

O' Brien's The Poor Mouth

Flann O'Brien

Teacher	Yu-Ting Wang (王鈺婷老師)
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Content Introduction	Flann O'Brien's satire novel, <u>The Poor Mouth</u> , was published in Gaelic in 1941 and translated into English in 1964. The title of this book refers to the Irish-Gaelic expression "putting on the poor mouth." O'Brien's other novels include <u>The Dalkey Archive</u> , <u>The Third Policeman</u> , and <u>The Hard Life</u> . In this novel, Corkadorkey is a remote region in Ireland where it is always raining and its residents live in poverty and hunger.

Abstract

Flann O'Brien's satirical novel, The Poor Mouth, was published in Gaelic in 1941 and translated into English in 1964, gains wider popularity and fame in Ireland. James Joyce once praised O'Brien "a real writer, with the true comic spirit". In this paper, I would like to discuss the Poor Mouth from three perspectives: the status of comedy, the displacement of names, and the concepts of identification.

O'Brien's The Poor Mouth

After reading O'Brien's The Poor Mouth, I think that O'Brien brings an "attitude of mystery" which appears both in his novel and his real life. In addition, we may wonder how O'Brien skillfully leans on Irish legends and transforms them into philosophical purposes, which might imply the universal truth for mankind. If so, the status of comedy (humor) somehow could compete with tragedy. On the other hand, what is the function of one's name and surname for them? What does the "Gaelic fate" represent to us? How does "individual" reflect a group and how does "group" influence an individual? Does social consciousness belong to one kind of ideology that plays an important role and shapes one's identification? In the following, I would like to discuss the above questions from three perspectives.

In the first place, comedy can compete with the status of tragedy. For a long time, tragedy awards a privilege of supreme position than comedy or tragicomedy. Some people excessively praise and highlight its significance; as a result; it seems that they ignore facing squarely the importance of other genres, such as comedy. In fact, I believe that both tragedy and comedy could give us spiritual cleansing and inspiration, but only through different representation. In The Poor Mouth, O'Brien tries to express some serious themes in a funny and humorous way. The themes O'Brien concerns might elaborate from the smallest element—individuals to the greatest element—nationality, which could also arouse universal feeling and reflect universal truth. Besides, O'Brien makes fun of language and brings the genres of satire, fantasy and even farce into his novel, which creates variation and profusion. Even in some ways, comedy achieves superior effects and wins plenty of echoes more than tragedy because of its light form of drama. I would say that comedy tries to teach us in an unconscious way.

In the beginning of The Poor Mouth, we saw how an weird and bizarre family Bonaparte O'Coonassa has. After our protagonist O'Coonassa was born, he lives and sleeps with a "big family"—a large amount of cows, horses, sheep and even pigs. Every night, O'Coonassa has to tolerate the stench comes from their "lovely family" and be sure not to be involved in fights between them. They live in the same house and eat the same food—potatoes. Ambrose, the luckiest pig, is Old-Fellow's favorite pet. What an irony here is that Ambrose lives like a king—eat well and sleep well—but finally dies of over-eating or other disease.

Secondly, if we identify the above situation as the displacement of treatment of people and animals, another situation may be the displacement of names. In Chapter 4, many

well-dressed gentlemen come from Dublin and Galway to join the festival, but there are all sorts of names and surnames. They call themselves in a bizarre way, such as Popeye the Sailor, My Friend Drumroosk, The Skylark, The Headache, The Dative Case and even Yours respectfully and so on. Another interesting scene happens in Chapter 3 when our protagonist O'Coonassa is sent to school. When his master, Osborne O'Loonassa hears that O'Coonassa tells a series of names, he gives a dreadful blow on his skull and screams: Your name is Jams O'Donnell. O'Coonassa finally realizes that everyone in the class has been named Jams O'Donnell. If so, we may wonder what is the function of one's name and surname for them? What does name or surname signify? As for me, I think that the name can bring two functions: one is "identification" to others; the other is "signification" to meanings. If all people are named the same, how could we distinguish one person from another person? We finally understand that "Jams O'Donnell is a term which tries to imply that all Gales have the same "miserable fate" and could not escape from it, no matter how hard you strive. Ferdinand De Saussure, in The Course in General Linguistic, indicates that a sign is mainly composed of two elements: the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept). Besides, Saussure also points out signification "is the counterpart of the sound-image" and "value is doubtless one element in signification" (968). Difference can create signification.

In The Poor Mouth, we know what the signified (concept) of a skylark, headache, and the Dative Case stand for, but if we relate those nouns into the name or surname of one person, it seems that the relationship between the original signifier and signified are transformed or even destroyed. Besides, it will finally lead to an inevitable consequence—name is name and man is man; thus people will feel isolated and remote to his own "name." For instance, in a Chinese name, each character of one's name will contain at least one deeper and implied meaning. So in The Poor Mouth, those bizarre names will not only become meaningless and hollow to one's identification, but also lose its relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Finally, The Poor Mouth deals with the concepts of identification—the identification of self and the identification of others (society). What power makes all Gaelic people accept their Gaelic fate—fatalism and pessimism. Sometimes we think what the society think, we act what the society asks—it is the power of ideology. As for O'Coonassa, he is instilled by his relative and the Gaelic villagers that life is miserable and is just Gaelic fate. In the beginning of the chapters, we find that O'Coonassa still feels doubt about Gaelic fate that he hears from others, in next to no time, the fatalism and pessimism become one of his living attitude. In other words, the individual consciousness is very slight and powerless in some ways; therefore, the social consciousness somehow determines and represents entirety.

For Gaelic people, they are proud of their poverty and misfortune and see them as symbols to prove their dignity of living. Culture continues, of course, by means of good

preservation and protection from a country. Ironically, Gaelic people excessively praise the uniqueness and distinctiveness of their culture so much that they are unable to realize one truth—every culture has its bright and dark sides. (positive and negative sides)“Closed-minded” and “shortsighted” are like curses that keep recurring Gaelic fate.

Works Cited

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