

CHAPTER - IV

Point Counter Point

I

Point Counter Point (1928) is a milestone in the literary career of Aldous Huxley. His earlier concerns reach their climax in this novel where he attempts to point out the ills of the 1920's in a cynical and detached way, yet there are obvious signs of a growing seriousness of attitude. Point Counter Point is regarded as the author's most ambitious and successful work and it differs from the earlier novels in its ending also. For the novel ends on a note of suffering, death and remorse.

According to Jocelyn Brooke, Point Counter Point is one of Huxley's " most perfectly constructed " novels.<sup>1</sup> Even Huxley himself has expressed a preference for it as being 'the most complete and the most solid'.

The theme of the novel is announced in the quotation from Fulke Greville on the page following the title-page, particularly in the last couplet :

What meaneth nature by these diverse laws,  
Passion and reason, self-division's cause?

The novel is a study in frustration, the frustration

brought about by the conflict between passion and reason. According to Huxley, two thousand years of Christianity had resulted only in self-division. Men had attempted to live in obedience to a repressive ethic instead of in accordance with natural law. And what was the result ? Not innocent joy or happiness, not peace and love, but violence, hypocrisy, lechery, sadism and perversion. Man's foolish attempt to deny the validity of the senses and pretend that he is a spiritual being has condemned him to wretchedness and self-destruction. Some half a dozen characters are chosen to represent the various forms of self-division and they are studied in their reactions to sex. All <sup>are</sup> ~~the~~ condemned and none achieves happiness.

" In Point Counter Point each character embodies a temperament or intellectual position prominent after the first world war ", says Richard Eastman, " Accordingly each has made an idol of some particular ingredient of personality : e.g. animal sensuality, analytical intellect, lust for power, class consciousness etc. There is no obvious central story line. Instead, Huxley's people drift into collisions which test and usually intensify their positions." 2

Walter Bidlake, a journalist and a literary critic, is a young man, intellectually idealistic, but emotionally corporeal. He has met Marjorie Carling, an

unfortunate wife of a drunkard, and persuaded her to be his mistress. After a few months of living together he finds her to be boring and over-sensitive and falls violently in love with Lucy Tantamount, the daughter of an aristocrat as well as a gay and detached pleasure-seeker, who enjoys his company for a brief and then goes to Paris where she is involved in a new affair. Thus Walter is led to frustration. His political opinions are advanced, but he dislikes the working classes. He is essentially a romanticist :

" Honour, fidelity - these were good things. But the personal major premiss of his present philosophy was that Lucy Tantamount was the most desirable." 3

Through the portrayal of this romantic figure Huxley tries to prove that passion divorced from reason makes life a mockery.

The other character revealing the theme of self-division in the novel is Philip Quarles, a young novelist belonging to a rich family and married to Elinor, Walter's sister. He is self-divided between intellectual perception and practical adjustment. Elinor, who finds it difficult to share his intellectuality, makes futile attempts to get him involved

in other women so that he can accept the actualities of life as they come. Her next attempt to destroy his coldness is to increase her intimacies with Everard Webley, a Fascist, whom she really dislikes for his hollow and theatrical behaviour. Still she arranges a quiet meeting with him in her house in London, but has to cancel it as she receives a telegram about her son's serious illness and has to go to her parents with whom little Phil lives. Later on Phil dies and Webley is murdered.

Spandrell is another important and most vividly drawn character. According to Jocelyn Brooke he is "a modern incarnation of Baudelaire" as "the Baudelairean situation is reproduced almost exactly"<sup>4</sup> - the child's adoration for the widowed mother, the mother's remarriage to an elderly Army Officer, the boy's revulsion and his subsequent cult for debauchery and the 'artificial paradises' of drugs and alcohol. Yet Spandrell is not a mere echo of Baudelaire for he represents an aspect of Mr. Huxley himself - the perpetually recurring conflict, between sensuality and asceticism. In case of Spandrell the conflict is presented in its extremest and most perverse form: debauchery has become a moral compulsion, a prolonged and unremitting protest against the mother's defection; Spandrell is filled with a passionate hatred not only for all moral values but even for the beauties

of nature.

" I was with debauchery that he distracted his endless leisures. He was taking his revenge on her, on himself also for having been so foolishly happy and good. He was spiting her, spiting himself, spiting God." (p.299).

It is he who makes Illidge, a laboratory assistant of Lord Edward Tantamount, murder Webley. For " Illidge too is a self-divided character. His communism conflicts with his science, as well as with his natural feelings. The outcome is political murder."<sup>5</sup>

The other characters represent the counterpoint of the theme. Burlap seeks happiness in his hypocrisy and is simultaneously a worshipper of poverty, Mammon and Venus. Mrs Janet Bidlake seeks refuge in art while religion is the solace for Mrs. Rachael Quarles.

Among the self-divided characters only Mark Rampion, the life - worshipper, said to represent D.H. Lawrence, achieves wholeness. He is a vitalist and sees life steadily and as a whole. According to him, the western civilization suffers from the triple disease of sentimentalism, materialism and industrialism. He describes it thus :

" It's the disease of modern man. I call it Jesus's disease..... Or rather Jesus's and

Newton's disease; for the scientists are as much responsible as the Christians. So are the big businessmen, for that matter. It's Jesus's and Newton's and Henry Ford's disease. Between them, the three have pretty well killed us. Ripped the life out of our bodies and stuffed us with hatred."(pp.161-162).

He believes :

" Civilization is harmony and completeness..... You can be a barbarian of the intellect as well as of the body. A barbarian of the soul and feelings as well as of sensuality. Christianity made us barbarians of the soul and now science is making us barbarians of the intellect." (p.144).

The idea of wholeness is the answering theme to " Passion and reason, self-division's cause." It is from the interweaving of the two themes that the counter-point of ideas in the novel is built up.

A special technique described as " the musicalization of fiction " enables Huxley to modulate from one key theme to another from the physiochemical aspect of things, from the religious to the physiological. In this way he conveys a simultaneous impression of the whole image of society. He has made Philip Quarles, a novelist character in the novel, expose his ideas in his notebook:

" All you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel contrapuntal plots. While Jones

is murdering a wife, Smith is wheeling a perambulator in the park. You alternate the themes. More interesting the modulations and variations are also more difficult. A novelist modulates by reduplicating situations and characters. He shows several people falling in love, or dying, or praying in different ways, dissimilarly solving the same problem. Or vice versa, similar people confronted with dissimilar problems. In this way you can modulate through all the aspects of your theme, you can write variations in any number of moods."(p.408).

The technique is already echoed in Huxley's early novels. While conversing with Jenny Mullion in Crome Yellow Denis himself remarks that their thoughts run along parallel lines with no possibility of ever meeting (Crome Yellow, p.19) . In Antic Hay we come across the counterpointing of the conversations of Gumbril's friends with the account of the " black bundle's " and her husband's wretched existence (Antic Hay, pp.61-66). In Those Barren Leaves there is already one section of the book which is structured according to this method - namely Part III " The Loves of the Parallels".

" Point Counter Point, however, is a full orchestration, with an entire complement of instruments ", says Peter Firchow, " which enables Huxley to present a more accurate and thorough transcription of his understanding of the human condition than was hitherto possible." 6

Each character is like an instrument in an orchestra - an equation Huxley specifically makes - which takes up at various points one or another of these themes and " plays it according to the properties peculiar to its construction, or, in different terms, according to the limitations of the character's own individual conception of reality." <sup>7</sup>

The total effect of Point Counter Point is one of bitter disillusionment with society. In it he discharges a quiverful of spleen at his contemporaries many of whom appear but lightly disguised. Mark Rampion is obviously, a sympathetic portrait of D.H. Lawrence, and his courtship of Mary Rampion parallels Lawrence's of his wife Frieda von Richthofen. Burlap is a recreation of Middleton Murry. Beatrice in her relationship with Burlap is slightly disguised Katherine Mansfield. Quarles himself is a spokesman for Huxley, while Spandrell is perhaps modelled on a Baudelaire-like figure.

Point Counter Point is the best illustration of the novel of ideas. It is very rich in its ideas.

" To be appropriate to one's age is well enough, but to be only appropriate is to write at the temperature of journalism rather than of literature ", says Alexander Henderson, "Peacock



suffers from this defect..... But Huxley has gone far beyond anything Peacock could do. His satire of fashionable ideas is far sharper, because he sees them, not as mere floating conceptions which can be symbolized by a farcical name but as something incorporated into the lives of men and women....." <sup>8</sup>

"His Illidge is a communist, but he is also a man with inferiority complex, driven by it to murder. His Everard Webley is a Fascist, but also a man in love." <sup>9</sup> Only one character in the novel is slightly monstrous and that is Rampion. We are shown so little of Rampion's private, personal life, in proportion to the number of times he propounds his doctrine, that now and then he ceases to be a real person and becomes a gramophone record.

## II

In Huxley's early novels, his female characters were types and had a puppet-like appearance. Most of them were pleasure-seekers who tried to escape into different illusions, but their attempts brought them mere boredom and frustration as if they had pursued only the mirages and nothing else. Still almost all of them were typical figures, slightly different from one another in some aspects and somewhat monstrous in their appearance.

But in Point Counter Point Huxley has shown his

ability in presenting a marvellous gallery of female figures. Most of them embody certain attitudes to life and help Huxley to give a multiple vision of life. Through different points of view they appreciate life in different aspects. If we read the novel quite keenly and carefully, we see that Huxley uses a systematic pattern in the depiction of these female characters. Lucy Tantamount represents a negative approach to life, while Mary Rampion stands for the positive one. The rest of the women characters are placed between these two points.

Lucy Tantamount, a young beautiful girl, born in a rich aristocratic family of the Edwards, is a typically Huxleyan *femine fatale*, though less perfectly characterized than some of her predecessors in Huxley's Early novels ( Anne Wimbush in Crome Yellow and Myra Viveash in Antic Hay ).

Being a widow of Henry Tantamount Lucy always puts on a mourning dress - less because of her sorrow for her dead husband than with an intention to increase her charm and beauty. In the novel she is sensuality incarnate.

Because of her chronic dread of solitude, Lucy is shown always in pursuit of someone's company. She prefers public life to loneliness. 'The more the merrier' is the principle of her life, For her,

" it was always possible, if one sat up another five minutes, that something really amusing might happen " (p.182).

Hence she needs some cavalier servants in constant attendance. What she wants is someone's dog-like fidelity to her. Hence we see her often objecting to being dominated, to following instead of leading. In this aspect she resembles Spandrell : what she likes is to dominate, to be the leader. That is why, her love-affair with Spandrell couldnot last for more than a month. She uses her lovers like toys with whom she can play for some time and then throw away. Molly comments upon her nature :

" I like the way she floats through life instead of trudging. I like the way she flits from flower to flower. Doing a good deal of damage to the flowers, I must admit. .... But getting nothing but fun out of it herself" (p.123).

Throughout the novel Lucy is posed as a hard, ruthless amusement-hunter. She says to Spandrell " I merely try to amuse myself "(p.211). She pursues her pleasure as a man pursues his, remorselessly, single-mindedly, without allowing her thoughts and feelings to be in the least involved. She uses young men and slave-holds them for her entertainment. As she is interested

merely in fun and amusement, she never cares for morality or love. She has enjoyed a number of love-affairs in her life and left them as soon as she ceased to enjoy their company. According to Spandrell she is like " a born bad angel " (p.211), while Elinor comments on her sensuality,

" Lucy..... has the masculine detachment. She can separate her appetite from the rest of her soul "(p.401).

Her constant visits to theatres, music-halls and hotels in the company of both cultured and uncultured persons throw light on her hedonism.

Another notable feature in Lucy's character is her detachment and aloofness, that is inherited by her from her father along with her scientific curiosity and her love of experimentation with human beings. In the novel she enjoys Walter's company, but never cares for his fidelity. On the other hand, she mocks at his dog-like fidelity. She uses him merely for enjoyment and never allows herself to be involved in him. It is quite obvious in the following passage :

" She wanted to be herself, Lucy Tantamount, in full command of the situation, enjoying herself consciously to the last limit, ruthlessly having her fun; free not only

financially and legally, but emotionally too - emotionally free to have him or not to have him. To drop him as she had taken him, at any moment, whenever she liked. She had no wish to surrender herself " (p.278).

That is why, Lucy delights in tormenting Walter's sentimentalism, mocking at his romanticism and playing with his feelings as if he were her victim. The last letter sent by her from Paris reveals her zest for pleasure-seeking and shatters his world of emotions.

Lucy's philosophy of life is well expressed in her own words :

" Living modernly is living quickly. You can't cart a waggan-load of ideals and romanticisms about with you these days. When you travel by aeroplane, you must leave your heavy baggage behind. The good old-fashioned soul was all right when people lived slowly, But it's too ponderous now-a-days. There's no room for it in the aeroplane..... You can't get something for nothing. If you like speed, if you want to cover the ground, you can't have luggage. The thing is to know what you want and to be ready to pay for it. I know exactly what I want; so I sacrifice the luggage " (pp.282-283).

Through the affair of Lucy and Walter, Huxley

is given a provision of a dramatic episode of the clash between sensuality and sentiment. It is quite important to know that though Lucy's hedonistic attitude to life makes her resemble Anne and Mrs Viveash, she differs from them in the fact that she is never bored or tired of her way of life. On the other hand, she enjoys it fully, without any regret or remorse.

Lucy Tantamount plays a negative role in the novel as a hedonist, while the character of Marjorie Carling is portrayed for the purpose of depicting the consequences of modernistic and advanced approach to life.

As a wife of a drunken scoundrel, Marjorie has suffered a lot in her life. She is rescued from her misery by Walter Bidlake for whose sake she leaves her husband and later lives with him as his mistress for about two years. The consequences of her freedom are shown in a dramatic manner when she becomes pregnant and at the same time is shocked to know that Walter is no more interested in her, but has fallen madly in love with Lucy Tantamount. Moreover, not being his wife, she is never invited to parties where Walter goes. Thus she is caught in a whirlpool of mental pains and

deep sorrow. For him her sacrifice and love are like blackmail. For

" she had done what he had asked her, she had given up everything, accepted social discomfort for his sake. Another piece of blackmail. She blackmailed him with sacrifice "  
(p.5).

Thus Marjorie with her 'ugliness, sickness and fatigue' suffers the serious consequences of the hedonistic way of life.

At the same time, Marjorie, like others in the novel, is a self-divided character swaying between culture and natural feelings. As she is superficially cultured, she believes in self-pride and the code of amorous honour. She is a woman of some firm principles in her life. Her belief in self-control is one of these principles. In the very opening chapter of the novel when Walter is preparing to go to a party, her self-division is well-presented :

"'Not later than the midnight'. She might have reminded him of the time when he never went out in the evenings without her.... but she wouldn't; it was against her principles; she didn't want to force his love in any way "  
(p.5).

Later on she says :

" 'Half-past twelve'..... But she couldnot prevent herself from speaking. She loved him too much, she was too agonizingly jealous. The words broke out in spite of her principles " (p.5).

Marjorie's intellectuality is presented in terms of her thoughts about her pregnancy. Her utter consciousness of and scientific brooding over it makes her more and more distressed and afraid. The following passages illustrate Marjorie's predicament :

" Six months from now her baby would be born. Something that had been a single cell, a cluster of cells, a little sac of tissue, a kind of worm, a potential fish with gills, stirred in her womb and would one day become a man...." (p.2).

".....but Marjorie was conscious only of sickness and lassitude; the mystery for her meant nothing but fatigue and ugliness and a chronic anxiety about the future, pain of the mind as well as discomfort of the body. .... She dreaded the pains, she dreaded the inevitable difficulties and embarrassments. .... Pain and discomfort - that was all the future held " (p.3).

The thoughts of darkness, loneliness and death and her feeling of herself as 'a dog in a ditch, alone' are the outcome of her intellectual brooding.



Later on, Huxley makes her seek refuge in religiosity that makes her a little less banal than when we first meet her.

Lady Edward Tantamount is a typical aristocratic socialite whom we have already met in Huxley's early fiction in the guise of Mrs Wimbush (Crome Yellow) and Mrs Aldwinkle (Those Barren Leaves). Like them she plays a significant role of getting together a variety of people by arranging grand parties at her mansion-like home and thus enables the novelist to introduce a number of persons having a multiplicity of attitudes.

Like the elitist ladies in the early novels, Lady Edward Tantamount is fond of social blunders. Hedonism and moral laxity are the characteristic features of her character. What strikes dominantly in her nature is her shrewdness, which is reflected in her marriage to Lord Edward, a man with a large property, but childish in spite of his physical growth. Even in her love-affair with John Bidlake

" She never lost her head. If she had lost her head, she might have lost the Tantamount House and the Tantamount millions and the Tantamount title as well. .... So she kept her head.... like a rock above the waves "  
(p.29).

and thus keeps her social position very safe. Though undeveloped and somewhat flat, this sketch of Lady Tartamount is drawn with remarkable skill and insight.

Beatrice Gilray is another embodiment of the hedonistic approach to life. This 35-year-old lady, an assistant of Burlap on the *Literary World*, is deliberately introduced by Huxley in order to throw a revealing light on Burlap's hypocrisy and shrewdness. Moreover, there is a suggestion of an ironic reference to Dante's virgin as this Beatrice is patiently seduced by Burlap and so the irony comes full turn. "For in The Divine Comedy, Dante is seduced into goodness by his image of Beatrice, while in the modern setting Beatrice is seduced by false appearances into the bed and bathtub of a sham Messiah."<sup>10</sup> Beatrice is supposed to resemble Katherine Mansfield, the great New Zealand short story writer, and Burlap Middleton Murry, a well-known twentieth century critic, essayist and editor.

Elinor Quarles is another important woman character in Point Counter Point, who belongs to the group of intellectuals. But she is not satirized as Mary Bracegirdle is in Crome Yellow or Mary Thriplow is in Those Barren Leaves. On the other hand, she is a pleasant woman and somewhat nearer to the positive

portrait of Mary Rampion in her naturalness of behaviour, feelings, instincts and expectations.

Throughout the novel, Elinor remains a contrast to Philip, her intellectual husband. Her talkative nature is opposed to his reserve. His inability to get on with people is contrasted to her 'gift of intuitive understanding and social ease' .

" She was quickly at home with anybody. She knew, instinctively, as well as old John himself, what to say to every type of person-to every type, except, perhaps, her husband's. .... Still, being in love with him, she persisted in her efforts to lure him into direct contact "(p.105).

Sometimes she is upset by his indifference and detachment, yet she always encourages his writing talent. In spite of her attempts to give him intimacies of thought and feeling, she has a deep contempt for grand abstractions and idealisms, as she has been given a premature introduction to the best of philosophies by her mother. She tries to encourage in him a passion for other women and thus engender human warmth in him, but her efforts prove futile.

Later on Elinor develops her intimacies with Everard Webley in spite of her dislike of his hollowness so that Philip is provoked to behave like a normal man.

She is self-divided between her desire to leave her husband to punish him for his indifference and her instinctive dislike for people like Everard. She becomes a pathetic figure in the concluding part of the novel when two tragic events occur in her life - the death of her son and the murder of Everard.

Mary Rampion, the only and purely positive female character in the novel, is impressive in her spontaneous, natural and untroubled way of living. She differs from the rest of the women characters in the novel in a number of aspects. Though born in an aristocratic family, she is quite healthy, strong and honest. Her self-confidence and child-like enthusiasm are remarkable. Mary resembles her husband in her views on life and civilization. According to her, civilization means a harmonious blending of reason, feeling and instinct. She is like " a born savage" (p.157) and is called the " Diana of the Moors " (p.143). She says that one must know how " to be a perfect animal and a perfect human " (p.156). Mark admires her immensely :

" Living comes to you too easily..... You live by instinct. You know what to do quite naturally, like an insect when it comes out of pupa. It's too simple..... You haven't earned your knowledge; you've never realized the alternatives " (p.157) .

Thus Mary Rampion is delineated by Huxley in accordance with the Lawrentian philosophy of life.

There are many more striking women characters in Point Counter Point who have enriched its remarkable gallery of portraits. There is, for instance, Mrs Janet Bidlake who is interested in art, while Mrs Rachael Quarles tries to achieve a wholeness of personality through Christianity. But in Rampion's eyes it is not a genuine wholeness for a civilized person. On the other hand, " she is suffering from, what he calls, 'Jesus's disease'." <sup>11</sup> In the musical party arranged in the Tantamount Hall, we meet Polly Logan with her sentimental mother, Mrs Betterton, who is elephant - like in appearance, but thinks of herself as quite charming, and Molly d' Exergillod, a professional talker who usually wants to attract Philip with her wit and wisdom. Then there is Gladys, a poor working-girl, who plays an important role in exposing the hypocrisy of the well-to-do. Huxley has given a touching account of how she was seduced by Mr. Sidney Quarles.

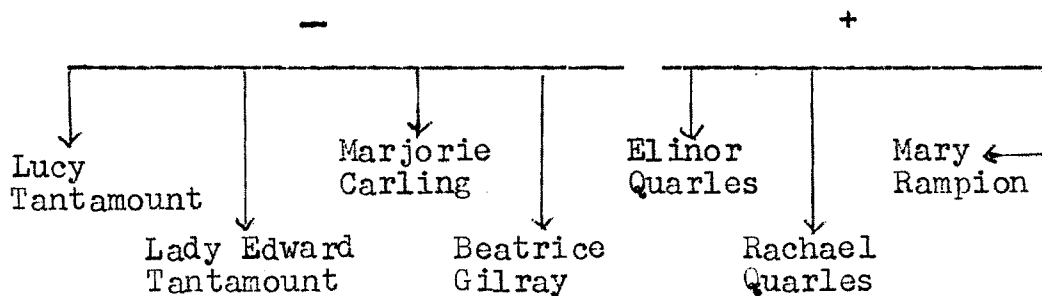
On the whole, Huxley has given a fairly genuine picture of the 1920's with all its complex frustrations. Mark and Mary Rampion are the only really unified man

and woman among a whole crowd of self-divided personalities.

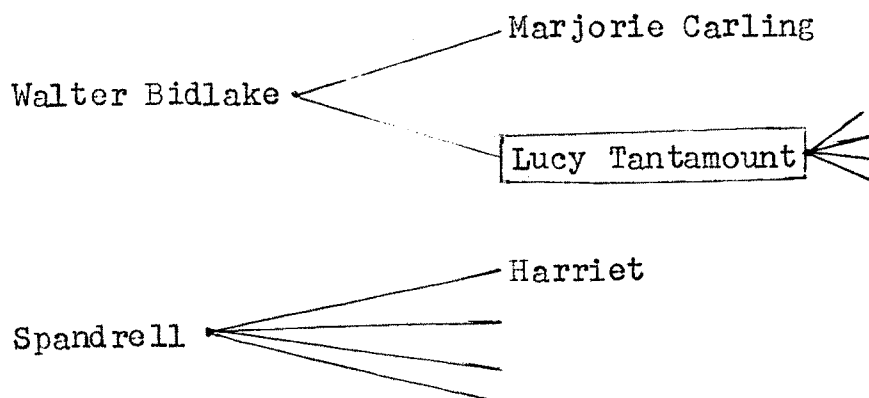
### III

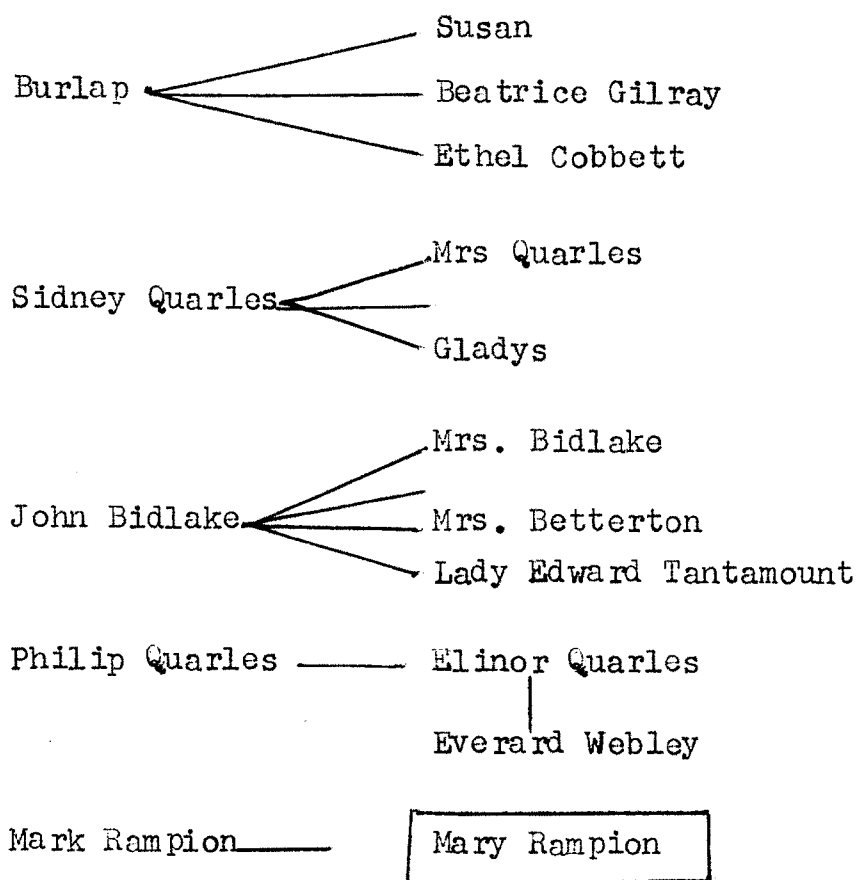
In Point Counter Point the women characters, like men characters, try to move towards the solidity and three-dimensionality of those in the great novels of the nineteenth century, say, of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. But they still retain some of the limitations of the satirical mode that Huxley had mastered in his early novels. They partake of the tensions that the novelist of ideas suffers when he wants to grow into a 'congenital novelist' interested more in characters than in ideas. Hence they fail to bounce into life, which proves conclusively that Huxley is primarily a novelist of ideas and not a congenital novelist. So it is profitable to look at the characters from the point of view of the 'imitation' of life as such, though Huxley has tried to give the life-dimension to most of the characters (say, Elinor Quarles, Lucy Tantamount, Marjorie Carling). As pointed earlier, Lucy Tantamount and Mary Rampion represent the two opposite ideological poles - Lucy representing the negative, 'death-oriented, hedonistic attitude with all its attendant pleasures and miseries and Mary Rampion representing the positive, 'life-

oriented' attitude and the other women characters representing various points on the line joining the two poles. (This pattern has a parallel in respect of the men characters - for example, Spandrell representing The 'death-oriented', 'demon'- like hedonism and Mark Rampion representing the opposite attitude of 'life oriented', integrated kind of living.)



In Point Counter Point women play an extremely important role in relation to all the major male characters as the following figures representing man-woman relationships in the novel indicate :





From the ideological point of view the only satisfactory relation is the last - that of Mark Rampion and Mary Rampion - though it is not concretized (except in their prophetic talk) in the way that the lovers of the traditional novel approve of. From the viewpoint of the novel of ideas, Huxley has done his best in Point Counter Point, working up a variety of women characters representing various shades of positive and negative viewpoints. What is important is that he has built into the novel a value-system to



help us to evaluate the characters from the Huxleyan point of view.

Notes

- 1 Jocelyn Brooke, Aldous Huxley (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), p.18.
- 2 Richard E. Eastman, A Guide to the Novel (New York: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p.203.
- 3 Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point (London : Chatto and Windus, 1935), p.22.
- 4 All subsequent references to the text will be indicated by giving the relevant page number at the end of every quotation.
- 4 Jocelyn Brooke, p.20.
- 5 Alexander Henderson, Aldous Huxley (New York : Russell and Russell, 1964), p.58.
- 6 Peter Firshow, Aldous Huxley : Satirist and Novelist (Minneapolis: Jones Press, 1972), p.96.
- 7 Ibid., p.98.
- 8 Alexander Henderson, pp.66-67.
- 9 Ibid., p.71.
- 10 Frederick R. Karl and Marvin Magalaner, A Reader's Guide to Great Twentieth Century English Novels (London : Thames and Hudson, 1959), p.275.
- 11 Alexander Henderson, p.63.