

Analysis of mr know
all written by william
somerset maugham
essay sample



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This is a story about culture, manners, first impressions, values and – most importantly of all – prejudice. Prejudice arises because it is human nature to stereotype new people we meet based on race or how they look before getting to know them. The message of the story can perhaps best be summed up in the English proverb: You should not judge a book by its cover.

The author of “ Mr. Know-All”, W Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was a popular English playwright, novelist and short story writer. Maugham is said to have been the highest paid author in the world during the 1930s. He travelled extensively, and was one of the best known writers of travel stories during the inter-war years. This story, which takes place on a ship, is one of those travel stories. The central theme is revealed in the opening paragraph.

From the start, the narrator expresses his prejudices against the man with whom he must share a cabin (Mr. Kelada). He dislikes Kelada’s name, his luggage, his appearance, his manners and even his pride in being British.

In this story the prejudice has nothing to do with class as the narrator and Kelada are sharing a cabin and so are travelling in the same passenger class. In fact, the narrator’s comments about the number of travel stickers on Kelada’s suitcases, the size of his wardrobe trunk, and his expensive toiletries and monogrammed brush suggest that the narrator may be jealous because Kelada appears to be either more wealthy or sophisticated than he is.

As the story develops, the narrator changes from referring to Kelada by name to using the term “ Levantine”. When Britain took over part of the Levant at the end of the First World War, some in the new government used the term “ Levantine” as an insult to local people of mixed Arab and

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European descent. This suggests that the narrator's prejudice against Mr. Kelada is racial, which is supported by the fact that he also refers to Kelada's "oriental smile" and the fact that Kelada may be from Alexandria or Beirut.

A suggestion I have seen on another website is that Maugham could be describing religious prejudice. At the time the story was written, the word Levant was apparently a code word used for being Jewish. Kelada's great pride, forceful personality, and description as being "dark-skinned, with a fleshy, hooked nose" all fit with what would have been the then stereotype of a Jewish merchant.

The climax of the story develops from an argument over pearls, and Kelada's claim that the newly developed cultured pearl industry would not reduce the value of those produced naturally. In this he is correct as nowadays natural pearls are very rare and very valuable. However, the cultured pearl industry has grown to be much larger than the natural pearl industry, and over 99% of the pearls sold around the world today are of the cultured variety.