

Humor and irony in british literature

Literature



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The comic novel is a very English kind of fiction and does not always settle down in other national literatures well. Certainly the English novel tradition is remarkable for the number of comic novels among its classics from the work of Fielding, and Sterne and Smollett in the eighteenth century, through Jane Austen and Dickens in the nineteenth to Evelyn Waugh, Arnold Bennett and David Lodge in the twentieth.

Even novelists whose primary intention is not to write funny novels such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and E. M. Forster have scenes in their fiction which make us laugh aloud. In this work we will define on the example of literary texts of British literature the notion of humor and irony both of which are based on the comic element.

Comedy in fiction would appear to have two primary sources, though they are intimately connected: situation (which entails character - a situation that is comic for one character wouldn't necessarily be so for another) and style.

Both dependent upon timing, that is to say, the order in which the words, and the information they carry, are arranged. The principle can be illustrated by a single sentence from Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*. At the beginning of the novel, the shy, unassuming hero, Paul Pennyfeather, an Oxford undergraduate, is divested of his trousers by a party of drunken aristocratic hearties, and with monstrous injustice is sent down from the University for indecent behavior.

The first chapter concludes: " God damn and blast them all to hell," and Paul Pennyfeather meekly to himself as he drove to the station, and then he felt rather ashamed, because he rarely swore. (Waugh, 1929) We laugh at this

because of the delayed appearance of the word “ meekly”: what appears, as the sentence begins, to be a long-overdue explosion of righteous anger by the victimized hero turns out to be no such thing but a further exemplification of his timidity and passiveness.

Lucky Jim of Kingsley Amis exhibits all properties of comic fiction in a highly polished form. As a temporary assistant lecturer at a province university, Jim Dixon is totally dependent for the continuance of his employment on his absent-minded professor's patronage, which itself requires that Jim should demonstrate his professional competence by publishing a scholarly article. Jim despises both his professor and the rituals of academicscholarship, but cannot afford to say so.

His resentment is therefore interiorized, sometimes in fantasies of violence: “ to tie Welch up in his chair and beat him about the head and shoulders with a bottle until he disclosed why, without being French himself, he'd given his sons French names” (Amis) and at the other times, as here, in satirical mental commentary upon the behavior, discourses and institutional codes which oppress him. The style of Lucky Jim is full of little surprises, qualifications and reversals which satirically deconstruct cliches. Jim's powerlessness is physically epitomized by his being a passenger in Welch's car, and a helpless victim of his appalling driving.

The banal and apparently superfluous sentence “ Dixon looked out of the window at the fields wheeling past, bright green after a wet April” (Amis) in fact proves to have a function. Looking from the same window moments later, Jim is startled to find “ a man's face staring in his from about nine inches away” Surprise is combined with conformity to Welch's incompetence.

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“ The face, which filled with alarm as he gazed, belonged to the driver of a van which Welch had elected to pass on a sharp bend between two stone walls.

” (Amis) A slow motion effect is created by the leisurely precision of the language: “ about nine inches away”, “ filled with alarm”, “ had elected to pass” contrasting comically with the speed with which the imminent collision approaches. The reader is not told immediately what is happening, but made to infer it, re-enacting the character’s surprise and alarm. Another stylistic device based on humorous effect it creates is irony. Irony consists in saying the opposite of what you mean or inviting an interpretation different from the surface meaning of your words. Unlike other figures of speech - metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche etc.

- irony is not distinguished from literal statement by any peculiarity of verbal form. An ironic statement is recognized as such in the act of interpretation. When, for example, the authorial narrator of *Pride and Prejudices* says “ It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a fortune, must be in want of a wife,” (Austen, Chapter I) the reader, alerted by the false logic of the proposition about single men with fortunes, interprets the “ universal” generalization as an ironic comment on a particular social group obsessed with matchmaking.

The same rule applies to action in narrative. When the reader is made aware of a disparity between the facts of a situation and the characters’ understanding of it, an effect called “ dramatic irony” is generated. (Lodge, 179) Arnold Bennett in his *The Old Wives’ Tale* employs two different methods to put his characters’ behavior in an ironic perspective. Sophia, the

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beautiful passionate but inexperienced daughter of a draper in the Potteries, is sufficiently dazzled by Gerald Scales, a handsome commercial traveler who has inherited a small fortune, to elope with him.

The embrace described in the passage below is their first in the privacy of their London lodgings. Her face, view so close that he could see the almost imperceptible down on those fruit-like cheeks, was astonishingly beautiful; ... [and] he could feel the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him. She was very slightly taller than her lover; but somehow she hung from him, her body curved backwards, and her bosom pressed against his, so that instead of looking up at her gaze he looked down at it. He preferred that; perfectly proportioned though he was, his stature was a delicate point with him.

(Bennett, 278) What should be a moment of erotic rapture and emotional unity is revealed as the physical conjunction of two people whose thoughts are running on quite different tracks. Gerald in fact intends to seduce Sophia, though in the event he lacks the self-assurance to carry out his plan. Even in this embrace he is at first nervous and tentative, "perceiving that her ardour was exceeding his." (Bennett, 278) But as the intimate contact continues he becomes more confident and masterful: "His fears slipped away; he began to be very satisfied with himself" (Bennett, 278).

There is probably a sexual pun hidden in "His spirits rose by the uplift of his senses", for Bennett frequently hinted in this fashion at things he dared not describe explicitly. Gerald sexual arousal has nothing to do with love, or even lust. It is a function of his vanity and self-esteem. "Something in him had forced her to lay her modesty on the altar of his desire". Like "the

secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him" (Bennett, 279) earlier, this florid metaphor mocks the complacent thought it expresses.

The use of the word "altar" carries an extra ironic charge since at this point Gerald has no intention of leading Sophia to the altar of marriage. Up to this point, Bennett keeps to Gerald's point of view, and uses the kind of language appropriate to that perspective, thus implying an ironic assessment of Gerald's character. "So he kissed her yet more ardently, and with the slightest touch of a victor's condescension; and her burning response more than restored the self-confidence which he had been losing.

" (Bennett, 279) The description of his timidity, vanity and complacency - so very different from what he ought to be feeling in this situation is enough to condemn him in reader's eyes. In the next paragraph Bennett uses the convention of the omniscient intrusive author to switch to Sophia's point of view, and to comment explicitly on her misconceptions, adding to the layers of irony in the scene. Sophia's words are more creditable than Gerald's, but her words, "I've got no one but you now", are partly calculated to endear him to her.

This merely reveals her naivety, however. "She fancied in her ignorance that the expression of this sentiment would please him. She was not aware that a man is usually rather chilled by it, because it proves to him that the other is thinking about his responsibilities and not about his privileges. ... [He] smiled vaguely." (Bennett, 279) As the "burning" Sophia utters this sentiment in a "melting" voice, Gerald is "chilled" by the reminder of his responsibilities.

He responds with non-committal smile, which the infatuated Sophia finds charming, but which, the narrator assures us, was an index of his unreliability and a portent of disillusionment to come: " A less innocent girl than Sophia might have divined from that adorable half-feminine smile that she could do anything with Gerald except rely on him. But Sophia had to learn. " (Bennett, 279) The reader is supplied with knowledge that helps to feel pity for Sophia and contempt for Gerald. This type of irony leaves us with little work of inference or interpretation to do; on the contrary, we are the passive recipients of the author's wisdom.

To conclude it is necessary to note the main difference between humor and irony. These two devices while both based on comic element apply different approaches to their object. Irony the funny object is hidden beyond the mask of seriousness, and the negative, derisive attitude to the object is expressed. The different is humor, where the serious thing is hidden beyond the mask of ridiculous and the attitude to the object of derision is predominantly positive.

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