

Withdrawal of A Decent Man: On the Irony in “Running for Governor”

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Abstract: Mark Twain’s short story “Running for Governor” is threaded with irony, which achieves a structural effect and contributed a lot to the organization of the story on the macro-level, and achieves a strong rhetorical effect with artful linguistic devices on the micro-level, therefore forming a sharp contrast between truth and falsehood. Irony in the story is effectively penetrating and powerful in its function of plot development, characterization and the demonstration of authorial attitude. This paper aims to reveal how the artistic effect of irony is achieved in this story, and show that the artistry of Mark Twain’s irony lies in creating the tension between ambivalent feelings through which there comes a direct communication between the author and reader through the ingenious organization and masterful use of language.

Keywords: Irony; Mark Twain; Running for Governor.

1. Introduction

Mark Twain’s short story “Running for Governor”, recognized as a typical example of his mordant satires, is about the character’s retrospection of his experience of running for governor against his main rivals Stewart L. Woodford and John T. Hoffman. It adopts first-person narration, with “Mark Twain” as a character-narrator, who “was nominated for Governor of the great state of New York”, “on an independent ticket” (Twain 338). From the moment on he is attacked by a series of slanders, in face of which he is almost mentally crashed, and finally must end up this affair with his withdrawal from the campaign. The whole story is threaded with irony, which, on the macro-level, has achieved a structural effect and contributed a lot to the organization of the story; on the micro-level, it has achieved strong rhetorical effect by the use of linguistic devices which form sharp contrast between facts and falsehood. Therefore, this paper aims at revealing how the artistic effect of irony is achieved in this short story.

2. Irony on a Macro-level

Irony in the story, on a macro-level, has achieved a structural effect which traverses the whole narrative. In the first place, it can be classified as a structural irony. Structural irony, as Abrams defines, is “a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning and evaluation throughout the work. One common literary device of this sort is the invention of a naïve hero, or else a naïve narrator or spokesman, whose invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader -- who penetrates to, and shares, the implied point of view of the authorial presence behind the naïve persona -- just as persistently is called on to alter and correct” (Abrams 135-136). Structural irony depends on the reader’s knowledge of the author’s ironic intention, which is not intended by the fictional narrator. In this story, although the character-narrator shares the author’s name “Mark Twain”, there is a huge distance, or gap between the two drastically different “Mark Twain”s, the character-narrator Twain who participates in the affair and the author Twain who observes it. The author Twain

fully understands the lowdown on the whole event of the so-called election contest, while, the character-narrator Twain appears as naïve, without the knowledge that the essence of running for governor is no more than slandering and being slandered by others. Therefore, discrepancy between the voices of the narrator and the author as well as between the understandings of the character and the reader is produced, which, according to Wayne Booth, can also lead to irony (Booth 1961). The character-narrator Mark Twain is blundering on the losing side and obscured from a penetrating discernment into facts, which are perfectly comprehended by the author Twain and the reader, between whom there exists a certain unspoken relationship of complicity, from which the character-narrator remains excluded.

Another evidence for me to say the irony here is a structural one is that, the author invents two kinds of characters who are completely opposite to each other in conduct and morals: Mark Twain is a man of principle but Woodford and Hoffman are political hooligans who are capable of any vile business – the two kinds present a sort of ironic incongruity. When they encounter on the stage of political campaign, it is naturally that the tension of opposites should emerge as a problem. In the process of campaign, the two political scoundrels dress themselves up as decent men of honor, the embodiment of justice and truth, while, the simple-minded Twain who has “good character” is relentlessly attacked by false charges and mercilessly branded as a monstrous criminal. The infamous political scoundrels become the accuser, while the upright man is pushed out as the accused. Therein a kind of rich comedy is produced – a number of dreadful and extraordinary crimes are attributed to an individual who is morally incapable of and bears no relation to any of them, which will inevitably lead to an opposite effect – the accusers’ action becomes a satire upon themselves. The more they affect to be demure in a provocative way and strike a theatrical attitude in their denunciation and persecution of Twain, the more is there a strong element of farce about them, and the more they appear ridiculous and contemptible. Extreme sensation and violence of the crimes render themselves unworthy of any defence or protest. They spare no efforts to embellish their rumors into dead truth, but it only turns out that in doing so they are exposing themselves, making an exquisite caricature

of their self-disclosure.

Irony, on a macro-level, is revealed from another perspective. The story involves two kinds of equilibrium, if viewed from Todorov's perspective, one is the character-narrator's psychological equilibrium, the other is what can be described as the equilibrium of electoral mechanism. The equilibrium of electoral mechanism is as hard as rock, which is not upset throughout the story. While, the character-narrator's psychological equilibrium has undergone such a process: equilibrium – disequilibrium – equilibrium, which follows the sequence of five propositions (Equilibrium – Force – Disequilibrium – Force – Equilibrium) describing a state which is disturbed and then re-established in an altered form (Todorov 1975). Before Twain gets entangled into the election game, his mental state is undisturbed; but after he is nominated and enters the mighty machine of election, he is bound to be assaulted by, and suffers greatly from numerous slanders. In this way a certain contrast is built between the two kinds of equilibrium. When the narrator is able to endure the slanders he is still involved in the electoral mechanism; when he feels unable to do so and thrown into psychological disequilibrium, and the pain caused by such disequilibrium reaches a certain point, he has to retreat from the unalterable order of the election mechanism to seek a new equilibrium of his heart. This indicates that, although he backs off from the game, there will be other people who will still enter into this mechanism and the equilibrium of electoral mechanism will remain intact. People change, but this mechanism remains unchanged. Therein, this contrast ironically reflects how the electoral mechanism can corrupt people and society.

Last but not least, in terms of organization of the story, in order for the use of irony to achieve a structural effect, the author constructs it with the combination of quotations from newspapers, the character-narrator's comments and complimentary annotations – different types of texts operate together to form two threads of the narrative: one thread can be traced by the wretched tricks his rivals play on him, which are not manifested but indirectly represented by the long quotations from newspapers and journals; the other thread follows the character-narrator's psychological reactions towards his traducers, which are shown through the few passages of narrator's comments and the annotations supplemented in square brackets. The two threads of narrative form a sharp contrast between the extreme malice and complexity of his opponents and the extreme simplicity and daze on Twain's part. Newspaper quotations presents to the reader all kinds of falsehoods, after which the narrator's explanation is followed, revealing the truth; in this way the "contrast between a reality and an appearance" is set, which constitutes "the basic feature of every irony" (Chevalier, in Muecke 33). There is no direct depiction of the development of the running process, nor is there any meticulous characterization; the whole story is developed to a great extent by the frequent excerpts from newspapers, which not only present the events that constitute the plot – how the narrator's rivals plot against him step by step and drive him to the brink of political ruin. The newspapers and journals are supposed to tell the truth and speak on the behalf of the public, but ironically they have been reduced to the instrument for seeking political benefits, which makes the author's ironical intention the more pungent. After each quotation there is a short passage of the narrator's personal account, which mainly serves as an instrument to link the quotations together except giving an explanation of his psychological reactions

that his opponents' shameless slanders have stirred in him. In the end, the narrator has to back out with bitter words that "I gave it up. I hauled down my colors and surrendered. I was not equal to the requirements of a gubernatorial campaign", and signs his withdrawal like this – "Truly yours, once a decent man, but now MARK TWAIN, L.P., M.T., B.S., D.T., F.C., and L.E." (Twain 344) – an ironical summary of all the ridiculous names ascribed to him. In this way, the irony is maintained from the very beginning till the very end, not only in the ironical tone but also in the overall structure. And there exists a remarkable contrast in the length and language of these quotations and the narrator's personal account – the former, in the form of longer passages, employs a number of exaggerated expressions; while, the latter, in the form of short passages, of which the language is sincere and the tone is desperate – this is suggestive that the narrator quails at the increasing intensity of defamatory statements about him, startled, dazed and indignant, but can do nothing but let matters take their course, incapable of any action. Mark Twain has exhibited great art in the ironical use of language contrast truth and falsehood. So, the following part will be dealing with the irony on the micro-level of the rhetorical effect through the analysis of some linguistic fragments.

3. Irony on a Micro-level

In the very beginning there is a letter from the narrator's grandmother, which, though short and brief, is worthy of utmost attention, for it shows a good grasp of the essence of the election game:

You have never done one single thing in all your life to be ashamed of—not one. Look at the newspapers—look at them and comprehend what sort of characters Woodford and Hoffman are, and then see if you are willing to lower yourself to their level and enter a public canvass with them. (ibid. 338-339)

The whole letter is composed of two sentences. In the first sentence, the repetition of "never" and "not one", not only is grandmother's judgment on the narrator, but also a confirmation of his self-evaluation that he has a "prominent advantage" – a "good character", which is exactly what his opponents resort to every conceivable means to defame and tarnish. On his entering into the public canvass, his rivals have schemed all along to label him with various kinds of groundless infamies. So the repetition used in grandmother's letter not only carries a foreshadowing of what is to follow later on in the story, but also forms a sharp contrast with the infamies imposed on him. The second sentence has two implications. One on hand, grandmother makes clear her attitude to Woodford and Hoffman, as well as to the Gubernatorial campaign – "see if you are willing to lower yourself to their level"; the subordinate clause introduces two alternatives – the narrator can either stand for election or give it up according to his will, but the word "lower", and the word "sort" which conveys a deprecatory meaning, work in concert with each other, implying grandmother's scornful tone towards the election business and her favor for the latter alternative. On the other hand, she warns the narrator of the hidden risks of the gubernatorial campaign, and gets right down to the heart of the matter by calling the narrator's attention to "the newspapers" – the medium through which verbal attacks are waged against and various accusations are imposed on the narrator. Summing up, the letter drops a clear

hint of the development of the plot, foreboding the beginning of the narrator's unfortunate end.

Throughout the story Twain's political opponents Hoffman and Woodford have never shown up and there is no direct description of them except at the beginning there is such comment about them that "if ever they had known what it was to bear a good name, that time had gone by. It was plain that in these latter years they had become familiar with all manner of shameful crimes" (ibid. 338). But at all times Twain feels their threatening ubiquity from the newspapers, through which Hoffman and Woodford "speak" to him. The author's ingenuity lies in that he uses the opponents' own language to form a self-mocking miniature of themselves. There are altogether six full passages of newspaper quotations, each of which dubs the narrator Twain with a disgraceful criminal charge, becoming on one hand more and more serious and startling in creating a sensational effect, on the other hand more and more aggressive and threatening in compelling Twain out of the campaign. As the slanders mount in an incredible speed, the compelling force of his opponents becomes more and more pressing and overwhelming; as the rhythm of the story develops in an increasing tension, and the irony becomes more and more poignant. Let us get down to the six quotations to examine how the irony achieves a rhetorical effect.

In the first quotation, the narrator is accused of perjury, the aim of which is to "rob a poor native widow and her helpless family of a meager plantain patch" (ibid. 339). The headline "perjury" is capitalized, conspicuously striking the eyes of the reader, in which way a certain shocking sensation is achieved, and naturally the reader's attention is aroused and doubts are stirred – Mark Twain, an Independent denominator to run for governor, should have behaved disgracefully. Apparently these political rivals exhibit a certain politeness, but malice is implied between the lines. The derogatory use of "condescend" forms a kind of insinuated sarcasm that Mark Twain is a man who tends to behave in a patronizing manner. The adverbial clause "now that Mr. Mark Twain is before the people as a candidate for Governor" (339) introduces a condition in which Mark Twain has no alternative but to make a clarification for himself. But the "evidences" provided in such ample and inuscular details – "thirty-four witness, in Wakawak, Cochin China, in 1863" (339) – are so forceful that any attempt of self-defense seems to be rendered impossible. "Mr. Twain owes it to himself, as well as to the great people whose suffrages he asks, to clear this matter up. Will he do it?" The first sentence seems to be declaring a simple statement, but the implicature is duplex: on one hand it is obliquely addressed to the narrator to bear upon him by resorting to the "great people" as their allies; on the other hand, it also speaks indirectly on the behalf of the public in order to elicit a response from "Mark Twain". Then a tag question "Will he do it?" is attached at the end, intensifying the censuring tone as well as the calumniating force. The second quotation is a continuation of the first one about the perjury problem. "SIGNIFICANT. – Mr. Twain, it will be observed, is suggestively silent about the Cochin China perjury." Here the use of the adverb "suggestively", by stimulating further thoughts in the reader, tends to imply something improper or indecent, and conveys an understatement that Twain is inwardly guilty in an indefensible position; moreover, the parenthesis "it will be observed" provides an additional information that this is not the end of Twain's misbehaviors or crimes, dropping a further hint to the reader that another

round of slandering is already in preparation, and all these slanders are brewed from cold calculation. After this event Twain is labeled as "the infamous perjurer" (339), to which title he can only react with a burst of helpless "amazement" (339) – the simple confession in face of the baseless charge is contrasted sharply with the bombastic language used in the newspaper.

The third quotation, in two highly rhetorical sentences, instantly precipitates Mark Twain in the rank of contemptible thieves (340). The headline is termed as "WANTED TO KNOW", by which the political hooligans not only manage to strengthen the impinging force against "Mark Twain", but also reinforce the momentum of the public questioning about his moral qualities as a candidate. "Will the new candidate for Governor deign to explain to certain of his fellow-citizens (who are suffering to vote for him!) the little circumstance of his cabin-mates in Montana losing small valuables from time to time..." (340) – seemingly this is a polite request used for asking Mark Twain to give a reasonable account for the theft, but at the same time it spares no efforts to disparage malignantly Twain's integrity by the use of a derogatory "deign", which constitutes a verbal irony since it deliberately gives the audience with such a presumption that Twain is so arrogant as to think himself too important to provide an explanation; furthermore, by the deliberate mention of Twain's "fellow-citizens (who are suffering to vote for him!)" (340), the part of speech that is intentionally put into brackets has an exaggerating effect as to warn Twain's supporters to reconsider their fidelity and political stance. It is not directly addressed to Twain's voters, but has the agitating power to shake their conviction and shift their ground. This subtle rhetoric operates to incite an increasing curiosity about Twain's person and a pressing insistence on the public's part to uncover Twain's horrible crimes. At the end another additional question "Will he do this?" is attached in a seemingly casual way, but the sensation it stirs has gone wide and far, making the affair the more imperative and the candidate Twain the more helpless. So far the election affair escalates ever more, and "Mark Twain" is driven to the verge of mental breakdown by another notorious name "the Montana Thief" which is "customarily" referred to by journals and newspapers, which are quite familiar with, and good at the powerful rhetoric of language use.

The fourth quotation has undoubtedly reached the peak of their shameless devices against Mark Twain both in the rhetorical use of language and in the severity of the crime imposed upon him. This time Twain is accused of spreading rumors that Hoffman's grandfather was hanged for highway robbery. A bold black headline strikes the eye – "THE LIE NAILED!" (340), which again alarms the audience and creates a refreshed sensation with the reference to an indisputable fact; the crafty addition of an exclamation mark makes the concocted charge the more outrageous to the degree of arousing the great indignation of the fellow-citizens. Evidence is piling up to nail down Twain's crime – three particular witnesses are mentioned, with names, specific addresses, and even "sworn affidavits" (340). The language used to describe the atrocity of the "slanderer" Twain stands in glaring contrast to that used to describe the innocence of Hoffman's side. As for Mark Twain, his statement is "vile", nothing but a "brutal and gratuitous LIE", and his means to achieve political success are "shameful", which makes the "virtuous men" feel "disheartening". As for Hoffman's side, he is a "noble standard-bearer"; his relatives are "innocent",

tortured in deep “anguish” caused by this “miserable falsehood”. All these exaggerations in the turns of phrases cause the distortion of facts, which becomes a typical case of the trick of a thief crying stop thief – the real slanderer becomes a victim while the real victim becomes a slanderer. The next part of the quotation reaches the pinnacle of irony employed by the political hooligans:

When we think of the anguish this miserable falsehood must cause the innocent relatives and friends of the deceased, we are almost driven to incite an outraged and insulted public to summary and unlawful vengeance upon the traducer. But no! let us leave him to the agony of a lacerating conscience (though if passion should get the better of the public, and in its blind fury they should do the traducer bodily injury, it is but too obvious that no jury could convict and no court punish the perpetrators of the deed). (340) (Underlines are added by me)

Each sentence in this passage has functioned in an organized way. The subordinate clause in the first sentence has already made their false statement an indisputable fact, and then the devastating consequence the slanderer Twain stirs is presumed with an emphatic “must” that makes Twain the more abominable by indicating a logical probability and even a presumptive certainty. The subordinate clause has established a premise for drawing a conclusion about which there is no doubt in the main clause that the public would seek vengeance upon the traducer Twain. Words used to condemn Twain’s crime are agonizing (“miserable falsehood”), words used to describe Hoffman’s side are compassionate and sympathy-provoking, which act in co-operation with the words (“outraged” and “insulted”) used to describe the public. As if to exhibit their generosity and magnanimity, a “but no” comes full of sentiment and compassion, introducing a concessive sentence as if to call upon the audience to let go off the criminal – “let us leave him to the agony of a lacerating conscience” – the cunning use of “let us” conveys an imperative mood which expresses a direct request and in the meanwhile leagues themselves together with the public. The part in the bracket is an embedded adverbial clause which pushes their mean intrigues as well as the public’s rage to a new climax. The “if” clause introduces an imaginary circumstance in which it might happen that the public inflicts bodily injury on Mark Twain, but the adverb “though”, together with the emphasis “it is but too obvious”, builds a logical compatibility between two propositions – the public’s vengeance and the law’s punishment, and makes the situation introduced in the main clause reasonable and well-grounded, and the previous statement in the subordinate less strong or less important. This winding rhetoric used here has achieved what J. L. Austin explained as perlocutionary effect, which is in some sense external to the performance of an utterance. Therefore the effect of a perlocutionary act on the audience is emphasized. According to Austin’s preliminary elaboration, the idea of an “illocutionary act” can be understood as such – “to say something is to do something; or by saying or in saying something, we are doing something” (Austin 18). It is often viewed at the level of its psychological consequences, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something. In this case, these politicians have not only successfully sown discord between the public and Mark Twain, but also have incited them against him. See how this

effect is achieved:

The ingenious closing sentence had the effect of moving me out of bed quickly that night, and out the back door also, while the “outraged and insulted public” surged in the front way, breaking furniture and windows in their righteous indignation as they came, and taking off such property as they could carry when they went. (341)

A lie, if repeated often enough, will be accepted as truth. Public clamour can confound right and wrong, and repeated slanders make the public believe that Twain is guilty and has past all hopes. We can see how language not only distorts facts, but also makes things happen, although it is quite possible that the “outraged and insulted public” is bought off to give a harsh blow to the narrator. In the quotation above, verbal irony is also employed by the author, “ingenious closing sentence” and the “outraged and insulted”, of which the meaning that the narrator Twain implies differs sharply from the meaning that is literally and ostensibly expressed, and involves the narrator’s explicit expression of negative attitude and evaluation. After their melodramatic performance, Twain’s profile is degraded as “Body-Snatcher” (341).

In the fifth quotation, in which Twain is denounced to be a drunkard and abused as “Mr. Delirium Twain” (341), the pressure is not only brought upon “Mark Twain” but also upon the Independent Party. The headline “A SWEET CANDIDATE” is a malicious sarcasm which has been a direct personal attack on Twain, who is also abused as a “abandoned creature” and “besotted brute” in state of “beastly intoxication” (341) – all such wording serves to arouse aversion and indignation in the audience. The quotation is in fact indirectly addressed to the Independent Party after the monstrous persecution of its standard-bearer Twain. Urging that “It is the imperative duty of the Independents to prove that this besotted brute was not Mark Twain himself” (341), they pose a threat to and launch a public defy against the Independent Party whose relationship with Twain is severed by ever increasing distrust and disharmony. “We have them at last!” (342) – it is worthy of consideration whom the words “we” and “them” refer to, by a simple sentence the hidden meaning between the words is revealed: firstly, the use of “them” indicates that by condemning Twain they also successfully condemn the Independent Party as a whole; second, the use of “we” has tactically associated them with the public, who stand for social justice. As if to make their appeal the more imperative, the last sentence increases the pressure from public opinion – “The voice of the people demands in thunder-tones: “WHO WAS THAT MAN?” (342) – the sentence in bold corresponds perfectly with “thunder-tones”, and conveys a shocking visual and auditory effect, in a menacing manner, signifying the relentlessly pushing force of these politicians and intensifying the conflict. As the threatening letters and extortion notes crash into Twain’s mailbox due to the agitation incited by the Republican and Democratic journals, the rhythm of the story is also accelerated in an incredible speed, which contributes to the intensification of irony by revealing that how the violence of words jostles against the true face of facts. Instead of using “get” or whatever word with similar meaning, the author used “acquire” to describe how the bad names come to the narrator. “Acquire”, in the proper sense of the word, usually means gaining something by one’s own ability, efforts or behavior, but the truth is that Twain has no intention, nor has he done

anything to try for such infamies. The emotively commendatory word “acquire” is used derogatorily to achieve a biting verbal irony.

The sixth quotation, as one of the systematical measures undertaken to strike Twain down, becomes a summary of the crimes listed in the previous quotations. It achieves a structural effect both in revealing the opponents’ shameful means and in strengthening the force of irony. The news is headed by an astonishing bold “BEHOLD THE MAN!” (343); by seizing Twain’s silence and inability in defending himself, all those bad names (“the Infamous Perjurer”, “the Montana Thief”, “the Body-Snatcher”, “Delirium Tremens”, “Filthy Corruptionist”, “Loathsome Embracer”) are attributed to him, which would be impossible to shake off for his lifetime. The opponents are quite conscious of the logic of writing – after such laborious expressions as “amply proved”, “endorsed and re-endorsed by his own eloquent silence” (343), they make Twain “stands forever convicted”, and then they quickly catch up in step by launching an impatient cry that “Gaze upon him – ponder him well – and then say if you can give your honest votes to a creature who has earned this dismal array of titles by his hideous crimes, and dares not open his mouth in denial of any one of them!” This has been a tough interrogation and a final appeal to the Independents to give Twain up. Considered as a whole, the sixth newspaper quotation has served as a restatement and conclusion of the previous ones, accelerating the pace of plot development and in the meanwhile pushing the ironical effect to a new high.

4. Conclusion

Summing up, irony in this story, exhibited both on a macro and micro level, is effectively penetrating and powerful in its function of plot development, characterization and the demonstration of authorial attitude. There is a strong comic element in the irony of this story – it is laughable when those political hooligans appear in all their ugliness, and it is pitiful when the protagonist Twain suffers so much injustice. In such irony the feelings aroused in the readers are contradictory. During reading the readers are watching a melodrama where the character they care about is being ruthlessly humiliated – they laugh at the laughable, but their unguarded feelings are piqued, and the laugh is instantly frozen upon their lips. That is probably the artistry of Mark Twain’s irony – creating the tension between ambivalent feelings through which there

comes a direct communication between the author and reader through the ingenious organization and masterful use of language. In laughter the reader comes to the recognition that the so-called “democracy” is nothing more than a kind of politics in which the bourgeois politicians have their own way and hoodwink the public as they wish; and the so-called “free election” is nothing more than a farce of shameless traducement and entailment. They can be ruthless in getting what they want, and resort to whatever means to cast their opponent in negative terms. To them, the freedom of speech has been the freedom of forcing their views upon the public, and the newspapers and journals, the so-called mouthpiece to plead for public interests, have become an instrument for the benefit of different political factions – a media violence and rape to the truth and public opinion. As long as the capitalists preserve the control upon the press, the newspapers and periodicals will remain as a political instrument and the freedom of speech as well as democracy becomes a fraud, which is what Mark Twain felt vexed about and spared no effort to condemn.

Acknowledgments

Fund Project: "History and the Politics of Narrative in Doctorow's Late Works" (18ZFQ75001), 2018 Annual Youth Project for Scientific Research and Innovation (China University of Political Science and Law).

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