Through the Lens of Cosmic Satire: Attacking the Human Condition in Selected Poems by Dorothy Parker

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Abstract The present paper aims at exploring cosmic satire in the poetry of Dorothy Parker. The focus will be on selected poems in which Parker sarcastically attacks the human condition, making man who sees himself as the center of the cosmos or the universe the main target of her satiric arrows. To establish a theoretical framework for the paper, the researcher presents a brief overview of satire in general: its origin, definition, kinds, and techniques, with special reference to cosmic satire and its main focus. In her satirical poems, Parker vividly exposes human faults, mocking man's failings in a humorous and witty manner.

Keywords Dorothy Parker; satire; cosmic satire; the human condition.

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Introduction

Satire is defined as a genre of literature in which human vices and follies are ridiculed. In *the Oxford Dictionary of English*, the term refers to "the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices" (1581). In this sense, According to Rebecca Yearling, satire might be "genial or

harsh, tolerant or punitive, aimed at general social abuses or at the vices of specific individuals. It might aim to expose, to reform, to enlighten, or merely to amuse" (43-44). The origin of the word satire can be traced back to the Latin word "*satura*" which means primarily full, and then comes to mean "a mixture full of different things" (Highet 231). In his article "Satura and Satire," Ullman points out that it was the Roman satirist Horace who first used the word "satura" as a literary term in his collection of satirical poems entitled *The Satires* (172).

Cosmic satire focuses on the human condition, attacking man—the master of this world. Here, the human being "is made to seem insignificant in the universe, in the grand scheme of things," to quote Thomas Tierney who indicates that the satirical attack here is generally directed at man's arrogance, "his pride, his self-assurance, his feelings of overwhelming importance…[T]he focus is on the woes that beset man rather than those he creates or is directly responsible for" (149). Attacking man's belief that the cosmos or the universe is centered around him, Peter Charron writes (in archaic English):

> Besides all this, man beleeveth that the heaven, the starres, all this great celestiall motion of the world, is only made for him…And the poore miserable wretch is in the meane time ridiculous: he is heere beneath lodged in the last and worst stage of the world, most distant from the celestiall vaut, in the sincke of the world, amongst the filth and lees thereof, with creatures of baser condition, made to receive all those excrements and ordures, which raine downe and fall from above upon his head; nay he lives not but by them, and to endure all those accidents that on all sides happen unto him; and yet he makes himselfe beleeve that he is the master and commander of all…. (qtd. in Tierney 149)

There are three main kinds of satire, varying in their levels of harshness and having certain characteristics that distinguish each kind. Satire can be Horatian, Juvenalian, or Menippean. Named after Horace, Horation satire is gentle, mild, and light-hearted, mainly aiming to amuse and evoke laughter, and rarely contains personal attacks. Sympathetic in tone, Horation satire attempts to promote morals and heal the situation through resorting to humour rather than to anger. Horatian satirists do not seek to change the world but merely highlight human stupidity. They usually comment on human nature and "address issues that they view more as follies, rather than evil" (Barron). Jonathan Swift*s Gulliver's Travels* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* are two examples of Horatian satire.

Originating in the writings of the Roman satirist Juvenal, Juvenalian satire is vicious, dark, angry, and contemptuous. Serious rather than comic, this kind of satire is the harshest, using more condensed doses of sarcasm and irony. Juvenalian satirists see that their mission is to attack their target, whether a person or an organization, to reveal hypocrisy and moral wrongdoings. Of the best example of Juvenalian satire are *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess.

Finally, Menippean satire, which takes its name from the Greek philosopher Menippus, creates a balance between the two former types of satire. Its satirical arrows are often directed to mental attitudes or beliefs rather than persons or entities. In other words, Menippean satirists are more aggressive than Juvenalian satirists but more critical than those who write Horation satire. William Blake's book entitled *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are two expressive examples of Menippean satire.

Satirists usually employ certain technical devices through which they can add an extra layer of meaning and achieve the effect sought by the satirical work. Of these techniques are irony, sarcasm, parody, burlesque, lampoon, and invective. Irony generally refers to the use of words to express a meaning that is the opposite of their literal meaning. Irony has three types. It can be verbal, dramatic, or situational. Verbal irony takes place when a person says something but intends the opposite. Dramatic irony occurs when a writer lets the readers know more information about an event than a character in the literary work does. Situational irony takes place when the actual result of a certain situation is completely different from what has previously been expected. A form of irony, sarcasm is usually employed "to communicate implicit criticism about the listener or the situation" creating a negative effect of contempt, scorn, and disapproval (Shamay-Tsoory et al 288).

A common technique of satire, parody refers to the imitation of another writer's style for the purpose of creating a humorous or satiric effect. A similar satirical technical device is burlesque which imitates "the manner (the form and style) or else the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary genre, in verse or in prose, but makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between the manner and the matter" (Abrams 26). Burlesque and parody are sometimes used interchangeably. Lampoon is a harsh attack on a particular person, ridiculing the appearance and character of that person. Finally, invective is a tool of satire that is used in both prose and poetry to attack a person, a topic, or an institution through employing a highly abusive and insulting language. An example of invective can

be noted in *King Lear*, Act 2, Scene II, when Kent attacks Oswald very abusively, describing him as

> a knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamorous whining, if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition. (Shakespeare 83)

Dorothy Parker

Called by friends as Dottie and by others as Mrs. Parker, Dorothy Parker was an American poet, satirist, critic, and short-story writer whose name was closely associated with modern urbane humour. She attracted the attention and admiration of her readers by her remarkable wit, wisecracks, and ridiculous treatment of human faults and shortcomings. Despite her unhappy childhood and unsettled marriage life, Parker never gave up her comic spirit and witty remarks. Her originality and sense of humour were "so wonderful that neither age nor illness ever dried up the spring from which it came fresh each day'" (Hellman 187).

Parker's literary production is various, covering a wide range of fields such as poetry, short stories, drama, criticism, and book reviews. She published three collections of poetry: *Enough Rope* (1926), *Sunset Gun* (1928), and *Death and Taxes* (1931). A book of her poems entitled *Not So Deep As a Well*: *Collected Poems* appeared in 1936. A distinctive short story writer, Parker produced two short story collections: *After Such Pleasures* (1932) and *Here Lies* (1939). "Such a Pretty Little Picture" came into view in 1922 as her first short story and "Big Blonde" was her autobiographical short story for which she won the O. Henry Award in 1929. Other famous short stories written by her were the soliloquies "A Telephone Call" and "The Waltz". *Close Harmony* and *Ladies of the Corrido*r are two plays on which Parker collaborated with Elmer Rice and Arnaud d'Usseau successively.

It was in *Vanity Fair* in 1914 that Parker published her first poem. She also published many of her work in *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*. However, Parker is always remembered for her famous couplet "**Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses**" (85), a two-line poem published in her collection *Enough Rope* in 1926. The journey of Dorothy Parker reached its end in 1967 when

the clever satirist died at the age of 73. In the words of Frank Jackson, Dorothy Parker really had "a pretty good run, considering her excessive consumption of alcohol, an occupational hazard for more than a few successful writers...." The epitaph on her memorial plaque in Baltimore reads, "Please excuse my dust" (36).

Cosmic Satire in Parker' Poetry

Cosmic satire is evident in the poems written by Dorothy Parker, a leading satirist whose body of satire was part of the popular American culture in the early twentieth century. In the introduction to *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, Edmund Wilson describes Parker's poetry as "popular irony," stating:

> [W]e should admire Mrs. Parker…She writes well: her wit is the wit of her particular time and place, but it is often as cleanly economic at the same time that it is flatly brutal as the wit of the age of Pope; and, within its small scope, it is a criticism of life. (xiv)

To explore the theme of cosmic satire in Parker's poetry, the present paper focuses on some selected poems. These are "Rhyme Against Living," "Resume," "One Perfect Rose," "Swan Song," "Thought for a Sunshiny Morning," and "The Very Rich Man." These poems, the researcher sees, reveal cosmic satire in an obvious way as Parker's satiric target here is the entire loop of life and death where man sees himself as the center of the universe while he is really "insignificant" when seen within "the grand scheme of things," as stated above by Thomas Tierney (149).

As if dissatisfied with life, Parker had a sad touch that marked her life and was accordingly reflected in her poetry. As Brendan Gill puts it, "She was one of the wittiest people in the world and one of the saddest" (xxvi). There were almost two occasions in which Parker attempted suicide. In his biography of Parker titled *You Might as Well Live*: *The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker*, John Keats tells us that "in 1922, when all the world seemed full of laughter, her laughter was sardonic. She seemed determined to pursue unhappiness" (90). In one of her highly meaningful poems entitled "Rhyme Against Living," Parker seems to reject life and think of death. For the speaker of the lines, there is no difference between the good times in her life and the bad ones. Desperate and hopeless, the persona is overcome by a dominant feeling that urges her to commit suicide:

> If wild my breast and sore my pride,
> I bask in dreams of suicide.

If cool my heart and high my head,
I think, "How lucky are the dead!" (*Sunset Guns* 73)

Even when matters are going well for her, as the last two lines suggest, the speaker still thinks of death and sees it as something attractive for her. Described by Vincent Sheean as "a terrified soul" (Keats 127), she mistrusted life but at the same time mocked it very cleverly. The first time Parker attempted suicide was when she had an abortion towards the end of the year 1922. However, she came later to joke about the attempt and began to drink heavily.

"Résumé" is Parker's most expressive poem revealing cosmic satire. In this poem, satire is mixed with unpredictable humour. Mocking the different ways through which the person contemplates suicide, Parker sarcastically writes:

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live. (*Enough Rope* 61)

Addressing the person who thinks of putting an end to his life, the poet explains that there are various methods of committing suicide that one can resort to. Of these are "razors," "rivers," "acids," "drugs," "guns," "nooses," and "gas." However, the poet clarifies, these ways of death all hurt the person in a way or another and are accordingly silly and unnecessary. Then comes the last line revealing wry irony that makes the poem humorous and amusing. Life seems worth living, only because the other alternatives are worse. So, Parker gives her desperate addressee the reasonable conclusion: "You might as well live," as if she is saying suicide is both painful and hurting, so just live.

Expertly, Parker uses technique to reveal theme in "Résumé." To start with the title of the poem that can be interpreted in two ways both of which convey the poet's ideas and views. Firstly, "Résumé" may mean to go ahead or continue after a long pause. This goes in harmony with the excessive use of semicolons throughout the poem that cause pauses in the sentences but at the same time allow the reader to 'resume' reading again. By employing a semicolon in a nonstop list, the poet

skillfully shows how the person can use several ways to commit suicide, and how the semicolon suggests that life, nevertheless, should resume. Secondly, the title of the poem can be conceived of as "resumé" as in a long list of achievements or skill set. The lines present a list of ways or methods to which people may resort when they think of committing suicide, exactly like a resumé.

Parker also uses structure, meter, and rhythm to convey her theme. The poem structure reveals that it consists of eight short lines each of which contains a few words as if the poet tries to say to us that life is too short to end suddenly and inappropriately. Furthermore, meter and rhythm combine in a beautiful way that enables Parker to express her point of view about life and death in a highly expressive way. Examining meter and rhythm in the poem, one notes that the majority of lines are written in dimeter. This means that the line consists of two feet. Each foot consists of two syllables. The first syllable is stressed while the second is unstressed (/ x). This pattern of rhythm is called trochaic. So, most of the lines of the poem are written in trochaic dimeter as for example we see in the following lines:

/ x / x
Razors / pain you;

/ x / x
Rivers / are damp;

/ x / x
Acids / stain you;

These poetic techniques do not only reflect the shortness of life which we should not foolishly interrupt, but they also make the poem simple enough for the audience to read and understand. The delicate rhythm and the easy meter Parker employs in the poem brilliantly lessen the roughness that comes along with the ideas surrounding the act of suicide and its horrible consequences.

The sarcastic tone of the human condition continues in "One Perfect Rose," a poem in which Parker humorously ridicules the old-fashioned romantic way of expressing love by giving a rose to the beloved. The poet writes:

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his messenger he chose;

Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet--
One perfect rose.

I knew the language of the floweret;
"My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."
Love long has taken for his amulet
One perfect rose.
Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose. (*Enough Rope* 73)

In the first stanza, the female speaker tells us that her lover has given her a flower which he has carefully selected in order to please her. The charming beauty, the pure tenderness, and the fresh scent of the rose make it really "flawless" or "perfect" in shape and meaning.

In the second stanza, the speaker makes it clear that she understands the hidden message of love that the tender flower conveys to her and that she appreciates this gentle act of her lover. Nevertheless, she cannot stop mocking these romantic clichés of communicating romance among lovers as if she is suggesting that such romantic traditions no longer suit modern love and the different context it exists in.

The poem's satirical arrows seem to be severely directed to the outdated male assumption that sentimental gestures are the best and shortest way to a woman's heart. Parker ridicules those men who still think that a flower may sweep a woman off her feet. This hidden satire is cleverly conveyed in the last stanza of the poem where the speaker sarcastically makes it clear that it would be better for her to receive "one perfect limousine" than to be given "one perfect rose" which reflects nothing but an old-fashion outlook about love and women.

The structure of the poem expressively reflects the idea posed in the lines. The poem consists of three stanzas, four lines each. This neat traditional organization of the poem helps the speaker mock the conventional forms of expressing sentimental love poetry. Diction also is a technical device that the poet employs to convey her theme. While words such as "rose," "tenderly," "deep-hearted," "pure," "scented," "dew," "leaves," "heart," and "love" convey a romantic atmosphere, the word "flow'r" is written in old-fashioned spelling to show how traditionally affection is articulated. It is important for the readers of "One Perfect Rose" to realize that the poem was published in the 1920s,

> a period when women enjoyed newfound and unprecedented independence and power. Wishing for "one perfect limousine" instead of a mere rose, the speaker imagines being offered, not romance, but *options*: limousines suggest both wealth and the ability to get around on your own. In other words, the speaker doesn't want her lover to see her as a swooning damsel, but as a modern woman—a person with her own interests, and with places to be! (Taylor)

After ridiculing the old-fashioned manners of expressing romantic love in "One Perfect Rose," Parker moves to another literary piece of her cosmic satire, namely, "Swan Song," an amusing poem in which she sarcastically comments on life and death. The title is indeed significant, reflecting the idea of the poem. Swan song is a phrase that is usually used to refer to the final gesture or performance given before death, closure, or retirement. The expression was first used in ancient Greece to indicate that "swans sing a beautiful song just before their death since they have been silent (or alternatively not so musical) for most of their lifetime" ("Swan song"). Later, the expression became popular in the English language and literature, and it was used by famous English writers such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Coleridge, Tennyson, and others. Parker's "Swan Song" cynically speaks about the inevitabilities of life and death. The poet writes:

> First you are hot.
> Then you are cold;
> And the best you have got
> Is the fact you're old.
> Labor and hoard.
> Worry and wed;
> And the biggest reward
> Is to die in bed.
> A long time to sweat,
> A little while to shiver
> Is all that you will get—
> Where's the nearest river? (*Sunset Guns* 44)

In the above lines, Parker satirizes the human condition in general. For here, life and death are the same. Whatever you have in your life, you'll finally leave this world, no matter you have been happy or sad, enthusiastic or apathetic, young or old, rich

or poor. After your "long time" of hard work and the good or bad feelings you have undergone, "the biggest reward" you'll finally have, the poet points out, is "to die in bed." Oscillation between opposing feelings such as happiness and sorrow, optimism and frustration, satisfaction and disappointment, is the main characteristic of life. Sometimes you are "hot" and full of energy, and therefore find yourself drenched in sweat. Other times, you are "cold," shivering in the chill air. After presenting her long list of the inevitabilities of life and death to her readers, Parker ends her poem in a sardonic way, concluding, in the last line but one, that what she has mentioned is all one "will get" at the end of life, a frustrating close that makes her ironically ask at the final line of the poem, about the place of "the nearest river," apparently in order to throw herself in it and put an end to this life which she sees as shocking, dreadful, and contradictory. Though the tone of the speaker seems light and easy, her sense of depression is easily felt by the readers even if this desperate sense is hidden under the cover of humour. After Parker's second attempt of suicide and the ideas she had had in mind due to the incident, Parker reached the conclusion that nothing really matters in this life. This is what Keats elucidates:

> This living was no project of hers. For all that it might consist of the companionship of witty, talented, wealthy, and charming people, life was not clearly preferable to death. In the end, everyone died anyway, so there was no point to anything. It did not matter if people wrote plays or started magazines or had Long Island estates or said funny things at Jack and Charlie's, for the plays would close and no one would remember them and the magazines would run their moment in the sun and then fold someday, and the Long Island estates would eventually become ruins, and wit was just doing calisthenics with words. Love was supposed to be wonderful, but love could hurt, and in the end love died, too. Love was a permanent flop. Nothing really mattered. (Keats 105)

Ironically, Parker—whose writings are dominated by the ideas of death and suicide— lived till she became seventy-three years old, thus outliving the majority of her relatives and friends.

As usual, Parker capably employs her poetic techniques to express her ideas and feelings. Throughout the poem, contrast is used to reveal the theme of the lines. Contrast can easily be noted in "hot" and "cold," worry and wed, "a long time" and "a little while" and "sweat" and "shiver." All these contrasting words reflect the conflicting and contradictory feelings we experience throughout our journey in life.

Perhaps more sarcastic than "Swan Song," "Thought for a Sunshiny Morning" is a poem that sardonically tells us about the death of a worm. Parker states:

It costs me never a stab nor squirm
To tread by chance upon a worm.
"Aha, my little dear," I say,
"Your clan will pay me back one day." (*Collected Poems* 117)

The speaker sarcastically addresses a little worm saying that it will cost her nothing if she accidentally walks on it one day and destroys it completely. She may even be thanked and paid back for this action by the tribe of the worm itself. The little worm here stands for man himself who thinks he is the most important creature on earth while he is actually so powerless that his life can come to an end at any time. Thus, the satiric target of Parker in the poem is mainly this human being who sees himself as the master of the universe. Though proud and arrogant, man will face his horrible destiny and will ultimately be eaten by worms, those little weak creatures.

It is clear that the title of the poem is ironic as we as readers cannot find any thought for a "sunshiny morning" related to the issue posed in the poem as it is mainly about the death of a little worm which brings into mind the horrible fate of man who always shows himself as strong and domineering while he is, in reality, weak and helpless. The ending parker uses for the poem is indeed surprising, as the reader may expect that the 'clan' of the worm, its family and companions, will be sorry for its death. Unexpectedly, the poet closes her poem with the affirmation that no one will be sad for the awful end of the little worm, even its own tribe.

The poem consists of one stanza only, a quatrain containing four lines. The lines are short, written in iambic tetrameter, with the rhyme scheme aabb. The main figure of speech in the poem is apostrophe. The speaker ironically addresses the worm, telling it that it will die and no one will get regretful for its death. The sarcastic tone is remarkably noted throughout the poem.

Satirizing the human condition continues in "The Very Rich Man," a section of a long poem entitled "Tombstones in the Starlight." Like an epitaph, "The Very Rich Man" reads as follows:

He'd have the best, and that was none too good;
No barrier could hold, before his terms.
He lies below, correct in cypress wood,
And entertains the most exclusive worms. (*Collected Poems* 168)

In the above lines, Parker satirically shows how the rich man obtains all he wishes and how he always gets "the best." Nevertheless, the poet surprises us, this wealthy person cannot escape the human condition, as he will sooner or later have to yield to death whose "barrier" never holds before the terms and conditions of this haughty rich man. Accordingly, the wealthy person who stands for man in general will ultimately lie "below" in his costly coffin that is made of "cypress wood" which is known for its expensive price. This is the tragic end of the rich man and his worldly wealth insignificance that can only end in a pricey casket. Parker concludes that the arrogant rich man, the representative of all human beings, will—after he dies—be a delicious meal for worms. What an end! This is man and this is the human condition as cleverly ridiculed by Parker's witty lines of cosmic satire.

Like most of Parker's poems, "The Very Rich Man" is a short poem consisting of four lines only with an alternative rhyme (abab). Parker here uses both diction and metaphor to reflect the notion she poses in her poem. The choice of words such as "best," "good," "terms," and "cypress" fit in the poem context which describes the very rich man and his luxurious life. In addition, the metaphor at the final line in which the dead man is compared to a meal on which worms feed indicates how unimportant and weak this conceited creature is, and how trivial his end seems to be.

Conclusion

To conclude, the satirical poems written by Dorothy Parker reveal their writer as a clever satirist who could look deep into the human condition and recognize the hypocrisy, haughtiness, and short-sightedness of man who regards himself as the master of the universe and the most important creature in it while he is, in fact, weak and helpless. Parker could put her hand on the shortcomings of the human self and did not fail to highlight man's faults, weaknesses, and failings in her satire which she expertly enfolds in a sense of humour and sarcasm. The delicate rhythm that harmonizes with the simple meter, the unexpected endings that surprise readers, the ridiculous manner in which reality is handled, and the way in which technique reflects theme are among the features that characterize Parker's poetry in general and her cosmic satire poems in particular.

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