

A Confederacy of Dunces: Grotesque Incongruity and Societal Criticism

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John Kennedy Toole unleashes a compelling criticism of modern society in the principal work he produced in his short lifetime, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Using masterfully crafted comedy, Toole actually strengthens his disparaging position on the modern world. Boisterously and unabashedly opinionated, Ignatius Reilly, the principal character of this novel, colors the narrative with a poignant humor that simultaneously evokes both laughter and pity from readers. Near the beginning of the story, his mother's financial difficulties suddenly force Ignatius to leave the womb-like security of his bedroom and seek employment, making him abandon his project of writing a scathing description of "the disaster course that history had been taking for the past four centuries" (Toole 41) on childish Big Chief tablets. The action of the novel revolves around Ignatius's experience in society as he bumbles from job to job with his ever-present sense of superiority.

His outward slovenly appearance and the incongruity between his professed beliefs and his actions create in Ignatius the epitome of the modern grotesque hero. Walker Percy wrote: "Toole's greatest achievement is Ignatius Reilly, slob, intellectual, ideologue, deadbeat, goof off, who should repulse the reader with his gargantuan bloats, his thunderous contempt and one-man all out war against all of modern times..." (Samway 345). Using the grotesque to further highlight the satirical conflict that man encounters with modern society, John Kennedy Toole, in *A Confederacy of Dunces*, artfully attacks the economic, religious, and social states of present day America.

The use of such a grotesque principal character sharpens Toole's criticism of the modern world through the conflicts that the grotesque creates within and around Ignatius. A definition of grotesque becomes necessary to fully understand the role that it plays in heightening the novel's satire. In *A Handbook to Literature*, William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman describe grotesque as being "applied to anything having the qualities of *grotesque* art: bizarre, incongruous, ugly, unnatural, fantastic, abnormal...The interest in the *grotesque* is usually considered an outgrowth of interest in the irrational, distrust of any cosmic order, and frustration at humankind's lot in the universe" (240-41). Thus, the grotesque, because of its association with the helpless cynicism of man in his world, is an ideal technique to employ when embarking upon criticism of contemporary society.

However, to most successfully use the grotesque, especially in a humorous work such as Toole's, the author must present a norm from which to deviate, creating a more potent conflict between opposites. Michael Kline elaborates on this in his analysis of *A Confederacy of Dunces*: "...the grotesque cannot be absolute in order to produce humor. While it can be strange, it must also contrast with some attempted unity to which we compare its divergence" (284). Toole understands this rule of effective conflict, and he presents two disparate levels of grotesque in his *A Confederacy of Dunces*. A reader detects the incongruity that exists within Ignatius himself, while also identifying the more observable conflict between Ignatius and modern society.

Although it is readily apparent to a reader, Ignatius is unable to see the conflict within himself. He sees the world around him as his sole antagonist, and rarely "does Ignatius turn the burning lamp of his scrutiny upon himself" (Patteson 80). In actuality, though, it is evident that there is a gross disparity between Ignatius's fervently professed internal beliefs and his external actions. This ironic split in Ignatius was a point of interest for Toole. As his friend Joel Fletcher's

journal indicates, Toole was once captivated during a stroll by a poor woman beating her child because he was playing in the winter cold without a coat. Fletcher writes: "Ken mimicked the Elysian Fields mother braining her child while voicing such concern over his welfare, chuckling to himself, delighted by the comic irony" (qtd. in Palumbo 61). Such gaping inconsistency between word and deed demonstrated by this mother is exactly the type of conflict seen in Ignatius's character. Ignatius considers himself a genius and rationalizes any self-admitted shortcomings by concluding that he is an "anachronism" (Toole 78), truly belonging in his beloved medieval age.

Most of Ignatius's internal beliefs are based on Boethius's work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which Ignatius refers to consistently. Paralleling Boethius's imprisonment and execution caused by his philosophy, Ignatius feels that his contemporary world is persecuting him for beliefs beyond its comprehension. Throughout the novel, however, Ignatius actively contradicts his internal beliefs, and because of these numerous and obvious inconsistencies, "he epitomizes the very perversions against which he rages" (McNeil 35). Ignatius's extreme philosophies are the foundation on which Toole constructs his criticism; because the narrative is from Ignatius's point of view, the reader measures the deviance of Ignatius's actions and the deviance of the other characters relative to his professed beliefs. Toole's description of Ignatius's actions and other characters' commentary serve to highlight the grotesque incongruity that Ignatius exhibits.

The clearest means of grotesque conflict in *A Confederacy of Dunces* is between Ignatius and the other characters in the novel. As Keith D. Miller points out, "two distinct groups of characters are almost immediately discernable: those who seek to impose what they believe to be "higher values" on the rest of society, and those whose aspirations are essentially normal (31).

Ignatius, of course, belongs to the former, and the clash between Ignatius and the latter group of characters creates the second level of comparative incongruity, which fuels the theme of the grotesque. These two levels of grotesque conflict--the internal and societal--strengthen Toole's criticism of modern society. Lloyd M. Daigrepoint writes, "If we find Ignatius grotesque, it is because our perception is influenced by our present age; Ignatius's inability to fit into the modern world points out its shallowness, oppressiveness, and absurdity" (74). Indeed, Toole's use of the grotesque incongruities in the character of Ignatius Reilly enable him to criticize more effectively aspects of contemporary society, namely the economic, religious, and social states of humanity.

The impact of the economic philosophies present in *A Confederacy of Dunces* is significant to Toole's societal criticism; it is money that propels the story's action from the very beginning, forcing Ignatius to abandon his literary project to seek employment. Economic concerns affect nearly every area of Toole's commentary. In his essay Daigrepoint briefly outlines the economic history that is vital to Ignatius's standpoint:

[...]the struggle for social justice and religious reformation[...]facilitated a social and economic revolution in which spiritual concerns were often cast aside or made to accommodate economic goals. Puritans, for example, modified Luther's teaching on the sanctity of the laymen's calling so that the acquisition of wealth became a sign of God's favor, evidence of one's election. (75)

As evident from this passage, economic preoccupation affects the other two areas of Toole's criticism--the religious and social areas of society.

Ignatius's internal philosophy on economics is ascetic; he views the excesses of his contemporaries with unbridled scorn. Despite the conception in modern society that a successful

career is the ultimate fulfillment, Ignatius despises the idea of working, and considers days spent idle in his bedroom more fulfilling than earning money. Ignatius's view on economics resembles Daigrepoint's historical outline; Ignatius believes that the liberation of lower economic classes during the Renaissance and the Reformation resulted in a bourgeois quest for economic advancement in which spiritual concerns degraded into mere materialism. His disgust of the modern obsession with money is apparent when Ignatius writes in one of his journals: "What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale" (40). Ignatius strongly proclaims the superiority of the medieval age, claiming to adhere to that age's tenets.

Ignatius, however, blatantly contradicts his own beliefs through actions. Although he criticizes the trappings of a bourgeois existence, he partakes greedily in them. Ignatius constantly badgers his mother for material possessions, and in an exchange between mother and son when he discovers that she buys alcohol for herself, Ignatius becomes indignant:

"I suggest that you divert some of the monies you are pouring into the liquor industry."

"For shame, Ignatius. A few bottles of Gallo muscatel, and you with all them trinkets."

"Will you please define the meaning of *trinkets*?" Ignatius snapped.

"All them books. That gramophone. That trumpet I bought you last month." (62)

It appears evident that Ignatius indulges in expensive material objects more frequently than his philosophy would allow. His appetite is enormous, as well, and to avoid severe protestation, his mother must pay for his seemingly insatiable hunger. David McNeil expresses the irony of this situation: "Whenever he is not condemning the modern world for its obscene 'excess,' he fattens his already obese body with a steady diet of hot dogs, Dr. Nut (a soft-drink) and bakery cakes"

(35). This behavior of Ignatius is an extremely grotesque deviance from the philosophy he expounds throughout the novel.

Ignatius's professed philosophy on economics also provides the framework with which to analyze the other characters' ideals. There is a grotesque difference between them, which draws attention to Toole's criticism of modern society: "Through Ignatius, Toole satirizes, from the perspective of the ideal of spiritual and social unity of medieval existence, the tawdriness of modern existence as caused by economic obsession" (Daigrepoint 75). Mrs. Reilly and her friend Santa Battaglia are characters whose outlooks sharply contrast with Ignatius's philosophy.

Mrs. Reilly, Irene, is a grotesque example of the desire for the comfort and economic security that accompany financial success, or what she calls, "making good." She is persistently preoccupied with her debt, constantly worrying about paying it off. Repelled by the idea of sex, Irene consents to a relationship with a man her age, Claude Robichaux, only when she learns that he is capable of assuming her debts. Irene Reilly's friend, Santa Battaglia, glorifies her deceased mother who labored endlessly to provide for her children, but who regularly aimed intense violence towards them: "My poor dear momma. The police took her out the Lautenschlaeger Market four times for disturbing the peace" (211). With these two characters, Toole demonstrates the danger of placing so much importance in money; economic hardship is victimizing and causes strain in the forms of obsession and violence. These two characters, Mrs. Reilly and Santa Battaglia, embody the bourgeois preoccupation with money that Ignatius's philosophy condemns.

Another area of modern society at which John Kennedy Toole directs his grotesque criticism is the religious life of present day people. The direction of modern religion is largely determined by society's view of economics, as materialism supercedes spiritual concerns.

Although the characters do not exhibit true religious belief, there does seem to be a religious force guiding the action of the novel, as the chaos and disorder of the concurrent plots are resolved harmoniously at the conclusion by a force of moral order. Pat Gardner identifies this religious force at play and asserts that *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a Christian comedy that ultimately brings redemption to disorder (88).

Although true religious belief is not evident in the novel, it echoes in the extreme religious stance of Ignatius. W. Kenneth Holditch points out that Ignatius "represents a medieval Catholic practicing a religion little altered by the passage of the past five or six hundred years" (119). In one of his journal entries, Ignatius describes the Medieval age as "...a period in which the western world had enjoyed order, tranquility, unity, and oneness with its True God and Trinity" (40). The modern Catholic Church, affected by the Reformation and Enlightenment, is simply not acceptable to Ignatius: "I do not support the current Pope. He does not at all fit my concept of a good, authoritarian Pope. Actually, I am opposed to the relativism of modern Catholicism quite violently" (64). Ignatius has a dramatically extreme stance on religion, a belief that is not mirrored in his behavior.

Although he professes to be an adherent of the medieval Catholic standards, Ignatius's behavior does not indicate a religious disposition of any sort. Michael Patrick Gillespie points out "Catholicism's function as a gauge of the central character's deviant behavior..." (40). A concern of medieval theology that dominated the course of literature and culture was the avoidance of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. According to *A Handbook to Literature*, any one of these sins "entailed spiritual death and could be atoned for only by perfect penitence." It goes on to say, "Pride was the most heinous of the sins because it lead to treachery and disloyalty, as in the case of Satan" (478). Ignatius obviously

embodies five of these seven sins, pride, wrath, sloth, avarice, and gluttony. Ignatius's extreme sense of pride prohibits him from recognizing the other four sins, and he shows no repentance during the course of the novel. Thus, although Ignatius claims to be a representative of the medieval Catholic Church, he would be considered a grotesque sinner by its standards.

Ignatius's professed religious view also contrasts with those beliefs and actions of the other characters. Through Ignatius's religious conflict with society, Toole shows that materialism is the new religion of the modern world, which he further stresses by including descriptions of popular artificial materials such as plastic and cellophane, which the other characters praise (Patteson 81). *A Confederacy of Dunces* contains grotesque examples of obsession with the material, again through the characters of Irene Reilly and Santa Battaglia. These characters, "because [they] define human existence in economic terms, hopelessly seek fulfillment without thinking of any kind of moral order" (Daigrepoint 79). The lower class hopefully invests in plastic contraptions and the rich portrayed in the novel are hopelessly obsessed with narcissistic fads; both groups are seeking fulfillment in shallow materialism.

Irene Reilly claims to have strong ties to the Catholic Church, but her everyday concerns stray far from those of a truly religious individual. She is so preoccupied with enjoying herself in life that she cannot have genuine hope in life in the hereafter: "Mrs. Reilly, whose attachment to the Catholic Church is incongruous with her mania for 'dying halfway decent' and being treated nice by somebody before I die' (312)" (Daigrepoint 77). She speaks these lines to defend her economic interests in her relationship with Claude Robichaux, seeking to enter into the holy union of marriage for monetary purposes. This shallow attitude towards marriage also demonstrates her grotesque vision of religion. Irene Reilly's all-consuming concern with her material possessions in this life has stifled her chances for true religious faith.

Santa Battaglia shows a similar grotesque deviance from the philosophy espoused by Ignatius. Santa boundlessly admires the material pursuit that her mother struggled with in her life, and Santa's obsession with her mother's photograph turns it into an icon before which she brings society for judgment. In a scene at the end of the novel when her son, a policeman, finally makes a legitimate arrest, Santa brings the news to her mother's photograph triumphantly:

Santa Battaglia held the newspaper up to her mother's picture and said, "How you like that, babe? How you like the way your grandson Angelo made good? You like that, darling?" She pointed to another photograph. "How you like poor Irene's crazy boy laying there in the gutter like a washed-up whale? Ain't that sad?" (356)

Santa's irrational behavior here demonstrates her belief in her mother's judgment from the dead, elevating her to the status of a god to which she constantly appeals for advice and support.

Santa Battaglia and Irene Reilly's religions are shallow means of salvation, for the two women do not adhere to the true beliefs of the Catholic Church. Ignatius's behavior is no better, as his actions sharply contradict his own strongly pronounced religious beliefs. These two groups of characters create the grotesque contrast between true religious faith and the modern world. There is an extreme difference between the characters' actions and the medieval religious view that Ignatius constantly voices. Toole denounces both extremes in his religious criticism, and his commentary implies that an ideal religious viewpoint exists between the two where there is an equal correspondence between word and deed.

Toole's social criticism in *A Confederacy of Dunces* branches from his religious and economic criticisms. Socially, the novel depicts several different kinds of social attitudes, from the intimate bond of low-class friends, to the frosty marriage of a rich couple, to the radical views of a homosexual. All of the various perspectives contrast each other, but the most

important grotesque comparison still resides in the character of Ignatius. This social area of criticism relies more heavily on the grotesque disparity evident between Ignatius's philosophies and his actions than the contrast between him and the other characters.

Ignatius spews forth bitter social criticism throughout the novel, demonstrating his reactionary philosophy in an age of moral relativism. One group of people at which Ignatius routinely directs his scathing contempt is the teenagers who appear on a televised dance show. Watching the program daily, Ignatius bitterly cries out, "The ironic thing about that program... is that it is supposed to be an *exemplum* to the youth of our nation. I would like very much to know what the Founding Fathers would say if they could see these children being debauched to further the cause of Clearasil" (54). Ignatius does nothing to hide his disgust for the rampant social corruption and indiscriminate sexuality that he sees all around him, although he never makes his specific social views clear.

Ignatius contradicts his social superiority consistently. Hugh Ruppensburg writes: "Ignatius, acting on the premise of his own moral superiority, is just the opposite. Moreover, he usually fails to recognize the corruption which confronts him, perhaps because he is more corrupt than most of his intended victims" (119). Rather than being a mature, rational critic of the world around him, Ignatius constantly exhibits his immaturity. Ignatius is more of a child figure than any of the other characters in the book with his temper tantrums, his dependency on his mother, and his fear of sexuality. As William Bedford Clark writes, the central concern of the novel is the corruption of childish innocence, as the grotesque character of Ignatius embodies child-like qualities (269). Grotesque childish perversion is rampant in Ignatius's personality; one of the most startling examples is the scene early in the novel where Ignatius masturbates to the memory of his childhood dog, Rex.

While satirizing modern society, Toole also condemns the hypocrisy and extremity of Ignatius's criticisms of his fellow humans: "In Ignatius, Toole expresses how indictment or censure, if strong enough, can easily escalate into violence and perversion" (McNeil 37). Many critics assert that this harsh censure is not representative of Ignatius's true beliefs, but that he formulates these philosophies to mask his fear of the adult world of independence, sexuality, and economic competition. Ignatius's character is the central symbol of grotesque social criticism, as Toole creates in him a hypocritical vision of modern man. Ignatius is so socially skewed that he cannot recognize his true self.

Ignatius is the central force behind Toole's extensive criticism of modern society, and the grotesque incorporated into Ignatius's character enhances this criticism. Hugh Ruppersburg writes, "...[Ignatius] is so out-of-touch with nature and reality that he will never become the artist or philosopher or social reformer he envisions himself to be. He is the essence of modern man--disembodied, alienated, deluded, spiritually disenfranchised, fundamentally absurd" (124). Indeed, the gross difference between Ignatius's thoughts and actions and between his thoughts and modern society's views create an absolutely grotesque character who, through a reader's sympathy and scorn, carries the message of Toole's novel.

Through his use of the grotesque, Toole asserts that Ignatius is not simply a repellent slob used to evoke laughter, but that he is the universal symbol for modern man. The incongruity that Ignatius represents in comparison to those around him echo the individuality of contemporary man, but it is the other level of disparate grotesque which most touchingly reveals the state of modern man. Ignatius's inability to recognize his own hypocrisy and to unify his inner life point to the extreme alienation that plagues present-day America. Toole suggests that humans today feel so removed from their true self--as convoluted economic, religious, and social standards

strip them of integrity--that they not only lose touch with their fellow man, but also sadly lose touch with themselves.

Toole does not expressly suggest any means by which modern man may achieve redemption, but his view becomes evident through studying the characters whom he chooses to make grotesque. Two types of characters exist in *A Confederacy of Dunces*--those whose actions do not correspond to their relatively sound beliefs, and those whose beliefs do not mirror the upright image they project through their actions. Ignatius belongs to the former group, and Irene Reilly and Santa Battaglia to the latter. From this vantage, it becomes obvious that Toole is criticizing the hypocrisy of modern man, but his condemnation is not one without hope for correction.

The grotesque that Toole employs lends a modern and hopeful feel to the traditional literary device of satire. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holmon write, "Where nineteenth-century critics like Walter Bagenot saw the grotesque as a deplorable variation from the normal, Thomas Mann sees it as the 'most genuine style' for the modern world and the 'only guise in which the sublime may appear' now" (240). Ignatius becomes the "'guise'" through which Toole's "'sublime'" message is communicated. When reduced from an extreme form, Ignatius's philosophies represent sound criticisms of society; Toole uses the grotesque to magnify his own criticism. John Kennedy Toole's sound criticism resides in the person of Ignatius, making him an essential vehicle for correction. Thus, Ignatius Reilly is not the embodiment of hopeless human fault; rather, Ignatius Reilly, rowdy and revolting, represents a vessel of salvation to the insincere spirit of modern man.

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