

"Comparisons are Odious?" Revisiting the Ancient Fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper Adapted in Maugham's Short Story

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Abstract- *The article seeks to locate a comparative study of the meanings and the morals of a popular ancient fable, adapted by William Somerset Maugham in his short story, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. The comparison and contrast in adapting the fable generated an intense academic debate about the appropriate policies of life, a human should undergo. Alike the ancient fable, the setting of the story opens with the conversation between an industrious ant and its reluctant counterpart, a grasshopper. Although the story of the fable is embodied with a moral where industry is rewarded and giddiness punished, we see a completely different scenario at the end of the story. Therefore, it is an irony of the moral conflict between two Ramsay brothers, namely George Ramsay, a man of ethics and Tom Ramsay, a man of a fantasy world. Throughout the story, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, Maugham's effort to portray the themes of justice, trust, fear, morality, embarrassment, happiness and struggle is indeed praiseworthy. But, at the same time, it has aroused a hypothesis of seeking out the ultimate principles of life. The paper considers the development of the Greek fable from its origin to the later adaptations, including the version of La Fontaine, a French fabulist, and the final reversal to a counter-fable by Maugham. It also includes a web of researches in the corresponding fields, and a synthesis resulting from the causes and effects of indebtedness and unemployment that can eventually affect the economy through fluctuations in confidence. The further objective of this work illustrates the misconception and mockery of a man of letter and the eventual paradoxes he has to face in reality. Finally, it concludes with an inception that a postmodern world like ours needs not only a determined and preset humane policy, but also a new narrative, and liberal outlook to survive or live in luxury.*

General Terms- *fable; counter-fable*

Key words- *Maugham; ant; grasshopper; industry; giddiness; reversal*

William Somerset Maugham, well known as a pure gentleman author of 20th century, has a superb mastery in making vivid characterization throughout his literary works. The characters in his stories seem to be very natural and most of the time, they have been picked from his surroundings. His vigorous clarity and deftness make the portrayal of the characters spontaneous. This is how Maya Zlobina (1962) pointed out the magnificent techniques of Maugham's characterization in the article *The Surprises in Somerset Maugham*:

With characteristic candor Maugham admits that human beings interest him only insofar as they furnish material for his work. It would seem therefore that he collects characters as the stamp collector collects postage stamps. Thus Maugham has long had the reputation of an astute, ironic and unerring master of his art, a gentleman writer who with a certain aloofness and indulgence takes stock of the vicissitudes of his fellow men.

(Zlobina 3)

In the short story *The Ant and the Grasshopper* Maugham has brought a pair of Ramsay brothers before us, who have been symbolically playing the roles of the ant and the grasshopper in the ancient fable, originated in Greece and then adapted in many languages and literatures around the world. This article deals with the correlation between the morals of the fable and the short story of Maugham. Besides, it points out the adaptation of the Greek fable and its eventual reversal to a counter-fable. Moreover, it contains a critical appreciation on the two different modes of philosophy of life with a final justification. In brief, it finds out the answers of the academic debates how Maugham is successful in switching a fable into a counter-fable through his intellectual enigma.

The short story *The Ant and the Grasshopper* starts abruptly with a haunting memory of the narrator's innocent childhood. He reminds the innate faculty of a young mind when the child is offered with a moral tale by a mentor or an elder of the family. In the setting of the story, Maugham points out how carefully the moral of the fables of La

Fontaine have been explained to the narrator during his early age. This is how the narrator mentions:

Among those I learnt was The Ant and the Grasshopper, which is devised to bring home to the young the useful lesson that in an imperfect world industry is rewarded and giddiness punished. In this admirable fable (I apologise for telling something which everyone is politely, but inexactly, supposed to know) the ant spends a laborious summer gathering its winter store; while the grasshopper sits on a blade of grass singing to the sun. Winter comes and the ant is comfortably provided for, but the grasshopper has an empty larder: he goes to the ant and begs for a little food. Then the ant gives him her classic answer:

"What were you doing in the summer time?"

"Saving your presence, I sang, I sang all day, all night."

"You sang. Why, then go and dance."

(Maugham)

But we know, unlike the other common children, the young narrator was not confronted with the moral of the fable. Instead of praising the laborious ant, his young mind showed sympathy to the poor grasshopper. Out of his innocent enigma, he could not sum up the provided meaning and moral of the story. Rather, he started growing a kind of hatred towards the ant community in general. This is how he expressed his immediate action to the moral of the fable:

I do not ascribe it to perversity on my part, but rather to the inconsequence of childhood, which is deficient in moral sense, that I could never quite reconcile myself to the lesson. My sympathies were with the grasshopper and for some time I never saw an ant without putting my foot on it. (Maugham)

Prior to illustrate the applied approaches of the fable let us consider the origin and adaptations of it in the pages of literature. According to the recorded history, this is one of the fables first told by Aesop, the renowned ancient Greek fabulist, in the 5th century BC. *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, alternatively titled *The Grasshopper and the Ant* is numbered 373 in the Perry Index, an official index of Aesop's Fables, also known as Aesopica.

The Aesop Romance, an ancient episodic literary work, claims that Aesop was the sole author of these early fables and he wrote them for the library of Croesus, the ancient king of Lydia, who according to Herodotus, reigned for 14 years: from 560 BC until his defeat by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 546 BC. Collections of what are considered to be Aesop's fables have been transmitted by a series of contemporary Greek and Latin authors. And

many classical authors named Aesop as the pioneer of fables. For instance: Herodotus (484-425 BC), the ancient Greek historian in the time of Persian Empire, calls Aesop a 'writer of fables' and Aristophanes (446-386 BC), a comic playwright of ancient Athens, speaks of 'reading' Aesop, but that might be a simple compilation of fables ascribed to him. This is how Sophocles, (497/6-406/5 BC) the Greek tragedian made an epigram with the light of the Aesop's fable *North Wind and the Sun* and addressed Euripides, (480-406 BC) another contemporary tragedian for his adultery:

It was the sun, not the boy, who stripped me

Of my cloak, Euripides; but the north wind went

With you, when you made love to another man's wife.

You are not wise, when sowing another's field,

To bring Eros to court for being a snatch-thief. (Sophocles, tr. Yonge)

Again, while in prison, Socrates (470-399 BC) turned some of the fables into verse which has been translated thoroughly by Benjamin Jowett in 1892. Some few verses have been quoted below.

The seen is the changing, and the unseen is the unchanging.

That may be also supposed.

And, further, is not one part of us body, and the rest of us soul?

To be sure.

And to which class may we say that the body is more alike and akin?

Clearly to the seen: no one can doubt that.

And is the soul seen or not seen?

Not by man, Socrates.

And by "seen" and "not seen" is meant by us that which is or is not visible to the eye of man?

Yes, to the eye of man.

And what do we say of the soul? is that seen or not seen?

Not seen.

Unseen then?

Yes.

Then the soul is more like to the unseen, and the body to the seen?

That is most certain, Socrates. (Plato, tr. Jowett)

Roman poet and playwright Quintus Ennius (239-169 BC) also rendered few of the Aesop's fables in Latin verse, of which some few examples still exist as popular parables. An example of Aesop's use of tetrameter verse is remarkable in the adaptation in Latin by Ennius in his *Saturae*. In a translation of Aulus Cornelius Gellius, Bill Thayer very cleverly and gracefully mentions:

The following are the last two lines of that version, and I surely think it is worthwhile to remember them and take them to heart:

This adage ever have in readiness;

Ask not of friends what you yourself can do.

(Gellius, tr. Thayer)

Next, some of these fables appeared in Latin elegiac verses by Avianus, a Latin fabulist and Dositheus Magister, a primitive grammarian in the 3rd century, BC. Later, Titianus, a Roman senator and author is said to have rendered the fables into a prose version in 1st century, AD. At the same time, Phaedrus, a Roman fabulist and Babrius, another Greek fabulist made their little contributions in adapting the fables into Greek choliambics, a poetic meter originated by the Greek iambic poet, Hipponax in 6th century, BC.

Apart from the series of Greco-Roman adaptations, Aesop's fables continued to be revised and translated throughout the ensuing centuries. These fabulous ancient fables reached into an unconstrained suppleness of metrical structure in the late 17th century by a French fabulist, Jean de La Fontaine, to whom Maugham showed a keen acknowledgement at the beginning of his argument in the short story, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. As many as 239 fables have been brought into light with Fontaine's deftness of touch through 12 consecutive books, published during the last three decades of the century (1668-94 AD). Invariably, the subject and theme of fables are always pregnant with meanings. Moreover, they are often considered common property of every nation on earth. But what makes La Fontaine's fables unique is the clarity of narration, craft of touch, consistent metrical order, the unflinching humour of the pointed moral and the absolute art of their apparent artlessness. Two salient features are truly identical throughout his works: keen insight to the shortcomings of human nature, and the skill to cover social creeds and sympathies. Therefore these fables earned the greater degree of consciousness than any other classic of French literature. And for generations, these little apologues have been read, recited, granted and paraphrased by every French school kid. Madam de Sevigne (1626-96 AD), a Parisian prominent letter-writer mentions, "La Fontaine's fables are like a basket of strawberries. You begin by selecting the largest and best, little by little; you eat first one, then another, till at last the basket is empty."

Maugham's short story *The Ant and the Grasshopper* is otherwise titled from La Fontaine's fable *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, written in French. In this version, the fable appeared as a form of verse which, later, has been translated into English by Elizur Wright. Here is the full length fable in English:

A Grasshopper gay
Sang the summer away,
And found herself poor
By the winter's first roar.
Of meat or of bread,
Not a morsel she had!
So a begging she went,
To her neighbour the ant,
For the loan of some wheat,
Which would serve her to eat,

Till the season come round.

"I will pay you," she saith,

"On an animal's faith,

Double weight in the pound,

Ere the harvest be bound."

The ant is a friend

(And here she might mend)

Little given to lend.

"How spent you the summer?"

Quoth she, looking shame

At the borrowing dame.

"Night and day to each comer

I sang, if you please."

"You sang! I'm at ease;

For 'tis plain at a glance,

Now, ma'am, you must dance."

(La Fontaine, tr. Wright)

In the early days of Maugham the young children were made to learn by heart certain fables. Even, sometimes, mothers used these verses to form lullabies and to sing for their kids. Therefore, it is certain that Maugham came to contact with this fable in his very childhood. He assumes that the fable provided him with a definite moral about the virtues of industry and efficiency of hard work that ultimately leads a man to a better and secured prospect in future. "July is followed by December"- is the pointing moral of the fable, depicted by *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1768). *The Sunday School Teacher: A Monthly Magazine* (1866) sums up with a moral by saying, "An idle soul shall suffer hunger." Again to conclude their remark on this fable, the other magazine, *Reader's Theater Script & Fluency Lesson* (2014) says, "Work today to eat tomorrow." Many of such morals are found in the pages of criticism for the corresponding fable *The Grasshopper and an Ant*. But Maugham was not at all convinced with these indistinguishable morals, and so guided by an ardent mistrust and misconception, he made a complete 'U' turn and composed the story *The Ant and the Grasshopper* with an alternative portrayal. To Maugham, ant's industry is mean and self-serving and so it is an obvious example of losing the themes of charity and compassion to a good friend, the grasshopper. This ambiguity raised the question of rethinking and re-interpretation, what led to an eventual idea of building a counter fable.

The idea of making counter-fable or reversal of a fable is not first advocated by Maugham. There is, nonetheless, an alternative tale ascribed to Aesop where the ant seems to be in a bad state. It appears to be a definite counter-fable and is numbered 166 in the Perry Index, a widely used index of Aesop's fables. It refers that the ant was once a man who was a busy farmer. He had to undergo through a massive hardship and perils of life. But although he was a relentless worker, once he was not satisfied with his harvest. So, he plundered the crops of his neighbours at night. Hearing this, Jupiter, the king of gods became very angry and immediately punished him by turning into what is now an ant. Yet, even though, the man had to change his shape into a tiny insect, he couldn't change his habits, and

till this day, he has to go around the farmlands, gather the fruits of other people's labour and store them up for his fortune. According to the Greek sources, the moral of the story is that it is easier to change in appearance than to change one's moral nature. It was not a widespread fable in its storyline, but among the few prominent collectors of fables who recorded and adapted it later are Gabriele Faerno (1564) and Roger L'Estrange (1692). This is how Roger (1692) made a comment to the moral of the fable: "That which some call good husbandry, industry and providence, others call raking, avarice and oppression: so that the virtue and the vice, in many cases, are hardly distinguishable but by the name."

If we consider the portrayal of two Ramsay brothers in Maugham's story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, we can easily come across that George Ramsay, the elder is representing the character of the ant in the said fable. Undoubtedly, he is a man of letter with all positive qualities. He is an idol of replica and honour to his family and surroundings. Throughout his life, he has been very honest and disciplined. He is a perfect example to be a responsible husband to his wife, and the best father to his four daughters. Even he is the sole earner to feed and supply all the amenities for the extended family including Tom's, his younger brother. Even as an advisor, George seems to be very loyal and decent to his clients and colleagues. At the age of forty seven, he looks old enough for an apparent look of sixty. All through his career as a solicitor, he made a saving for his retirement at the age of fifty five. And he assumes that he has a pretty decent amount of thirty thousand pounds to lead a secured life in his little country house then. In a word, being a man of industry and thrift, he is always pleased with what he has got by the providence. And that's why he is now planning to rub his hand for his younger brother, Tom Ramsay, who, according to George, is worth nothing but a black sheep of the family. This is how, Maugham's initial portrayal of George's feelings towards Tom is described in the story:

"It was all very well when Tom was young and good-looking, but he's only a year younger than I am. 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."

(Maugham)

As Tom Ramsay seems to be a black sheep, a prodigal and unscrupulous rogue according to his elder brother, George; it is no doubt that he is playing the role of the grasshopper in the fable. We know, Tom, unlike his elder brother, leads an idle, reckless and carefree life. He is a man deviated from family and work. He is not at all interested to work for a livelihood or meeting the everyday necessities. He is always tidy in his attire and is engulfed with his friends

and girl friends letting his familial responsibilities on his brother's shoulder. Though he is only a year younger to George, he appears to be a man of thirty five. The portrayal of Tom by Maugham is as follows:

For twenty years Tom raced and gambled, philandered with the prettiest girls, danced, ate in the most expensive restaurants, and dressed beautifully. 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.

(Maugham)

Tom is a man completely surrounded with the fantasies of modern dreams and to accomplish all his missions he can do whatever he likes. Even he dislikes the disciplined way of lifestyle, George always advocates. Instead of being humble and loyal to his brother, Tom, always, is oriented with luxurious modes of life. Many a time, he mentions, "The money you spent on necessities was boring; the money that was amusing to spend was the money you spent on luxuries." Maugham, (1924). And for the source of money to spend a luxurious life, he starts exploiting and blackmailing almost everybody in his surroundings. Once he started his life with a decent job, then got married and became father of two children. But, all on a sudden, he left his job and declared that he was no more suited for office and family responsibilities. And with the little money he had, he spent two happy years roaming around the luxurious cities of Europe. And, of course the money he had was not enough for the venture. And soon after, it was revealed that to manage all these expensive enterprises, he borrowed money from his friends by using his crooked and fraudulent conducts. In this regard, Maugham (1924) mentions, "He (Tom) was charming and unscrupulous. I have never met anyone to whom it was more difficult to refuse a loan. He made a steady income from his friends and he made friends easily." After returning home from his flamboyant trip in European capitals, Tom was in a perfect gutter. So, for the sake of the respect of Ramsay family, George provided him with a grant to start a fresh business and to come round to a decent work again. But with this money Tom purchased a motor car and some exotic jewellery for his girlfriends and again started a philandered lifestyle.

Even to satisfy his pocket, Tom started doing something worse. He knew that his elder brother, George had a pretty good reputation among his friends and colleagues. So, to cut his brother's nose, Tom started making a series of criminal plots. Once he took a job as a bartender and used to shake cocktails in a bar where George appeared with his friends occasionally. Again, for a while, Tom is found driving a taxi for his living. But certainly he started the job

for an evil intention to catch the attention of his affluent brother, by stopping his taxi outside the club where George used to visit his friends at evenings. This is the vexed apology he made for his activities: "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." (Maugham, 1924) Thus, exploiting and blackmailing gradually became the only mean to Tom to collect the money he needs to pay for his splendours. In another occasion, once Tom had nearly gone to prison for being bankrupt to a businessman, named Cronshaw. The man filed a case in the court complaining against Tom for his inability to pay his debt, and for this allegation, Tom would have received a verdict to go for a jail along with a huge monetary fine and that could bring an eventual misfortune for the whole family. So, forgetting all the previous records of Tom's misdeeds, George appeared to be his legal advisor and fought for the trial. Finally, Tom was released from the conviction when George had settled the issue by paying a huge amount of payment to the plaintiff for the sake of the reputation of the family. But soon after the settlement of the issue, it was revealed that the case was fake; and it was nothing but another obnoxious plan of Tom. This time, Tom used his friend Cronshaw, with whom, he made another pleasant trip in Monte Carlo and spent the total amount lavishly. So, apparently Tom is portrayed as an unscrupulous rogue and an obvious fellow of mistrust. Like the grasshopper in the fable, all through his life, Tom didn't do anything beneficial for the family; rather, he enjoyed the maximum benefit through exploiting, and blackmailing his near and dear ones.

According to the provided moral of the fable of the ant and the grasshopper by Aesop and La Fontaine, it would be a real justice if Tom is bound to make an end of his vehement life and placed in a workhouse. But to the utter resentment and dissatisfaction of George, fortune smiles on Tom. He suddenly became very rich by marrying an old woman, aged enough to be his mother, who died soon after their marriage, leaving for him half a million pounds, a yacht, a house in London, and a house in country. And this certain metamorphosis at the resolution of the story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, discloses Maugham's hidden approach to make a counter fable where the irony of the fate of George appears to be the loser and Tom, the free will agent is the ultimate winner.

Now, if we look forward to making a critical appreciation of these two Ramsay brothers, George and Tom, two representing characters of the ant and the grasshopper respectively; we find, both of them are extremely money maniac. To both of them, money is a dire necessity. Both the brothers are focusing to its power and eventual ability to measure, control and influence others. To some extent, George gets our sympathy for his straightforwardness and a disciplined way of life and saving for a secured fortune. But this sympathy doesn't last long when he starts rebuking Tom for misusing his money. Like George, Tom

also knows the value of money and so he thrives for it by taking every possible way. But unlike George, he didn't think for a saving for a secured fortune; rather he spent all the money to accomplish his desires. The fulfillment of his cherished desires was his main objective, and he is successful in doing this. When George is counting every single pound for his retirement, Tom achieves a far more secured fortune. While George is a mimic puppet of the material world like the industrious ant, Tom is a symbol of visionary world like the grasshopper. While George is an orthodox conformist, Tom is a fellow empowered with social confidence. So, at the end George's rigid principles became a symbol of a typical mockery, whereas, Tom is provided with a heavenly prospect of wealth and luxury for what he is always intended to. And thus Tom wins the heart of the readers and the total idea of the fable turns into a reversal or a counter fable.

Maugham was not only the sole author to play with a reversal of the morals of the fable through his story *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. There emerged some other notable adaptations of the fable in researches on human morality, unemployment and indebtedness around the world. In the year of 1992, the ant and the grasshopper emerged in a cross-cultural ethical study on industrial anthropology in the U.S. and the Japanese context in between 1982 and 1992. In this study, *The Ant and the Grasshopper, Or David and Goliath? A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Normative Orientation in the U.S. –Japan trade Dispute*, Tomoko Hamada (1992) tried to make a universal applicability of human morality through David and Goliath, the two key characters who are embodied with the characteristics of the ant and the grasshopper respectively. Later in 2005, these two characters of the fable again appeared in a study on the causes of deterioration of the labour market and its eventual effect on the financial situation in Portugal. The hypotheses of the project were made by an institute called *Consumer Indebtedness Observatory*. The ant and the grasshopper, the two characters of fable appeared in the conclusion of their final findings. This is how they synthesized their interpretation of the findings:

Two empirical studies, based largely on personal interviews, are being carried out: one involves workers who have lost their jobs; the other involves debtors who sought the assistance of DECO to renegotiate their debts with creditors. Based on this, we can identify two general profiles which we have termed, as in a fable, the grasshopper and the ant. These profiles show different consumption patterns and different ways of dealing with money and credit. These differences help to explain the distinct sustainability in the face of unemployment shown by the ants and the grasshoppers.

(Frade)

So to sum up, we can come to a fact that in the post modern world of today, everybody is in a way self centered. George, the ant seems to be a complete singular character who lacks the charms and pleasures of life. On the other hand, Tom is not a mere grasshopper; rather with his extroverted charms and social enticements, he becomes victorious. Though, Tom's victory sounds paradoxical; to Maugham, a man like Tom is the man, fit to survive today. So, to conclude, a popular maxim of Bob Marley can be the best justification for Tom, the grasshopper. And here it goes: "In the end, everything gonna be alright." (Marley)

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