

Humour Of Today's Literature

Posted on October 5, 2022

Introduction

Humour in literature changes across periods, but it has never been confined to light entertainment. Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," and James Joyce's "Araby" use different forms of comic tension to expose desire, vanity, social convention, and self-deception. The original essay treats Chaucer as humorous while classifying Marvell and Joyce as almost entirely serious. A closer reading shows a broader spectrum. Chaucer relies on fabliau, bodily comedy, and reversal; Marvell uses witty hyperbole and grotesque exaggeration within a seduction argument; Joyce uses irony to reveal the gap between romantic fantasy and commercial reality. Humour can therefore coexist with death, frustration, religion, and disappointment. (Marvell, n.d.)

Defining Literary Humour

Literary humour includes more than jokes that produce immediate laughter. It may arise through irony, parody, incongruity, exaggeration, satire, understatement, mistaken identity, or the exposure of a character's inflated self-image. Comedy can also carry discomfort because readers laugh at deception, embarrassment, or pain. Historical distance affects response: language and social assumptions that amused an earlier audience may require explanation or may now appear offensive. The analytical question is not simply whether a work is funny. It is how comic form organizes judgment. Humour can invite sympathy, create distance, undermine authority, or reveal that a serious claim is internally absurd. The same technique can entertain one audience while unsettling another.

The Miller as an Unreliable Performer

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Miller insists on telling his story after drinking and warns the company that it will be coarse. His performance already challenges social hierarchy because he follows the Knight's elevated romance with a fabliau about adultery, deception, and bodily humiliation. Chaucer creates humour through the mismatch between refined expectations and the Miller's determination to speak in his own register. The narrator's drunkenness does not make the tale meaningless. It allows the poem to question who controls literary taste and whose experiences deserve representation. The frame also distributes responsibility: the pilgrim Chaucer reports the tale while pretending to apologize for its indecency, inviting readers to enjoy what he officially disclaims. (Chaucer, n.d.)

Comic Plot in The Miller's Tale

The plot depends on competing desires and false confidence. Nicholas believes cleverness will let him deceive John, Absolon imagines courtly performance will win Alisoun, and John trusts a fabricated flood prophecy. Each man interprets the world through a role he wants to inhabit: scholar, lover, or protective husband. The practical joke involving tubs suspended from the roof turns biblical fear into domestic absurdity. The final sequence combines mistaken identity, obscene contact, branding, shouting for water, and John's fall. Comedy emerges through accelerating consequences in which every scheme collides. The laughter is not morally innocent, because John's injury and Alisoun's objectification complicate the triumph of cleverness.

Gender and Agency in Chaucer

The original summary describes Alisoun mainly as the woman around whom male action occurs. She is also an active participant who chooses Nicholas, rejects Absolon, and helps design the humiliation. Her agency exists within a narrative that repeatedly describes and exchanges her through male desire. Readers can therefore see both resistance and objectification. The fabliau allows a young wife to outwit an older husband, but it does not provide a modern model of equal relationships. Humour can expose patriarchal control while still using women's bodies as comic objects. A responsible reading asks who receives pleasure, who receives pain, and whose perspective the narrative leaves underdeveloped.

Wit in To His Coy Mistress

Marvell's poem is a carpe diem argument in which the speaker tries to persuade a hesitant woman to accept sexual intimacy. Its first movement imagines unlimited time and expands courtship across impossible centuries and geography. The scale is deliberately excessive: the speaker would spend ages praising each feature if mortality did not intervene. This hyperbole is witty because its apparent generosity reveals rhetorical strategy. The speaker performs patience only to argue that patience is impossible. The humour is intellectual rather than slapstick, arising from the speed with which cosmic time becomes a tool in a private negotiation. Readers are invited to admire the argument while remaining skeptical of its convenience.

Grotesque Comedy and Mortality

The poem's middle section introduces the grave, decay, and the speaker's unsettling image of worms taking the woman's virginity. The language is macabre, coercive, and also grotesquely comic in its extremity. Marvell uses shock to collapse idealized romance into bodily mortality. The humour does not erase pressure; it helps the speaker make pressure memorable. Contemporary readers may

recognize that the woman's voice is absent and that mortality is manipulated to accelerate consent. The poem's brilliance lies partly in this ethical discomfort. Wit can make a questionable argument aesthetically powerful, which means literary analysis must distinguish rhetorical success from moral justification.

Irony in Araby

Joyce's "Araby" appears less comic because its conclusion is painful, but the story depends on irony. The unnamed boy imagines his attraction to Mangan's sister as a sacred quest, using religious and romantic language to elevate ordinary adolescent desire. Readers notice the gap between his grand interpretation and the mundane obstacles around him: delayed money, a late train, tired adults, and a nearly closed bazaar. The story's humour is quiet and sympathetic rather than cruel. The boy is not mocked simply for loving; his exaggerated self-conception is exposed. Joyce allows readers to remember the seriousness of youthful feeling while recognizing how the world refuses to cooperate with its imagined drama. (Joyce, 1914)

The Bazaar as Deflation

The bazaar promises exotic escape through its name, but the boy encounters darkness, commercial small talk, and sellers preparing to close. The setting deflates his fantasy by revealing that "Araby" is a marketplace rather than a mystical destination. His plan to purchase a gift has already translated devotion into consumption. When he overhears flirtatious conversation and receives indifferent service, he sees himself as a creature driven by vanity. The ending is emotionally severe, yet the structure has comic features: an epic mission is defeated by an uncle's lateness and ordinary business hours. Joyce transforms anticlimax into an initiation in which self-knowledge arrives through embarrassment.

Comparing the Three Forms

Chaucer, Marvell, and Joyce all create humour through incongruity, but the objects differ. Chaucer places bodily desire beneath courtly and religious forms; Marvell places erotic urgency inside cosmic philosophy; Joyce places adolescent fantasy inside a drab commercial city. In each work, language exceeds circumstance. Characters or speakers make desire larger, purer, or more controlled than it is, and the text reveals the gap. Chaucer produces loud communal laughter, Marvell produces argumentative wit, and Joyce produces reflective irony. The difference is tonal rather than a division between humorous and humorless literature. Humour can end in triumph, unease, or humiliation. Their comic methods differ because their social worlds and narrative purposes differ.

Women and the Structure of Desire

The original essay notes that women motivate events in all three works, but this description risks reducing them to causes in male stories. Alisoun speaks and acts, though the tale frames her through male competition. Marvell's mistress does not speak, so readers know her only through the speaker's attempt to persuade her. Mangan's sister speaks briefly and becomes an object onto which the boy projects religious and romantic meaning. Comparing these positions shows how humour can depend on unequal access to voice. Modern readers can appreciate formal wit while asking how the works construct consent, agency, and fantasy. The question is not whether historical texts meet current expectations but what their structures make visible or silent.

Humour and Social Commentary

Comic writing often reaches serious issues more effectively than direct instruction. "The Miller's Tale" exposes class pretension, clerical desire, marital jealousy, and the instability of masculine authority. "To His Coy Mistress" stages the pressure of time, mortality, and persuasion. "Araby" examines religion, colonial consumer culture, adolescent desire, and the disappointment of modern urban life. None of these themes prevents humour. Comedy creates an angle from which social arrangements appear strange. It can also reinforce prejudice or normalize cruelty, so laughter itself should be analyzed. Readers need to ask what assumption makes the scene funny and whether the work invites endorsement, criticism, or unresolved ambivalence.

Is Modern Literature Less Humorous?

The original conclusion suggests that modern literature is more morbid and less humorous than past writing. Three texts cannot support that historical generalization, especially because Chaucer and Marvell are not simply cheerful and Joyce is not without comedy. Modern and contemporary literature contains satire, absurdism, dark comedy, parody, and comic realism alongside tragedy. Historical audiences also lived with war, disease, religious conflict, and death, which often intensified rather than eliminated humour. The form changes with genre and audience. Modern irony may be quieter, more self-conscious, or more uncomfortable than fabliau, but it still performs the cultural work of exposing contradiction and helping readers endure complexity.

Conclusion

Humour in "The Miller's Tale," "To His Coy Mistress," and "Araby" operates through different scales of incongruity. Chaucer builds physical farce from deception and competing desire; Marvell uses hyperbole and grotesque wit to make a seductive argument; Joyce uses anticlimax and irony to expose romantic self-deception. The works are united not merely because they involve women but

because their male characters or speakers transform desire into exaggerated stories about themselves. Humour reveals the distance between those stories and material reality. Literature has not moved from a humorous past to a serious present. It has continually reinvented laughter as entertainment, criticism, defense, and a difficult form of knowledge.

Works Cited

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