Similarities and Differences in Swift and Du Bois Through Satire for Social and Moral Change

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There is often a need to analyze social norms because man is a flawed being and accepts conditions at face value. There is evidence that some laws do not age well, and readers can rely on polemicists and satirists to bring these laws to light by ridiculing them, even if it means sugar coating the critique to make it palatable. Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and W.E.B. Du Bois' "A Mild Suggestion" are satirical works written 181 years apart, for different audiences, on separate continents, that deal with unpopular points of view to which the public has turned a blind eye. Johnathan Swift was an Anglo-Irish writer, poet, and Anglican cleric. He wrote this essay in Dublin, Ireland, and first published it in 1729. W.E.B. Du Bois was an American sociologist, writer and Pan-African civil-rights activist. He published his short story in 1912 with the hope that it would shed light on the African American condition and bring about change in the ideology of white Americans.

Some Context

When satire criticizes society and says something is wrong, the author usually follows it by explaining how it can be made right. Both Swift and Du Bois provide a "critical distortion of the familiar" (Feinberg 1967 p19) and, by doing so, provide the means to leave the reader better than he was found. "A Modest Proposal" and "A Mild Suggestion" use particular ideas to elicit graphic and grotesque imagery to combat the frail ideologies of their society in the hope of social and moral change. "A Modest Proposal" encourages the discussion of equal and distributed economic development for all of Ireland's citizens. The mockery is done controversially by insisting on a remedy from an American friend who suggested that eating babies solved many of that country's problems, "that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious,

nourishing, and wholesome food" (Swift 1729 p2464). The benefits were seen all around, including among the rich and the poor. A mockery is made quite convincingly due to the length and incredible detail in which Swift explains the logistics of such an endeavour as if it were a legitimate political policy. "A Mild Suggestion" observes the treatment of a singular black man as a reflection of African Americans' experience. By presenting a ridiculous solution and ignoring the suitable answers for equal economic development, one can witness the hopelessness of the African Americans' plight. The black man in the story plans to solve "The Negro Problem." At the same time, white people consider the mere existence of African Americans a problem; African Americans think the lack of education and opportunity to grow equity is a problem and a reason for their poverty. Du Bois uses satire to propose an organized massacre to finally rid themselves of the injustices and the white people of the need to accommodate or tolerate. However, violent grotesque things are more memorable and thus cause more of an uproar (than an ordinary essay would, however well written), causing more people to introspect and look for a solution that is not despicable.

Both writers have used the contrast between manner and matter for satirical effect. They write calmly, gently, in restrained terms, never growing melodramatic or excited about the horrors they are discussing. There is nothing unusual about the subject as if it were typical or expected behaviour. Swift is more successful as providing greater detail produces more opportunities and specific targets to remedy. Swift's length and detail are advantageous as more of Ireland's policies and struggling people are recognized. The line between Du Bois' idea and reality is too thin, but Swift's outlandish proposition produces a nice and thick line, leaving less room to misinterpret, and is thus less ambiguous. Could Du Bois have made a more unrecognizable claim? Of course. Good arguments have a significant social impact, generate

conversation and ideas, and promote a discussion of new solutions to "unsolvable problems." Both writers have used methods that have inferences to real solutions or observations for change for ultimate social and moral development. With grotesque imagery, violence, incredible detail, and a flair for the extraordinary, it has set Swift above Du Bois in satire. At the same time, both writers still maintain a firm stance toward social and moral development, with thoughtful coincidences between their satire, theories and reality.

Both writers satirize population control through genocide. The oppressed or marginalized classes are considered the problem. The authors each provide a solution favouring the established classes, portraying the higher class as victims who need saving from the problem folk. While Swift proposes cannibalism, Du Bois suggests a massacre. Swift's piece disguises cannibalism as a quid pro quo economic plan to bring Ireland out of poverty, "and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of Papists among us" (Swift 1729, p2464). Du Bois' story of a nationwide massacre is a solution to white Americans' competition with African Americans and dissatisfaction with the more definitive answers to "the Negro Problem." Both writers use an intelligent method to parallel the process of reality with their satire. Reality would follow in parallel as the solutions would play out in their satire. Although following a similar theme, the two works could not be more different. The latter can be seen as an homage to the former while still being specific to the particular region and its problems.

Planned Executions

Swift uses bureaucratic language that indicates a political agenda. Swift can afford to do this "top-down" method of proposing a solution because his solution is somewhat unrealistic, as the thought of eating babies would make the stomachs of many churn. However, Du Bois uses a narrative much like a story with archetypal characters simply having a conversation on a boat.

This "bottom-up" solution is presented due to the genuine threat of people being inspired by this piece of satire. Satire is often above the cognitive abilities of ignorant people, and Du Bois could not risk the message coming across too manifesto-like. Unfortunately, Du Bois' suggested plan can be considered a secret fantasy of many white supremacists. He makes it a point to remind the audience that the work is a satirical piece by reminding the reader of Swift's work using a play on words in the title. This top-down/bottom-up difference in writing can also describe why Swift's piece is longer and Du Bois's shorter. Swift discusses more aspects of the economic and social problems Ireland is facing and thus bring these issues to the forefront and spreads awareness that will lead to remedial action and development. Du Bois' story leaves the reader with a feeling of shame, empathy and the motivation to be better.

Some Thoughtful Perhaps Intentional Coincidences

The timelines and implementation times of both "solutions" are vastly different. Swift's solution requires setup time (at least nine months plus a year), not to mention the time needed to create the infrastructure and institutions to execute his vision. These two robust solutions provide a road map to economic benefits as an outcome of barbaric actions. Swift describes the butchering, storing, and distribution of infants as food and all of the many benefits to every level of society, including but not limited to taverns, butchers, gentlepeople, the poor themselves, and Ireland as a whole. It would even benefit the very fabric of society itself, as "this would be a great inducement to marriage, which all wise nations have either encouraged by rewards or enforced by laws and penalties" (Swift 1729, p2466). Du Bois elaborates on the methodology behind going about the "purge day" in considerable detail, emphasizing the day, means, and technique. Swift's strategy is ongoing because economic uplift and sustainability is a long-term behaviour that needs to be maintained once rectified. Du Bois' concept, on the other hand, is

accomplished all in one night. Du Bois, however, speaks about race, which is an issue that is fixed overnight in the ideal world. The emancipation proclamation exemplifies how racist policies can be put to an end overnight, but there is no mention of maintenance. While there would still be some planning, Du Bois' character promises to settle "the problem once, suddenly, and forever" (Du Bois 1912, p93).

The Catholics in "A Modest Proposal" and the African Americans in "A Mild Suggestion" must have different degrees of information about the plan of action for it to work. Swift's proposal required the awareness, participation, and cooperation from both classes of citizens because a nation's morality and economic strides are the responsibility of all of its citizens, including mothers, fathers, societies, businesses, and political institutions working together. For a solution to work in satire and reality, an in-depth explanation is required for both rich and poor. Du Bois' suggestion, however, can only be explained to the perpetrators. We must leave the intended targets in the dark, or the "surprise" will not work. Even in reality, Du Bois' suggestion does not require the African Americans to be aware of positive social change on their behalf because they are on the receiving end of positive behaviours, and only the white Americans will have to be informed to do better to their peers. In other words, just as in Du Bois' story where the African Americans are left in the dark, in the ideal world, the African American people do not have to see it coming; the positive racial behaviour just has to happen.

Conclusion

Finally, these works are peak satire, prime examples of the genre. As Swift covers specific and several issues with Irelands policies, reminding the general public about maintenance and a united front, Du Bois inspires, in satire, a scenario where there is an overnight shift in the social and psychological beliefs of Americans. The fact that they masterfully describe

horrific, violent acts but the framework for execution that they provide perfectly mimics the implementation required to truly solve the problem they are mocking makes them the pinnacle of their form. Literature provides the mortgage and satire its insurance. Society is flawed as humans are flawed. We have reasons to go to the dark side with more than just seven sins. While literature celebrates all things human, satire is the cynical, critical friend to remind us of the pretence we got used to. It shows us familiar things in a new way, rarely telling us something new. Writers, politicians, and comedians have used satire to encourage the public to be more ethical. One of the methods traditionally used to achieve this effect is showing the victim as ridiculous rather than wicked" (Feinberg, 1967 p86). It is with great care that we must read satirical works such as Cervantes' Don Quixote, Golding's Lord of the Flies, Huxley's Brave New World, Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, and Terry Pratchett's work to remind us that Don Quixote was not mad, Piggy was not wrong, "Soylent Green" is people, others are not out to steal our precious bodily fluids, and Vimes reminds us that there is a deep and beautiful balance between cynicism and love.

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