Parody and pathos two methods of eliciting humor creative writing example

Sociology, Women

Taken from the posthumous memoir of Dr. John Watson, published on the 25th anniversary of his passing, in which the prolific chronicler of England's most celebrated amateur detective frankly admits to the many and fanciful misrepresentations of his friend's character - falsehoods which Watson confesses to have perpetrated upon an unsuspecting and admiring public. To wit, that Sherlock Holmes was, in fact, bored speechless and rendered irremediably irresoluteby excessive detail.

" Of the many compelling investigations carried to a happy and just resolution by the ' observational powers' of my friend Sherlock Holmes, few if any can be ascribed to that singular affinity for minutiae the admiration of which all England still rings with praiseaye, and for which he is yet known on many a distant shore. Alas, it is all my doing! You who read this post-mortem confession will know that my accounts of Holmes' ratiocinative exploits omit no occasion in which the great man exhorted his clients to " omit no detail" (Conan Doyle, p. 254). Well, it is for me to set the record straight. I shall begin with that familiar expression of false modesty, in which Holmes described the most detailed and circuitous perambulations of logic as " elementary" (Ibid). I now solemnly admit this perfunctory and economic expression to be sheer invention on my part. Indeed, years of sleep deprivation and cocaine use had rendered Holmes peevish, and decidedly impatient. As such, more than a few startled clients found their rambling monologues met with an impatient rolling of bloodshot eyes, followed by a shrill complaint that the great detective's pipe and poached egg were growing cold, and would they kindly come to the point!"

Analysis

This bit spoofs Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous detective stories, and the style of writing employed by Sherlock Holmes’ literary sidekick, Dr. John Watson. In Conan Doyle’s famous stories, Holmes’ seemingly manic attention to detail is the basis for the great detective’s unlikely solutions. Most of Holmes’ adventures begin with an interview at his apartment in Baker Street, where he exhorts those who enlist his aid to “ omit no detail,” often upbraiding them for leaving out the smallest bit of information. This parody turns on the notion that Holmes’ cool and unemotional interpretations of detail is a carefully constructed persona that Watson posthumously confesses to have been false. Instead, Holmes’ true character is revealed by the fact that he was more apt to complain that his “ pipe and poached egg” were growing cold than to insist that his clients take their time and tell him all.

Furthermore, the preceding parody is written as Victorian-era parody, from the standpoint of someone well-versed in “ Holmesiana,” rather than as a modern-day pastiche utilizing contemporary references and jokes. Holmes’ nearly religious devotion to the interpretation of facts leading to a logical hypothesis was one of the most notable features of Conan Doyle’s fiction and one that has made a lasting impression on generations of devoted readers. As such, the idiosyncrasies of a key character, or of a distinctive narrative style, can provide an effective and relatable means for parodying a work of fiction.

The town that knew better

There once was a small Midwestern community that was very sure of itself. An old and rather isolated town, it was a quiet and verdant place perched high above the banks of a winding and scenic river. Most of its inhabitants belonged to families that had lived there for generations. As is often the case with such places, the people who live there had cultivated a collective sense of moral superiority to which most subscribed wholeheartedly (those few who harbored doubts about this found it prudent to keep their misgivings to themselves). To be sure, it’s not unusual for a small group of people who have lived together for a very long time to develop a self-congratulatory attitude toward their own rectitude. This place had it in spades.

And so it will come as no surprise that the little town was distrustful of outsiders. Visitors passing through found that the waitresses at the only restaurant for miles around wouldn’t bother to ask whether they’d like a slice of pie, or even another cup of coffee before slapping down the check and hurrying off to the kitchen on winged soles of squeaky rubber. The reader will be even less surprised to learn that when a young, idealistic young man came to town one day as the new editor of the county’s one-and-only newspaper, the warmest welcome he received was a non-committal shrug from the gas station attendant (the editor discounted the bank manager’s warm smile and hearty handshake; the man’s interest was purely and obviously financial).

If there was any doubt as to the editor’s standing, it was quickly dispelled. After publishing a story about a county worker who sued his employer over a disputed pension, the newspaper received a cryptic phone call from an angry

woman promising to lodge a complaint with “ the authorities,” who solemnly declared that she wished to remain “ enormynous.”

The young editor was blessed with a healthy sense of the absurd, but when caller I. D. showed the angry woman to be the county worker’s wife, the editor didn’t crack a smile. He was a young man from a big city living in a small town that knew better.

Nevertheless, his duties as editor kept him busy and made it possible to ignore the single-minded and provincial attitudes that surrounded him. One summer evening, he was covering a typically dull meeting of the county school board, his thoughts drifting in and out of the conversation, when he heard one of the board members mention that the next item on the agenda was bingo. Or, more to the point, a proposal that students from the local high school should work at the weekly bingo games held at the community center. The idea, explained the high school band teacher, was to make money so the marching band could take part in a musical competition in the big city. Sounds reasonable enough, the editor thought as he considering leaving the meeting early.

As he stood up to go, a board member named Miss Effie Spokes turned to her colleagues with a pinched, disapproving look. “ Bingo is gambling; gambling is immoral!,” she proclaimed, a bony forefinger pointing skyward. The band teacher took up the challenge, insisting that the children wouldn’t be playing bingo, only serving food and cleaning up afterward. “ Makes no difference,” Miss Effie said with an incontestable fervor the likes of which the editor had only seen at an anti-abortion rally. Despite the band teacher’s protestations, it was clear that Miss Effie Spokes would not relent. The editor

had come to terms with the town’s intransigence on many issues, but this was something else. His grandmother played bingo. The woman knit

tea cozies for the senior citizen’s home, for god’s sakes! The editor usually waited until after these meetings to question the board, but this one couldn’t wait.

“ Madame board member,” he began loudly and facetiously, holding up his notepad so as not to be overlooked. “ Do you mean to say that the young people of this community will be corrupted by bingo?” Annoyed by the puckered look of disdain with which Miss Effie met his question, the editor couldn’t help himself. “ I’ve seen your own daughter and her friends drinking beer out of brown paper bags in the church parking lot on Friday nights,” he said. “ How exactly will bingo corrupt the boys and girls of the marching band?” Miss Effie had clearly cowed her fellow board members into seeing it her way, but they shifted uncomfortably in their chairs at the tone of this exchange.

“ The members of this board, and of this community, know the difference between right and wrong,” Miss Effie insisted in a cold, measured tone. “ Bingo is gambling; gambling is immoral,” she said once again. The editor had a sudden vision of pudgy band members with bad skin organizing covert bingo orgies behind someone’s barn, a nerd’s version of a floating crap game. Ridiculous! According to Miss Effie, the county’s moral fiber was at stake, the human wreckage would quickly mount! Evidently, the other board members felt the same way because they voted unanimously to disallow band members from participating in bingo in any way. The town that knew

better, it seemed, had spoken.

The following week, the editor paid a visit to the law office where Miss Effie Spokes worked as a secretary. He hoped to interview her in preparation for an article about the great bingo debate, which passed for Democracy in Action in the town that knew better. Miss Effie

declined the editor’s cordial request, though not on principle. There was a far more practical reason for her refusal – she was on her way to court. “ My daughter was picked up for underage drinking Friday night,” she admitted sheepishly. “ In the church parking lot.”

Analysis

The preceding story is written in a mildly tongue-in-cheek style to underscore and accentuate the story’s comic effect. A satirical under-current runs through the story, which is about the narrow-mindedness that is endemic to those values so often ascribed to “ small-town” America. It is intended as a straightforward critique and, as such, eschews a more sophisticated plot-line. A somewhat longer format might have accommodated, for instance, a plot in which the “ big city” editor could be cast in the role of the small-minded ideologue and the townspeople, in the guise of Miss Spokes, as accepting and tolerant. However, the shorter form seemed better suited to less nuanced characterizations.

H. L. Mencken wrote more than 100 years ago about what he called America’s “ booboisie,” the backwards provincials who are sure they know all they need to know. Though an old one, this view still holds considerable comic currency. The county worker’s wife, who calls the paper “

enormynously," is an example of the comically self-righteous townsperson, as is Miss Effie Spokes. The editor remains nameless throughout, a largely amorphous figure with little to define him other than the comment about his grandmother. The editor comes to the story with some preconceived ideas, but as an indistinct " observer" is still an identity that the reader can " slip into" and assume for him or herself.

Works Cited

Conan Doyle, A. (1894). Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.