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Narratives of Empire

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Hierarchies and Equality in
Marryat's *Mr. Midshipman Easy*

Mr. Midshipman Easy by Captain Frederick Marryat is a naval novel about the adventures of a young midshipman, Jack Easy. This novel is based on the escapades of Captain Marryat and his time sailing the high-seas. Marryat writes this story as a boy-adventure novel, and he infuses his own personal views throughout the novel with intentions to sway the readers to his ideals. Marryat's intentions to persuade the readers to accept his ideals is evident throughout the novel, and he even admits to this in Chapter XXI, as he says "And now we must be serious. We do not write these novels merely to amuse,--we have always had it in our view to instruct, and it must not be supposed that we have no other end in view than to make the reader laugh" (114). He attempts to influence people's views by making characters and material objects in the novel become the very embodiment of ideals he likes and dislikes. Though there are numerous topics that Marryat pursues, they are all a part of one overarching theme: equality versus hierarchy. This novel was written in the times of imperialism, and the theme of equality versus hierarchy connects to this ideology most explicitly throughout the novel. Throughout the novel, Marryat presents both themes of hierarchies and equality, however he doesn't remain objective in his portrayal of them. In *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, Marryat repeatedly presents equality

in a negative light, which affected how the novel was read by its intended audience and inevitably pushed the reader to embrace hierarchies and his imperialistic beliefs.

Marryat attempts to coerce the reader to embrace hierarchies by using the nature of his characters to convince the readers to accept his beliefs. In the text *The Literature of the Victorian Era*, the author, Hugh Walker, says “Marryat makes no pretense of profundity... but though his characters are not revelations, his habit of drawing from the life gives them a certain convincing naturalness which is often lacking in more ambitious studies” (642). At the start of the novel, he introduces Nicodemus Easy, a man who has taken up philosophy. Marryat describes Easy’s undertaking of philosophy as nonsense, and says that the nonsense Easy takes up is that of equality. In this novel, equality can be defined as everyone being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities. To Marryat equality is only embraced by nonsensical people. This statement is supported by remarks made in Patrick Brantlinger’s text *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Brantlinger states, “As with most other imperialist authors, Marryat’s politics were both conservative and authoritarian: democracy and equality were anathema to him” (31). These doctrines are quite noticeably displayed throughout the text. Marryat does this by making Nicodemus Easy’s philosophy of equality seem entirely abhorrent. He makes Easy seem foolish and by subconsciously triggering anger or abhorrence in the readers. At the beginning of chapter one, Marryat dismissively describes Easy’s philosophy as the “rights of man, equality, and all that.” There are a couple of different things going on in this seemingly innocent statement. First, the dismissive tone Marryat uses tells the reader that equality is something that should not be taken serious and that it is of little importance. This thought is exacerbated when Marryat says that “philosophy is said to console a man under disappointment”

and then says “although Shakespeare asserts that it is no remedy for toothache” (1). Shakespeare is a man who is greatly admired and lionized by people from any era after his, and by saying that a man as great as Shakespeare believes philosophy to be silly and has no application in the real, physical world would destroy positive feelings towards philosophy and equality. The other thing this sentence does is incite irritation. By saying “rights of man” Marryat is slyly referring to Thomas Paine and his text *Rights of Man*. *Rights of Man* is a text that contained ideals that were the core beliefs that started the American and French Revolutions. Both of these revolutions opened up advancements towards the common people, and, thereby, attacked hierarchies. Equality called for equal opportunity, position, and privilege for all. Hierarchies gave certain rights and better opportunities to the few, to those of a higher ranking status. So, these revolutions would be viewed as problematic for a society that is governed by hierarchies. The lost of British control of America gave Americans their current government system, which is based in the ideas of equality. This government system gave rights to the people, they weren't all governed by one body anymore. In the French Revolution, absolute monarchy and the feudal system were uprooted. Both of these revolutions brought with them equality. This would obviously invoke ill-will in the British, because, if equality spread to Britain it might mean the upheaval of their own system. This would take away power from those in higher positions, and the spread of equality would mean the possibility of advancement in the common people. Those of high status would be on the same level as the common people. So, the mentioning of this topic would invoke ill-will in people who saw the American and French Revolutions as a stand against and detrimental to England. By associating equality with Nicodemus's foolishness, Marryat

makes it more likely for the reader to detest Nicodemus' point of view, and willingly and happily embrace hierarchies.

Alongside Nicodemus Easy, Marryat uses the character Mesty as a way to negatively portray equality while making hierarchies appear favorable by comparison. In the latter half of the novel, when Jack returns home to find his house in disarray, he gives Mesty dominion over the servants employed under Nicodemus. Throughout the novel, it is Mesty's skill and thinking that is responsible for the success of Jack. So, Mesty being put in charge of the servants should be a good thing. He is closely tied to the hero of the novel. Mesty can even be seen as the actual hero of the novel because it is his skill that gets Jack and himself out of trouble, and it is his aid that pushes Jack to his success. Since, Nicodemus Easy hired the servants because of his beliefs in equality, Mesty being put in charge of them should paint equality in a good light because Mesty is integral to the beloved hero's success. Equality should be an upstanding ideal to embrace through this association. However, this is not the case. Marryat intentionally undercuts Mesty in such a way that putting him in charge of servants hired under the principle of equality makes equality seem entirely deplorable. One way Marryat undercuts Mesty is by making him African. During the time this novel was written, Africans were seen as savages who, by the will of God, could never be on the level of Victorians. So, Mesty could never be the hero of the novel in the eyes of the Victorians, and Marryat uses this piece of information to his advantage. This would inevitably affect the way the intended Victorian audience would read Mesty. Today, readers may see Mesty as the true hero, but in the time this novel was written Mesty would always be a savage. Marryat exacerbates Mesty's savageness to contribute to this way of thinking through the image of his sharpened teeth and broken English. This paints the image of

Mesty being on the level of a wild animal. Due to the fact that these “servants” have been employed under the notions of equality, Marryat implies that people who follow equality are so ignoble and inferior that they can be commanded by the likes of a savage African. This would incite negative feelings towards equality. No Englishman would want to follow a philosophy that could put an African over them. At this point in the novel Marryat depicts equality to be so inferior that the Victorian readers would much rather embrace hierarchies. However, it is towards the end of the novel where the reader is explicitly shown the horrendousness of equality. Near the end of the novel, it appears Nicodemus has completely gone insane, and Marryat points to equality as the culprit. Nicodemus has employed criminals to work in his house, he has not collected rent from his tenants, and he has created a contraption that supposedly shrinks or enlarges parts of the brain to produce desired effects. Nicodemus succumbs to his death by the very contraption at the end of the novel. Marryat paints a pretty harsh image of equality, implying that equality is only for the mentally inept and that this ineptness leads to death or at least great destruction of a good life. He uses Mesty and Nicodemus Easy as ways to portray equality as negative, which in turn depicts hierarchies as the only acceptable route.

While Nicodemus is the personification of equality, Marryat presents Jack as the personification of hierarchies. Jack is introduced as a pain of a baby who grows up to be a spoiled brat. However, he is painted as a courageous and brilliant boy by his parents and nurse, and is constantly referred to as the hero throughout the novel. In his article, *Romanticizing the Empire: The Naval Heroes of Southey, Coleridge, Austen, and Marryat*, Tim Fulford describes Marryat as “making officers into embodiments of the virtues thought necessary for command ... such as patriotism, self-reliance, courage, paternalism, and above all, attentiveness to duty. They

made them into heroes” (162). This is extremely evident in Jack, and, in this setting, Marryat uses this as a device to appeal to British sentiments. Jack being presented as an amazing child, being shown to grow into an intelligent and cunning young man, and then a successful adult endeared him to readers. He was an idol that the intended audience (young males) could look up to. Though Jack originally believed in hierarchies, he eventually discards his father’s equality and embraces hierarchies. By the end of the novel, he appears to have had a good and fulfilled life. The intended Victorian audience is led to believe that if they follow in Jack’s footsteps they too will be lionized and receive a good lot in life. Marryat displays hierarchies as being the path that leads to greatness.

As previously mentioned, Jack initially believes in the philosophy taught to him by his father, but at sea he goes through a transformation. His acceptance of equality is soon replaced by the ideals of hierarchies. He argues that equality is impossible and that a hierarchy is a must for the survival of society. Near the end of the novel, as Jack is in an argument with his father, he says

The most lasting and imperishable form of building is that of the pyramid, which defies ages, and to that may the most perfect form of society be compared. It is based upon the many, and rising by degrees, it becomes less as wealth, talent, and rank increase in the individual, until it ends at the apex, or monarch, above all. Yet each several stone from the apex to the base is necessary for the preservation of the structure, and fulfils its duty in its allotted place (Marryat 197).

Jack argues that equality is simply impossible. In the novel, Jack states “Equality can and does exist nowhere. We are told that it does not exist in heaven itself - how can it exist upon Earth?”

(Marryat 197). In this statement, Jack uses divine providence to strengthen his position more. Hierarchy, in this novel, is a system in which people/groups are ranked one above the other according to status or authority, and this status and authority, as seen in Jack's statement above, is ordained by God himself. It is here where Marryat makes his most fruitful arguments for hierarchies. He has Jack argue for the necessity of hierarchies with eloquence and conviction. The young Englishmen, who were this novel's target audience, were most likely idolizing Jack at this point in the story, so, having Jack, the courageous hero, argue for hierarchies led to the young boys wanting to follow in the footsteps of their new role-model. In *A New Spirit of The Age* by R.H Horne, Horne describes how Marryat is able to ensnare the readers in his beliefs through a connection with the characters. Horne writes on Marryat's books that "You become gradually intimate with them, and are affected at last by a pure sympathy in their way of life." Marryat gets the reader to make a positive connection between Jack and hierarchies, and by doing this he tactfully entranced people to embrace hierarchies over equality.

Besides the use of characters like Jack and Nicodemus Easy to present his beliefs, Marryat himself acts as a way to portray hierarchies as desirable compared to equality. Marryat wrote adventure novels that were widely read by the youth. Marryat's adventure novels were very popular, and to the people who read them they spoke of astounding journeys and immense glory. Marryat's high-seas promised an escape from school and home-life. In the novel, education is portrayed to be this evil entity where children are prisoners. It is understandable why people would look to the sea for escape. Sea life promised adventure, pride, and honor. This allowed imperialism to be shown in this angelical light and become something that brought a person immense honor. The young people who read this novel were the same people who were

joining the army. So, to see characters like Jack Easy who went out to sea, had amazing and memorable adventures, earned honor and valor, and then inherited a large fortune by the end of the novel showed readers that if they aspired to be like Jack they might obtain the same things. In *The Victorian Age of English Literature* by Margaret Oliphant, it is expressed that Marryat's "delightful books of adventure have been the treasure of many generations of boyd, few of whom have renounced their allegiance to him" (291). Marryat not only used the adventure novel to capture the minds and hearts of readers, but, by being a captain and sea-faring man himself, he became a role-model to these young men. Mark Splika, in his article *Victorian Keys to the Early Hemingway: Captain Marryat*, quotes Joseph Conrad as describing Marryat as "the enslaver of youth, not by the natural glamour of his own temperament . . . His novels are not the outcome of his art but of his character, like the deeds that make up his record of naval service" (123). Marryat's personal story of overcoming battles and being wounded at sea added to the image of him being a superhero. He was a figure who actually lived out the stories in his novels, and this went a long way in endearing him to fans. This is another way in which Marryat expertly persuaded people to embrace imperialism. He was a lionized figure that young men looked up to, and reading his novels showed them the way to be just like him. In the novel, the narrator says "There certainly is a peculiar providence in favor of midshipmen, they have more lives than a cat - always in the greatest danger, but always escaping from it" (Marryat 92). Marryat implies that imperialism was ordained by God, and that the the people who followed it are basically invincible.

As seen thus far, Marryat uses numerous tools to manipulate how hierarchies and equality are read by the audience, which ultimately allows him to sway the reader to adopt his beliefs.

Marryat associates hierarchies with the favorable hero Jack Easy, on the other hand, he associates equality with the foolish Nicodemus Easy. Marryat purposefully presents equality as negative and hierarchies as positive, which, consequently, affects how the novel and the ideals are read. The readers are forced to embrace hierarchies because they are better than the alternative: equality. In actuality, both hierarchies and equality are both valuable. Hierarchies allow for structure and rules to be upheld. They allow for control over an environment (a country, state, etc) to be maintained. For example there is a hierarchy of power in the United states; where the branches of government are over regular citizens. These branches enforce laws that keep order and minimizes crime. However, equality makes sure the branches are equal in power so the President, for instance, doesn't become a dictator. Equality also allows for all citizens to have the same rights, so there is less of a chance that there will be unfair treatment between groups, or for one group to have more power than another. By remaining subjective in his portrayal of both hierarchies and equality, he doesn't allow for the reader to decide for themselves which side to choose or not choose.

In conclusion, this book, at first, appears to be a novel about adventure and the high seas, but it is not. The underlying theme of equality vs. hierarchies is immediately made apparent. Marryat deliberately characterizes equality as detestable while he simultaneously characterizes hierarchies as favorable. By doing this, Marryat succeeds in manipulating his intended audience to believe that equality is bad and hierarchies are good. Underneath the veneer of an adventure novel, is Marryat's attempts to implant his thoughts and beliefs into the minds of the reader, which inevitably sways the reader to embrace hierarchies and imperialism.

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