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William Somerset Maugham’s *The Ant and the Grasshopper*: The Literary Implication of Unmasking George’s True Nature

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Abstract

In his 1938 autobiography, *The Summing Up*, Maugham makes a direct and lucid interpretation of how he observes life and its values as he says, “For art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom, and magnanimity.” (1945, 303). The conventional way of teaching and adopting ‘value’ is shattered in Somerset Maugham’s short story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. An autobiographical undertone clears the mystery of his intention as the story begins in the middle of a conversation between the writer himself and George, one of the characters in the story. Using literary devices like image, irony, and allusion, Maugham exerts his philosophy of defining value in the manner of unmasking the shell. Maugham rails against the labeled truth by alluding to Aesop’s fable. By reversing the story line, he showcases the paradoxes of life. The multifaceted variations of the term ‘Truth’ are denoted in a rather amusing way through the depiction of the character Tom Ramsay. Influenced by Baroch Spinoza’s ethics, Maugham inverted the labeled definition. The implications made through the story endorse the freedom of the individual to be true to his or her nature. By weaving a dramatic and well-knit plot, Maugham intends to exhort lessons regarding human nature and circumstance to their nature and situations. The dramatic twist shown by inverting Aesop’s fable makes it an exemplary tale about individual tolerance, altruism, and understanding, which are, according to Maugham, the values to be nurtured and brought to perfection. This study attempts to show how George’s true nature and feelings are unveiled to expose the hypocrisy prevalent in the cosmopolitan urban world.

Keywords: George Ramsay, Tom Ramsay, Value, Compassion and Baruch Spinoza

William Somerset Maugham is a 20th century British writer. His multifaceted experiences regarding his service with the Red Cross and with the British Secret Intelligence Service during the First World War made him observe life closely. Moreover, a wide range of travel experiences has also widened his vision of life, which is reflected in his mature fiction. Gore Vidal is also seen in observing Maugham’s life and work as, “As the years passed; he put more and more effort - even genius - into his one triumphant creation, W. Somerset Maugham, world-weary world-traveler, whose narrative first-person became the best-known and least wearisome in the world” (Adams 2016, 106). But Maugham did not have much fame in the earlier part of his career. He was criticized by his contemporaries for his over rationalistic attitude towards life. The consistent reliance on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza remains a major critical concern in his fiction as he shows a clear distinction between social morality and individualist ethics. Later over the time, the melodrama and narrative aptness made way for him to get to the readers. The typical characterizations, the melodramatic rupture in tone & social preferences, and the ethical earnestness make him stand apart from his contemporaries. Maugham always had his stand against social moralizing in the Victorian patriarchal manner, which was used to be more stereotypical than being true to nature.

The focus of Maugham rather is in exploring the inert truth of a being in a given social position or circumstance. His experimentation with the naked veracity of an attitude is the driving force in Maugham's mature fiction. However, Maugham's attempt was not to psychoanalyze his characters' emotions or behaviors; rather, he is more prone to vividly and convincingly dramatize his or her situations in which he or she has to act or behave. Hence, his focus is not on the psychological complexity or existential profundity of individuals but on the natures of the individuals in situations where they are forced to act or choose to do so. Cyril Connolly, in his 1965 article for *The Sunday Times*, appreciatively observed Maugham's ethical standpoint as "the endlessly inquiring mind of the speculative philosopher" (Adams 2016, 109). The characters shown in her fiction tend to behave in a prescribed manner against their natural inclinations. The characters appear to be entertainingly caricatured as types or stereotypes. He saw the individuals as ethically (without felt or perceived) committed patterns whose thoughts and actions do not synchronize. The characters in his fiction are modeled as fated typological ones who look miserable when examined within limited boundaries of necessity. While they are seen by Maugham as having the potential for ethical action. In the modernist enhancement concept, the characters can be called the embodiment of psychological subject matter and political cause.

Maugham's homosexual inclination was forbidden by the moral conventions and social strictures of the time he lived in. Maugham's synthesis of individualist ethics is thus reinforced in his fiction in a manner as he persistently clings to the free, individualistic values expounded by Spinoza. Though in many of his novels, fictions and stories, the freedom of sexual expression remain the central issue of his discussion, but in this short story, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, Maugham's focus is on the social disparity of possessions and changing human attitudes in this rapidly changing modern world. His dealings with these dubious human attitudes convey his ethically earnest fictive argument "to be true to one's own." A remarkably counter-conventional critique of a good man is presumably Maugham's signature aim.

Maugham has incessantly looked for/any ultimate spiritual value for guidance and inspiration in living a life in the modern secular world, which has been a world of appearances. In this pointlessness, human beings pretend to be true to their ideals where the ideals have remained unsought by them. A dramatic end in his fiction with laughter or simply a gesture is a rhetorical strategy reinforcing his refusal to give an explicit ethical message, unlike a parable. This literary technique prompts its marginalization to the twentieth-century literary canon. The readers are left with choosing and determining the lesson, depending on their nature and existential situations. The implicit ending of the tale again shows a sharp contrast with the fable. This objective split thus, marks an end to the traditional way of unveiling a story. This is rather an attempt to take the readers into his way of experimenting with the lesson to be discerned. V. S. Pritchett named it a "detached figure" narrative approach (1987, 340). In this regard, Lionel Trilling, in his 1967 anthology, *The Experience of Literature*, acknowledges his technique as "cool mastery of his art" (1969, 90).

Maugham refuses to take truth, beauty, and love as the ultimate spiritual values and argues for the kindness that is immersed in love as the better part of goodness. This loving-kindness is the only value that claims to be an end in itself in our long age of changing and shifting values. Maugham seems to be reaffirming the significance of this value, which we are uncertain of. Hence, his stories appear to be a critique on La fountain's parable and having a further implication towards compromised modernity. In the modernists' pursuit of ontological veracity and psychological profundity, they eschewed all committed to the social morality of the Victorian prophets and sages, and in their commitment to formal experimentation, they knowingly and high-mindedly sacrificed their appeal to the common reader.

In Maugham's *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, it is asserted implicitly that we live in an age of changing and confused values. The situations and circumstances of our living cannot be changed. While setting an ethical standard, we can employ a means to ease social ills and pain and thus create a pattern individually and collectively to enhance

circumstantial living. Hence, Maugham gives a telescopic look into the nature of the individuals. The individuals fail to act as their choices and eventually get unhappy, dissatisfied, and jealous. As a result, upon the long-established social and moral prejudices, they feel to be unduly treated and abandoned by their fate.

George Ramsay, the elder brother, in the story, has been shown as an ideal man who works hard, tries to save the family name, an ideal husband who is faithful to his wife, an ideal father who is loving and affectionate to his children, an ideal son who has become a successful lawyer and holds a respectable position in the society. Above all, he lives by and upholds the socially moralized standard of ethics. Maugham depicts George as a socially moralized character in a conventional Victorian patriarchal manner. On the other hand, Tom Ramsay, the younger one, appears to be a braggart, wayward man who has no particular job, never hesitates to do anything for his living without considering the family status. He cheats people, fights with people, does blackmail his brother. He is also an insincere and irresponsible husband who leaves his responsibilities as a family member in the mid of his life. But Maugham lavishly depicts him as more handsome, charming, and the potential to manipulate people to believe his stories and lend money. As the narrator mentions,

He always looked as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. Though he was forty-six, you would never have taken him for more than thirty-five. 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 unflinching gaiety, and incredible charm. I never grudged the contributions he regularly levied on me for the necessities of his existence. (*The Ant and the Grasshopper*, 2)

Unlike Tom, George looks much older than his age due to hard work and his concerns regarding the well-being of the family members. As the writer comments,

I never saw anyone wear an expression of such deep gloom. He was staring into space. He looked as though the burden of the whole world sat on his shoulders. (*The Ant and the Grasshopper*, 1) George, out of force of habit, puts up with

many of Tom's squandering time and money for twenty years. Besides, he had to meddle with the discreditable affairs of Tom as their family name was put into question when one day, one of Tom's friends, Cronshaw, brought a legal charge for cheating against him. After all, these compromised and conditioned provision/bestowal of financial help and support for Tom, George manages to have a minimum amount of money saved for the future. He is content with the thought that Tom will be suffering at his old age due to the lack of a well-secured future for his reckless and spendthrift manner. When George comes to know about the sudden fortune of his younger brother, he seems unhappy. Through the ironic projection of George's beating his clenched fist on the table and saying, "it's not fair," Maugham has entertainingly caricatured the stereotypical character.

It may look insensitive of the narrator to laugh at George, but George's reaction to the news of Tom's fortune, reflecting his feigned idealistic attitude towards his own younger brother, gives ground for the laughter. Instead of having pure brotherly love and affection, George feels upset when he hears the news of Tom's sudden fortune. When George sees the unpredictable future of Tom is twisted with his owning half a million pounds, a yacht, a house in London and a house in the country, his long-established socially moralized notion comes into conflict with his unconscious assimilation with the fable-like ending. George uncharitably hoped for Tom to suffer in the long run. His attitude overshadows his prioritizing and seeing life in terms of money, which is a characteristic attitude of the Modern Era. It exposes the social and moral hypocrisy of George as he fails to confront the reality. It mirrors the hollowness of socially moralized ethics. George's gestures such as growing red in the face, beating clenched fist on the table are inspected thoroughly to determine his nature in such given situations. Maugham's ingenuity lies in, thus isolating the situations in which the characters become unnecessarily unhappy and unfulfilled by their own or others' niggardly opinions or prejudice.

In consequence, with this implicit exhortation, D. H. Lawrence opines, "the sense of responsibility towards humanity" is implicit in Maugham's

cautionary tales (1987, 177). Withholding moralizing judgment within an acceptance of absolute necessity, Maugham has put stress on the individualized values. The realization that comes from hindsight has been examined thoroughly.

Tom has no allegiance to his brother, getting married to a lady old enough to be his mother, obviously not for love, but her wealth unveils his prioritizing life in terms of money while showing no concern for human values. The way life unfolds its ironies are synthesized in the short story in a manner as to the elder brother oversimplifies the values and then pretends to be upholding it. Tom makes the full advantage of George's fear of embarrassment because he looks upon some of Tom's actions as being an embarrassment to him. As it goes in the text,

It was not very nice for a respectable lawyer to find his brother shaking cocktails behind the bar of his favorite 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 honor of the family giving it up. George paid. (*The Ant and the Grasshopper*, 2)

Maugham does not enter into giving a psychological acuity and complexity rather draws attention towards certain atypical individualist ethics. The story ends showing Tom the happiest man not for he has won half a million pounds but for having lived the life the way he wanted to. George gauges success by monetary worth as he keeps wondering how a Tom like the man can get success remaining remiss all his life. Tom is his own man, even if he may be morally corrupt. Therefore, Maugham caricatures the discrepancy between the principles George has and the way he acts when his brother obtains the fortune. The unfortunate situation of George Ramsay is thus, convincingly dramatized in the development of the story to reinstate his belief that an individual has the potential for ethical action in and enhancement of their lives.

Baruch Spinoza is one of the forerunner rationalists of 17th century philosophy. He is recognized as a naturalistic individualist. He used to define naturalistic individualism as doing something

out of intrinsic feeling rather than guided by social morality. The metaphysical longing for ethical earnestness is aroused in Maugham when he read Baruch Spinoza. He distinguishes himself in seeing individuals not as ideally and socially patterned ones but as their innate individual natures. Spinoza is highly criticized for his naturalist individual ethics by his contemporaries. Innate goodness and perfection of human nature are focused in his exertion of philosophy.

Spinoza's choice of an action determines what an individual should be in an ideal moral valuation or what his instinctual nature is. Hence, the distinction between the public and the private is rightly undecided and is eventually manifested in the complete opposite of the expression of private life. With these views of Spinoza, Maugham was temperamentally and rationally adhered to. As it goes in *The Summing Up*, 'I look upon my first reading of Spinoza as one of the signal experiences of my life. It filled me with just that feeling of majesty and exulting power that one has at the sight of a great mountain range (240).'

Maugham's portrayal of human nature and behavior within a naturalist order without privileging the psychological self emanates from his appreciation of the philosophy of Spinoza. In *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, there was no coherence between the principles George adheres to and the way he acted when he heard that his brother Tom obtained a fortune. He shows jealous and has a feeling of deprivation in his entire life. Nonetheless, the dissemination regarding property is an underlying cause of this incongruence in human nature and behavior. People with good luck and fortune are not meant to be enjoyed alone while others are suffering due to the lack of provision. People in this changing and the confused cosmopolitan world are firm with their principles, dwindle, or are not happy with their vision of living.

Maugham's straightforward way of dealing with the true issues is delineated in his stories through the characters, plot, and literary devices. The portrayal may seem a bit eccentric as it fails to conform to the stereotypical notions. But as the stories unfold, the attention immediately falls into the unadorned style of narrating and a shrewd understanding of human nature. His stories thus appear to be cautionary tales

about the consequences when people are not honest with themselves or others. These tales eventually turn out to be talking about the missed opportunities of finding individualist values, such as love, compassion, and charity. This study has focused on Maugham's disparaging emotions regarding values that have been looked upon for so long in the cosmopolitan setting. His experimentation with the character George unmasks his dispassionate composure in clinically looking into human activities. Instead of setting the values or framing a character in one of those values, the writer highlights the individual nature and situations that impel an individual to behave in a certain manner. The mean and self-serving industry of George is hence, ridiculed and hammered. The way George pours out his agonies to the narrator is a comic representation of his reality where the adherence to the values is taken for granted, not internalized. This is achingly poignant in the sharp, ironic ending of the story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. However, the study has thoroughly researched the ironic manifestation of George's reality and its vacuity. The focus of this study is on the sudden, surprising revelations of the human predicament. The idea about an individuals being true to nature has been reached through a veneer of irony. In this reference, Adams rightly quoted Angus Wilson as he says Maugham as the author is 'a master of irony and compassion' in his insightful introduction to a 1966 selection of

Maugham's stories (Adams, 2016, 47).

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