Satirical Literary Genius: A Call for Change

Satirical genius originates long before Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. The genius actually began with such literary greats as Chaucer with his famous work *Canterbury Tales*, Jonathon Swift’s (not so) Modest Proposal, and William Shakespeare’s famous plays and sonnets. These authors, while intricately different, all share the facet of seeking to expose the corruption and what they perceive as the explicitly undesirable circumstances of the societal regulations that were dominant in their time. It is important to remember that literature was written primarily for the aristocracy and so, in the cases represented here, the authors’ aim was vastly to inspire thought and advocate change within society.

First and perhaps the most obvious satirist of English Literature is that of Geoffrey Chaucer, author of Canterbury Tales. This insightful piece highlights the extreme hypocritical truths behind every level of the societal hierarchy of the medieval times. Chaucer explicitly exposes the hypocritical conundrums of each level of society. In The General Prologue, he unveils the reckless and uncloistered Monk, the Somnour who impregnates young girls and marries them off to hide his wrong-doings, as well as the Pardoner’s homosexual partner who was castrated to avoid temptation. Chaucer illustrates, in great detail, the chaotic and utterly uncouth circumstances surrounding the concept of societal hierarchy. Additionally, The General Prologue drives a stake into the concept of good versus evil. After all, those who are to be honored and trusted, such as clergy are represented as the most vile and uncouth while the commoners tend to be the most pure and loyal. The Wife of Bathe is a great example of this. While she contradicts the idea of a lady, she, in The Wife of Bathe’s Prologue and Tale, is shown to be loyal and good. The concept that her mission is to find a new husband satirizes the expectations placed upon women to take their place as wife, submitting to a man.

William Shakespeare uses different forms to accomplish the same goal as Chaucer. Shakespeare is known, in large part, for his plays and sonnets. Through his sonnets, Shakespeare exposed the absurdity of Petrarchan sonnets and their common themes of melodramatic imagery such as hearts, tears, and sighs. Sonnet 130 is the most obvious example of Shakespeare’s disdain for the seemingly unreal concepts surrounding Petrarchan sonnets that speak lightly and beautifully, as if its writers were viewing the world through rose colored glasses, illustrating love objects as seemingly perfect. In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare breaks down those walls. He tells us that although his mistress is not perfect, he loves her despite her bad breath, inability to sing, and wire- like hair. The Taming of the Shrew is another example of Shakespeare’s tendency toward the satirical. As with many of his plays, The Taming of the Shrew is meant to serve as a mirror for the members of aristocracy viewing the play. Like The Wife of Bathe Prologue and Tale, the play contradicts the traditional expectations of woman as the feeble minded, weaker sex. Shakespeare reveals Katarina as a shrewish woman but inevitably and implicitly satirizes that concept with her final speech, where she appears to submit to her husband while simultaneously hinting at the widow and her sister Bianca that they should pretend to submit to maintain peace in the home.

While Shakespeare and Chaucer use a light and airy form of satire, others such as Jonathon Swift use a darker form. Swift’s A Modest Proposal is an intensely dark satirical work that truly calls for change in the relationship between England and Ireland. As an Englishman who despised office seekers and eager advancement, although he truly despised the Irish, Swift recognized a need for change in Ireland. The proposal made by Swift is a means of helping with the dire situation of starving children in Ireland. He uses a form of shock treatment to awaken his readers to comprehending the ill conditions of Ireland. Through equating women to “breeders” and animals, and proposing that Irish children be sold to the English for consumption, Swift uses a deranged sense of humor to illustrate England’s overtaking of Ireland. By comparing women to animals, this once again represents disdain for the way that women are represented in these times.

From the beginning of time, satire has been used to call attention to the unforgiving and often excruciating circumstances surrounding societal expectations. It takes the creative literary genius of brilliant authors to express these concerns on a level that calls others to contemplate change. Advancement of society is, in large part, due to the Chaucer’s, Shakespeare’s, and Swift’s of the world who were opinionated and elegant enough to attract enough of an audience to serve the purpose of advocating change as necessary.