Selected Snobberies has defined modernity snobs with sheer sarcasm. His sarcasm becomes prominent as he views modernity snobbery as a kind of mindset or impulse to replace the old things with the updated products available in the market although the former products are still usable. Thus, the whole process turns into a vicious circle created and altered from time to time by the industrialists. Huxley points out that "Modernity-snob, is obvious, is the best friend of industrialists". Industrialists target the modernity snobs and use "ideological state apparatus" (Althusser) which Huxley puts in his essay as- "the public is taught that up-to-dateness is one of the first duties of men. Docile, it accepts the reiterated suggestion." Finally, Huxley suggests that we all are modernity snobs now. The ideology spread by the producers and manufacturers creates a sense of desperation and restlessness. The attitude of being trendy most often leads people to immoral/ unethical activities. Moreover, the more modernity snobbery is being promoted by the state and mass media and producers, the more consumers/

mass people are growing the sense of severe self importance ignoring the aftermath impact of this extreme behaviour on society and environment as well. Struhl in his paper “Marx and Human Nature: The Historical, the Trans-Historical, and Human Flourishing” explores the formation of human nature in relation to a particular period of time from Marxist points of view and points out that - “Human nature, so the story goes, is greedy, selfish, competitive, and aggressive. Human beings are innately motivated by power and desire for dominance” but at the same time they have to cope up with societal ethical/moral strictures. The ambivalence is perceived when a person is conditioned to behave in certain circumstances. In an essay on Democratic Art, Huxley asserts,

I belong to that class of unhappy people who are not easily infected by crowd excitement. Too often I find myself sadly and coldly unmoved in the midst of multitudinous emotion. Few sensations are more disagreeable. The defect is in part temperamental, and in part is due to that intellectual snobbishness, that fastidious rejection of what is easy and obvious, which is one of the melancholy consequences of the acquisition of culture. How often one regrets this asceticism of the mind & how wistfully sometimes one longs to be able to rid oneself of the habit of rejection and selection, and to enjoy all the dear obviously luscious, idiotic emotions without an afterthought.

In his endeavour to tell a story with clarity and grace, to present a set of attitudes and values, Maugham entertains his readers with insights into character and the harsh realities of life. In him the tangibility of truth is not always pleasant but can be felt and perceived by the interwoven literary gestures. George’s bitter comment on his brother’s sudden socio-economic rise reaffirms his inner duality which is constantly at flux according to the various experiences at various stages of life in this postmodern era. George’s relation to reality, the attitudes toward it are in fact, experimental reflections of the inner reality realized through defamiliarization. Maugham deconstructs by breaking with the classical antiquity that conveyed to the readers that self-restraint and hard work would avert starvation and secure the future. He portrays with literary implications that faith in this socialized moral ethic has now-a-days been faltering and taking a dynamic turn. George’s

lavishing money on his spendthrift younger brother Tom is based on with some varying degrees of commitment to the protection of his own social and material status.

Huxley’s apocalyptic vision of a new modern man is manifested through a veneer of irony, a sarcastic redefinition of a modern snob. Like Huxley, Maugham’s experimentation with the means of success of a modern individual is enveloped in irony and humour. Their fictional engagement provides a narrative space for the exposition of key aspects of modernity. In this essay, we have analysed the fictional treatment of an individual attitude namely snobbery. People only approve those snobberies that excite their activities or motives. Huxley has simplified the idea of human nature in relation to explaining it with the term snobbery. For socialists the snobberies of ants are approved and appreciated as it excites the workaholics to work more as it makes them feel superior to others in society. On the other hand, for the capitalists and post capitalists, Grasshoppers and their snobberies are approved as they are the ones to whom in the name of luxury and enjoyment the capitalists create false need and can sell their products. Hence, the final laughter of the narrator in *The Ant* and the Grasshopper signifies Shakespearean binary “Foul is fair, fair is foul”. This attitude resonates with ironical engagements with the possibilities of a new social order. Maugham’s new gestures in the appraisal of non-idealistic attitude towards attributing material wealth or success to the opportunities rather adhering to the long held work ethic only indicate the emergence of a new tenet. This new outlook enables social relations including human nature to obtain particularly apparent and noticeable expression. With these shifting values and attitudes, snobbery in this version of the modern world is both profoundly unsatisfactory and completely unavoidable. It both contradicts and parodies the hollowness of modernity.

References

- Ballard, Richard. “The Ant and the Grasshopper: Rationalising Exclusion and Inequality in the Post-apartheid City.” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, vol. 51, 2004.

- Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations." *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*. Edited by Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Chakraborty, Keya. "William Somerset Maugham's The Ant and the Grasshopper: The Literary Implication of Unmasking George's True Nature." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2020, pp. 8-12.
- Huxley, Aldous. "On the Margin: Notes and Essays." George H. Doran and Company, 1923.
- Huxley, Aldous Leonard. *Music at Night and Other Essays, Including Vulgarities in Literature*. Delphine Lettau, Cindy Beyer & The Online Distributed Proofreaders, 2018.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Maugham, William Somerset. *Sixty-five Short Stories*. Octopus Books, 1976.
- "Snobbery." *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/snobbery>
- Struhl, Karsten J. "Marx and Human Nature: The Historical, the Trans-Historical, and Human Flourishing." *Science & Society*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2016, pp. 78-104.
- Thackeray, W.M. *The Book of Snobs*. Richard Edward King, 1895.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2006.

Author Details

Keya Chakraborty, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Subrina Islam, Lecturer, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka, Bangladesh,

Email ID: subrina@uap-bd.edu