

Humor in US-American Literature: A Book Review Article about Su's (??) Work

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Humor in US-American Literature: A Book Review Article about Su's (苏晖) Work

Hui Su (苏晖) teaches US-American literature at Central China Normal University and among her interests in scholarship is US-American humor. While in Chinese scholarship her work is well received, in Anglo-American scholarship her work is barely known. In this book review article we discuss Su's work with particular attention to her 2014 book *黑色幽默与美国小说的幽默传统* (Dark Humor and the Tradition of Humor in American Fiction). In the initial period of her scholarship, Su focused on the aesthetics of the comic and published over thirty scholarly articles (see selected examples in the Works Cited) and in 2005 Su published her first monograph *西方喜剧美学的现代发展与变异* (Modern Development and Variation of Western Comic Aesthetics). Su posited that in the latter half of the twentieth century, whether in the West or China, scholarship about the comic in literature, film, and popular culture has become a major activity with the result of articles and books published (see selected examples in the Works Cited). However, in our opinion what is missing in particular is an examination of a transition from traditional to modern aesthetics in the history of Western comedy aesthetics and Su's 2005 *Modern Development* fills this gap. Su explores the Western comic tradition and its modern transformation, highlights the differences in theory and art forms which exist between these two broad periods, clarifies the factors for this discrepancy, and reveals the underlying rules in Western comic aesthetics. Su argues that there are two lines of development in Western comic aesthetics: 1) one "dwells in orthodox aesthetic ideas elucidated by aesthetic theorists" and 2) is "a hidden line deeply rooted in Western folk cultures and arts, namely, the carnival traditions existing in ancient folk festivals and cultures" (*Modern Development* 63; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are ours). Su argues that the carnival tradition is the origin of comedy, which is at odds with conventional Aristotelian comic aesthetics that put much emphasis on ethics and negative aspects of matters ridiculed. Embedded in the hidden line is also Su's notion of a modern renaissance of the carnival, a concept she borrows from Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. She asserts that it was only in the twentieth century that the carnivalesque rose to mainstream comic aesthetics. According to Su, the "inherent qualities" of the carnivalesque refer to aspects of subversion, relativity, mass participation, secularity, and the spirit of freedom which then correspond to the cultural core of Western modernism and postmodernism in the twentieth century.

In another part of *Modern Development* Su explores the development and variation of twentieth-century Western comic aesthetics focusing on two tendencies: absurdity and the carnivalesque. Following her speculation on whether absurdity belongs to tragedy or comedy, Su proposes that absurdity is an extreme presentation of comic aesthetics. Specifically, two larger socio-cultural shifts underlie and propel this variation: first, a turn from an ugliness-based standard to a beauty-based standard and second, an influence on the carnivalesque stems from irrationality-based concepts which gained currency in modernity and challenged traditional values, logic, and language. Throughout modernity, comedy has also become gradually more general and tragic whereby modern comedies often take on the issue of subjective freedom. When defining central categories like the "comic," "ugly," "tragic," "sublimity," "absurdity," "grotesque," "irony," and "carnivalesque," Su employs tenets of comparative literature and uses cultural perspectives of the East and the West. For example, when Su argues that the carnival is the origin of comedy, she refers to not only ancient Greek comedies, but also to ancient Chinese operas and Japan's early comedies. Taking a historical stance, she also compares various comic aesthetics from ancient Western and modern texts and this global perspective makes Su's exploration of Western and Eastern texts of comedy persuasive.

In *Dark Humor and the Tradition of Humor in American Fiction*, Su links the theory of the aesthetics of the comic with textual criticism. Su's combination of theoretical tenets and literary history emphasizes diachronic textual analysis. Novels with dark humor have been studied extensively and variety of theories have been used to tackle this genre including the theory of "incongruity" and "superiority" and the theory of "relief." Some of the most renowned dark humor experts in Chinese and US-American scholarship include Renjing Yang, Shidan Chen, Mansu Qian, Xiaoling Wang, Elaine B. Safer, Max F. Schulz, Sanford Pinsker, John Parkin, J.L. Styan, and William Allen. Su notices that her Chinese colleagues tend to focus on individual writers and their works and therefore lack multi-angle, systematic research. Comparatively, Western scholars have done more research in total, but their studies seldom deal with dark humor from the perspective of humor tradition. This gap is all the more obvious because humor is one of the main features in US-American literature and Su cites Carl Holliday who said in 1912 that, "If there is a superior aspect of American literature to other ones, it is humor ... This is the nation's tradition" (*Dark Humor* 1).

What is impressive about her *Dark Humor* is that Su uses "tradition" to intertwine an intricate network of influences, origins, and forms. Daniel Bell emphasizes that "tradition becomes essential to the vitality of a culture, for it provides the continuity of memory that teaches how one's forebears met the same existential predicaments" (xv). Following this notion, Su utilizes the concepts "tradition" and "continuity of memory" and explores the concept of tradition in three different contexts. First, "tradi-

tion" can refer to the notion of a Western cultural tradition and Su holds that the influence of Western literary tradition on contemporary humorists engaging in dark humor cannot be ignored. Hence she argues that contemporary writers of dark humor draw on comedians and humorists such as Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, Swift, and Voltaire. The second context in which "tradition" is relevant is a national one meaning that Su reads humorous texts as specifically US-American. Su points out that the "extensive use of hyperbole" (Dark Humor 33) is one of the characteristics of early US-American humor and mentions later that "Mark Twain's exaggeration [are] inherited directly from the tradition of the absurd story of the American West" (Dark Humor 120). Further, Su posits that naturalist writers like O'Henry and Jack London inherited Twain's style exposing harsh realities in a humorous and exaggerating tone. Another example discussed in Su's book relates to Poe's short novels and how they epitomize grotesque aesthetic characteristics. Su argues that one can find echoes of Poe's influence in twentieth-century Southern writers. Faulkner, in particular, created a series of grotesque characters. The final context in which Su addresses "tradition" lies in the link between the tradition of humor *per se* and dark humor. She proposes that the seeds of US-American dark humor can be traced to colonial times exemplified by Benjamin Franklin's *The Sale of the Hessians* (see Blair and Hill), then in the romantic period texts such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Birthmark*, Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* and *Moby Dick*, as well as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Angle of the Odd* and *Diddling* show features of dark humor. During the realist period, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* not only represents a peak of US-American humor, but also displays distinct elements of dark humor. According to Su, these trends contribute to the booming of US-American literature with dark humor.

Su's Dark Humor challenges some controversial issues. Throughout her discussion, Su addresses the pros and cons of some ideas which make her overall argument balanced. For example, she discusses the debate on whether early US-American humor had a distinct national quality. She criticizes John DeLancey Ferguson for overemphasizing the ties between humor in US-American and British literature and criticizes Ferguson for ignoring the creativity and unique charm of US-American tradition. Having examined the ideas in Constance Rourke's 1931 book on US-American humor, as well as "Europeanized" humor in Benjamin Franklin's works, Su concludes that "humor is a new creation in the United States which rose out of a convergence of humor from other nations. It has undergone a period of imitation, but imitation was gradually replaced by creation ... Multicultural integration was an important factor contributing to American humor" (41). In addition, she argues that US-American humor "is closely linked to the social and natural phenomena of America" (43). Further, taking Poe's work as an example, Su argues against the belief that he paid little attention to social reality and that his novels were just a means by which he earned a living and provided readers with pastimes. While Robert E. Spiller writes that Poe "seemed alien to his time and his country, a strange dark bird like his own raven, appearing suddenly and as suddenly disappearing into the night" (52), Su disagrees and holds that "Poe's series of grotesque novels were fully conscious of social conflicts in American life in the first half of the nineteenth century, ridiculously satirizing American social reality" (Dark Humor 63). In Su's opinion, Poe's condemnation with a lack of interest in social matters can be sensed in two aspects. On the one hand, he satirized the hypocritical Anglo-American democracy and the utilitarian business communities in his books *Four Beasts in One*, *King Pest*, and *Some Words with a Mummy*. On the other hand, he sneered at interpersonal intrigues, a major theme in his *Mystification*, *Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences* and *The Mystery of Marie Roget*.

It is her systemic application of aesthetic theory to literature which connects her Modern Development and Dark Humor. For example, in *Modern Development*, she claims that "to induce laughter, something contradictory and inconsistent should be present in the comic aesthetic object. In other words, the disharmony of phenomenon and essence, form and content, aim and means, motive and effect" is at the heart of a comic affect (44) and in *Dark Humor* she uses this theory to analyze the humorous features of Twain's works and contends that there is disharmony and comic paradox in three respects. First, inconsistencies are inherent in the opposition between phenomena and essence and internal character and external behavior. In *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* Twain contrasts the superficial honesty and integrity of the small-town people with their hidden greed and vanity to achieve an effect of irony. The second inconsistency rests in the contradiction between aim and means and motivation and effect, as is the case in subjective fantasy and objective suffering of the worker Ah Song Hi in *Goldsmith's Friend Abroad Again* and in the contrast between the expectations of the boy Jacob and his tragic death in *The Story of the Good Little Boy*. Third, the comic disharmony or opposition is situated between characters and environment such as in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the stark contrast between the farce of dog catching beetles and its environment, the sacred solemn church. Su's analysis of humor in Poe's short novels is informed by aesthetics theories as well. She thinks Poe's humor epitomizes grotesque aesthetic features in the way characters and scenes are designed. Poe's short stories *Four Beasts in One*, *The Black Cat*, *The System of Doctor Tarr and Profes-*

or Fether, and *The Man that Was Used Up* accumulate a variety of opposing factors to achieve an extreme sense of anomaly and the effect of defamiliarization.

Not only does Su integrate humor theories and literary interpretation organically, she redefines the nature of dark humor and reveals a previously neglected link between humor *per se* and dark humor. Su adds to the many voices that debate whether dark humor is a movement or school or a writing style and declares that "dark humor is first and foremost an aesthetic category" (252). She further observes that "in the 1960s, with the advent of a series of dark humor works which possess common aesthetic features, the aesthetic connotation and denotation of dark humor have gotten richer" (252). In Su's view, the aesthetic features of contemporary dark humor reflect a modern variety of humor which grew out of a trend toward absurdity and irony. To be specific, dark humor writers use their stories to utter a bitter and despairing laughter as a means to deal with absurd reality. Commonly used ironic narrative strategies like parody, verbal irony, and cosmic irony only endow these works with a double significance and hence dark humor is a variation of traditional humor in the sense that it challenges and subverts rationality, roots the rational in the irrational, makes comedy tragic, intensifies laughter, and possesses the trait of self-deprecation. Su employs diachronic and synchronic comparison to interpret the tradition of humor and dark humor. With respect to the diachronic change, Su proposes that the traditions of humor originated in US-American colonial literature, continued to develop in some writers of romanticism, realism, naturalism, and modernism and then diversified in twentieth-century literature. In the twentieth century, dark humor evolved into a large literary movement and Su compares dark humor with various other literary traditions in the West and includes contemporary Chinese literature. In Su's opinion, "the aesthetic concepts and creative approaches of dark humor have had a profound impact on many Chinese writers ... [who] created a corpus of dark humor narratives with distinctive Chinese characteristics" (340-41).

In conclusion, Su's work integrates the historiography of US-American literature of humor with an innovative comparative methodology. She employs diachronic and synchronic comparison to cover a wide research range. She also joins cultural perspectives from the East and the West and notices variations within Chinese dark humor literature. This fits well with a comment by Biwu Shang who quotes Anita Starosta and writes that "to be free from Eurocentrism and Western hegemonic discourse, Starosta suggests adding 'a foreign voice in which all criticism and theory speak'" (<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2372>>). Su's work on US-American humor exemplifies "a foreign voice" which ought to initiate a dialogue between Chinese scholars and their colleagues in the West.

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