

## Paradigms of Relationships: Materialism over Morality in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*

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**Abstract.** The first and greatest of all ballad-operas, is John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, written in 1728, wherein, he portrays an English society, which is drenched in the idea of self-interest and their growing love for materialism. Here in the play, with the presentation of pictures of immoralities and treacheries of highwaymen, Gay is actually mocking at the society in which the value system doesn't work and the morality, if any, is guarded by the woman alone; a society where everyone enjoys liberties, but no one wants to have responsibilities; a society where power-play of the 'masculine' eventually victimizes the 'feminine'. *The Beggar's Opera* received attention and approbation for suggesting contradictions between the morality and materialism. Ballad-opera is a satirical form of literature. The play, thus, satirizes legality on the one hand and criminality on the other. It depicts how the characters are loaded with their self-interest and lack being humane.

**Keywords :** Ballad-Opera; materialism; morality; self-interest; widowhood; relationship.

The introduction of the play features the Beggar and the Player who directly address to the audience. The Beggar explains that he originally wrote this story to celebrate the marriage of two ballad-singers. The Beggar then further states that his opera utilizes Nature-simile, his opera includes a prison scene and the female roles receive equal stage time as the males. He says that the only contemporary feature that he has omitted is the use of a prologue and an epilogue. The Player then assures the audience that the Beggar's work should be judged on the artistic merit and not on the appearance of the author as the Muses pay no attention to fine clothing. This also reflects the discriminations faced by the authors and their works on the basis of social hierarchies.

The plot of the play revolves around Peachum, his family and Macheath. Peachum, a criminal himself, who manages a syndicate of highwaymen is also a receiver of stolen goods and carries a side business of informing against his own clients. He examines which crooks he should betray and which he should save for his own profit :

Let Betty Sly know that I'll save  
Her from transportation, for I  
Can get more by her staying in  
England. (*The Beggar's Opera*, 3)

Mr. Peachum has connections with the local government and courts because he is of a higher class than that of the thieves. He and Mrs. Peachum disbelieve in the idea of marriage. Their pretty daughter Polly Peachum falls in love with Captain Macheath, a highwayman who has an easy access with women. Polly, against the wishes of her parents marries Macheath on the one hand and reassures her father on the other that she is merely playing with Macheath for goods and gifts. Mr and Mrs. Peachum welcome the idea of courtships of their daughter with many for their own profits, while they are against the idea of marriage; for marriage according to them is, "not a profitable business" (6), until one becomes a widow to celebrate widowhood, with the property of the husband passes to his widow.

Peachum is furious to know about the marriage of Polly and Macheath and hence finds a way to turn the marriage into their financial advantage by securing Macheath's death. However, Polly overhears the conversation and Macheath is not murdered but arrested and sent to Newgate Prison, where we come to know about Lucy, another wife of Macheath. The real face of Macheath is now known to the audience. Lucy is the daughter of Lockit, the warder. A fierce conflict between the two wives- Polly and Lucy follows, where Lucy even executes an unsuccessful plan to poison Polly which however, she couldn't.

On the contrary, despite her jealousy and Macheath's betrayal Lucy helps Macheath to escape from the prison. But Macheath is arrested again to be hanged. While both, Lucy and Polly ask for mercy from their fathers to save Macheath. In the last scene, we see that Macheath has been pardoned and is saved from hanging. Macheath, in his high spirits finally chooses Polly as his wife. Here, sexuality and morality do not go together which is a huge blow to the Eighteenth 18<sup>th</sup> century society.

The sordid self-interest and the nasty swagger which is rooted in the society is presented as an ironic commentary on the social relations among the people of Gay's time. Mr. Peachum and his wife are drenched in the idea of self-interest. When it is known that Polly would marry Macheath out of love, much to their disagreement, eventually, Peachum finds a way to turn this marriage into profitability :

I tell you, wife, I can make this  
match turn to our advantage.(12)

Mrs. Peachum is no less. She agrees with Mr. Peachum in every decision that he makes. She too seems to be quite happy with the prospect of Macheath's murder, post Polly's marriage with him :

Ay, husband, now you have nicked the matter. To  
have him peached is the only thing could ever make  
me forgive her. (14)

Polly is a young girl, who can take her own decisions, but we find the selfishness of her parents taking the centre stage. Mr. Peachum and his wife strongly deny that marriage is a pious relation. Upon learning that Polly is marrying Macheath, Mr. Peachum goes up to the level of calling his own daughter a 'wench', a 'slut'. He then asks her to reconsider her thoughts and suggests :

Do you think your mother and I should have lived  
comfortably so long together if ever we had been  
married? (9)

He gives Polly an example of his own relations with Polly's mother; where he has not married Mrs. Peachum, still lived in harmony together. The whole institution of marriage and morality is shaken and it does not become a battle between our morality and that of the morality of the characters of the play. Every time we laugh at something, there is an essence that makes us think and disturb us. In yet another scene, Peachum is adamant about Polly spilling the beans about her marriage :

What is the wench, dumb? Speak, or I shall make  
you plead by squeezing out an answer from you.  
Are you really bound wife to him or are you only  
upon liking? (10)

It is clearly not that Mr. Peachum is a worried father, since, her only daughter is marrying no one respectable, but a highwayman Macheath; it is in the sheer interest of fortune that he is in the sheer interest of fortune that he is disheartened to know, they could not have Polly plaguing someone's life for their own good. Peachum further states :

There are not many husbands and wives, who can  
bear the charges of plaguing one another in a  
handsome way. If you must be married, could you  
introduce nobody into our family but a  
highwayman? Why, thou, foolish jade, thou wilt  
be as ill-used, and as much neglected, as if thou  
hads't married a Lord. (10)

We hence know, that Mr. Peachum and his wife disbelieve in the idea of marriage. But, quite shockingly, they welcome the idea of courtships. The paradigms of relationships are questioned and only self-interest of the characters remains the answer. Shocked by Polly's decision to marry, Mr. Peachum reflects :

If the girl had the discretion of a court lady, who  
can have dozen young fellows at her ear without  
complying with one, I should not mind it, But Polly  
is tender and a spark will at once set her on a flame.  
Married! My daughter to me should be, like a court  
lady to a minister of state, a key to the whole gang!  
(6)

The people, as projected by Gay, in his play, were opportunistic, and so was Mr. Peachum. Even though, he knew that Polly loved Macheath, all he was concerned was about his own gains. He not only yells at Polly, but also, warns Mrs. Peachum how she should have concentrated on the upbringing of Polly, so Polly could be of some use to them :

But 'tis your duty my dear, to warn the girl against  
her ruin, and to instruct her how to make the most  
of her beauty. (7)

We can hence, affirm, that rather than believing in the purity of marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Peachum welcomed the idea of courtships, solely, because of their own self-interest. It is here, that we can witness their growing love for materialism.

John Gay also satirizes the morality of eighteenth century England, by glorifying the idea of widowhood. In the play, the pious and lovable relationship of a husband and wife is over-shadowed by self-interest when Peachum asks his daughter Polly to either part ways with the idea of marrying Macheath or enjoy widowhood. He thus announces :

The comfortable estate of widowhood is the only  
hope that keeps up a wife's spirit. Where is the  
woman who would scruple to be a wife, If she had  
it in her power to be a widow whenever she  
pleased? If you have any views of this sort, Polly,  
I shall think the match not so very reasonable. (14)

This indicates that husband-wife relationship according to him, is not based upon the values of love and trust, instead widowhood is celebrated.

The little morality, if any, is carried by Polly Peachum. All through the play, she tries hard to find a sordid balance between Mr. Peachum and the love of her life, Macheath. When questioned by her parents, if union between Macheath and her would lead them to any profitability, she humbly refuses :

I did not marry him, coolly and deliberately  
for honour or money. But, I love him. (11)

She then tries to explain herself further through the lines :

Can be controlled by advice?  
Will Cupid our mothers obey?  
Though my heart were as frozen as ice,  
At his flame, 'twould have melted away. (10)

When Mr. Peachum, cunning as he is, still tries to make profit over their marriage and realizes killing Macheath after Polly's marriage would eventually, serve his purpose, Polly quickly repudiates :

But I love him, Sir...How then could I have  
thoughts of parting with him? (13)

Polly, with all her might, pleads Mr. Peachum not to kill Macheath :

What is a jointure, what is a widowhood to  
me? I know my heart. I cannot survive him. (14)

Polly, here, pleads the life of Macheath and affirms if Macheath dies, she too, won't be able to survive. Polly is ethical, and knows what is right.

Macheath, a highwayman, Polly falls in love with, has a questionable morality. He is no different from Mr. Peachum in his ideas of marriage and relationships but little does Polly know about him :

What signifies a promise to a woman? Does not  
man in marriage itself promise a hundred things  
that he never means to perform? Do all we can,  
woman will believe us; for they look upon a promise  
as an excuse for following their inclinations. (28)

It is later, in the play, that we come across the fact that Macheath is already married to Lucy; this love for Lucy or even for Polly is a lie. Macheath is interested in women and thinks of them as his possessions; there lies no values in what he thinks of them :

I must have women. There is nothing unbends  
the minds like them. Money is not so strong a  
cordial for the time. (22)

For Macheath, women are nothing more than 'charming mistresses'. (23)

Macheath's morality is questionable again, when he casts aspersions on Polly, just to be in the good-books of Lucy, his another wife, whose father happens to be a jailor :

The wench gives it out only to vex thee, and to ruin  
me in thy good opinion. 'Tis true I go to the house,  
I chat with the girl, I kiss her, I say a thousand  
things to her (as all gentlemen do) that mean nothing,  
to divert myself and now the silly jade hath, set it  
about that I am married to her. (29)

Macheath tries his best to win Lucy, yet again, only for his own self-interest of embracing his freedom again and in the process, he asserts :

I am naturally compassionate, wife; so that I  
could not use the wench as she deserved; which  
made you at first suspect there was something  
in what she said. (37)

We find symbolic implications in the characters of the play. Macheath is notorious for his philandering ways and is also a womanizer. He has his own interests and follows his own ways. Gay has used Macheath as a reflection of the then Prime Minister, Robert Walpole. Here in, opera about a highwayman and his mistress, Gay presented a picture of the world of politics and high society; the immoralities and vices of highwaymen, 'crooks were no different from those of their so called Betters'. The difference was only one of the social classes. We see all sorts of social and political parallels in between Gay's plot and the Life of his time. Macheath, the protagonist of the play gives us glimpses of the lasciviousness of the aristocracy. The play depicts a society where the Lawyers stood as an epitome of legality whereas, the highwaymen depicted criminality.

Polly goes to the Newgate prison and witnesses Lucy there. The two get into a fierce conflict. Despite the fact that Macheath had betrayed Lucy and that Lucy was jealous of Polly; Lucy decides to help Macheath. She executes a plan to get the keys to Macheath's freedom :

My father, I know, hath been drinking hard  
with the prisoners and I fancy he is now taking  
his nap in his own room- if I can procure the  
keys, shall I go off with thee, my dear ? (37)

Lucy is morale and values relationships. She acknowledges :

When a woman loves, a kind look, a tender word  
can persuade her to anything, and I could ask no  
other bribe. (40)

We may affirm that Polly and Lucy are the only moral pillars of the play. They may rightly be acknowledged as the morality police.

Despite his betrayal Casanova image, it is Macheath, who gets to decide who he wants to marry? Materialistic as he always was, Macheath chooses Polly over Lucy since he believes Mr.Peachum would now favour him;and Lucy ceases to be of any use now. John Gay also suggests the pitiful condition of women of his times, through his female characters. The women despite morality and ethics, had hardly any say before the men. Their values, if at all any, were only in the terms of their physical beauty, their charisma :

Tis woman that seduces all mankind,  
By her we first were taught the wheedling arts;  
Her very eyes can cheat; when most she's kind,  
She tricks us of our money with our hearts.  
For her,like wolves by night we roam for prey,  
And practise ev'ry fraud to bribe her charms;  
For suits of love, like law, are won by pay,  
And beauty must be fee'd into our arms.(3)

Here, Filch states that men first learn the art of trickery from women; a woman's kindness is but a device used especially to ensure a man's love. However, this concept in itself is very intimidating. Peachum announces :

Gamesters and highwaymen are generally very  
good to their whores, but they are very devils to  
their wives. (6)

These lines trigger the manifesto of women's identity and status in the eighteenth century society and Gay faintly hints on their social neglect.

The morality of highwaymen and that of Macheath is questioned yet again. In a tavern near Newgate, Jem, tries to justify his profession of being a highwayman; he tries to justify looting and robbing and Gay suggests, the eighteenth century society has no remorse for what they do- bad or evil :

Are we more dishonest than the rest of mankind ?  
What we win, gentleman, is our own by the law of  
arms, and the right of conquest. (19)

The use of irony and poetical airs also add up to the effect of satire and question morality in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Macheath states, "A pistol is your last resort". (21) Macheath himself is a highwayman and when he says this, we find it very ironical. We also find it quite ironical that the most philosophical lines are being said by thieves and robbers. The dialogues and situations give us a brilliantly vivid picture of the underworld of London, morality of the society and also the paradigms of relationships.

A comedy has a resolution of triumph of good over evil. Though Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* has a happy ending when a womanizer like Macheath is given the right to choose a wife for himself. Despite all his crimes, he is pardoned and even declares Polly as his wife over Lucy and others. This makes a happy-ending for the play but this end doesn't make us happy as well. The author with merry cynicism twists the plot into a happy ending to prevent the work from turning into a tragedy. It is just breaking the norms of a justified end and in this way the end is not justified. The end is meant to stir us by stirring our conscience and by doing this, Gay satirizes and hence mocks the relationship and morality prevalent in 18<sup>th</sup> century society.

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#### **Work Cited**

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