

# Good satire and mockery in the beggars opera by john gay essay example

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Many writers have found themselves writing about society in an indirect way through the features and attributes they reflect in their writings. The same can be said about *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay which was a representation of class boundaries and therefore had an impact on the consciousness of the public. The conventions that Gay uses continue to influence society today as it satirizes and mocks what society creates as societal stereotypes. Class boundaries in London at the time had caused major disintegration that became inevitable because of the nature of the problems that the disintegration caused. The placement of economical and gender based class structures show the struggles of the common folk and his basis of writing is identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the lower and upper class. In all these people change their personalities; women become major decision makers just as they are emancipated, aristocrats and beggars alike commit the same crimes, gentlemen become thieves just as the highwaymen become gentlemen. The ballad is a typical inspection of all the evil found in humans as seen in the eighteenth century London and as such, it is a clear reflection of lack of equity and equality in the classes.

According to some critics such as John Adrian, Gay was reaching out to all audiences but then was more satirical in nature than anything else. It was meant to divert the attention of all people not only from the entertainment angle but also to instill moral lessons. His message was not targeted to any particular group but rather was supposed to appeal to everyone. His pointed satire rests on the leadership as it does to the common man. The major concern was over the state of the country and its governing body that was very corrupt. On one angle the reader sees the degenerative effect of

acceptable vice which is a common disease that cuts across all classes of people. The satire that his work portrays is entrenched in the cultural markers of social status of persons which was becoming common in London. The class structure was posing a major problem and a public concern over the emergence of the bourgeois class. The problem does not rest on the rich but the way in which they acquired their wealth and how they define themselves using the acquired wealth. J. Douglas Canfield goes on to talk about the corrupted persons found in the lower class and the diseased aristocratic elite who are just concerned about their pursuit for money. He says, “ Despite all their rhetoric, Macheath and his gang are all motivated by this principle [greed], as, despite their ladylike pretensions, are all the whores. And, of course, the major satirical implication of the play is that, despite all their pretensions, so are the government, the clergy, the lawyers, the merchants-all of British society, and, all of the bourgeois audiences of the play” (324).

Gay attempts to use some characters to bring out rather sad events to a humorous execution and eventual conclusion. It is with such humor that he uses Peachum to let the audience know of the humor with which the play commences. The love of money by many people is shown and how it can be used to cause problems to many. Peachum loves money so much so that he gets himself thinking of the criminal who is more valuable to him whether dead or alive. It is quite sad that he treats these criminals as very important business decisions. He goes on to weigh the pros and cons of choosing each one of them and the impact the choices would have on his “ business”. It is also quite humorous about the way he goes about mixing the legal aspect

and the criminal world when he talks about his career. He displays the hypocrisy that exists displayed by lawyers because they act at a double capacity of both the defenders of the law and that, they criminals themselves. The same lawyers protect the rogues thereby encouraging cheats because they live by them. Gay brings out the corrupted decency of the London society which is an evil that is satirized all through this work (Canfield 110).

Gay goes on to satirize Robert Walpole and the entire English government of the time. Walpole was a very dishonest leader who was very keen on eradicating free press. Free press is a tool that is supposed to be enjoyed by the people of any given country but in this case it was not meant to serve the people but a few greedy persons like Walpole and Peachum. It is ironical that a leader who is supposed to promote freedom wants to take away the little that there is in his country. It is sad enough that people like captain Macheath and Peachum are meant to represent popular criminals such as John Sheppard and Jonathon Wild who was executed in 1725. Walpole is a thief, womanizer and a double dealer who is put in a position of leadership. He in the end is seen as very dishonest who uses spies, wrongfully imprisons others, engages in bribery while at the same time he buys not only journalists but also entire newspapers. It is quite ironical that he is supposed to promote free and fair treatment for all citizens but then goes against the common norm. Gay uses such people as Walpole to bring out how unfair the 18th century leadership was and how it never served the good of all the people.

Gays talks about the rot in all the classes without sparing any. His concern is

also centered on the disapproval he has on capitalism because it begets selfishness as seen throughout *The Beggar's Opera*. All persons may belong to different social classes but they are driven by the same desires. A good example is that of Polly's father, Peachum and husband Macheath who are only motivated by their desire to acquire more money. The career of Peachum is built on betrayal and he barter the destinies of other people in order for him to gratify his desires. The reference of his character to Jonathan Wild is sad enough that it is so organized but all for the wrong reasons. He goes on to say that " a lawyer is in honest employment, and so is mine (Gay 418). His greed does not stop at his public life but goes on to his private life. He encourages his daughter to make good use of her beauty (422) and that is why his attention is focused on the financial benefits he stands if she marries a rich man. It is ironical that he is a respected man in his class but then his life is dominated with vice.

Persons whose morals were questionable are the ones that many people identified with and this is a sad reality about England at the time. Wild and Sheppard who were criminals were considered martyrs by the members of the lower class. The upper class on the other hand considered them very interesting and thrilling at the same time. It is satirical that people can draw admiration from people with questionable integrity and Gay takes advantage of this fact and goes on to satirize their acceptable appeal. This shows some similarity of all men despite their societal status. To make the satire more interesting and appealing to a wide range of people he uses a couple of songs which are about the king, happiness as well as anxiety. Gay does this in such a way that people could not easily see the ills he purposed to

illustrate but he skillfully presents them in a satirical manner in such a way that people could enjoy watching the play (Canfield 112). It was difficult to say the truth as it was at the time and so he chose to tell the truth on a lighter note and in such a way that people could easily accept it.

Madeline Smith Atkins goes on to poke the characters of the ballad as pure mockery to their society. Atkins says “ Highborn or common, the raffish characters in Gay’s ballad opera were all cast from the same mold: they were miscreants, who poked fun at society’s shortcomings” (viii). When considering a character like Macheath in this perspective, he passes for a total mockery to gentleman behavior because he shares so many common characteristics with Peachum. He is his son by trade and marriage but one may think he is his son by birth. In his eyes there is no such thing as appreciation of women for who they are but sees them as a tool that should be used to get money and even be treated as money itself. Gay mocks his objectification of women and likens their ownership to the ownership of a guinea. Such is a man that is highly regarded in society who has no respect for womanhood. In the eyes of men like Peachum and Macheath women are tradable commodities that can be acquired through sham marriages. Ideally, Gay’s use of these attributes in these men shows how universal vice is in all aspects of social life.

Away from political satire, Gay embodied social satire as seen through the court system. The judicial system of London at the time was rewarding hypocrisy in the same measure as moral bankruptcy. Virtue and talent had long been buried and forgotten. In the words of the Beggar “ the fine gentleman had imitated the gentleman of the road and the gentleman of the

road the fine gentleman" (72). It is also not difficult to notice that Gay mocks the taking over of Italian Opera and the diminishing of London Opera. Instead of celebrating their own, the Londoners chose to be embroiled in the new forms of opera. It is for this reason that the Beggar says that " he has introduced the similes that are in all your celebrated operas" and he also wishes that he " has not made his opera throughout unnatural" (45). Such criticism was made about Italian operas that relied on myth and legend and that the Italian opera created fantasy worlds which were not real. It is evident that gay was mocking the hypocrisy of Londoners and their love for Italian opera. Yvonne Noble says that The Beggar's Opera brought back London opera to the front once more (30). But then, he used both the upper class and lower class together because he depicted both as being part and parcel of the same criminal activities and all the transgressions experienced at the time.

The irony of it all is not the fact that almost all the characters that gay uses have questionable integrity but rather, he refuses to point a finger at their ills. Gay does not bring himself to judge any of them in as much as they are a bunch of immoral persons. All the reader or audience is supposed to do is just see their ill character and the truth through their crooked mannerisms. All the readers see is an honest presentation of them and not the way persons can be good to others. it is also ironical how hypocrisy is the ladder used by statesmen to reach great heights. Justice is also on sale and that the officers found in courts are men who receive bribes in order to help in suppressing evidence. Lawyers are depicted as persons who profit only by the vive of other people depending on the price on offer. All that is seen all

through the text is a law that lies on selfishness and personal gain and not the good of all the citizenry. The problem lies not on what is morally acceptable and presumed to be right but by the fact that everyone wants to look at themselves as a making of society. According to Noble, they ought to look at themselves and the good that comes out of themselves rather than the equating vices to virtues simply because society is not pointing out the ills and judging people correctly just as the law requires (131).

The purpose of the satire that Gay uses is to denounce acceptable criminal activity of his time, but also to bring to light the weakness of the government that was keen on perpetuating the ills. His criticism passes for typical mockery of society with the aim of helping the same society to transform itself. Gay's focus is on the transformation of society that was corrupted and which encouraged corruption in all classes to the ideal society. Virtues and vices alike are common practice but vices had taken a toll on the vices. Gay gave the general public a picture of the state of affairs with the aim of wanting them to see for themselves how they had degenerated to extreme levels of corruption. There are several prominent figures of the time that are referred to in the play and their character is very questionable. They are portrayed as common criminals because their moral standards are wanting. In the language of finance that is used all through it becomes evident that there exists conflict between virtue and vice and the major concern of Gay is to lay bare this conflict for everyone to see (Canfield 209). The reading of the text reveals the intricacies of a society that allows vices to thrive more than virtue does. All the problems of the London society boil down to capitalism and the desire for money and a better life. Gay focuses on them in a critical



yet satirical manner with the sole intent of mocking the leadership at the time in order to help bring sanity back in society.

## **Works Cited**

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