

The aim of this annotation is to prepare a case for how the unary trait works to make the ending of the film and text story effective.

Mr. Know-All

cf. Lacan's famous "subject-supposed-to-know"

W. Somerset Maugham

Maugham, as the first person narrator, uses negative statement about Kelada in the same way heroic poetry begins with dactylic drum beats: BOOM BOOM! James Joyce begins *Ulysses* with "Stately Buck Mulligan," as a belligerent opening. This is a war-chant rhythm, like the Haka used by Māori rugby teams (adopted by non-Māori teams). The effectiveness of the Haka is that it introduces the unary trait at the level of the flow of emotions at the same time it punctuates/interrupts the flow of the signifying chain. In effect, it holds the two streams, conscious and unconscious, in alignment, creating a laminar flow condition, ideal for holding the audience in the "spell" of the fictional creation. The classic example of the unary trait as a *point de capiton* for regulating laminar flow is the expression "Once upon a time," present in almost every language to mark, simultaneously, the bracketing of the work of fiction (suspension of doubt) AND the obligation of the audience to postpone judgment of the value of the story until the final terminus point, the "moral" or "punch-line."

The narrator preserves his anonymity. It is not certain that he is the same as the author. In the film, the narrator presents himself as a British civil servant.

Commentators, drawing from the wealth of description of Kelada's physical appearance, presume the narrator's implicit racism, which would have been commonplace for the time following World War I or even the late 40s, which is the time of the film version.

Playing by the "rules of the game," Kelada demonstrates that he, too, is a bit of a racist.

I was prepared to dislike Max Kelada even before I knew him.

The war had just finished and the passenger traffic in the ocean going liners was heavy. Accommodation was very hard to get and you had to put up with whatever the agents chose to offer you. You could not hope for a cabin to yourself and I was thankful to be given one in which there were only two berths. But when I was told the name of my companion my heart sank. It suggested closed portholes and the night air rigidly excluded. It was bad enough to share a cabin for fourteen days with anyone (I was going from San Francisco to **Yokohama**), but I should have looked upon it with less dismay if my fellow passenger's name had been Smith or Brown.

When I went on board I found Mr. Kelada's luggage already below. I did not like the look of it; there were too many labels on the suitcases, and the wardrobe trunk was too big. He had unpacked his toilet things, and I observed that he was a patron of **the excellent Monsieur Coty**; for I saw on the washing-stand his scent, his hairwash and his brilliantine.



Mr. Kelada's brushes, ebony with his monogram in gold, would have been all the better for a scrub. I did not at all like Mr. Kelada. I made my way into the smoking-room. I called for a pack of cards and began to play patience.

I had scarcely started before a man came up to me and asked me if he was right in thinking **my name was so and so**.

"I am Mr. Kelada," he added, with a smile that showed a row of flashing teeth, and sat down.

"Oh, yes, we're sharing a cabin, I think."

"Bit of luck, I call it. **You never know who you're going to be put in with. I was jolly glad when I heard you were English.** I'm all for us English sticking together when we're abroad, if you understand what I mean."

Kelada (**who makes a point of spelling his name in the film, something that would have been missed in the original text version**) uses the space in front of him to “massage” a message, a formation that presents to the listener a landscape open to view that explains his position, as a benefactor able to answer all questions.

The problem with racist interpretations of the narrator’s point of view is that they re-purpose the role of criticism as a moral corrective. We are encouraged to read the story “historically,” as evidence of the implicit racism of past readers and authors. But, this view presumes a moral high-ground that it has not established and, worse, makes factual errors to prove its case. Maugham uses the implicit racism of the passengers, which may be approved or despised by the reader, as the context to establish Kelada’s *distance* from his fellow-travelers. This distance is critical to the end of the story, where it will be used implicitly by the text but explicitly by the film version, which develops a parallax model to enact the logic of Kelada’s conversion from sadist to masochist.

... ironic, in that Kelada pretends to hear but ignores the answers of his interlocutors.

The theory of infinite supply is the obverse of negative criticism of “the mysterious foreigner” in British literature. Ali Baba, for example, has a cave of treasures that balance out his repulsiveness as an unprincipled thief. European Jews were, using the same logic, believed to be both fantastically wealthy and impoverished and ruthlessly greedy

Another version of the theory of infinite supply, put in the currency of the signifier. In the next sentence, this supply is put in terms of geography, then categories of learning.

This would seem to be sufficient evidence that Maugham is not talking about a Jewish Kelada!

I blinked.

"Are you English?" I asked, perhaps tactlessly.

"Rather. You don't think I look like an American, do you? British to the backbone, that's what I am." To prove it, Mr. Kelada took out of his pocket a passport and **airily waved it under my nose.**

King George has many strange subjects. Mr. Kelada was short and of a sturdy build, clean-shaven and dark skinned, with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large lustrous and liquid eyes. His long black hair was sleek and curly. He spoke with a fluency in which there was nothing English and his gestures were exuberant. I felt pretty sure that a closer inspection of that British passport would have betrayed the fact that Mr. Kelada was born under a bluer sky than is generally seen in England.

"What will you have?" he asked me.

I looked at him doubtfully. Prohibition was in force and to all appearances the ship was bone dry. When I am not thirsty I do not know which I dislike more, ginger ale or lemon squash. But Mr. Kelada flashed an oriental smile at me.

"Whisky and soda or a dry martini, **you have only to say the word.**"

From each of his hip pockets he furnished a flask and laid it on the table before me. I chose the martini, and calling the steward he ordered a tumbler of ice and a couple of glasses.

"A very good cocktail," I said.

"Well, there are plenty more where that came from, and if you've got any friends on board, you tell them you've got a pal who's got all the liquor in the world."

Mr. Kelada was chatty. He talked of New York and of San Francisco. He discussed plays, pictures, and politics. He was patriotic. The Union Jack is an impressive piece of drapery, but when it is flourished by **a gentleman from Alexandria or Beirut,** I cannot but feel that it loses somewhat in dignity. Mr. Kelada was familiar. I do not wish to put on airs, but I cannot help feeling that it is seemly in a total stranger to put mister before my name when he addresses me. Mr. Kelada, doubtless to set me at my ease, used no such formality. I did not like Mr.



The card-game of patience here is a marker for the narrator's generic Stoic attitude toward Kelada's "sadistic" (passive-) aggression.

Kelada-as-trickster must "naturally" also specialize in card tricks. This is enlarged in the film, where Kelada gives a stage performance of magic illusions, claiming here and elsewhere that there's nothing he doesn't know about how to manipulate a deck of cards. This reveals his inner morality: that he has stopped playing cards because his opponents would be unfairly disadvantaged by his superior skill.

This is a critical clue. Like the twist of a Möbius band, Kelada is "everywhere and nowhere." He is consistent (= self-intersection, a logical circuit) but non-orientable. This has a double sense in the way that Kelada is "oriental" and "non-orientable" at the same time. The story is based on Kelada's ethical twist, from a generous but ruthless braggart to a self-effacing, self-humiliating knight who voluntarily rescues a maiden held prisoner by a dragon-husband.

In topology, the projective form is (1) self-intersecting, i. e. a *circuit* that supports a FLOW of energy, and (2) non-oriented. Non-orientation is the Real of topology; it resists graphic representation in the same way that the Lacanian Real resists the Symbolic. To make a projective form visible, either as a graphic or a narrative, it is necessary to IMMERSE it into a 3-d space characterized by contingency (there is none in the projective plane) and "room for a view," i. e. a dimension allowing the viewer to "take a step back" from the viewed.

Kelada. I had put aside the cards when he sat down, but now, thinking that for this first occasion our conversation had lasted long enough, I went on with my game.

"The three on the four," said Mr. Kelada.

There is nothing more exasperating when you are **playing patience** than to be told where to put the card you have turned up before you have a chance to look for yourself.

"It's coming out, it's coming out," he cried. "The ten on the knave." **With rage and hatred in my heart I finished.**

Then he seized the pack.

"Do you like card tricks?"

"No, I hate card tricks," I answered.

"Well, I'll just show you this one."

He showed me three. Then I said I would go down to the dining-room and get my seat at the table.

"Oh, that's all right," he said, "I've already taken a seat for you. I thought that as we were in the same stateroom we might just as well sit at the same table."

I did not like Mr. Kelada.

I not only shared a cabin with him and ate three meals a day at the same table, but **I could not walk round the deck without his joining me.** It was impossible to snub him. It never occurred to him that he was not wanted. He was certain that you were as glad to see him as he was to see you. In your own house you might have kicked him downstairs and slammed the door in his face without the suspicion dawning on him that he was not a welcome visitor. He was a good mixer, and in three days knew everyone on board. He ran everything. He managed the sweeps, conducted the auctions, collected money for prizes at the sports, got up quoit and golf matches, organized the concert and arranged the fancy-dress ball. He was everywhere and always. He was certainly the best hated man in the ship. We called him Mr. Know-All, even to his face. He took it as a compliment. But it was at mealtimes that he was most intolerable. For the better part of an hour then he had us at his mercy. He was hearty, jovial, loquacious and argumentative. He knew everything better than anybody else, and it was an affront

“Levantine” refers to anyone from the Levant, a geographical region including Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and modern-day Israel, which did not exist at the time the story was written. Kelada could have been Lebanese, Jewish, or any of the races living in that region, but many commentaries have assumed that he was Jewish and characterized Maugham’s description as anti-Semitic. This is partly true only if, by “Semitic,” one includes, properly, all of the Semitic peoples, Arabs as well as Jews.

In the film, Ramsey is said to have spent TWO years in Japan. Possibly the director/writers felt that it was necessary for the audience to sympathize completely with Mrs. Ramsey’s infidelity, i. e. to transfer blame to Mr. Ramsey, who in the scene in their cabin, makes it clear that he would have killed any rival and then killed his wife as well. Just as Kelada’s performance of magic in the ship’s theater was added in the film but not present in the text, the audience must be emotionally educated to his particular style of aggressive bragging in order to be prepared for the decisive scene, where he examines Mrs. Ramsey’s pearls.

Mr. Ramsey must appear as **more** insensitive than the text makes him out to be, and Mrs. Ramsey must appear to be **more** innocent.

The technique of “emotional scaling” — either enlarging or shrinking the status or appeal of a character or action — is a common practice in the translation of texts to film. This is like the technique of underpainting, where the painter lays down a darker or lighter background before working in the figures in detail. The effect is **SUBLIMINAL**, more effective because it is not noticed at the level of conscious interpretation but is felt emotionally. Without this “anamorphic” underlayment, the viewer/reader does not reach the climax of the work able to understand it.

to his overweening vanity that you should disagree with him. He would not drop a subject, however unimportant, till he had brought you round to his way of thinking. The possibility that he could be mistaken never occurred to him. He was the chap who knew. We sat at the doctor's table. Mr. Kelada would certainly have had it all his own way, for the doctor was lazy and I was frigidly indifferent, except for a man called Ramsay who sat there also. **He was as dogmatic as Mr. Kelada and resented bitterly the Levantine's** cocksureness. The discussions they had were acrimonious and interminable.

Ramsay was in the American Consular Service and was stationed at Kobe. He was a great heavy fellow from the Middle West, with loose fat under a tight skin, and he bulged out of his ready-made clothes. He was on his way back to resume his post, having been on a flying visit to New York **to fetch his wife who had been spending a year at home. Mrs. Ramsay was a very pretty little thing, with pleasant manners and a sense of humor.** The Consular Service is ill paid, and she was dressed always very simply; but she knew how to wear her clothes. She achieved an effect of quiet distinction. I should not have paid any particular attention to her but that she possessed a quality that may be common enough in women, but nowadays is not obvious in their demeanour. It shone in her like a flower on a coat.

One evening at dinner the conversation by chance drifted to the subject of pearls. There had been in the papers a good deal of talk about the cultured pearls which the cunning Japanese were making, and the doctor remarked that they must inevitably diminish the value of real ones. They were very good already; they would soon be perfect. Mr. Kelada, as was his habit, rushed the new topic. He told us all that was to be known about pearls. I do not believe Ramsay knew anything about them at all, but he could not resist the opportunity to have a fling at the Levantine, and in five minutes we were in the middle of a heated argument. I had seen Mr. Kelada vehement and voluble before, but never so voluble and vehement as now. At last something that Ramsay said stung him, for he thumped the table and shouted.

"Well, I ought to know what I am talking about, I'm going to Japan just to look into this Japanese pearl business. I'm in the trade and there's not a man in it who won't tell you that what I

The 18-minute film has the advantage of enlarging on each nuance of Kelada's and of other characters. The text must jump quickly to the main conclusive "trial" of the story, where Kelada brags about his ability to give precise estimates of the value of pearls, which had come to the public's post-war attention as a conflict between cultured and natural pearls.



more than a chain!

In the film version,

Mrs. Ramsey stays home in London and buys her pearls at an Oxford Street shop London, at a cost of eight pounds sterling. In the film, passengers seem to be departing from England although it's clear from the text they are leaving from San Francisco bound for Yokohama. The Ramsey's, British in the film, are clearly American in the text. As British, they may have had more appeal to the mainly British audience of the film, and Mrs. Ramsey's predicament would have been more understandable.

In this **tightly structured scene**, Kelada will reveal to the audience what he is thinking primarily through affective signs: flushing, opening his mouth widely — indications of his internal struggle to maintain his reputation as a know-it-all or save Mrs. Ramsey's reputation and marriage.

Wikipedia: "Elmer was a Top 100 name for at least 50+ years — until 1937 — hitting Number 38 at the turn of the last century." Nonetheless, the name was also used in comic deprecations and was, in Hitchcock's 1957 film *Rear Window*, the name of the henpecked husband visible to the left Jefferies' apartment (a position contrary to the happy/unhappy couples to the right). The audience must conclude that Elmer is a cuckold who deserves all he gets to exonerate Mrs. Ramsey fully.

say about pearls goes. I know all the best pearls in the world, and what I don't know about pearls isn't worth knowing."

Here was news for us, for Mr. Kelada, with all his loquacity, had never told anyone what his business was. We only knew vaguely that he was going to Japan on some commercial errand. He looked around the table triumphantly.

"They'll never be able to get a cultured pearl that an expert like me can't tell with half an eye." He pointed to **a chain that Mrs. Ramsay wore**. "You take my word for it, Mrs. Ramsay, that chain you're wearing will never be worth a cent less than it is now."

Mrs. Ramsay in her modest way flushed a little and slipped the chain inside her dress. Ramsay leaned forward. He gave us all a look and a smile flickered in his eyes.

"That's a pretty chain of Mrs. Ramsay's, isn't it?"

"I noticed it at once," answered Mr. Kelada. "Gee, I said to myself, those are pearls all right."

"I didn't buy it myself, of course. I'd be interested to know how much you think it cost."

"Oh, in the trade somewhere round fifteen thousand **dollars**. But if it was bought on Fifth Avenue I shouldn't be surprised to hear anything up to thirty thousand was paid for it."

Ramsay smiled grimly.

"You'll be surprised to hear that Mrs. Ramsay bought that string **at a department store the day before we left New York, for eighteen dollars.**"

Mr. Kelada flushed.

"Rot. It's not only real, but it's as fine a string for its size as I've ever seen."

"Will you bet on it? I'll bet you a hundred dollars it's imitation."

"Done."

"Oh, **Elmer**, you can't bet on a certainty," said Mrs. Ramsay.

She had a little smile on her lips and her tone was gently deprecating.

"Can't I? If I get a chance of easy money like that I should be **all sorts of a fool not to take it.**"

While the text devotes just over 50% to the episode of the pearls' value, the film has reduced this to a scene lasting just three minutes and nineteen seconds. 3:19/18:44 is a ratio of only 18%, but this is due to **the need for the film to build in themes and references to compensate for the text's over-efficient means of communicating tone, emotion, and idea**, Aristotle's *mythos*, *ethos*, and *dianoia*. Film delivery of these key elements of fiction is hit or miss. The audience may be sleeping, thinking of something else, or simply not paying attention. Film is an indicative gesture that points but can't say exactly what it is pointing at. The film must deliver its key idea quickly and efficiently, so the build-up scenes that prepare the audience must be considered as essential though secondary. This teaches us that the unary trait is always **UNARY WITH RESPECT TO THE SECONDARY**. Its context-dependency means that it is a cut that is always cutting-through something, and in the process of cutting it is conditioning the layers of signifying chains that are flowing across and past each other. These are, if not framed and properly packaged, turbulent. The secondary aligns and smooths the chains, quilts them in place, to use Lacan's idea of the *point de capiton*, so that by the time the unary trait is made, as a "katagraphic" (redefining) cut, the audience is able to "take it all in" at a single swallow. **Reflection is a luxury that the unary trait cannot afford**. It is exacted and received in one stroke, felt rather than thought or thought about. Film-makers are a good source of instruction on what the unary trait does and how it can be used in popular culture forms meant to be understood by everyone.

Notice how the text is able to deliver effects more efficiently than film. The narrator notices that Kelada's hands were trembling, but the film must enact this trembling so that the audience understands its context and meaning. What can be conclusive for the text is not a guaranteed effect in a film. **The text cannot only show what is happening; it can tell the reader what he/she should think about it, and how other characters react.**

"But how can it be proved?" she continued. "It's only my word against Mr. Kelada's."

"Let me look at the chain, and if it's imitation I'll tell you quickly enough. I can afford to lose a hundred dollars," said Mr. Kelada.

"Take it off, dear. Let the gentleman look at it as much as he wants."

Mrs. Ramsay hesitated a moment. She put her hands to the clasp.

"I can't undo it," she said, "**Mr. Kelada will just have to take my word for it.**" [something that Kelada seems incapable of doing]

I had a sudden suspicion that something unfortunate was about to occur, but I could think of nothing to say.

Ramsay jumped up. "I'll undo it."

He handed the chain to Mr. Kelada. **The Levantine took a magnifying glass from his pocket and closely examined it. A smile of triumph spread over his smooth and swarthy face.**

He handed back the chain. He was about to speak. Suddenly he caught sight of Mrs. Ramsay's face. It was so white that she looked as though she were about to faint. She was staring at him with wide and terrified eyes. They held a desperate appeal; it was so clear that I wondered why her husband did not see it.

Mr. Kelada stopped with his mouth open. He flushed deeply. You could almost see the effort he was making over himself.

"I was mistaken," he said. "It's very good imitation, but of course as soon as I looked through my glass I saw that it wasn't real. I think eighteen dollars is just about as much as the damned thing's worth."

He took out his pocketbook and from it a hundred dollar note. He handed it to Ramsay without a word.

"Perhaps that'll teach you not to be so cocksure another time, my young friend," said Ramsay as he took the note.

I noticed that Mr. Kelada's hands were trembling.

The story spread over the ship as stories do, and he had to put up with a good deal of chaff that evening. It was a fine joke that Mr. Know-All had been caught out. But Mrs. Ramsay retired to her stateroom with a headache.

The *denouement* of the story begins with an imitation of what lovers do typically after having sex. The situation is structured to show how the narrator has “fallen in love” with Kelada after he has witnessed Kelada’s act of kindness. The narrator, like the reader, must re-adjust his entire theory of Kelada’s character, admit that his former prejudice was wrong. The conversion of the obnoxious Kaleda into a thoughtful and compassionate Kelada forces a more global recalculation about “orientals in general” and justifies giving Maugham credit for accomplishing the impossible: making a prejudiced reader unprejudiced by means of translating the rational argument against racial prejudice into an emotional argument that the reader cannot resist, if he or she gives into enjoying the conclusion. Just as the narrator and Kelada embrace at the end of the film version, the text is able to deliver an equivalent affection using the device of the British notoriety for understatement. When the narrator says that he “did not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada,” we can be assured that he is, with typical reserve and discretion, saying that he is in love with him. This catachresis (literally, “incorrect usage”) is essential for the unary trait’s “katagraphic” cut, which *redefines* the material it cuts in by executing a “non-orientable” circuit (= both open and closed at the same time). Just as it is possible to cut a bagel into two Möbius-faced halves, able to hold twice as much cream cheese, the katagraphic cut creates a unary trait that is able to hold (precisely) twice as much significance as a non-metonymic signifier. This is a doubly-encoded product that supplies the key to align the two meanings itself, a password that decodes the laminar-flowing signifying chains, annealing them together at the same time it pretends to divide/distinguish them.

Next morning I got up and began to shave. Mr. Kelada lay on his bed smoking a cigarette.

Suddenly there was a small scraping sound and I saw a letter pushed under the door. I opened the door and looked out. There was nobody there. I picked up the letter and saw it was addressed to Max Kelada. The name was written in block letters. I handed it to him.

"Who's this from?" He opened it. "Oh!"

He took out of the envelope, not a letter, but a hundred-dollar note. He looked at me and again he reddened. He tore the envelope into little bits and gave them to me.

"Do you mind just throwing them out of the porthole?"

I did as he asked, and then I looked at him with a smile.

"No one likes being made to look a perfect damned fool," he said.

"Were the pearls real?"

"If I had a pretty little wife I shouldn't let her spend a year in New York while I stayed at Kobe," said he.

At that moment I did not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada. He reached out for his pocketbook and carefully put in it the hundred-dollar note.



At the conclusion we are able, thanks to the unary trait, realize that the narrator and Kelada are, more than a loving couple, actually a single composite being, sadist and masochist in 1.