

Exploring the Satire in Literature: Taking the Luncheon as a Case Study

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Abstract: William Somerset Maugham is a renowned English writer, known for his plays, novels, and short stories. One of his famous short stories, *The Luncheon*, tells the tale of a forty-year-old lady who admires the author's works and wins his favor by expressing her desire to meet him for lunch at a high-class eatery. Maugham ironically reveals the gluttony of the middle-class people and their hypocrisy. Based on textual analysis, the paper intends to explore the significance of the employment of satire and its application. In this paper, the author mainly focuses on two ways of satire, including irony and parody to discuss the function of satire in literature, arguing that satire cannot merely present vivid characteristics of characters in literature but also reveal authors' intents of its employment. Additionally, the review paper also analyzes the application of satire in the literature of the past as well as satire in modern literature. The paper can contribute to providing a comprehensive analysis of Maugham's use of satire in *The Luncheon* and its impact on the reader's understanding of the story themes and characters.

Keywords: *The Luncheon*, satire, the function of satire, the application of satire

1. Introduction

The ironic story of *The Luncheon* is presented in the scene of a restaurant. In this story, the narrator used to be a young, impoverished writer who lived in Paris. Once, a lady, one of his readers, wrote to him to congratulate his work. So the narrator invited her to an upscale restaurant to have lunch even though he had only eighty francs left for the month. During the meal, the lady kept ordering dishes. Consequently, the narrator walked out of the restaurant with no money left in his pocket. Nevertheless, many years later, the narrator met the lady again occasionally at a play. He can barely recognize the lady, for she has put on so much weight. Therefore, in some ways, the narrator thought he has completed his revenge as a twenty-one stone is a huge number of increased weight at that time.

2. The Overview of Satire in Literature

2.1. The Definition of Satire in Literature

Satire has a significant role in literature writing, aiming at ridiculing vices, stupidity, and follies in society. According to Robert Harris, literary work with hate only tends to be a lampoon, whose

speeches or writings maliciously poke fun at a person or situation [1]. On the contrary, the judicious blend of criticism and humor without invective words can be defined as a real satire [2]. Generally, satire is used with wit and wisdom, whereas writers simply attack the absurdity in society and spark outrage.

2.2. The Classification of Satire Literature

Dating back to the 18th century, satire majorly dealt with the corruption in Rome, human cruelty, and folly. Afterward, numerous types of satire have been created, among which Horatian satire and Juvenalian satire are the most typical ones: Juvenalian satire, put forward by Decimus Junius Juvenalis, can be defined as a trenchant criticism to decry the vice of human beings. In comparison with Horatian satire, Juvenalian satire focuses more on political issues, for it usually ridicules contemporary leaders or society changes. The representative work is *Don Juan* by Lord Byron [3] and *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift [4]. For example, in *Don Juan* by Lord Byron, an adolescent boy is sexually precocious. When he is a little boy, he has an affair with a married friend of his. Byron portrays him as evil to expose the hypocrisy, selfishness, and shallowness in the late 19th century. From Byron's perspective, there is no true virtue in this world but only the appearance of it.

Horatian satire, named after the Roman satirist Horace, refers to playful criticism of social issues [5]. Through this way of satire, readers are more likely to end up with a smile after reading the story instead of getting irritated. Relaxing as the tone is, it intends to criticize deficiencies of public figures, humanity, or society, and address these problems. As Abrams claimed, authors that utilize Horatian satire normally use gentle and informal language to elicit a wry grin from readers about human flaws [6]. Horatian satire is presented in a great number of English classics and *The Luncheon* is one of them. In *The Luncheon*, Maugham exposes the hypocrisy and greed of humanity through multiple ironic situations and witty conversations. Compared to Horatian satire, although Juvenalian satire attacks the targets with a bitter tone, it can harm their reputations effectively to some extent if they attend the political elections in the future. It regards its targets as evils with serious attitudes so as to prevent these evils from damaging society. Therefore, it is worthwhile delving into both the language and context of the story.

2.3. Satire in *The Luncheon*

2.3.1. Satirical Language in *The Luncheon*

After introducing Horatian satire, *The Luncheon* is presented from the first-person narrative perspective. *The Luncheon* contains the self-contradict words spoken by the "lady" that is rather hilarious. Particularly, from stem to stern, she keeps stressing that she never eats anything for luncheon or she never eats for more than one thing. Nevertheless, she keeps ordering costly dishes such as salmon, caviar, and giant asparagus. To fulfill her huge appetite, she even carelessly grabs a peach that is not in season. It can be concluded the woman is greedy but cold, regardless of the narrator's financial status. Furthermore, she is such an experienced lady that she always pretends to refuse the author's kindness when "I" ask, "what would you like", "coffee?" or "Are you still hungry?" However, in her replies, her demand normally comes after her answer of "No, I'm not hungry". Ironically, at the end of the story, the pretentious woman even asks the narrator to follow her example of keeping a diet. Notwithstanding, she successfully tricks the narrator into buying her a costly meal, she is definitely going to pay for her greed by gaining weight. Implied by the lady's discourse sometimes with gestures, this novel builds a greedy image of this lady with gentle tones on the surface, however, criticizing her cold personality is the final intention.

2.3.2. Satirical Context in *The Luncheon*

Apart from the hypocrite, “the lady” in the story, the protagonist “I” having lunch with the lady, and the waiter also contribute to this farce. When “I” promise to take the lady to a high-class restaurant, “I” have a yearning for satisfying his vanity to some extent, even though he finds himself an excuse, saying he is too young to say no to others. In fact, he imagines dining with a gorgeous young lady in a classy restaurant while there are simply eighty francs in his pocket. In spite of his shattered illusions of this lady, the author keeps flattering her during the meal by placing an order one after another whereas the author tells the truth that he is already out of money awkwardly. For instance, although “my heart sank” when he heard that the lady demands some great asparagus which is horribly expensive. Shabby-genteel as he is, he has no choice but to ask the waiter, “Madam wants to know if you had any of those great asparagus.” The struggle of the narrator is amusing that he totally makes a rod for his own back. At the end of the story, “I” walk out of the restaurant without a penny left in his pocket. Compared with satirical language in *The Luncheon*, the context in *The Luncheon* added to the characters' psychological descriptions and facial expressions. In terms of psychological descriptions, the expression “I knew exactly how much I had and if the bill came to more I made a decision that I would put my hand in my pocket and with a dramatic cry startup and say it had been stolen.” to express the embarrassing situation in that circumstance, which the protagonist “I” cannot afford to pay the bill. In terms of facial expressions, the waiter in the story is portrayed as a mercenary man by Maugham. When the author is worrying about the bill, the waiter comes around the table with the menu all time. For example, “the waiter came again with the bill of fare” and “A happy smile spread over his broad, priest-like face and he assured me that they had some so large, so splendid, so tender, that it was a marvel.”

2.4. The Function of Satire Literature

2.4.1. For Describing the Characters

In literary criticism, satire serves as a powerful style to draw readers' attention to some social problems. In essence, irony and parody are frequently used in satire literature. *The Luncheon* is a typical work that depicts the story with irony as a rhetorical device. Human flaws such as greed and flattery are presented through dialogues, gestures, and even facial expressions. When the ravenous woman in the story talks about art and music with the narrator, she is showing her enthusiastic approval of the narrator's book but extorts him by ordering dishes ceaselessly. She pretentiously reminds the man to avoid having a meal at lunch to conceal her evil. The lady is quite similar to Miss Watson in *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain from the perspective of hypocrisy [7]. Although Miss Watson always claims herself as a kind person who believes in God, she owns slaves and never treats them as equal human beings. For instance, she promises Jim, one of her slaves, that she never sells him away from home, but she has already planned this for fortune. However, the hypocrisy of the woman in *The Luncheon* is slightly different from Miss Watson due to their different focuses on hypocrisy. Specifically, the woman cheats on the man for simply fulfilling her appetite while the hypocrisy of Miss Watson may threaten the life of her slave [8].

On top of that, the hypocrisy of the woman in *The Luncheon* can be compared with the landlord in *The Million Pound Bank Note* written by Mark Twain [9]. The story satirizes people's worship of money and power. When the protagonist called Henry walks into a restaurant, dressing up like a beggar, the landlord sends him out immediately. In contrast, the protagonist changed his attitude significantly when he sees the million pound bank note held by Henry with the gestures and facial expression of “his eye was on the note, and he was petrified. He was shipping, with all his body and soul, but he looked as if he couldn't stir hand or foot.”

Finally, parody is another way of expressing satire in literature. An example is the country named Lilliput in *Gulliver's travel* [10]. In the story, the country easily starts a war that satirizes England and established a large number of colonies around the world. Another example is *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* written by Douglas Adams. In this science fiction, impossible problems are solved by absurdly advanced technology. The illogical concept of technology serves the purpose of criticizing the flaws of different institutions in society [11].

2.4.2. For Showing the Author's Implication

Numerous writers have taken advantage of satire in the past decades. The social problems satirized by writers are generally associated with the social context in a specific era, especially during social conflicts and wars. For example, Maugham points out the false motives of middle-class gluttony. Applying similar manners, *Chimney sweeper* written by William Blake is based on the Industrial Revolution. In the late 18th century in England, enormous cities are created with the boost of the population in the urban area, thus rescuing a part of the people living in the rural areas, which were later transformed into industrial areas [12]. Therefore, many children are compelled to become child laborers. In the poem, one of the chimney sweepers named Tom dreams about freeing from the miserable life of angels. Sadly, he's trapped in the prison till the end of his life. The dreams apparently show the ironical contrast between Tom's dream and reality. In Tom's dream, the angels tell him that he'll be rescued by God. So Tom believes that he will obtain freedom one day if he works hard. Ironically, his dream will never come true.

Likewise, satire is commonly used in revealing human flaws, which is often used to explore and criticize human flaws, vices, and follies. It is a form of irony that is employed to mock, ridicule, or satirize human behavior, institutions, or beliefs that the writer or author views as absurd, or unjust. Satire can be used to bring attention to the flaws in society, politics, religion, or culture, and to encourage readers to question these beliefs and values. In *The Luncheon*, Maugham ironically presented the struggle of the narrator throughout the story. In the end, he finally pays for his flattery which shows the conflict between truth and lies. Similarly, in *The Million Pound Bank Note*, the intriguingly adverse attitude of the landlord shows the deficiencies of human beings. Another instance is that, in *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby is forced to live in an obscene world to earn much more money, so that he can marry Cassie, his beloved girl [13]. He wraps himself as a rich kid with great fortune, but later his lies are caught by Cassie's husband. Gatsby still hopes that Cassie would run off with him. Unfortunately, Gatsby was born into a dirt-poor family which is looked down upon in that era. Since class discrimination and hypocrisy are ingrained in Cassie's blood, so Cassie would never truly fall in love with Gatsby. Sadly, Gatsby was framed by Cassie's husband and murdered in the end. He even could not realize the hypocrisy of Cassie until his death.

Satire can also be used to critique individual behaviors or attitudes that are considered harmful or problematic. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the author uses satire to critique the puritanical society of 17th-century New England and its attitudes towards sexuality and sin [14]. Through exposing the hypocrisy and judgmental nature of society, Hawthorne highlights the harm caused by such attitudes [15].

In addition, satire is often used to critique individuals, groups, or institutions that hold power or influence in society [16]. For example, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the author uses satire to criticize the Soviet Union and its leaders by portraying a group of farm animals who overthrow their human owner and establish their own society, only to see it become corrupted by greed and authoritarianism [17]. In this way, Orwell exposes the flaws of the Soviet system and warns against the dangers of totalitarianism.

In contemporary literature, satire is still commonly used to critique modern society and its flaws. For example, in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author uses satire to critique the

oppressive patriarchy and religious extremism that underlie the dystopian society of Gilead [18]. By highlighting the consequences of these beliefs and values, Atwood encourages readers to question their own beliefs and values, thereby resisting oppressive systems [19].

Overall, satire is a powerful tool for writers to expose and critique human flaws and injustices. Through the use of irony, exaggeration, and humor, satire encourages readers to question their own beliefs and values, and to work towards a more just and equitable society.

2.5. The Application of Satire

In the previous analysis, it's concluded that satire is concerned with social problems. Similarly, Hodgart agreed that, satire tries to affect individuals' behaviors which is also a political part in the literature [20]. Since there were restrictions on speech in the past, writers had no choice but to use satire as a powerful weapon to point out the deficiencies in certain human behaviors or challenge the fallacy of the authority. In western countries, prominent writers such as Sterne or George Eliot used satire to attack evil in the society. For instance, in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* written by George Eliot, the story concentrates on each individual the narrator observed in the society and satirizes people in the society who follow the custom unreflectingly [21].

In today's society, with the right of the freedom of speech, satire is commonly used in the press. News with satire is able to exposure of the events so as to raise the awareness of the citizens to some extent. Beyond that, in modern literature, writers are apt to adopt Juvenalian satire in their writing, including George Orwell. In his work named *1984*, he satirizes extreme totalitarianism and communism by depicting a world with monitors in every corner that "the big brother is watching you" like always [22]. The government takes full control of citizens' life through propaganda. The protagonist hates society and the government, but he still cannot do anything about it. The absurd social system of the country in *1984* warns leaders not to infringe people's activities. Therefore, *1984* intends to argue that people should own certain of rights and freedom of speeches [23].

3. Conclusions

To conclude, this paper mainly reviews Horatian satire in *The Luncheon* by analyzing the satirical language and context, exploring how Maugham reveals the lady's greed and hypocrisy for food, along with her ironic conversation with the narrator. Accordingly, this paper also further analyzes the significance and application of satire in other literary works and compares the difference between satire in the past and satire in modern literature. Satire of the past before the 1900s tends to become satirical to individuals. At this period, writers were more likely to critique stupidity, avarice and hypocrisy etc, in a Horatian way. Nowadays, a group of current satirists may still point out the same vices of human beings, but they are more interested in straightforwardly writing stories to attack human vices. In addition to attacking human flaws, current satire tends to concentrate on social problems such as woman's oppression, totalitarianism, and patriarchy. After all, satire is one of the powerful tools to voice injustice or fight against problems in society. In the current society, satire is included in more than literature, which is also ubiquitous in the news. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate satire. Nevertheless, this review also has future potential for analyzing specific analyses of Juvenalian satire, whose works are mentioned in the function of satire and the application of satire in the future.

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