

Humour and Satire in English Literature

Ünal AYTÜR

Özet:

Mizah bizi güldüren şeydir. Birbirinden apayrı iki tür mizah vardır: Komedinin güldürmeyi amaçlayan mizahı ile hicvin eleştirmeyi hedef alan mizahı. Komedinin mizahı, hoşgörülü, yargılayıp suçlamayan “saf” bir mizahtır. Hiciv ise mizahı insanların saçmalıklarını, ahlâki kusurlarını gözler önüne sermek için kullanır. Komedide hicivde de mizah genellikle gerçek ile ideal arasındaki zıtlıktan kaynaklanır. Chaucer’den Auden’a, İngiliz edebiyatı her iki türden mizah örnekleriyle doludur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mizah, komedi, hiciv.

Abstract:

Humour is what makes us laugh. There are two very different kinds of humour: one producing comedy, the other producing satire. Comic humour presents the absurdity of life without judgement, whereas satiric humour is directed to attacking the follies or vices of mankind. Humour works chiefly by stressing the contrast between the ideal and the real. It has produced some of the finest works of art in English literature.

Key words: humour, comedy, satire.

All sorts of definitions have been given of humour. The simplest rule perhaps is that humour is what makes us laugh. And humour also cuts us off from the animals. But obviously social or moral pressure is sometimes strong enough to suppresses this peculiar habit. Saint Loyola (1491-1556) urged his followers not to laugh or make others laugh. Lord Chesterfield told his son that he never laughed in the course of his adult life. That is perhaps part of the well-known English reserve.¹ The medieval French chronicler, Jean Froissart (1337-1410 *Chronicles*, 1400), remarked that the English took their pleasures “sadly, according to their custom”. On the other hand, we have the phrase “Merrie England,” which goes back just as far. And between the 15th and the 16th centuries there is plenty of evidence that the English made no attempt to hide their feelings in public. Erasmus was delighted to

see that everybody kissed each other in England in the 16th century. Whenever you entered a house, or left it, you were warmly embraced by the entire family. The Elizabethan age was indeed loud with laughter. Sir Thomas Urquart (1611-1660), the great translator of Rabelais, died in a fit of laughter when he heard Charles II's restoration to the English throne. In the 18th century such high-spirited humour began to disappear. Social pressure repressed laughter even more effectively during the reign of Queen Victoria. To be demonstrative became more and more shameful, or at least "ill-bred". The Elizabethan laugh became a faint smile.

Yet, if laughter was no longer as loud as before, that is no reflection on the English sense of humour. The spirit of grave nonsense, - of saying absurd things as if one were entirely serious, is very English. Nothing is more characteristic of English humour than the limericks of Edward Lear. The wild impossibility of his characters is made so convincing:

They went to sea in a sieve, they did;
In a sieve they went to sea;
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a sieve they went to sea.
And when the sieve turned round and round,
And everyone cried, "You'll be drowned!"
They called aloud, "Our sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button; we don't care a fig-
In a sieve we'll go to sea!"
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live.
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue;
And the went to sea in a sieve. ...

And this crazy universe was invented by a serious landscape-painter. It was the same with Lewis Carroll, who in real life was an Oxford don and lectured on - of all subjects - mathematics. He made friends with a little girl called Alice, and to amuse her he wrote those absurd fantasies which still delight adults as well as children all over the world.

But the English have always had a fondness for Nonsense. Their nursery rhymes are full of it:

¹ But there is also the geographic factor. The English are a northern people, and perhaps the cold and rains of the north prevent them from being so expansive in their emotions as those who live in the warmth of the sun, as, for instance the Italians and the Greeks are, or the French. It was the imagination of Homer, a Greek, that filled Heaven with "inextinguishable laughter." And it was Rabelais, a Frenchman, who made people laugh "like a swarm of flies" at the young Gargantua.

High diddle diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon;
The little dog laughed
To see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

The limerick form, too, existed long before Edward Lear's time:

There was a young lady of Niger
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside,
And the smile on the face of the tiger.
(anonymous)

This is "pure" humour - the humour that produces comedy. Pure humour is satisfied with presenting to us the absurdity of life. It does not judge; or if it does, there is no harshness in the judgment. It is, in fact, "good-humoured" judgment. And the chief way in which humour works is by stressing the contrast between the ideal and the real. Cervantes shows us the figure of a noble ideal in Don Quixote; but he sets up against it that of Sancho Panza, who is strong just where the poor knight is weak. Sancho is, so to speak, a symbol of our body, while Don Quixote is our soul. His mind is filled with visions of an impossible nobility - and then Sancho comes along with a proverb, not very inspiring, perhaps, but at least much truer to real life.

And this is the method adopted by Shakespeare too. Nearly all his plays have a comic sub-plot. In *Twelfth Night* the main theme is one of romantic love. But, as if to remind us that life consists of something more than love, Shakespeare brings in a group of comic characters, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, Malvolio, Maria, and the clown; and their fooling gives balance to the play. In *As You Like it*, again, Shakespeare has drawn his finest picture of a love which is both ideal and high-spirited; but he takes care to contrast it with the love-affair of Touchstone, the court fool, and the country girl Audrey; while both types of love are criticised by Jacques the misanthropist. This method of contrast is even more obvious in the history plays. The serious events of Henry IV's reign are relieved by the presence of Falstaff and his companions. Some critics would say that Shakespeare has gone too far; that the "great" events are dwarfed by the giant humour of Falstaff. But that is not true. We may prefer to see Falstaff rather than Hotspur or the King, but Shakespeare has devoted as much care and time to the one as to the other. It is true, of course, that Falstaff towers above all the rest as a creation. He is the personification of comedy.

Contrast is the main principle in the 18th century comic novelists as well. Fielding's own theory of comedy is based on the difference between what people appear to be and what they actually are. In *Joseph Andrews* he balances the moral idealism of Parson Adams with the selfishness of all those characters that he meets on his way to London and back home. But for sheer comedy we must go to Lawrence Sterne. He wrote only one novel, and that was unfinished. But *Tristram Shandy* alone sets him in the first rank of comic writers. Even its construction is full of humour. The hero, who gives the book its name and who tells his own story, is not even born till halfway through the novel! Sterne writes (or pretends to write) exactly as he thinks; we seem to be listening to a man's voice, talking about whatever comes into his head. And yet, out of this confusion comes a group of characters as clear and convincing as any in literature. Most important of them are Tristram's father and his uncle - and there was never a more unlike pair of brothers. Mr Shandy has ideas about everything, and the simple-minded Uncle Toby drives his brother mad by an innocent remark which shows he has not understood a word of what his philosophically-minded brother has been saying. It is one of the great joys of reading to hear the brothers talk, as Uncle Toby, smoking his pipe by the fire, tries so hard to follow his brother's flights of fancy - and always fails. No writer has equalled Sterne in showing how difficult it is for us to communicate with each other. Each with our own interests, we interpret other people's remarks to suit ourselves. Mr Shandy is locked up in the prison of his eccentric ideas, Uncle Toby in that of his sieges and battles, Widow Wadman in that of finding a husband. And they persistently, pathetically, comically fail to understand the others.

The great humourist of the 19th century is of course Dickens, who was a very different sort of writer from Fielding or Sterne. His origins were different; and he wrote for a different public - the lower-middle class from which he came. As a result, he has all the vices of the worst popular writers, but his virtues are much greater than those vices. Out of his inexhaustible imagination he has produced a series of comic characters that can be rivalled only by Shakespeare: Mr Pickwick and Sam Weller, Mr Micawber, Pecksniff, and Mrs Gamp. The list is endless. Where Dickens is supreme, and where he joins up with the great line of English humourists, is in his wonderful understanding of those people whose business is unpleasant or even hateful to us, but quite normal and good to themselves. The way his crooked lawyers think and act (Dodgson and Fogg, for instance), who live on the sufferings of other people. Omer, the undertaker in *David Copperfield*, who knows people by their height because he is always thinking of their coffins. And above all, the terrible and immortal Mrs Gamp, the night-nurse of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. We know that many people have died being left to the tender care of this drunken horror, and yet when she begins to talk, we are spellbound.

"Laughter is the mind sneezing," says Wyndham Lewis. Its explosion blows away all kinds of unclean matter that clog up our brains. But it is not necessary for the humorist to hate what he laughs at. He may even have a soft spot for his comic creations. They may be grotesque, yet they are only exaggerated versions of what we ourselves may be. And it is

good sometimes to see oneself in the distorting mirror of the comic writer. As a matter of fact, the humour of comedy enjoys the endless absurdities of man for their own sake. The pure humourist hardly ever condemns these absurdities. But there is another sort of humour: the humour that is directed to attacking the follies or vices of mankind. This is a less amiable variety, perhaps, but it has produced some of the finest works of art in English literature. And as pure humour corresponds to the humane side of the English nature, so this other, which may be called “satirical” humour, may be said to correspond to the puritan side. The puritan demands that literature should be useful, improving; and that is exactly what satire sets out to do. Its declared aim is to reform the abuses of society, to shame man into improvement by pointing out what a mean and ridiculous creature he is. Hence Alexander Pope’s boast that people who are not afraid of God are afraid of his satires.

The word “satire” is Latin, of course, and originally meant a mixture of prose and verse: it had little to do with the subject of the mixture. Only, as it was often satirical, the word gradually took on its modern meaning. But it is not always easy to decide whether a man is writing comedy or satire. Chaucer, for example? Are all those churchmen of his - the Monk, the Pardoner and the rest - meant to be satirical, or not? They certainly don’t behave as they should. Isn’t this criticism, and isn’t it therefore satire? The answer is that there is no definite boundary between pure humour and satire. Joseph Hall, who claimed to be the first English satirist, points out that the humour of comedy is “toothless”, but that of satire “bites”. All humour is to some extent a satirical comment on humanity, but we only call it satire when it has a certain sharpness. And Chaucer’s good-natured attitude towards his characters prevents his work from coming under the heading of true satire.

The same argument applies to most of Shakespeare’s plays - most, but not all. *Troilus and Cressida*, alone, proves that, if he had wished, Shakespeare could have been one of the major satirists of English literature. The story of how Cressida deserted Troilus during the siege of Troy was one of the famous inventions of the Middle Ages. Chaucer had written about it; and Chaucer had used all his poetic powers to make Cressida sympathetic. Shakespeare did the opposite. His Cressida is a shallow woman, a mere creature of appetite. When she has to leave Troilus and go to the Greek camp, she makes herself at home with the enemy immediately. Her manners disgust the experienced Ulysses:

Ther’s language in her eyes, her cheek, her lip;
Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
At every joint and motive of her body....

And Troilus, though faithful, is just an infatuated young man: made (in his own words) “weaker than a woman’s tear” by his passion. This contemptuous attitude applies to all the other characters of the play. Helen is beautiful but silly - and she is an instrument of destruction. Diomedes sums her up:

For every false drop in her bawdy veins
A Grecian's life hath sunk; for every scruple
Of her contaminated carrion weight
A Trojan hath been slain. ...

Love itself, which Shakespeare had portrayed so superbly in *Romeo and Juliet* and *As You Like It*, is dismissed in this play with the cynical definition of Pandarus: "hot deeds is love." As for the Trojan war, Shakespeare makes it out to be a miserable and costly waste of time and blood. The heroic figures of Homer are here merely contemptible. Achilles is sulky, vain and treacherous; he kills Hector in the end by means of a cowardly trick. Ajax is a "beef-witted" giant - all muscle and no brain. Old Nestor and wise Ulysses talk very sagely but without any result. And all the while we have the cringing Thersites, who is kicked and beaten by everybody because he tells them what fools they are. His opinion of the war is very simple: "All the argument is - a cuckold and a whore."

There is very little humour here, we may say. There is, however; but it is the old savage humour which we meet again in the broken heads and bloody fights in Fielding's and Smollett's novels, and which gradually lost its harshness in the Victorian period. But the Elizabethans were tough people: Ben Jonson's satire is a good example. All the characters in his *Volpone* are rascals, of one kind or another. From the Fox himself, who pretends to be dying in order to entice his rich neighbours to give him expensive presents - hoping, of course, to be remembered in his will. Jonson sees them all as animals: the Fox's servant Mosca, the Fly, who is the little parasite - quite ready to betray his master when he thinks fit; Voltore the old vulture, Corbaccio the raven, and so on. And he shows us how these rogues in the end betray themselves by their own cleverness. Jonson had a higher sense of society than Shakespeare, who always thought in terms of the individual. Jonson's mind was a generalising one; he always kept before him a picture of the great Renaissance London of his day, suddenly offering people new opportunities for making a fortune. And in his great comedies, especially in *Volpone* and the *Alchemist*, he shows us how civilisation can go rotten. It was Jonson's virtue that he saw this corruption where most observers were merely dazzled by the richness of the New Age. And he gives us his observations with a superbly humorous zest.

But the golden age of English satire was the Eighteenth Century; and Swift was the finest general satirist of that age. "Satire" he once said, "is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets with in the world." This shrewd observation is a good example of Swift's characteristic irony. Swift considered the *Tale of a Tub* his best satirical work. Most readers have preferred *Gulliver's Travels*, in which satire is so perfectly concealed that it has become a favourite children's storybook. But we find the quintessence of Swift as a satirist in the short "Modest Proposal". Here Swift has concentrated all his indignation at the terrible poverty he saw everywhere in Ireland; it is a cold sort of indignation, and all the more

fearful for that. Swift's cure for poverty is simple: it is that the children of the poor should be killed and eaten. It is difficult to find anything to equal the anger one feels hidden under the cool and detached prose of this pamphlet: "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young, healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled" The rest of the "Proposal" gravely enlarges on this frightful suggestion. Swift's rage against man's inhumanity to man was never fiercer than in this cold plan for cannibalism. Obviously, "A Modest Proposal" deserves to be considered one of the greatest pieces of satire ever written.

There was little satire in the 19th century. The great exception is Lord Byron. Byron was in an ideal position for satirising English life. He knew it well. And his rank, but especially the fact that he had made himself an outcast and an exile, gave him complete freedom; and he criticised everyone from the Duke of Wellington to Lord Castlereagh. When Castlereagh committed suicide with a penknife during a fit of depression, Byron wrote him this terrible epitaph:

So He has cut his throat at last. -He? Who?
The man who cut his country's long ago.

But the laws of libel discouraged such personal attacks; and even more, the Victorian idea that no gentleman should utter personalities was not conducive to the satirist's art. In the 20th century there was a revival of satire: general in the works of T.S.Eliot and Evelyn Waugh; political, in the verse of W. H. Auden and in the novels of Huxley and Orwell; literary, in Wyndham Lewis's *Apes of God* - a novel which satirises a group of writers including James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf the Bloomsbury group. Auden's "Epitaph on a Tyrant" is a short but powerful piece of satire reminiscent of Swift's "Proposal" in its use of ironic indirection:

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the street.