

Mr. Know All / by W. Somerset Maugham

“Mr. Know All” is a story about culture, manners, outward appearances, values and – most importantly – prejudice. Prejudice exists because it is the human nature to stereotype people we meet based on race or how they look before getting to know them. The moral of the story can be summed up by the English proverb: “You should not judge a book by its cover”, since appearances may be deceiving.



PART A - THE STORY

Part One:

In part one the reader is introduced to the narrator who considers himself to be an English gentleman. He considers his “breeding” to be superior to non-white English citizens from the colonies held by England during this period in history. From the beginning of the story, we are told that the narrator was a highly prejudiced man who was prepared to dislike Max Kelada, even before he met him.

Once the narrator voices his dislike for Mr. Kelada, he leaves the cabin to play solitaire on the boat. There he is approached by Mr. Kelada. When Mr. Kelada introduces himself to the narrator, Mr. Kelada is described as having, “a row of flashing teeth.” White teeth should be a sign of good hygiene (היגיינה), but our narrator uses them to make Mr. Kelada look sinister (מרושע). The narrator uses any attribute of Mr. Kelada to make him look bad in order to justify his attitude. As a result, his interpretation is sometimes presented in a twisted manner (בצורה מעוותת).

When Mr. Kelada tells the narrator that he is an English citizen, the narrator is quite surprised. Although he accepts the fact that Mr. Kelada is a British citizen by law, because he has a passport, he does not accept him as a true Englishman. He thinks he isn't worthy of being called a gentleman, and certainly not equal to him.

Mr. Kelada is a Levantine. A Levantine is



someone who comes from the Levant, the former name for the geographical area of the eastern Mediterranean that is now occupied by Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. Mr. Kelada is presented with all the typical stereotypes of a person from the Middle East. He is portrayed as informal, loud, dogmatic and pushy. He cannot help but interfere in the lives of other people.

During the period between 1920 and 1933, the US government forbade the sale of any alcoholic drinks. This period was known as **Prohibition**. Since the ship was sailing from San Francisco, it was "bone-dry". That is, no alcohol was sold on the ship. Although the sale of alcohol was illegal, it was possible to buy it on the black market, as Mr. Kelada obviously did.



Maugham, the writer, establishes the racist hypocrisy (צביעות) of the narrator. When Mr. Kelada offers him an alcoholic beverage, the narrator quickly accepts and takes advantage of Mr. Kelada's stock of alcohol. This is symbolic of the hypocrisy of racists who pretend to be friendly to those who suffer from prejudice and bigotry (גזענות), but indeed detest (שונאים) them. In fact, they are even willing to use the resources (משאבים) of those they consider inferior (נחותים) when it suits their personal interests.

Nevertheless, Maugham, the author also criticizes Mr. Kelada who seems to ignore the cultural norms (נורמות תרבותיות) of the narrator and acts in a manner that causes others to dislike him:

- ✚ He talks too much.
- ✚ He acts with ill manners when he doesn't use the term "Mister" to address the narrator as is expected between two total strangers.
- ✚ He interferes in the narrator's solitaire card game.
- ✚ He reserves a seat for the narrator in the dining hall without permission.

Part Two:

Mr. Kelada took upon himself to arrange all the social affairs of the cruise. While Mr. Kelada appears to think that his efforts are appreciated, the narrator is quick to point out that: "He was certainly the best hated man on the ship."



The passengers called him “Mr. Know All” to his face. While this is clearly an insult (עלבון), Mr. Kelada takes it as a compliment. He earned the nickname because he would argue any point, even the smallest one, until he had won the argument. Undoubtedly, many of Mr. Know All’s “victories” (ניצחונות) came as a result of his ability to wear-down (להתיש) his partner in a debate.

It appears that Mr. Kelada’s annoying habits are not motivated by ill-will (רצון רע), but by cultural codes which are unacceptable to the narrator who is a snobbish English gentleman (another stereotype). Yet, these mannerisms prevent Mr. Kelada from assimilating fully (להיות חלק מ...) into the English culture and being accepted as a true Englishman.

Somerset Maugham is making an important point about the difficulties of foreigners in becoming part of their newly adopted cultures. The only way Mr. Kelada will be able to become accepted as a true Englishman, is if he deserts (נטש) the ways of his native culture—a heavy price that requires him to give up his cultural identity.

Being around Mr. Kelada was an unpleasant experience during the course of the day, but the meal times were the worst because the diners were a captive audience (קהל שבוי) who could not just get up and leave the table as well.

Despite being a clear annoyance, it is obvious that Mr. Kelada has gained a place of respectable status on the ship. This we can see from the fact that he arranges for himself to sit at the table of the ship’s doctor. The ship’s doctor, in the era in which the story was written, played a key social and professional role on the ship. The high status of sitting at the doctor’s table is reinforced (מחזק) by the fact that an American diplomat, Mr. Ramsey joins the doctor’s table.

Mr. Ramsey is quite annoyed at Mr. Kelada’s attitude of being right about everything. Therefore, he argues with Mr. Kelada. It appears that Mr. Ramsey’s problem with Mr. Know All’s attitude and self-confidence is connected to his ethnic background. While Mr. Ramsey has a certain social status as a member of the American Counselor Service, he is certainly not rich and has a quite neglected appearance: He is a heavy man who dresses poorly. This is in sharp contrast to the description of Mr. Kelada who is well dressed. Their physical contrast is an expression of their contrasting mental and cultural attitudes.

The reader is also introduced to Mrs. Ramsey who is described as a simple person with a modest personality and appearance. Her modest behavior is what makes her stand out. Mrs. Ramsey is also described as a “very pretty little thing.” Her physical incompatibility (חוסר התאמה) with her husband might represent the differences between them.

Part Three:

Mr. Ramsey decides to start an argument with Mr. Kelada just for the fun of it. The argument centers on whether the development of artificial pearls will have a negative impact on the price of the real pearls. This argument is very heated, even more than past ones and Mr. Kelada loses his temper.

Mr. Kelada reveals (גלוי) for the first time the nature of his business and says that he is travelling to Kobe, Japan, to investigate the cultured (artificial) pearl business.

Then, Mr. Kelada looks at Mrs. Ramsey, who is wearing a beautiful string of pearls, and tells her that her necklace will maintain its value despite the influx of cultured pearls in the marketplace. In other words, he is saying that Mrs. Ramsey’s pearls are genuine.

Mr. Ramsey slyly asks Mr. Kelada how much the pearls cost. Mr. Kelada estimates their price at between 15,000 to 30,000 dollars. Thus, Mr. Ramsey jumps and says that the pearls are artificial and cost only 18 dollars. Mr. Kelada claims Mr. Ramsey is wrong since the pearls are real.

Mr. Ramsey, who is sure the pearls are fake, offers to bet a \$100 dollar about the authenticity of Mrs. Ramsey’s pearls. Mr. Ramsey agrees willingly to let Mr. Kelada judge the authenticity of the pearls despite Mr. Kelada's obvious conflict of interest. Again, despite having a negative opinion of Mr. Kelada whom Mr. Ramsay sees as a member of the “inferior race”, he is willing to make use of his expertise.



Surprisingly, Mrs. Ramsey tries to convince her husband to call the bet off. She claims it is not fair to bet on something that is absolutely known. When she realizes that this is not going to prevent the bet, she pretends to be unable to take off the pearls so that Mr. Kelada can examine their authenticity. Despite the fact that it is obvious to all that Mrs. Ramsey is

uncomfortable with the bet, Mr. Ramsey is persistent and takes the string of pearls off and hands it to Mr. Kelada.

Mr. Kelada is about to announce that the pearls are real, when he notices Mrs. Ramsey's pale face. He sees her distress and decides to tell the people at the table that he has been wrong and that the pearls are fake, although they aren't. The irony of this is that Mr. Kelada, who apparently lacks sensitivity to other people, is more sensitive to Mrs. Ramsey than her husband.



The huge sacrifice that Mr. Kelada makes in order to save Mrs. Ramsay's marriage and reputation is surprising. Mr. Kelada who boasts about being correct all the time, "admits" to be wrong in a field he is considered to be an expert. He is also willing to lose a \$100, a lot of money at that time. After dinner the story spreads all over the ship and everyone laughs at Mr. Kelada.

The next morning, an envelope with a \$100 note is placed under the door of the cabin which the narrator and Mr. Kelada share. At this point, it becomes clear to the narrator that Mr. Kelada was correct about the pearls being authentic. Thus, we can infer that Mrs. Ramsey received the pearls from a secret lover in New York while her husband had been in Kobe. It is at this moment that the narrator understands Mr. Kelada's sacrifice and his dislike of Mr. Kelada decreases, "I didn't entirely dislike Mr. Kelada".



PART B - Analysis and Interpretation

Setting

The story takes place on a passenger ship sailing from San Francisco to Yokohama, shortly after the end of the First World War. The importance of the ship is that it is a closed environment. On land the narrator could have easily avoided Mr. Kelada, but on a ship, this would be impossible. The significance of World War One is twofold (double):

First, it explains why the narrator and Mr. Kelada had to share a cabin. The passenger traffic on the ocean-liners was heavy, so although the narrator would have preferred a single cabin, he had to agree to share a cabin with a person he didn't know and disliked just because of his name.

Second, it may help to explain the narrator's use of the word *Levantine* in describing Mr. Kelada and supply a possible reason for the narrator's antagonism towards him. During periods of war, feelings of prejudice and dislike for foreigners grow stronger.

Furthermore, the story takes place in "international waters" and not in a given country. This is significant in order to convey the message of the story: The writer implies that prejudice is an international problem, and not a problem of any given place. Prejudice and racism are human traits and not the traits of any given culture. Although the characters are far from their native societies, they still bring their racial and cultural prejudices and stereotypes with them on board.

The Plot

The story consists of two plots:

- ✚ The **main plot** deals with the conflicting relationship between the narrator and Mr. Kelada.
- ✚ The **sub-plot** deals with the relationship between Mr. Kelada and Mr. Ramsay. They discuss real pearls (nature-made) and cultured pearls (man-made), then they bet whether Mrs. Ramsay's necklace is made of real pearls or imitation.

The two plots are connected. The sub-plot serves to bring the complications of the main plot to its climax and solution. In other words, after the narrator discovers that Mr. Kelada



is in fact a gentleman, he understands he has been prejudiced and changes his opinion about him.

The Characters

✚ The **protagonist** is the narrator. Although his main dislike and criticism is referred to Mr. Kelada, he is also critical of each of the other characters except for Mrs. Ramsay. The narrator is British and admits he would prefer a cabin companion with a name like Smith or Brown. British gentlemen at that time had typical characteristics. They were dressed in quiet colors; they did not talk very much and did not use gestures when they talked. The narrator uses many words and expressions to show that Mr. Kelada does not know how to behave 'properly'. For example: chatty, exuberant, hearty, jovial, loquacious and argumentative, acrimonious and interminable, vehement and voluble. At the time of King George Britain was an empire, ruling many countries, such as India. The citizens of these colonies were given British passports, but were considered second-class citizens.



- ✚ The **antagonist** is Mr. Kelada who is a successful, businessman. His informality can perhaps be attributed to trying a little too hard to be liked and accepted.
- ✚ Minor Characters: Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the doctor.
- ✚ The characters are described by their appearance and characteristics, except for the narrator.
- ✚ In behavior Mr. Kelada is the double of Mr. Ramsay: both are dogmatic and cocksure. Physically, however, Mr. Kelada is a contrast to Mr. Ramsay. While Mr. Kelada is “short and of sturdy build”, Mr. Ramsay is a “great heavy fellow”. Their physical contrast is an expression of their contrasting mental and cultural attitudes.
- ✚ Mrs. Ramsay is not what she seems to be. Her quietness and outer appearance prove to be deceptive. Physically, Mrs. Ramsay is a contrast to her husband. While he is “a great heavy fellow with loose fat under his tight skin”, she is a “very pretty little thing.” Their physical contrast reveals their incompatibility – disharmony in their marriage.

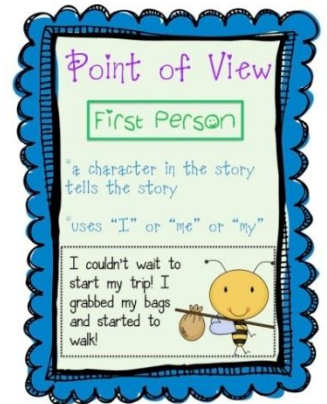
The Point of View

The story is told in the **first person** – the narrator sees everything and is a part of the plot.

In part one, where he meets with Mr. Kelada, the narrator is more active, and involved. He observes comments and judges Mr. Kelada as he sees him through his own eyes. Since he is influenced by his prejudiced British society, his judgments are subjective.

In part two, involving the necklace examination, the narrator is less involved. He is like a cameraman who takes photos and writes down what he hears objectively. After the chain examination is over, the narrator becomes subjective again.

In part three, the narrator discovers Mr. Kelada's true character. As a result, he undergoes a change – he realizes that people should not be judged by their looks but by their actions and character. It is the narrator who closes the story.



The Turning Point

Mr. Kelada and Mr. Ramsay have a heated argument about cultured pearls. This argument leads to the **turning point** of the story. Mr. Kelada, who is a pearl expert, examines Mrs. Ramsay's pearls. The minute he notices Mrs. Ramsay's pale face, he decides to declare that they are fake, although they are real. This is the **turning point (climax)** of the story since as a result of Mr. Kelada's declaration, the true nature of the characters is revealed.



Mrs. Ramsay is revealed as being unfaithful to her husband. When she was alone in New York for a year, she probably had a lover who gave her the expensive pearls.

Mr. Kelada, who has been considered a pushy, inconsiderate and vulgar person, turns out to be a real gentleman who saves Mrs. Ramsay's marriage.

The narrator undergoes a change. When he realizes that Mr. Kelada has endangered his reputation to save Mrs. Ramsay's marriage, he becomes aware that generalizations and stereotypes are not the right ways to judge people. **This is the moral lesson of the story.**

THE Central Themes in the Story

Prejudice – unreasonable feelings, opinions, or attitudes, especially of a hostile nature, regarding a racial, religious, or national group.

The major theme of the story is prejudice. From the very first paragraph, the narrator expresses his negative feelings about the man with whom he must share a cabin on the ship. He dislikes Mr. Kelada's name, his belongings, his appearance, his manners and even his pride in being British. When the narrator says that there are too many labels on Mr. Kelada's luggage it has a double meaning: First, Mr. Kelada travels a lot so there are labels from different ports on his suitcases. Second, people put labels on him so they are prejudiced and they have stereotypes about him.



Racism – the belief that some people are superior and others are inferior based on racial, religious or national group.

As the story develops, the narrator changes from referring to Mr. Kelada by name, to using the term "*Levantine*", which is an insult. This suggests that the narrator's prejudice against Mr. Kelada is an example of racism, which is supported by the fact that he also refers to Kelada's *oriental smile* and possible birth in Alexandria or Beirut.

Stereotype – a widely held, but fixed and oversimplified image or idea, of a particular type of person.

There are several symbols that represent the author's attitude towards prejudice:

- ✚ **The closed portholes** – These represent the close-mindedness of the narrator towards people from other societies.
- ✚ **The cabin** – On a boat people live in confined quarters (מגורים צפופים). The small living area represents the closed (small) mindedness that our narrator has when it comes to people of different backgrounds from his.
- ✚ **The labels on the suitcases** – While the labels on Mr. Kelada's suitcases tell us that he travels a lot, the labels also represent the labels (תוויות) that prejudiced people place on other people.

✚ **The suitcases** – These represent “the baggage” that people who seek to acclimate (להסתגל) into another culture carry with them. This baggage includes attitudes, behaviors and traditions that must be discarded if he wants to be accepted into closed-minded societies that demand uniformity (אחידות).

✚ **The large trunk, the toilet goods of Monsieur Coty, Max’s ebony brushes with monograms** – These are all items that belong to Mr. Kelada. They seem to point to a cultured man with proper economic standing (מעמד כלכלי). However, the narrator uses them to justify his prejudiced feelings regarding Mr. Kelada. No matter what the target of racial aggression is, the aggressor (תוקפן) will always look to find fault in the victim.



✚ **A lack of a name for the narrator** – The author does not name the narrator for a purpose: the racist narrator can be any one of us. We may all be guilty of judging people by stereotypes and generalizations rather than examining their true character and getting to know them as individuals. Thus, the moral lesson of the story is to avoid stereotypes and prejudices and to judge people as individuals.

The Title

The story is called "Mr. Know All" which is the nickname that the people on the ship give to Max Kelada. They do this in order to make fun of him because he believes that he is always right and knows everything better than anyone else. That is why it is so difficult for him, a pearl expert, to lie about the necklace saying he has made a mistake in thinking it is real. However, Max Kelada really is Mr. Know All for a few reasons. First, he is the only one who notices Mrs. Ramsay's scared face. Second, he realizes that she has a secret and doesn't want her husband to know that the pearls are real. Third, He knows how to behave as a perfect gentleman and is willing to lose his reputation in order to save her marriage. The narrator, on the other hand, who considers himself a real British gentleman, doesn't read between the lines to infer the reason for Mrs. Ramsay's pale face and clear distress. On the contrary, he misjudges her, thinking she is elegant and modest – the perfect little wife. He also misjudges Max Kelada, believing that he is not a British gentleman.

Irony

First, Mr. Kelada is forced to say that he is wrong about the pearls, when in fact pearls are the one thing he can truly be said to “know all” about. Second, Mr. Kelada, who is originally presented as a pushy person, concerned mainly with appearances, turns out to be sensitive, considerate and noble. However, Mrs. Ramsay, who is described as modest and possessing a quiet distinction, turns out to be an unfaithful wife.

Symbolism and Message

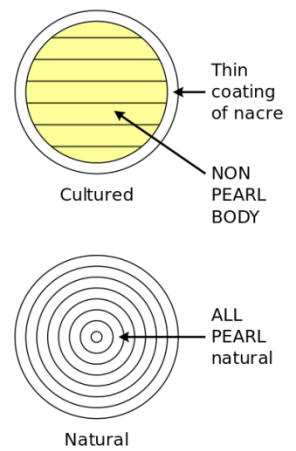
The bet made in the story is whether Mrs. Ramsay's chain was made of real (natural) pearls or imitation (cultured) pearls. Pearls are very rare and so they are very valuable. Around 1916, a few years before the setting of this story, the Japanese adopted a technique of 'helping' the shellfish to make the pearls and these became known as 'cultured' pearls. They were, of course, less valuable than the natural ones, but only real experts in the field could tell the difference just by looking at them.

The most important **symbol** in the story is the pearls. In Christian culture, pearls are associated with purity. Mrs. Ramsey, the owner of the pearls, is described as having godly attributes such as modesty and beauty. However, she was unfaithful and cheated on her husband and turns up to be fake. The pearls, on the other hand, appear to be fake and have no value, but are actually real and precious.

Mr. Kelada is portrayed as not being correct about the pearls; and thus, is a fake Mr. Know All. However, he is a real expert who knows to distinguish between real and fake.

The **message** of the story is that **looks can be deceiving and misleading**. We mustn't judge people according to stereotypes and preconceived prejudices. Maugham urges the readers to have open minds and to be willing to change their minds about preconceived notions.

This story exhibits the fact that first impressions can be misleading and that first appearances are often wrong. In other words, *Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover*.



PART C

HOTS in the Story

Distinguishing Different Perspectives

1. The different perspectives of the characters in the story. All the Westerners dislike Mr. Kelada and give him the nickname “Mr. Know All”. In spite of the fact that Mr. Kelada is jovial, hearty and sociable, the narrator criticizes him for being talkative, boring and obnoxious. What seems good and friendly to Mr. Kelada seems bad, pushy and vulgar to the Westerners.
2. The different perspectives the narrator presents at the beginning and at the end of the story.



Explaining Patterns – this HOTS helps us understand how the characters behave and why. Mr. Kelada and the narrator behave differently because they come from different cultures. That is, the narrator behaves like a snob because of the British culture he comes from, that's why he criticizes Mr. Kelada's behavior. Mr. Kelada, on the other hand, behaves in a pushy and over-friendly manner because of his culture. That's why he doesn't understand why the other passengers don't appreciate his efforts to organize all the social events on the ship.



Inferring - The story ends with an unanswered question. An envelope containing \$100 was pushed under Mr. Kelada's cabin door. It was addressed in block letters, so that no one would know who did it. Who left the envelope?

It is assumed that Mrs. Ramsey returned the envelope with the \$100 bill in order to make up for causing Mr. Kelada to look bad. Alternatively, the envelope could have been left by Mr. Ramsay after learning the truth about the necklace from his wife when he went back to their cabin the previous evening. In those days, \$100 would have been more than Ramsay's monthly salary. However, a truly honest man would have included \$200 in the envelope as Mr. Kelada should have won the bet.

