

Humorous Devices in Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse's Prose: A Thesis Outline

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Pelham Grenville Wodehouse is rightfully considered one of the most prolific comedic writers of 20th English literature. His style of prose grounded on situational character confrontation, and features a calm, sharp, laconic, often sarcastic style of dialogue, was incredibly influential in shaping the modern perception of 'British humor.'¹ Wodehouse's influence was not only cultivated directly through writers who admired him as a major source of inspiration (the list of prominent cases includes Dorothy L. Sayers, Jerome K. Jerome, Douglas Adams, Terry Pratchett, etc²), but he also directly influenced the birth of the British TV sitcom genre of the 1940s and is still influencing the genre through recent adaptations of *Jeeves and Wooster*.³ Considering this evolution of reception of Wodehouse's corpus of writing, it is both expected and felicitous that it is his remarkable style of writing that was both recognized as the most prominent feature of his prose during his life, and which continues to influence the world of comedy today.

In this thesis, Wodehouse's humor will be analyzed in its textual complexity as an element of a structural description of a situation, a tool of persuasion, and a feature literary style. This literary complexity and interaction between the different contexts of functional usage of humor must be accounted for in order to approach both an analysis of unique stylistic features of an author's writing style and a determination of paradigm-defining tropes, structural elements, and stylistic features for further analysis of an author's influence in literary history.⁴ The general goal of this holistically analytical approach to Wodehouse's prose, as evident from the

¹ Macdonald, Kate, and Ann-Marie Einhaus. "Comic short fiction and its variety." In *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story*, 145-58. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

² Knox, Monsignor Ronald. "Continuing the Tradition." *Jolly Good Detecting: Humor in English Crime Fiction of the Golden Age* (2013): 237-262.

³ Thompson, Kristin. *Storytelling in film and television*. Harvard University Press, 2003: 64-70.

⁴ Leech, Geoffrey N., and Mick Short. *Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*. Pearson Education, 2007.

methodological description alone, is to dissect this author's remarkable and overly influential style of humor and to explore its further role in modern comedy.

The aforementioned presumptions on Wodehouse's stylistic features and their prominent influence in the contemporary realm of situational comedy is based on literary research studies on Wodehouse's style of humor. Firstly, historians of comedy assume Wodehouse as arguably the most influential writer in the realm of aristocratic social satire of early twentieth-century Britain, as well as in socially based satire that centers around the situation of class value collisions in general.⁵ Among significant stylistic features advanced by Wodehouse in an influential manner are such features as wordplay based on social divergence in the semantic usage of words and phrases,⁶ disagreement-based situational comedy,⁷ and the implementation of dialogue dynamics as a driving tool of comedic effect.⁸ This list, however, is constantly expanding due to the permanent advancement in studies in both writing stylistics and the history of literature.

In particular, an influential direction in Wodehouse studies was set up by Holcomb, who noticed an influence the Mark Twain and P. J. Wodehouse played in the development of the early twentieth-century approach to 'nodal humor'—the usage of joke-like structures rather than actual jokes in order to build up and advance the comedic effect.⁹ Another instance of a refreshing look at Wodehouse's prose comes from a theory of argumentation and persuasive rhetoric, as Ponton notes that humor in Wodehouse's prose, especially in *Jeeves and Wooster*, is often based on the structure of persuasion. Characters often use implicit premises of inductive reasoning and social-

⁵ Colletta, Lisa. *Dark Humour and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel: Triumph of Narcissism*. Springer, 2003: 32-34; Mooneyham, Laura. "Comedy among the modernists: PG Wodehouse and the anachronism of comic form." *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, no. 1 (1994): 114-138.

⁶ Bowen, Barbara C. "PG Wodehouse Linguist?" *Plum Lines* 31, no. 2 (2007): 131-134.

⁷ Knox, Monsignor Ronald. "Continuing the Tradition." *Jolly Good Detecting: Humor in English Crime Fiction of the Golden Age* (2013): 240-241.

⁸ Ponton, Douglas Mark. "Persuasive farce. Dialogical pragmatics in the novels of PG Wodehouse." *Lingue e Linguaggi* 23 (2017): 195-209.

⁹ Holcomb, Christopher. "Nodal humor in comic narrative: a semantic analysis of two stories by Twain and Wodehouse." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 5, no. 3 (1992): 233-250.

class-related pathos in order to reach farce-like conclusions.¹⁰ The last example of recently acknowledged influential features of Wodehouse's prose is the creative usage of anachronisms and regional divergence in characters' personal phraseology as markers of social progress and a divergence in their value systems.¹¹ All these explorations appear to be dedicated to a distinct phenomenon, predicated on drastically different approaches towards methodology, and concerned with different areas of interests. What unites them is a relation between the functions of a character in their various dimensions (narrative situation, linguistics, etc.) and their contextual possession of values, social habits, and identities that define the characters' personalities.

This thesis, thus, will be concentrated on the issue of humor's usage as a stylistic device of expression of contextual values and identities attached to individual characters. Using the distinction between traditional humor ('jokes') and nodal humor ('joke-like structures') as two means of expression of humorous language and plot tropes, it reveals that Wodehouse used humor both to advance a plot in a way that leads to situations where values and identities are juxtaposed in the most creative manner. Within these situations, he employed linguistic misunderstandings, unexpected argumentative strategies, and minimalistic stylistic choices charged with such tools as sarcasm, irony, and satire in order to explore and illustrate social conflicts primarily through a framework of dialogue. Along with this, both sarcastic and satirical elements of humor are expressed both through character dialogue (thus being related to the portrayed character personalities, and making sarcasm and satire serve both as an amusement and as a character exploration medium) and through the author's perspective—mainly via

¹⁰ Ponton, Douglas Mark. "Persuasive farce. Dialogical pragmatics in the novels of PG Wodehouse." *Lingue e Linguaggi* 23 (2017): 195-209.

¹¹ Mooneyham, Laura. "Comedy among the modernists: PG Wodehouse and the anachronism of comic form." *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, no. 1 (1994): 114-138.

paradoxical and comedic narrative situations. This type of overlay and interaction between the character's and the author's sense of sarcasm—that often mismatch—turns out to be one of the main discoveries of Wodehouse as a narrator.

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