

Chaos and Consensus in Victorian Comic Literature

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“Does ridicule test and strengthen or demean the institutions and ideas it mocks; is there a progress of the comic which will end in a fully civilized humanity without laughter?”
(Grey, 426)

In this essay I will be discussing the statement that ‘the dominant movement in Victorian Comedy is from chaos to consensus’ with reference to Thackeray’s ‘A Little Dinner at Timmins’, Bulwer-Lytton’s ‘Money’, and Jerome’s ‘Three Men in a Boat’. Though these three stories end in consensus, each consensus is different in the way it is achieved, in what it represents for the characters and the readers, and in the reasons it is comedic. The importance of consensus in comedy can be seen as a remnant of Elizabethan comedy which demanded that a comedy end in marriage. In the case of Victorian comic literature consensus is represented by romantic or personal equilibrium between the characters in which deceit is revealed and challenges are resolved. Todorov’s (1969) structural theory of plot provides the following formula: an initial equilibrium is followed by the same equilibrium except for one change in the latter, with a state of imbalance in between the two equilibriums. If the word ‘equilibrium’ is substituted with ‘consensus’ and ‘imbalance’ substituted with ‘chaos’ then this formula provides an apt alternative to ‘the dominant movement in Victorian Comedy is from chaos to consensus’. Each of the comedies I will be discussing arguably fits this mould though often consensus and equilibrium can be bittersweet and do not equate to success or victory. It is the extent to which the stories do not present a dominant movement from chaos to consensus but movement-by-proxy, meaning the failure of the characters which brings about consensus after chaos, that Victorian comedy does not accord with the statement. Chaos followed by consensus does not constitute a dominant movement from the former to the latter.

Playing with traditional conceptions of ‘consensus’ is where a substantial amount of the comedy comes from in Victorian literature. An example of this subversion is Thackeray’s short story ‘A Little Dinner at Timmins’ in which the Timmins’ reach an equilibrium upon the ending of the story. This equilibrium is expressed through their financial suffering and the knowledge that their difficulties throughout the play were brought on by themselves and were

entirely avoidable. Chaos in 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's' presents itself through the extravagant expense of Mrs Timmins beyond her means, Mr Timmins' imposing and dramatic mother-in-law, and the Timmins's lack of self-awareness. The people the Timmins's hire bring about instances of chaos, either through the high standards of the chef which annoy the other servants, or the beautiful young lady at the counter at Fusby's whom Fitz takes a liking to. This fondness is spotted by his mother-in-law and is then used to blackmail him. Thackeray's version of consensus is described by the narrator at the ending of the story as follows. The Timmins's:

“have offended a score of their old friends, and pleased none of their acquaintances. So angry were many who were not asked, that poor Rosa says she must now give a couple more parties and take in those not previously invited. And I know for a fact that Fusby's bill is not yet paid; nor Binney and Latham's the wine-merchants; that the breakage and hire of glass and china cost ever so much money; that every true friend of Timmins has cried out against his absurd extravagance, and that now, when every one is going out of town, Fitz has hardly money to pay his circuit, much more to take Rosa to a watering-place, as he wished and promised. As for Mrs. Gashleigh, the only feasible plan of economy which she can suggest, is that she could come and live with her daughter and son-in-law, and that they should keep house together.... The Topham Sawyers, when they go down into the country, will represent Fitz as a ruined man and reckless prodigal; his uncle, the attorney, from whom he has expectations, will most likely withdraw his business... And all these accumulated miseries fall upon the unfortunate wretch because he was good-natured, and his wife would have a Little Dinner.” (21-22)

This ending is a consensus in the sense that the 'other shoe' has finally dropped; the Timmins's face the inevitable consequences of their frivolity, their delusions, and their mistakes. Balance is restored to the story's universe. This ending, however, is not a consensus in the sense that not only does it not provide the ending the characters wanted and were

seeking, but characters suffer undeserved punishments for the actions of others and earn no reward for their trials and tribulations. For example, the fact that one of the solutions to the financial problems caused by Mrs Fitz's dinner is Mr Fitz's imposing and controlling mother-in-law coming to live with them. This is the worst outcome Fitz could have imagined of the dinner, it was not Fitz's idea to have the dinner and he did not himself make any of the decisions which caused the dinner to be so socially and financially damaging, yet he is disproportionately suffering the consequences. The ending of 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's' fits the dictionary definition of 'consensus' in that it ends with a general agreement on a plan of what the characters must do to amend their mistakes. The ending only fits the mould of the "dominant movement from chaos to consensus" because the characters are punished. The imbalance they created through trying to behave like a higher class has been rectified and they have been 'put in their place'.

Chaos in 'Three Men in a Boat' is represented by the three men's, not to mention the dog's, incompetence and ineptitude for packing, boating, organisation, and even a modicum of self-awareness. The three men are hypochondriacs who believe they have every malady imaginable. They are surprised every time they make the same mistake but make no attempt to improve their skills. They are unable to pack a hamper, steer a boat or set up a tent and yet they decide to go boating and camping. Consensus is represented by their acceptance of these facts; they succumb to their inability to accomplish the challenge they created for themselves and quit. This consensus also falls short of an ideal ending. The three men have literally failed. 'Three Men in a Boat' presents a "dominant movement from chaos to consensus" only because the chaos ends. However, this chaos is not triumphantly eradicated or weeded out as the respective representations of 'chaos' are in 'London Assurance', 'The Importance of Being Earnest', and 'Money'. I will discuss chaos and consensus in 'Money' further in the penultimate part of this essay, but 'London Assurance' and 'The Importance of Being

Earnest' provide much more satisfying conclusions than 'Three Men in a Boat'. In both these plays' conclusions the main characters' true identities are revealed, the young couple or couples are united, and the financial problems of the young men are solved. In 'Three Men in a Boat' the chaos is not solved as it is in these plays, the chaos is ended. Harris, George, and J do not grow as individuals and as a group into being the men they thought they were in the beginning, they just accept their flaws, which is a virtue, but is not an archetypal ideal. The three men, like Timmins, do not deserve their ending. They are not morally bad people, nor have they knowingly engaged in any of the behaviour that has made their consequences inevitable. Jerome, like Thackeray, is toying with the common understanding of consensus and how a narrative should conclude itself.

Grey's (1977) review of Martin's 1974 book 'The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory' provides useful information about the nature of Victorian Comedy and Victorian critics' view of their contemporary comedy. According to Grey, Martin found Victorian critics felt "that the comic resides in the perceiving subject and not in the object, and that laughter pleases because it is a momentary release, in the words of one phrenologist, of "the lower propensities" to which the "higher instincts" are "always in some sort opposed.'" (425-426) The difficult consensus the story reaches could be seen as a release of these "lower propensities" (425) and this release is what qualifies the story as comic even though the consensus is tragic. A satisfying consensus where all the characters problems are solved, and each character gets what they respectively deserve would be catering to our "higher instincts" (425) whereas the versions of consensus presented in 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's' and 'Three Men in a Boat' cater to our lower propensities because the unexpected and the undeserved (if not mortally dangerous) is incredibly funny. The subversion of expectations and the ability to feel superior to the characters, provides the reader with relief and satisfaction. Indeed, as Grey explains, the comedy is dictated by the reader, not the

content of what they are reading. The characters failure and incompetence is funny in relation to our perceived competence.

Grey writes that the main questions Victorian critics had about comedy and concentrated on in their writing, as identified by Martin, were “what is the difference between humour and wit; does laughter come from a sense of superiority over a victim or a perception of incongruity in the world; does ridicule test and strengthen or demean the institutions and ideas it mocks; is there a progress of the comic which will end in a fully civilized humanity without laughter; and, the ground question of them all, is it morally and socially good to laugh?” (426) A wrestle with these questions can be seen within the stories I am discussing. Is Jerome good naturedly mocking the new middle-class clerks by giving them a tragic non-consensus, or is he criticising them and making a point about society and the institution that has created them? Is the distressing consensus in ‘Little Dinner’ funny because the reader and the narrator feel superior to the Timmins’? Are we cruelly mocking them or are we laughing at Victorian society which is pushing them to be so concerned with their class? Most likely a combination of all these motivations lies behind the readers laughter. The “lower propensities” (425) Grey referred to show their faces here as well, it is these feelings that are satisfied by laughing with and at these unfortunate, oblivious people.

Grey says of Victorian comedy that “corrective” comedy utilised “distressing lapses in sympathy.” (426) It is precisely this temporary suspension of sympathy that allows a reader or audience member to conceive of the endings of these two stories as having a consensus because when seeing them we also see the unsatisfactory nature of real life without being distracted by the conventionally unsatisfactory ending. Therefore, we can focus on the comedy and not the tragic outcome for the individual. This idea exists in unison with incongruity theory and Schopenhauer’s interpretation as explained in ‘The Industrial Age’:

“we laugh when we realize ‘the terrible truth by which firmly cherished expectations are shown to be delusive’, and this ‘bitter’ laughter expresses our sense ‘of the incongruity between the thoughts entertained by us in our foolish confidence in men or in fate, and the reality unveiled’.” (180) This point could have been directly referring to the three men in the boat and to Mr. Timmins, it so clearly fits the reason the tragic equilibrium they reach can operate as a consensus. An incomplete consensus is funny because it rings true, the reader is laughing at themselves and their naïve expectations of a satisfying consensus when they are given an unsatisfying one.

Bakhtin (1965) mirrors this sentiment in ‘Rabelais and His World’ when he writes that in carnival when people laugh, they “do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete.... He who is laughing also belongs to” the thing he is laughing at. (12) Bakhtin draws a line between satire and “the people’s festive laughter” (12) because the satirist “places himself above the object of his mockery.” (12) When a writer portrays an unexpected manifestation of consensus, they are either satirically mocking their object to no productive end, mocking their object with the corrective motivation of showing their reader how not to behave, or pointing out the imperfect consensus and equilibrium which people encounter in daily life. Therefore, Thackeray provided his specific brand of disappointing, bittersweet consensus either to mock his imperfect, middle class characters and possibly warn readers against engaging in such self-improving, embarrassing, and oblivious behaviour; or to point out the imperfections of a class system that forces its inhabitants to engage in the aforementioned embarrassment; or to provide the reader with a representation of themselves as they stumble through life trying to be seen as better than they are, and failing; or all of the above. Jerome’s choice of depressing consensus either mocks the class of clerks, their new money and their lack of respect and deference for the upper classes and the Victorian class system, and therefore warns against this behaviour; or Jerome is

attempting to put this behaviour on a pedestal by making them endearing comic heroes and by providing the reader with an understanding view of them which does not jeer or mock them for no reason, but jovially and light heartedly presents their ridiculousness without judgement for its own sake. Readers also see themselves in the three men: clueless, unequipped, but well-meaning people with unattainable goals and good intentions.

The movement from chaos to consensus in 'Money' is plainly seen and could definitely be described as the dominant movement of the play. The chaos is constituted by the misunderstanding between Evelyn and Clara before he came into his fortune, Evelyn's misconception of Clara's character, Georgina and Lord John's lie about Georgina giving the charitable money that was in truth given by Clara, and the convincing of Sir John that Evelyn had lost his fortune gambling. The characters suffer because they believe they are not loved by the person they love, when in fact they are, and their beloved is under the same impression. The consensus is the amendment of the chaos brought about by the characters being brave, honest, and vulnerable. Evelyn learns Clara's virtuous intentions and his deception by Lord John; Lord John learns that Evelyn's fortune remains intact; Lady Franklin is successful in her pursuit of Graves. The play provides the ultimate manifestation of consensus in comedy, three romantic unions and the promise of three weddings.

It is important to qualify that while, of the three stories I have chosen, the dominant movement from consensus to chaos is the most clearly established in 'Money', the comedy of 'Money' is also the least effective. Though 'Money' possesses the most virtuous, morally good, and sympathetic consensus, it sacrifices its comedy. Money was first performed in 1840, eight years before 'Little Dinner' was published in 1848 and almost fifty years before 'Three Men in a Boat' was published in 1889. As 'The Industrial Age' (2016) explains the Victorian Age was a time of rapid capitalist growth and ingenuity which valued seriousness

and self-improvement over triviality and aestheticism, and comedy writers as time went on became more drawn to writing stories that juxtaposed and challenged these values. The conscious lack of a satisfying or traditional consensus in 'Three Men in a Boat' can be seen as a direct response to the attitude towards consensus evident in 'Money'. If Jerome had the same intention as Bulwer Lytton the three men would have had a successful boat journey where they triumphed over both external challenges and their own flaws and arrived home better men for it, with Montmorency at their heels.

According to Grey, Martin found some Victorian comic literature sought to be "a guardian of high civilization." (426) This description certainly applies to the stance 'Money' takes, since the "dominant movement from chaos to consensus" inherently provides a hopeful and optimistic view of the nature of the world. Incongruity theory does not help to explain the use of consensus in 'Money' because there is nothing unsatisfying about the ending. 'Money' depicts the "firmly cherished expectations" and "thoughts entertained by us in our foolish confidence in men or in fate" (180) which 'The Industrial Age' (2016) describes as the hope that is exposed to be childish and unattainable through comedy. 'Money' does not show the audience the reality of their unattainable "foolish" (180) goals. 'Money' does not mock its characters for falling short of the ideal nor does it present characters oblivious to the true way they are being perceived.

When the movements in the other two texts are compared to 'Money' as the gold standard of a Victorian comedy with a dominant movement from chaos to consensus, the unorthodoxy of 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's' and 'Three Men in a Boat' is plainer. As Todorov (1969) predicts they all begin with a consensus, have a period of chaos and finish with another different form of the same consensus. They possess this movement by name, but to say this is the dominant movement in each of the Victorian comedies I have discussed

would be to present a false account of each narrative. For the narratives to involve a “dominant movement” they would have to include improvement; movement implies forward, productive motion by the characters, not movement-by-proxy. ‘Three Men in a Boat’ and ‘A Little Dinner at Timmins’s’ contain a movement-by-proxy because they do not portray characters who move the narrative from chaos to consensus using their own skills and virtues as ‘Money’ does; their characters find themselves in chaos and later find themselves in consensus, having done nothing to bring the latter about.

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