

Absurd and Its Transcendence: A Review of *Black Humor and the Tradition of Humor in American Fiction*

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Abstract As the first important book on American (black) humor study in China, *Black Humor and the Tradition of Humor in American Fiction* by Su Hui undoubtedly represents a new advancement in that area. The monograph contributes its original ideas in many aspects of (black) humor such as its social background, narrative strategy, and aesthetic function. Most significantly, it closely grasps the realistic motivation of (black) humor—the absurdity of human existence and endows the study with profound philosophical foundation. This paper mainly endeavors to explore the book's elaboration on the philosophical foundation, the prerequisite of humorists, and the ultimate function of (black) humor from such aspects as the absurdity of human existence, the wisdom to detect the absurd, and the transcendence of the absurd.

Key words Su Hui; black humor; absurdity; wisdom; transcendence

To the academic circle of both humor and foreign literature studies, Professor Su Hui's monograph *Black Humor and the Tradition of Humor in American Fiction* (2013) can be said to be a big event. It deserves our attention and confirmation for many reasons. As the first important book on American (black) humor study in China, it undoubtedly represents an advanced level in that field and sets a good example for academic research. In terms of methodology, it is a successful application of the approach of comparative literature, freely travelling through works of different countries and times and carves out a road of inheritance and development of humor poetics in the world literature. In a sense, it rewrites the history of American Literature with the approach of (black) humor. Additionally, it is also a successful combination of philosophy and literature studies, endowing the argument with an enlightening effect to its readers. The monograph contributes its original ideas in many aspects of (black) humor such as its social background, narrative strategy, and aesthetic function. Most significantly,

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I. The Absurdity of Existence: The Realistic and Philosophical Foundation of (Black) Humor

The first significant contribution of Professor Su’s monograph lies in the fact that she establishes the absurdity as the keynote of humor—humor in general and black humor in particular, thus revealing the realistic and philosophical foundation of (black) humor, and carries out a convincing argument through different approaches, dimensions, and levels.

The absurdity of existence can be illustrated by the following three aspects:

First, the absurdity of the existence itself. Throughout the whole book this point is emphasized time and again and can be regarded as the essential element of (black) humor—the realistic and philosophical foundation (black) humor. For this, Prof. Su finds out the influence of existentialism upon black humor and approaches the topic on a level of ontology. According to existentialism, “the absurd is a state of being which is absurd, the absurd in the origin of the world and the absurd of human existence itself”(Su 254). On the one hand, as an individual life, a person can not decide his or her birth and can only accept everything the world gives him or her. On the other hand, each person is doomed to death, and death can be said the biggest nothingness. This basically determines the absurd nature of existence. In this sense, Su Hui correctly declares that “the black humorists tend to disclose the absurdity of the world from the ontological level, define the absurdity as the essence of the world, express the uncertainty of the world and life, and reveal the randomness and gradual declination of the universe”(267). Furthermore, from the social and cultural background, the rise of black humor was related to the spiritual crisis in American society after the second world war. In this spiritual crisis, “the intellectuals were the most sensitive. They determined that the world was an absurd, chaotic, and meaningless one, and expressed this notion with different forms. The black humorists were the typical representatives of such modern intellectuals” (Su 225). In face of the absurd reality permeated with nothingness, “the black humorists decide that they must use a correspondent technique of writing to reflect the illusion and fraudulence of the reality” (Su 279).

Second, the incongruity between people’s subjective desire and the frustrating

reality. This should be a most powerful motivation that propels the generation of (black) humor. On this point, the following two literary figures cited by the book are quite typical.

In Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), there seems to be a incongruity between the protagonist Morris Bober's belief and his tragic life. Even though he is an honest, sincere, and diligent man, he is constantly fooled by fate, and ends his life in desolation and poverty. He believes that "hard work will definitely lead to wealth and sincerity will be rewarded in the end", but "his real circumstances prove to be very frustrating" (Su 157). Although Morris is a sincere man, "his neighbors dismiss him, his old customers abandon him, and even his wife does not regard his deeds as right. As for his effort to support his family, he suffers the most. What waits for him after his whole life's work is the bankruptcy of his business" (Su 156-157).

Another telling example is Lemuel Pitkin in Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934). Even though Lemuel has all virtues needed for a successful man such as "honesty, self-discipline, strength, frugality, bravery, mercy, and kindness", he is "nevertheless robbed, assaulted, and cheated again and again" (Su 199). The most ironical part is, Lemuel's moral codes and his good virtues make him an easy target for utilizing and blackmailing, and his "heroic deeds" are treated with sneer.

Third, the big discrepancy between a person's advertisements and his real motivations. The German earl in Benjamin Franklin's *The Sale of the Hessians* is such a typical figure. He is one of the most notorious hypocrites in the literary world. On the one hand, "he keenly sends armies to North America so as to get the compensation for all the losses, and lives a luxurious life with the blooded money"; on the other hand, he is at pains to "emphasize the importance of courage, honor, and God" (Su 43). While talking about "public benefit" all the time and promoting goodness and virtues verbally, he shamelessly takes bribes from his people. Here, black humor exhibits its best weapon—satire, the satire to expose and criticize the dark side of humanity and the dehumanizing social mechanism.

II. The Wisdom to See Through the Absurd: The Subject Prerequisite of (Black) Humor

The second brilliant point of Professor Su's monograph is that it defines the subject prerequisite of humor—humor in general and black humor in particular: wisdom, the wisdom to detect the absurd.

When analyzing Mark Twain's humor, Professor Su clearly claims that "humor needs wisdom and technique" (Su 118). Wisdom is a prerequisite of (black) humor because "the comedy in reality is usually beclouded with some false appearance

and can not be easily detected. Therefore, the artists need to undertake some rational thinking about the comic feature of reality. Simultaneously, they need to wield their wisdom to reveal the truth behind the false appearance with the special mentality of comic art and identify the comic nature of the reality. Only when the self-contradiction, perversion, and absurdity between the essence and phenomenon, content and form are brought to light, can comedy truly come into being. Therefore, to find out the comic configuration and people's comic consciousness in life, one indispensable thing is comic artists' wisdom" (Su 118-119). Not coincidentally, a well-known Chinese writer and scholar Lin Yutang expressed the similar opinion. To him, "when human civilization is in a low level and the flower of wisdom has not blossomed, human beings can not have high-level self-consciousness and comic consciousness can not be expected in such a state. Wisdom is the prerequisite for the formation of comic consciousness and this is the internal logic why many theorists in the world put comedy and wisdom side by side" (Su 119). To modern comedy master Charlie Chaplin, "the more highly-developed the wisdom, the more successful the comedy will be. Undeveloped humans can hardly have the sense of humor" (Su 119).

Yes, wisdom is a must for people to penetrate the absurd nature of existence, to realize the vanity of humanity, and to detect the dislocation between people desire and social reality. For this, Mark Twain is a remarkable representative among American humorist writers, "with penetrating eye and humorous mood, he undertakes a biting critique of society, a profound reflection upon human nature, and an ultimate exploration of the world. The reason why Mark Twain becomes the master of humor in the world lies in the fact that his humor is not only demonstrated in the form of art or narration, in portraying some funny characters, or in witty language, but also the embodiment of the author's super sagacity and insightful thoughts, the powerful weapon he uses to criticize the current malpractice and reflect upon humanity" (Su 90).

The reason why Flannery O'Connor could create "eccentric, wild, horrible, grotesque, and suffocating stories that contain deep substance in the apparently relaxing humor" is that she "has an amazing insight into the dark side of humanity" (Su 132). Soren Kierkegaard's words also shed some light on the importance of wisdom to humor: "Living in this world, one must be very sensitive to the absurd, the more thoroughgoing and practical a person's life, the more comic elements he will find in the world" (Su 256).

To live in this secular world and achieve a sense of transcendence at the same time, a person needs a wisdom most, as Su Hui insightfully observes, "to live but not feel like being confined in this world, to respect the law but feel highly above it at the same time, to possess something but feel like possessing nothing, to give up

something with the feeling of still having it, all these requirements put forward by the high human wisdom, can only be fulfilled by humor” (Su 332).

III. The Transcendence of the Absurd: The Ultimate Value or Function of (Black) Humor

The ultimate value or function of (black) humor does not only lie in presenting the absurd, but also in endeavoring to transcend it. And it is an important content throughout Professor Su’s whole book. As exhibited in her book, “laugh” is the weapon utilized by black humorists to match the absurd world and the defense mechanism against the horror. Throughout the whole book, the transcendence of the absurd is demonstrated as the follows:

First, with satire as its weapon, (black) humor strives to expose, reflect, and transcend human ugliness, flaws, and the absurd in society. Professor Su sharply points out that “aided by satire, to disclose the social and human defects is also the persistent tradition of American humor” (34). Mark Twain is such a writer. He “combines humor with satire and mercilessly exposes and criticizes all kinds of ugly phenomena in American society” (Su 90). For this, he is regarded as “the mirror of American society”. In *The Gilded Age* (1873), he bitinglly satirizes the greediness of humanity. In *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* (1876), he satirizes “the vulgarity, controversy, and greediness of urban petty bourgeois and the hypocrisy of the morality and religion of the bourgeoisie” (98).

Similar function can also be seen in the humor of black writers. To a great extent, “the purpose of black writers’ humor is to unmask and criticize the dark side of society, thus promoting people’s awakening and helping them see the dark reality of society clearly” (Su 144). Significantly, while satirizing, reflecting and criticizing the reality, (black) humor in fact puts forward its appeal for the social transformation. As is argued in Su Hui’s book, “black humor is concerned about how to face the dilemma of existence. When black humor painfully laughs at institutions, values and traditions, it provides due advice on reforming, bettering, or changing the painful reality” (224-225).

Second, the consoling function of humor. This function already comes into its own even in the period of colonial literature. Under those bleak living conditions, “people need humor to conquer the predicaments and they often laugh at hardships and misfortunes, and even exaggerate those miserable events until they are laughable. In laughter, people feel their suffering is reduced, and their fear of danger subsides”(Su 166-167). This function is more valuable to African Americans. To them humor is kind of “surviving strategy and has the function of psychological consolation” (Su

143). This is because that under the situation of racial discrimination, black people are bullied and persecuted in the white dominated world, and their “protest can not change the reality”. They need outlets to release their feelings of powerlessness. However, “the only way to make them enjoy the pleasure obtained through fighting the oppression is humor, and humor has this defensive function to help black people get some psychological comfort in their troublesome reality” (Su 144).

In a general sense, “the absurd reality in modern society produces a strong sense of depression, anguish, and outrage in people’s hearts. The overwhelming mightiness of the object and the disproportionate weakness of the subject pushes the tragedy to the extreme. The weak subject can neither defeat the powerful object with its bravery, nor demolish the perversion and absurdity of the object. It can only maintain a peace of mind with the help of aesthetic attitude of comedy, and release its pain by an irrational mentality” (Su 331-332). This surely is a classic elaboration of the consoling function of humor.

Third, (black) humor represents a detached attitude towards life. This can also be exhibited in Mark Twain’s (black) humor. To him, “humor is the means to shake off and transcend the absurd reality, and it represents a detached attitude towards the absurd and horrible world” (Su 180). The Jewish humor also expresses this detachment. The Jewish humorists “write the serious and tragic theme in a humorous way with the technique of irony, infiltrating life with the spirit of tragedy but transcending it with the spirit of comedy” (Su 162). This attitude of detachment enables people to keep a critical distance from reality and see its absurdity more clearly. To André Breton, “humor is a means for an individual not to be limited and restricted by living environment and society. Humor makes it possible for an individual to transcend the trivial reality” (Su 240).

This function can also be demonstrated by the customary strategy used by (black) humor: irony. As Professor Su clearly declares, “irony is the narrative strategy commonly adopted by contemporary black humorists and endows black humor with more aesthetic quality” (298). And at the same time, “irony makes the aesthetic subject obtain a spiritual transcendence”(313). D.C. Muecke also defines transcendence as one of irony’s basic features and points out that the universal psychology of irony is a condescending detachment and a kind of lightness. This lightness “may be but is not necessarily an inability to feel the terrible seriousness of life; it may be a refusal to be overwhelmed by it, and assertion of the spiritual power of man over existence” (36).

Surely this paper can in no sense exhaust the monograph’s merits and values. The above elaboration can only shed a little light on a very limited part of the many contributions made by Su Hui’s book to (black) humor study. The book does have more interesting and brilliant points for us to perceive and enjoy.

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