

**Does Irony Enhance the Potential of Humor?
A Vindication in the Short Stories of W.W. Jacobs**

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Courtesy: <http://www.online-literature.com/ww-jacobs/>

Abstract

W. W. Jacobs, a pioneer in the 19th century British short story brings out the therapeutic effect of humour which he blends with an element of irony. The study finds out that Jacobs' short stories postulate how humour offers a universal panacea for all the illnesses that afflict the modern society.

Keywords: Hamartia, Incongruity, Paradox

W.W. Jacobs

W.W. Jacobs born in 1879 in London was a Master-craftsman in using Irony as a literary device. By using irony Jacobs makes his stories quite appealing and interesting to the readers. As Wayne C. Booth says, "Irony helps the writer to achieve a secret communication, collusion and collaboration with the reader".

A hidden meaning of a situation is more effective than an open revelation. A reversal of expectation and contradiction of opinion are the resultant effects of irony. Jacob's stories

hold good for such reversals and contradictions. "Irony is a kind of linguistic twist in which real meaning is concealed or contradicted by the words used to".

W. W. Jacobs Makes His Characters a Paradox

W. W. Jacobs makes his characters a paradox and through this paradox, he cautions of twin personality of man. An incongruity of situation is created because of expectation and a completely different outcome. Jacobs was one of the writers of the 1890's, the golden age of short – story who held high esteem among readers. It is apt to quote what the famous critic F.R. Leavis considered him a great master, than P.G. Wodehouse"³. As Peter Westland says, "Jacobs' humour cannot be classified. It belongs to the essence of humour, as we find it in Dickens"⁴ What is worth mentioning of Jacobs' is the combination of satire and Irony to the culmination of humour. According to David Daiches "Jacobs humour is quiet and traditional and his narrative control faultless"⁵

Principal Figures

Jacobs' principal figures are generally the long shore man, sailors, night watchmen and others having to do with the sea and shipping although their domestic tribulations feature nearly as frequently as their professional occupations. We have in his stories enough of sharp-tongued wives, flirtatious widows, crooked landlords, downtrodden clerks, saucy errand boys and pert daughters of retired skippers. Conjugal and monetary hazards are a perennial concern, while the perils of courtship are also amply demonstrated. One can feel Jacobs' brilliance in ghost stories and stories of horror like the celebrated 'Monkey's Paw and Jerry Blunder. As Frank O. Connor says, "Jacobs' treatment of theme resembles that of Hemingway"⁶

W.W. Jacobs' characters do not possess great weaknesses. They are not characters found in epics and so those characters do not have 'hamartia'. These are people one can easily meet every day in the street. They have the daily beauty and folly at the same time. Jacob's stories are full of anecdotes with ironic twists. as Chesterton says, ' every one of Mr. Jacobs' stories is an amplified anecdote: that is to say it is a thing with a complication and a climax, a climax which must be at once expected and unexpected. In this matter, Mr. Jacobs is entirely in tune with the oldest mirth of mankind"⁷

“Blundell's Improvement” is one such story where love is the main theme of the story. It is a story of two men loving one girl Venia; whom does she love? Well, she prefers sergent Dick Daly to Blundell, at least she appears to do so. Mr. Turnbull, the father of the girl prefers Blundell to the sergent. He has his own reason; he wants to marry Miss. Soppet the sister of Blundell. Only if Blundell married Venia, his marriage would materialise. Turnbull knows that his daughter prefers Dick for hero worship as he is in army. Turnbull suggests to Blundell to push down Dick in waters when they went for a walk on the quay. Blundell could jump and rescue Dick and become a hero in front of Venia. Blundell thinks it would create sympathy in Venia for Dick. So he changes the plan. Instead of Dick, Blundell pushes Turnbull into the waters and he jumps to save him. Venia has a lot of admiration for Blundell. But Turnbull keeps on shouting that Blundell pushed him. No one listens and everyone including his daughter thinks that he is affected by sunstroke. When Venia becomes, Mrs. Blundell she is in doubt whether her father would become normal at all as he married Miss. Sippet, a Younger Woman than her.

Ingenuity over Irony

Jacob's employs ingenuity over irony that brings out a humorous situation which no other writer would have thought out of a trivial incident.

In the story 'A Spirit of Adventure' Mr. John Blows, a lazy man who doesn't work and lives by his wife's money makes his son tell that he has drowned in the river. His wife starts collecting money for his funeral. He returns after some time to get the money collected for his funeral and for her subsistence. He tells his wife to keep his living matter, as secret, lest they have to return the funeral money to the committee. Jacob's makes it hilarious when the wife is shocked not by the appearance of her husband but by the thought of the money to be returned to the committee.

There is an ironic situation when the wife describes his funeral to him and chides him for missing it. The rector preached the Sermon, a beautiful Sermon it was, I wish you'd been there to hear it (Jacob's Stories p.100) But stung by conscience, he appears before the committee and pleads for the money only to become a butt for laughter.

Psychological Insight with Irony

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:10 October 2017

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Jacobs's intertwines a psychological insight with irony to make the character interesting. Desire being a fallacy drives him almost to the verge of madness. But awakened by reason, he appears before the committee and pleads for redemption. It is the avowed intention of Jacobs to exploit the foils and foibles of human beings for the purpose of laughter. Writers like Jacobs are needed to wade off tensions and acrimony that prevail in the society. One can notice a light hearted and genteel humour in Jacobs'.

In the story 'Odd Freak, the three sailor men Ginger Dick, Peter Busset and Sam make Sam's ugly looking nephew Beauty as the wild man caught in the forest of Brazil and sell him to Ted a keeper of wild animals for 100 pounds. Ted asks them to come after three days for the money. When they come for money, Ted tells that the wild man has been eaten away by a tiger. The three sailors return helplessly. (Though there is poignancy and an element of Pathos, the readers are relieved by the ironic twist employed by the writer judiciously. What is fascinating in Jacob's stories is the absence of rancor and temerity. There is no revenge motif in his stories. An element of irony runs through softly and gently to achieve the twin purposes of humor and conviction)

There is a real irony in the words of Ted, the animal keeper, "He'll be fed different here, I can tell you. You won't know I'm at the end o' three days."⁸ The power of language increases the tense moments of the characters as well as the readers. Though the language is simple, it has intensity to carry forward what S.T. Coleridge calls 'Willing Suspense of disbelief' The animal keeper who is firm in logging the wild man along with a tiger puts the other characters on tenterhooks when he says, "Bring i'm out to the lack , an I'll put 'im' is now 'ome"⁹

Jacobs employs irony very effectively in the delineation of the relationship between the characters. The impact of the irony makes the personal relationship of the characters change for the better or worst. Jacobs is the storyteller par excellence. There were writes before and after Jacobs. But this unique trait of combining humour and irony makes Jacobs unique personality in the realm of short – story writing.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:10 October 2017
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