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Humanities

12/13/2024

### Satirizing Edwardian Society: Suffragettes Start a “No-Votes-for-Women League”

Often, thoughts of Victorian and Edwardian society conjure images of large ballgowns, opulence, and perhaps even notable authors of the time. H. H. Munro, who went by the pen name Saki, wrote several short stories and pieces of literature in the late 19th century, mainly criticizing and satirizing Edwardian society and culture. In one such collection of stories, he wrote *Hermann the Irascible*, where Hermann is the king of England who makes it mandatory for women to vote in all elections. This includes political elections like parliament and different councils. Still, the king also makes several offices elective like teachers, churchwardens, art-school teachers, coroners, and several other jobs in the community. The consequence of not voting in any of these elections is a 10-pound fine, and voting is still optional for male voters. This, in the story, effectively results in women not wanting the right to vote anymore because they are being forced to take a lot of time out of their schedules to vote for inconsequential positions, lest they receive the fine; even the wealthy cannot afford accumulations of this fine if they want to go on vacation. In *Hermann the Irascible*, Munro uses irony, *reductio ad absurdum*, and hyperbole to critique societal attitudes toward women’s rights and political change. These satirical devices characterize a society that conforms to outdated patriarchal norms while also exposing the absurdity and fragility of male-dominated power structures.

The story starts by introducing, in the government’s eyes, the “problem” of women wanting the right to vote. During a conversation with the King, the Prime Minister complains

about the suffragettes, who he calls “votes-for-women creatures”(Munroe 1), disrupting meetings and daily life by protesting and turning Downing Street into a “political picnic ground”(Munroe 1). The trivialization of serious protests as a picnic is ironic because it goes to show the dismissive attitude of men in power and shows how they do not take the suffragettes seriously. This is further exemplified by the fact that the Prime Minister calls the suffragettes “creatures”(Munroe 1), which just serves to dehumanize them and portray their cause as something unreasonable. The King responds with an absurd solution to this problem, drafting a bill that mandates women to vote in “elections for Parliament... school inspectors, churchwardens... swimming-bath instructors”(Munroe 1) and a comically long list of other offices. The absurdity of forcing participation in trivial and excessive elections highlights the lengths to which the male-dominated government will go to undermine women’s rights and helps to satirize this aspect of their thinking. This strategy of overwhelming women with excessive electoral responsibilities mocks the idea of meaningful and honest political engagement, suggesting that the government views any form of inclusion as adequate—regardless of significance. The list serves as a deflection from genuine reform; instead of addressing the need for equality in spheres of governance, the King’s bill emphasizes irrelevant positions to make it appear as though progress is being made. This tactic exposes the underlying intent to maintain control and credibility without facilitating true empowerment for women. Furthermore, the King is described as “the most progressive monarch”(Munroe 1) who legislates so fast that “before people knew where they were, they were somewhere else.” This irony emphasizes that his form of progress is regressive and serves to control, not liberate, women. He seeks to stop the protests not by actually drafting legislation that may help women or other marginalized groups but by thinking of a somewhat twisted way to force them to stop protesting out of fear of more absurd

legislation being passed. Ultimately, this satirical portrayal of the government's response to the suffragette movement highlights the ridiculous lengths to which those in power will go to maintain the status quo.

As the story continues, it exaggerates the impact of the law, as “there seemed no end to the elections”(Munroe 1). Women from all social classes—laundresses, clerks, and society women—are portrayed as burdened by the continuous need to vote, which “impeded and upset” their lives (Munroe 1). The irony lies in how the right they fought for is turned into a punishment. What the suffragettes once desired so much has been reduced to something that is now, instead of giving them more rights, is forced and taking away their freedom. The situation has escalated to ridiculous proportions, where even weekend vacations become “a masculine luxury”(Munroe 1) because women have so many voting responsibilities, lest they incur fines. Additionally, wealthy women are now unable to vacation in Cairo and the Riviera due to the fines that come with not voting for the extended number of positions in the community. The exaggeration highlights the absurdity of the law, which is shown in the lengths to which the government goes to discourage women from voting. Similarly, in contrast to these oppressive measures, a women-led movement has emerged, but it reduces the previous movement to absurdity by working against gender equality. The emergence of this movement, against their own gender rights, symbolized by the battle hymn “We Don’t Want to Vote” (Munroe 2), is a satirical reversal of suffrage activism. This irony shows how oppressive systems and the people in power manipulate desires for change into forms of self-oppression.

As the government continues to adhere to its policies, many women organize the Great Weep, which involves “relays of women, ten thousand at a time” (Munroe 2) crying publicly, even in places like “the National Gallery”(Munroe 2) and “Prince’s”(Munroe 2). The hyperbolic

imagery of women weeping everywhere reduces their legitimate grievances to a spectacle, further showing how their struggle is perceived as emotional and irrational. The Prime Minister, frustrated with the number of women weeping across the country, asks the king what to do, and he responds, “‘There is a time for everything,’ said the King; ‘there is a time to yield. Pass a measure [...] depriving women of the right to vote,’” (Munroe 2). The king talks of yielding, but what that does is show the twisted way in which he views the whole situation. The ironic thing is that the government or the king did not yield throughout the story, as their goal was just to enact such extreme measures to force women to yield and take back their earlier sentiments of wanting the right to vote. This illustrates how the people in power at the time viewed women’s rights as a nuisance to be dealt with and not something to care about or view as important. The government enacts extreme measures to coerce women into renouncing their rights. They get what they want in the end, as the King’s “profound chuckle” (Munroe 2) and his words, “There are more ways of killing a cat than by choking it with cream” (Munroe 2) relate to his manipulative satisfaction. In general, this demonstrates the fragility of male power when challenged and the King’s need for control. The satire critiques patriarchal authority by showing that the façade of yielding or progressiveness is just a ploy to maintain male dominance, driven by the underlying fear of women’s political participation.

Throughout the satire, Munroe consistently uses hyperbolic language, imagery, and irony, reducing the activists' genuine concerns and struggles to absurdity through reversal. He ends on a rather sinister note, where the King exposes his intentions more clearly, really making the reader question the governance and intentions of the people in power.

Works Cited:

Hector Hugh Munroe. *The Chronicles of Clovis*. 1911, pp. 29–31.

Hermann the Irascible.