

A Brief Analysis of Irony in *Lunatic's Diary* and *A Modest Proposal*

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Abstract

Lu Xun's *Lunatic's Diary* and Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* have much in common in terms of their artistic technique in writing. This paper makes a comparative analysis of how these two works take advantage of the mouths of particular characters to satirize the respective social reality and inspire people in their anti-colonial struggle. Their language styles are absurd and grotesque, in line with the identity of the characters they portray. This paper hopes to deepen readers' understanding of the themes of these two writings by analyzing the artistic technique of irony.

Keywords

Irony; Comparative literature; Emancipation.

1. Introduction

Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Jonathan Swift(1667-1745) lived in different times and countries. They were influenced by different cultures. Lu Xun was a great writer in the 20th century Chinese literary circle and an excellent master of literary satire. *Lunatic's Diary* is Lu Xun's first vernacular story. It ruthlessly exposes the crimes of imperialism, attacks the decay of feudal system and cultural thought, and reflects the darkness of Chinese society at that time. Swift was a great master of satire and political critic in the 18th century Britain. He harshly attacked the landlord class in England with his pungent and unique writing style and shouted for the suffering of the Irish people[1]. One of Swift's most famous works is his argumentative essay *A Modest Proposal*. Though different in genre, the two works share some similarities in artistic technique in that they both use irony a lot.

2. Author and Background

Lu Xun was a thinker, writer and educator who was inspiring and influential during the May Fourth Enlightenment Movement in China. Lu Xun was greatly encouraged by the victory of the October Revolution in Russia. Together with Li Dazhao and many other advanced intellectuals at that time, he stood in the forefront of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and set off the New Culture Movement after the May Fourth Movement in China. *Lunatic's Diary* is a pioneering work of modern Chinese literature, which sounded the battle horn of the "May Fourth" era. In the *Lunatic's Diary*, the narrator tells about his mental fear of eating people and being eaten by others in his diary. Using irony and other artistic techniques, the story fully exposes the feudal history and reality of "cannibalism" in old China, hoping to wake up those spiritually numb people, and encourage them to create a new era[2].

Jonathan Swift, the founder of radical democracy in the English Enlightenment, was a famous British satirical novelist in the 18th century. In Jonathan Swift's time, the Irish people were ruthlessly oppressed by the British government, and the economic recession and social unemployment was on the rise. And Ireland's political status was low. England also enacted a series of laws to persecute Catholics. In his life, he wrote many satirical writings and essays to criticize the feudal monarch, aristocrats and the church, and also criticized the British crime of seizing colonies and exploiting colonial people.

Among Swift's many satires, the best representation of his satirical art should be "*A Modest Proposal* for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents, published in 1729. In *A Modest Proposal*, Jonathan Swift, ostensibly posing as a projector deeply concerned about Ireland's growing population, advises the British government on how to deal with the problem in order to prevent hundreds of thousands of children from becoming a burden in this impoverished country. The narrator suggests that Irish children of about a year old should be fed up flimsily and sold in the market as aristocratic dishes. Throughout the article, this projector takes "eating people" as an "excellent policy" that could help enrich the country and benefit the people. Instead, it ruthlessly exposed and flogged the British government's heinous colonial exploitation of the Irish people.

Although the times of Swift and Lu Xun were separated by more than a century, they were both famous writers in the world with profound writing skills. *A Modest Proposal* and *Lunatic's Diary* have their own distinctive characteristics in writing techniques. In view of comparative literature, it is not difficult to find the common artistic technique, namely irony, to conduct a comparative research.

3. Analysis of artistic Technique

3.1. The use of irony in *Lunatic's Diary*

In *Lunatic's Diary*, Lu Xun took the perspective of the "lunatic", that is "I", to reveal the reality at that time and the nature of "man-eating" feudal ethics. This "I", on behalf of Lu Xun himself, is actually not a crazy man but a revolutionary. It is the ruling class that is crazy about suppressing revolutionaries, and it is the people who are deeply poisoned by the feudal ethics and have no distinction between right and wrong[3]. The author thinks that "lunatic" is crazy in everything they say and do. So Lu Xun used irony to write: "The fish's eyes were white and hard, and its mouth was open, just like that group of man-eaters. They ate a few, but it was so slippery that nobody knew whether the fish was human, then they spited out all the intestines." Lu Xun also wrote: "Some of them have been beaten by a magistrate, some have been slapped on the mouth by a gentleman, some have had their wives snatched away by yamen runners, and some have had their mothers forced to death by creditors. Their faces were less fearful and fierce than they had been the day before." [4] Every time you read these words, your eyes will be filled with disgusting images. What the reader sees is the phenomenon of social class antagonism and the miserable life of the working people who are deeply oppressed.

In addition, the author also thought of what he saw written in the pharmacopoeia, "human flesh can be fried and eaten" and "people with lung disease eat steamed bread with blood". All of this make him terrified. He also came up with the idea of "swapping sons and eating each other's sons." written in the ancient books; and "I thought: What hatred do I have with Zhao Gui-weng, and what hatred do I have with the people on the road with me? Only twenty years ago, I kicked Gu Jiu's old bookkeeper, and Gu Jiu was very unhappy."; "Whenever I am unhappy, I will hide in the flowers and hide my crying face among the moist and tender leaves. Their fragrance can comfort me, after a while, my bad mood disappeared."

All these show that the feudal ethics "cannibalism" has a long history, and involves a wide range. He also wrote "Instead of saying 'knowledge is power', it is better to say that knowledge is happiness[5]. Because with extensive and profound knowledge, one can distinguish between true and false, good and evil, and distinguish between the good and the bad. To grasp the ideas and achievements that mark human progress is like feeling the pulse of human activity for a long time. One cannot understand the harmonious movement of human life if one cannot feel the great human desire that jumps in its pulse." which showed his sense of knowledge and his disappointment to the majority of people who were numb.

3.2. The use of irony in *A Modest Proposal*

A Modest Proposal is also written in the first person narrative, but the "I" is clearly not Swift himself. Swift's true intention is to express sympathy for the suffering of the Irish people and strong indignation at the callousness of the Irish people, but the language in the article does not directly express his true meaning. It's easy to see that Irony's artistic touch is evident throughout. In the article, the so-called "advisor" who worried about the country and the people talked about "eating people" with relish[6]. He used creepy language to talk about "eating children." He even suggested peeling children before cooking them, so that the skins could be made into small gloves for ladies and summer boots for gentlemen[7]. He wrote "Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flay the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen."

And He considered healthy children could be stewed, roasted, steamed, or boiled to be a dish "...a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled ; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout..." "Could people, reading these cruel words and sentences, think that this advice was modest? It is these words that make people see the colonialists for what they are[8].

Attacking Ireland's business class for being blind and insensitive to the suffering of its own people, he wrote: "Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: Of taxing our absentees at five shillings, a pound, except what is of our own growth and manufacture: Of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury: Of curing the expensiveness of the product pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women: Of introducing a vein of parsimony prudence and temperance: Of..." Yet the "don't take" advice listed above is exactly what Swift has been arguing for years. After hearing the disgusting "advice" from the "advisor"[9]. The reader will only feel the suggestions Swift has made are more reasonable and feasible.

4. Conclusion

Both *A Modest Proposal* and *Lunatic's Diary* certainly use other artistic techniques, such as metaphors and symbols, but the common artistic technique in these two works is irony, which runs in the whole process a large proportion. The two writers are far apart in time and space, but both are concerned about the future of their own nation. Lu Xun tells bizarre "man-eating" stories through the mouth of a madman, while Swift puts forward "gentle" suggestions as a "counsellor". While constructing the superficial irony, they also encourage readers to explore the deep meaning of the irony. The two writers express the same theme with appropriate language and writing techniques in line with the identity of the characters, that is, reflecting the darkness of the society, exposing and satirizing the ruthlessness and cruelty of the exploiting class and rulers.

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