OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Inequality and Its Rhetorical Subversions: Satirical Monologue, Parody, and Narrative in Ancient Rome and the Antebellum South

Matthew J. Yoon
mjyoon0628@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how satire represented the boundaries between slavery and freedom in ancient Rome and the antebellum American South. Drawing on Gilbert Highet's distinction among satirical monologue, parody, and narrative, it compares Juvenal's *Satire 3* with Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"; Horace's *Satires 2.8* with the African American tradition of the cakewalk; and Petronius's *Cena Trimalchionis* with William Wells Brown's *Clotel*. Through close analysis of these six texts and traditions, the paper identifies recurring rhetorical devices, including anaphora, the imitation of established cultural forms, and irony arising from the difference between what characters claim and what their actions reveal, while considering these similarities alongside the distinct historical circumstances in which the works were produced.

The comparison shows that similar rhetorical techniques could serve different social purposes. Roman satire frequently draws its humor from anxieties surrounding social mobility and the pretensions of those seeking elite status. Yet these works also turn irony back on their own speakers and observers, complicating any reading of them as straightforward defenses of privilege. By contrast, African American oratory, fiction, and performance use satire to expose the contradictions of a slaveholding society and challenge the authority of those who sustained it. For enslaved performers and formerly enslaved writers, indirect criticism could also challenge dominant institutions when open opposition risked punishment. The paper argues that Highet's framework is useful for comparing the formal strategies of these traditions, but that understanding their purposes requires attention to the social position of their authors, their audiences, and the unequal conditions under which satire was produced.

INTRODUCTION

Satire has long flourished in societies marked by sharp social inequality. Classicist Gilbert Highet, in *The Anatomy of Satire*, divides literary satire into three forms: monologue, parody, and narrative (Highet 3). Though Highet developed this typology largely from the works of Roman poets such as Horace and Juvenal, it can be applied, with appropriate caution, to satire produced in other societies structured by unequal laws and institutions.

In both ancient Rome and the antebellum American South, coerced labor was fundamental to the economy, and the boundaries between the enslaved, the formerly enslaved, and the freeborn were a recurring source of tension. In *The Mind of the Slave*, Nicole J. Giannella notes that the legal and cultural nature of Roman slavery meant that enslaved people were treated both "as property and as human beings under the law of the Roman world" (Giannella 12). Manumission was comparatively common in Rome, and the freed slaves of Roman citizens normally became citizens themselves, although they remained bound to their former owners by obligations of patronage and were excluded from public office (Mouritsen). In the antebellum South, by contrast, slavery was hereditary and racialized, state laws increasingly restricted manumission, and free Black people faced legal disabilities that marked them as permanent outsiders. These differences matter for the comparison that follows. The Roman texts examined here were written by, and largely for, members of a literate free elite; the African American texts and practices were produced by people who had themselves been enslaved, or who remained so.

This paper examines how Roman satirists and enslaved and formerly enslaved African Americans used the three modes of satire outlined by Highet to represent, and to defend or contest, the boundaries between slavery and freedom. It first analyzes the satirical monologue, juxtaposing Umbricius's resentment of foreign-born rivals in Juvenal's *Satire 3* with Frederick Douglass's 1852 oration "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" The second section looks at parody, comparing Horace's mock-heroic dinner-party satire with the African American tradition of mimicry known as the cakewalk. The third section explores the narrative strand of satire, contrasting the cultural pretensions of the nouveau riche freedman in the Cena Trimalchionis section of Petronius's *Satyricon* with William Wells Brown's *Clotel*. The argument is twofold. First, the paired texts share a number of rhetorical devices: a speaker who claims reluctant authority, anaphora and accumulation, the mock-imitation of elite forms, and an ironic gap between what characters claim and what they reveal. These are shared techniques rather than identical structures, and the paper does not claim that the two traditions developed them independently, since Douglass and Brown were both steeped in a rhetorical culture shaped by classical models. Second, similar techniques served different social purposes. The Roman texts, written from within the free literate class, draw much of their humor from the anxieties that social mobility provoked in that class, although each also turns its irony on its own speakers and observers. The African American texts and performances direct their satire against the slaveholding order itself.

The six examples were chosen because each pair corresponds to one of Highet's three modes and because in each case the satire takes as its subject the boundary between enslaved and free, or between those who hold social standing and those who seek it. Highet's categories are used here as a heuristic for comparison rather than as a set of conditions that a text must satisfy. They are useful because they direct attention to how satire is built (who speaks, what is imitated, how a story is arranged) and so allow texts from very different settings to be read side by side. They also have limits. Highet's typology is formalist and grounded in the classical canon; it says little about the social position of satirists and their audiences, and it was not designed for oral or embodied forms such as the cakewalk, for which the surviving evidence is largely retrospective. The stages of the monologue and the elements of narrative described below are therefore this paper's synthesis of Highet's discussion rather than a checklist that he provides.

The paper also asks what satire did for those who produced and consumed it, and here a distinction is needed, because the word "survival" can describe quite different functions. In this paper it is used in three senses. *Psychological* survival refers to the relief or sense of coherence that voicing indignation may give a speaker or audience; this is a proposed effect, which the texts can suggest but cannot demonstrate. *Social* survival refers to the maintenance of a group's status, identity, or sense of its own boundaries; in the Roman cases, the more accurate term is status maintenance, since the authors and their readers faced no threat to their lives. *Literal* survival refers to the ability to voice critique without incurring violent reprisal, through what James C. Scott calls the "hidden transcript" of subordinate groups, expressed out of sight of the dominant or in disguised forms they fail to recognize (Scott). Only the antebellum cases involve survival in this last sense. Throughout, the paper distinguishes what the texts themselves show, such as their rhetorical structures and their speakers' stated grievances, from the psychological or social effects they may have had, which would require evidence about reception that is often unavailable.

ELEMENTS OF THE SATIRICAL MONOLOGUE

Gilbert Highet attributes the root of the literary monologue to the Greek "diatribe" (διατριβή). Associated with Bion of Borysthenes and other Cynic preachers, the diatribe is characterized by informal and aggressive moralizing, often with the purpose of exposing corruption in society (Highet 14–18). Drawing on Highet's discussion, this paper identifies three recurring stages in the satirical monologue, which need not occur in a fixed order. In the first, the speaker builds trust with the audience by asserting his or her reluctance to complain, even though the speech later becomes openly partisan and aggressive. In the second, having claimed moral authority, the speaker sets aside whatever frame introduced the speech (a fictional scene in poetry, or the expected script of a formal occasion in oratory) and addresses the audience directly. In the third, the speaker abandons formal restraint in an outburst of emotion. The conversational, focused structure of the monologue is used to express the speaker's growing indignation at society's flaws and corruption.

Both Juvenal's Satire 3 and Frederick Douglass's speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" display these stages. This section examines the rhetorical strategies of each text and then considers what social function each monologue served.

Juvenal's *Satire 3*

The Roman poet Decimus Junius Juvenalis, known in English as Juvenal, wrote sixteen satires, collected in five books, in the early second century CE under Trajan and Hadrian. Little reliable information about his life survives, and scholars have cautioned against reconstructing his social position from the angry voices of the poems (Anderson). In *Satire 3*, from Book I, Juvenal uses a brief narrative frame to introduce a long monologue spoken not by the poet but by his friend Umbricius. The distinction matters. William S. Anderson and Susanna Morton Braund have argued that Juvenal's indignant speakers are personae, constructed characters whose anger is itself on display and at times held up to ridicule, rather

than direct expressions of the poet's own views (Anderson; Braund). The monologue can therefore be read as dramatizing the grievances of a displaced client in a society where slavery and manumission were established institutions, without assuming that Juvenal shared those grievances wholesale.

The setting is the Porta Capena, the gate through which the Appian Way left Rome, where Umbricius waits while his household is loaded onto a single cart for his move to Cumae (Juvenal 3.10–11). By placing the speaker at the gate to deliver a farewell speech, Juvenal all but suspends narrative development in favor of diatribe. Umbricius's speech does not advance a plot; after the brief frame, the poem consists almost entirely of his complaints, addressed directly to his listener (Highet 16). The poem thus displays the second stage described above, in which the speaker sets aside the introductory frame in order to address the audience directly.

Umbricius then establishes trust with his listener by presenting himself as a reluctant complainant. Rather than positioning himself as a rebel, he portrays himself as an honest, hard-working citizen forced to speak by the loss of status he has suffered. He states that "there is no place in the city for honest talents, no reward for hard work" (*honestis nullus in urbe locus, nulla emolumenta laborum*, Juvenal 3.21–22). By suggesting that his monologue is fueled by genuine desperation, Umbricius grants himself the moral authority to deliver a corrosive attack on the status quo. Juvenal's use of anaphora and the parallel structure of *nullus* and *nulla* in this section show the poet borrowing the elevated devices of formal oratory for satirical ends. Yet Umbricius's claim to honesty is itself open to question. As Braund notes, he is a failed client whose complaints reveal his dependence on the patronage system he condemns, and whose idealized picture of old Rome is undercut by the poem's exaggerations (Braund).

Now assuming the authority of a betrayed citizen, Umbricius laments: "I cannot bear, citizens, a Greek Rome" (*non possum ferre, Quirites, / Graecam urbem*, Juvenal 3.60–61). *Quirites*, in the vocative case, was the traditional term for Roman citizens in their civic capacity, used when addressing the assembled people. Umbricius thus speaks as though addressing a public meeting of the citizen body, a pose that lends his private grievance the dignity of a public cause. The vocative does not, however, identify Juvenal's actual readership. Umbricius's complaints are those of a poor client, but the poem's readers had to be literate and familiar with Greek and Latin literature, and they are more plausibly located among the educated and propertied classes than among the urban poor (Braund; Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*). For such readers, the address may have carried an ironic charge: the grand appeal to the citizen body comes from a man whose real complaint is that he has lost out to rivals for the favor of wealthy patrons. By Juvenal's time, moreover, the popular assemblies had long since lost any real political role, so the appeal to the *Quirites* invokes a civic voice that no longer existed under the Principate. The anger behind the monologue is directed at the success of foreign-born newcomers, many of them of servile origin.

Umbricius's lament then moves into metaphor: the Syrian river Orontes, he says, has long since flowed into the Tiber, bringing with it the language, customs, and people of the East (Juvenal 3.62–65). Some of these newcomers had entered Rome as slaves and later been freed; others were free immigrants. Umbricius does not distinguish carefully between them, and his rhetoric merges foreign birth and servile

origin into a single object of contempt. In Roman law, the line between enslaved and free was sharp (Giannella 45); in practice, however, the commercial life of the capital allowed some freed slaves to accumulate considerable wealth, and many remained attached to their former owners' households as clients and agents (Mouritsen). Umbricius's particular complaint is that wealthy patrons now favor these newcomers over freeborn clients like himself.

Umbricius's diatribe gains force as his complaint adopts loftier language: "Shall that man sign his name before me? Shall he recline propped on a better couch, he who was brought to Rome by the same wind that brought the prunes and the figs?" (*me prior ille signabit? Fultusque toro meliore recumbet, advectus Romam quo pruna et cottana vento?*, Juvenal 3.81–83). The phrase "*advectus Romam*" (brought to Rome) likens the newcomer to an imported commodity carried in on the same trade winds as dried fruit, and it may allude to arrival through the slave trade. To justify his outrage, Umbricius presents these Greek rivals as flatterers who use a talent for performance to manipulate elite households: "If you laugh, he shakes with a louder guffaw; he weeps if he sees a friend's tears, though he feels no grief" (*rides, maiore cachinno concutitur, flet, si lacrimas conspexit amici, nec dolet*, Juvenal 3.100–102). The charge rests on a stereotype, since the Greeks are, in Umbricius's phrase, "a nation of actors" (*natio comoeda*, 3.100), and its exaggeration invites the reader to notice Umbricius's own jealousy.

Ultimately, Umbricius claims that even the most intimate domestic spaces are no longer safe from these intruders, exclaiming with unrestrained xenophobia that "nothing is safe from their groin" (*sanctum nihil aut ab inguine tutum*, Juvenal 3.109). By setting aside narrative in favor of an extended speech, Juvenal presents in stark form the tensions of a society in which people of foreign and servile origin could rise in wealth and favor. What the poem demonstrates is the rhetoric of a resentful speaker; whether it endorses that resentment is a separate question. The monologue gives forceful voice to the indignation of a displaced freeborn client, but its hyperbole, its self-pity, and the speaker's retreat from the city all leave room for readers to laugh at Umbricius as well as with him.

Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

Similar to Juvenal's poem, Frederick Douglass's 1852 oration "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" displays the stages of the satirical monologue described above. Douglass delivered the speech on July 5, 1852, at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, at the invitation of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society (Colaiaco), and he begins by establishing rapport in order to build moral authority (Highet 14). He frames his remarks around shared American foundational values, addressing his listeners as "Friends and Fellow Citizens." The repetition of the possessive second-person determiner "your" should also be noted in his mention of "the birthday of your National Independence … your political freedom." Rather than immediately attacking the assembly, Douglass displays his patriotic reverence. He then proceeds to praise the founding fathers, stating that "the signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men" who "loved their country better than their own private interests." His declaration that "for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory" is carefully

qualified: Douglass honors the good the founders did and the principles they professed, leaving room for the gap between those principles and the slavery that many of the signers themselves practiced. Though the arguments move in opposite directions, Douglass's opening has much in common with Umbricius's speech at the Porta Capena. Both speakers first align themselves with an idealized civic tradition and so establish a moral right to judge the present.

Douglass reaches the second stage when he sets aside the script expected of an Independence Day oration. Unlike Juvenal's poem, the speech has no fictional plot to abandon; what Douglass abandons is the conventional arc of celebration and praise that his audience expected. He breaks it by turning on his listeners with a direct question: "Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?" He reaches the third stage by rejecting formal argument and delivering a series of indignant statements instead (Highet 17–18). Declaring that the basic humanity and rights of the enslaved require no academic proof, he says, "Must I argue that a system marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is wrong? No! I will not." Rather than offering a structured legal defense, Douglass turns to sarcasm (a rhetorical tool closely aligned with satire), saying that "scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed."

The historical context of 1852 and the position of the audience at Corinthian Hall are essential to understanding the function of Douglass's monologue. Speaking two years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Douglass was addressing a Northern antislavery audience, many of whom may well have regarded themselves as morally distinct from Southern slaveholders (Blight; Colaiaco). Douglass uses his position as speaker to challenge this sense of distance and to force his audience to confront their complicity in slavery.

In 1850, the legal seizure of slaves was no longer confined to the South. Federal law now required citizens of the free states, when summoned, to assist in the capture of fugitives, thereby making the North an active participant in enforcement. As noted above, Douglass begins his oratory by calling his audience members "Fellow Citizens"; however, he then turns the spotlight away from himself, stating, "This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn," as he urges the audience to confront the brutal nature of slavery. Their celebration of "political freedom," he is saying, is an illusion; this is because the federal law itself tethers their communities directly to the continued depredations of the institution of slavery. Citing the disparity in slave codes, Douglass observes that "there are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man … subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment."

Like Juvenal, Douglass uses irony, anaphora, historical allusion, metaphor, and elevated language to fashion his satirical monologue; unlike Umbricius, however, he aims not to defend the exclusion of outsiders but to achieve equality. To counter the political authority of the slaveholding class, he brings the physical realities of the domestic slave trade into the lecture hall through descriptions of markets that buy and sell human beings. He exhorts the audience to observe the internal trade, saying, "behold the practical operation of this internal slave trade … mark the sad procession, as it moves wearily along … see the old man, with locks thinned and gray." This focus on the reduction of human beings to property recalls Umbricius's image of the newcomer carried into Rome like merchandise ("*advectus Romam*," Juvenal

3.82), though the two images serve opposite ends: Umbricius uses it to degrade a rival, Douglass to indict the trade. Douglass further employs anaphora to build the momentum of the diatribe, directly subverting the civic rhetoric of the audience. He states: "to him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license … your national greatness … your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless." The repetition of the possessive determiner "your" turns the rhetoric toward the audience members, forcing them to accept their role in the moral failures of the nation.

Juxtaposition: Shared Devices, Divergent Purposes

Juvenal's *Satire 3* and Douglass's speech both use the satirical monologue to address societies in which human beings were treated as property. Both employ devices that Highet associates with the form: a movement from initial modesty to an outburst of indignation, anaphora and parallel structure, and historical allusion (Highet 14–18). Neither speaker holds legislative power. Umbricius is a fictional client without influence, and Douglass, who held no office, spoke as a formerly enslaved man whose freedom had been purchased by British supporters only six years earlier. For both, the monologue serves as a substitute for direct political action. Whether either monologue offered psychological relief to its audience is harder to establish: the texts dramatize indignation, but they do not by themselves show what that indignation did for those who heard or read it.

Though the similarities are evident, the two monologues differ fundamentally in their stance toward slavery and its boundaries. In *Satire 3*, Umbricius uses anaphora and historical allusion to voice the anxieties of a freeborn client displaced by the success of foreigners and former slaves. His satire opposes the wealth and social mobility of foreign-born newcomers, including those who have left behind their legal status as property, and presents them as an invasive threat to the economic security of freeborn citizens like himself. It is less clear that Juvenal shares this view. Read as a persona, Umbricius is both the voice of a familiar Roman prejudice and its object: the poem invites its educated readers to enjoy the energy of his invective while also recognizing his self-pity and his dependence on the patrons he criticizes (Braund; Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*). If the monologue helps to preserve a social structure, then it does so ambiguously, by giving voice to a resentment that the poem may also hold at arm's length.

In contrast, Douglass uses his speech to challenge the legitimacy of the social hierarchy itself. He seeks to overturn the status quo rather than preserve it. Umbricius opposes the blurring of the boundary between slave and citizen; Douglass opposes the existence of the boundary itself. While Umbricius depicts socially mobile newcomers, some of them freedmen, who have prospered despite their origins, Douglass describes the systematic violence inflicted on enslaved people, highlighting the racial inequality that was a hallmark of nineteenth-century America.

Ultimately, Juvenal and Douglass draw on many of the same conventions of the monologue, but they put them to markedly different uses. Umbricius uses the monologue to defend his own status and to lament the loss of privilege to rising newcomers, while Juvenal's framing leaves open how far readers should

share his complaint. Douglass uses the monologue to oppose an unjust social structure, turning a traditional rhetorical form into a mirror that forces a slaveholding nation to confront its own hypocrisy even as it celebrates its independence.

ELEMENTS OF THE SATIRICAL PARODY

Gilbert Highet identifies parody as the second primary mode of literary satire, defining it as the deliberate imitation of a standard, recognized form in order to expose its contradictions or moral failures (Highet 67–69). Highet's parody depends on three conditions: the imitation of a recognizable form, the distortion of that form, and an audience capable of recognizing the distortion.

The diatribe attacks openly, through an accumulation of grievances. Parody operates more obliquely: it imitates its target closely enough to remain recognizable while distorting it from within. Rather than listing their grievances against an institution, parodists inhabit the institution's language and conventions so thoroughly that the gap between the form's claims and the reality it conceals becomes unmistakable. In this way, parody is at once an act of imitation and an act of subversion. Its effectiveness depends on the audience's familiarity with the original form; its satirical force comes from the recognition of distortion.

This section looks at Horace's *Satires 2.8*, commonly referred to as the dinner-party satire of Nasidienus, and the tradition of performative mimicry known as the cakewalk, which developed among enslaved African Americans in the antebellum South. Both satisfy Highet's conditions of satirical parody, but they did very different social work. For Horace and his readers, parody was a means of comic social discrimination among the free and the comfortable; for enslaved performers, it was a way to voice critique in conditions where open critique could be met with violence.

Horace's *Satires 2.8* and the Parody of Elite Conviviality

Horace (65–8 BCE), best known for his *Odes*, was also a master of satiric verse. By his own account, he was the son of a freedman (*libertino patre natum*, *Satires* 1.6.6), and his rise into the circle of Maecenas made him an unusually self-conscious observer of social status. Horace's *Satires 2.8*, published around 30 BCE, imitates the conventions of the Roman *convivium* (i.e., the formal dinner party, which operated as a venue of social refinement and cultural display) in order to expose the pretensions of the wealthy host Nasidienus Rufus. As L. R. Shero observed, the dinner-party scene was a recurring vehicle for Roman satire. This was in some measure because the *convivium* formed a space in which conversation among political and social peers followed shared norms of consumption and interaction: it was an arena where cultural authority was constantly performed and tested (Shero 127; see also Gowers). Horace, through his narrator Fundanius, borrows and manipulates the conventions of the symposium report in order to parody those who aspire to, but fall short of, the manners of the cultural elite.

In the poem, Nasidienus, Horace's wealthy but socially inept host (whom the poem nowhere identifies as a freedman), provides a banquet of extraordinary expense. The irony of *Satires 2.8* lies in the systematic

collapse of each attempt at display, and here Horace achieves considerable humor. An awning falls on the table, destroying the elaborate food arrangement. Nasidienus goes off to grieve the catastrophe, and when he returns, it is with new courses, each accompanied by a high-blown explanation of its preparation. These explanations are presented as if Nasidienus possesses exhaustive knowledge of the culinary techniques involved, but his pretentiousness reveals instead his anxiety about their reception.

In *Satires 2.8*, the parody operates on several levels at once. At the surface level, Horace is parodying a social climber's attempt to purchase cultural authority through lavish expenditure. At a deeper level, he is also parodying the genre of the symposium report itself, since the guests at Nasidienus's table do not produce the elevated philosophical discourse the genre demands. Rather, they observe the spectacle with contempt and private mockery. Nor do the guests escape ridicule. Maecenas has brought along two hangers-on, Vibidius and Balatro, who call for larger cups and mock their host behind a show of sympathy; Balatro's mock-solemn speech of consolation after the awning collapses parodies philosophical consolation itself; and the party ends with the guests fleeing without tasting the remaining dishes, a discourtesy that reflects poorly on them as well as on their host (Gowers). The poem is presented as a report delivered by Fundanius to Horace, which adds a further level: one observer describes the event to another, and both find the spectacle amusing precisely because neither has a stake in Nasidienus's success. The amused detachment of these reporters is itself part of what the poem invites its readers to examine.

The social function of this parody is better described as status maintenance than as survival. Horace, writing as a rising member of Maecenas's circle, uses the parody of an inept host's dinner party to mark the boundary between a successful *convivium* and its clumsy imitation. By presenting Nasidienus's earnest efforts as involuntary comedy, the poem flatters its readers' sense that true refinement cannot be acquired through expenditure alone. In this sense, Horace's parody operates as a form of social gatekeeping. Yet the gatekeeper's own position was not secure. Horace, the son of a freedman, owed his place among the elite to talent and patronage rather than birth, and the poem's unflattering portrait of the guests suggests that the codes of elite dining are as open to satire as the host who fails to master them (Freudenburg, *Walking Muse*; Gowers). The poem thus reinforces the distinction between insiders and aspirants while also showing how ungracious the enforcement of that distinction can be.

Performative Mimicry and Parody in Antebellum Slave Culture

Like ancient Rome, the antebellum South produced a tradition of parody. While this tradition had parallels with Roman satire, it operated under radically different social conditions and for opposite purposes. Horace's parody is directed by an insider, through a narrator who belongs to the elite's circle, at those who aspire to join it. The parodic practices of enslaved African Americans operated from below, directed upward at the members of the ruling class and their social pretensions (Levine; Watkins).

Perhaps the best-known example of this tradition is the cakewalk, a dance form that originated on Southern plantations. Performing the cakewalk, enslaved people imitated and exaggerated the formal

promenades and courtly mannerisms of the white planter class. The performers adopted the postures, dress, and ceremonial gravity of white social ritual but enlarged each element to the point of absurdity. According to later recollections by formerly enslaved people, white observers who watched these performances often enjoyed them without recognizing the mockery directed at themselves (Stearns and Stearns; White and White). Because most of this testimony was recorded after emancipation, and because the cakewalk was later commercialized on the minstrel and vaudeville stage, the antebellum practice has to be reconstructed with care.

The deliberate imitation of a standard, recognized form noted by Highet as one of the markers of literary parody is evident in the cakewalk. Planter families displayed their wealth and refinement in formal balls, promenades, and other public rituals of dress and deportment (White and White). The performers of the cakewalk imitated these forms closely enough that the model was apparent to the intended audience, but distorted them in ways that those being mocked could overlook or misread. The performance's effectiveness lies in this doubling: white observers could see an amusing entertainment performed by people they regarded as unrefined, while members of the enslaved community could understand the exaggeration as mockery. This structural doubleness, Highet notes, is a hallmark of effective parody: the gap between what the imitating form appears to say and what the audience assumes it to be doing (Highet 73).

The function of this parody differs fundamentally from that of Horace's. The social order of the antebellum South denied legal personhood to those who were enslaved and punished open criticism with violence. The cakewalk allowed a critique of the ruling class to be performed in the rulers' presence while remaining illegible to them, a clear instance of what Scott describes as the hidden transcript entering public life in disguised form (Scott). What some in the planter class may have regarded as clumsy imitation, or even as a tribute to their own refinement, was in fact a mockery of their claims to natural superiority. Here "survival" can be used in its literal sense: the disguise allowed criticism to be expressed without inviting reprisal. Horace's parody reinforced the boundaries of an elite to which he had been admitted; the cakewalk worked from within the structure it mocked, and its invisibility to its targets was a condition of its existence.

Juxtaposition: Parody from Above and Below

Horace's *Satires 2.8* and the cakewalk tradition both satisfy Highet's conditions for satirical parody: each presents a cultural form that is both familiar and distorted, and both emerged in societies that depended on forced labor and a rigid social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the two examples differ sharply. In *Satires 2.8*, an insider uses parody to deride an aspirant, although the poem also casts an unflattering light on the insiders themselves. In the cakewalk, people excluded from the social order altogether used parody to criticize those who ruled them.

Horace uses parody to suggest that the border between the refined and the vulgar is real and that social standing cannot simply be purchased. The enslaved performers of the cakewalk use parody to suggest that

the border between the "civilized" and the "savage" is a fiction: the master class's claims to natural superiority are themselves a performance, and one that can be exaggerated and rendered ridiculous in its reproduction. In both cases, the satirical parody does its work not by confronting its target directly but by inhabiting the target's own forms and turning them inside out.

ELEMENTS OF THE SATIRICAL NARRATIVE

The first two sections of this paper examined the direct presentation of the satirical monologue and the more oblique strategy of parody. This section turns to the satirical narrative. In *The Anatomy of Satire*, Highet describes satirical narrative as relying on situational irony, characterization, dialogue, and plot to expose corruption in society (Highet 51–55). Building on Highet's account, this section focuses on three elements. The first is an observer, often a detached or partly detached figure, who serves as the reader's guide through a world of folly and inequality. The second is a set of characters whose speech and behavior expose the gap between what they claim and what they are. The third is a plot structured by situational irony, which reveals that gap through events.

This portion of the paper analyzes two texts: the Cena Trimalchionis section of Petronius's *Satyricon* and William Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. Both authors use satirical narrative to depict the performative nature of social authority. In Petronius, the principal target is the nouveau riche freedman (i.e., an individual of low social origin who has recently become wealthy), though the narrator and the educated guests are also objects of ridicule. In Brown, the target is the slaveholding class and the nation that tolerates it. The comparison again shows similar techniques put to different uses. Petronius entertains his readers with a freedman's failed imitation of elite culture while also mocking those who claim to possess that culture; Brown uses the satirical narrative to expose the moral corruption of slaveholders and of the nation that sustained them.

Cena Trimalchionis in Petronius's *Satyricon*

Gaius Petronius Arbiter, usually identified with the courtier whose death Tacitus records (*Annals* 16.18–19), wrote the *Satyricon* during the reign of Nero; the work survives only in fragments. In its best-preserved episode, the Cena Trimalchionis, Petronius deploys the elements of satirical narrative described above: an observer-narrator, vividly characterized guests and host, and a plot driven by situational irony (Highet 51–53). As we have seen, the dinner party was a cornerstone of Roman elite life. Petronius presents a dinner party that violates nearly every norm of elite conviviality in order to produce its satirical effect.

Paideia and Ostentation

The narrator, Encolpius, is a down-at-heel young man with a rhetorical education who attends the dinner with his companions Ascyltos and Giton and the teacher of rhetoric Agamemnon. Possessing the *paideia* (cultural capital) of a traditional education but little of the wealth that ordinarily accompanies it,

Encolpius is well placed to register the vulgarity of Trimalchio's household. It would be a mistake, however, to treat him as a reliable spokesman for the author. As Gian Biagio Conte has argued, Encolpius is a "mythomaniac" narrator whose literary pretensions are themselves a target of Petronius's irony (Conte). The surviving text opens with Encolpius and Agamemnon trading complaints about the decline of rhetorical education, and Agamemnon concedes that teachers, like flatterers angling for invitations to rich men's dinners, say whatever will please (Petronius 1–4). Petronius uses the gap between Encolpius's cultural pretensions and his precarious circumstances, as well as the gap between Trimalchio's wealth and his lack of learning, to satirize both.

This dynamic is established at the threshold of Trimalchio's house. On entering, Encolpius is so startled by a painted dog on the wall, chained and labeled "*cave canem*" ("beware of dog"), that he nearly falls over (Petronius 29). Inside, he sees the *fasces*, the bundled rods and axes carried before Roman magistrates as emblems of their authority, fixed to the doorposts of the *triclinium*, or dining room, above an inscription honoring Trimalchio as a *sevir Augustalis*, an official of the imperial cult, a post commonly held by wealthy freedmen (Petronius 30). In both cases, image and emblem take the place of substance: a painted dog rather than a guard dog, and the insignia of public office repurposed as domestic décor. The scene also characterizes the narrator, whose fright at a painting is as comic as Trimalchio's display. The symbols of Roman gravity and power have been absorbed into the ostentatious decoration of a freedman's house, but the cultural formation that would give them meaning cannot be acquired in the same way.

Character Development and Dialogue: The Performative Nouveau Riche

Petronius's Trimalchio has become a byword for vulgar ostentation (F. Scott Fitzgerald considered *Trimalchio in West Egg* as a title for *The Great Gatsby*). The character's afterlife testifies to the vividness of Petronius's characterization, but it does not show that Trimalchio develops. Rather, like many satirical figures, he is memorable precisely because he is consistent, revealing the same traits in ever more extravagant forms. Trimalchio engages in relentless self-display, each gesture crafted as a performance, as he strives to belong to a culture he cannot organically inhabit. He keeps a water clock and a uniformed trumpeter in his dining room so that he can be told how much of his life he has lost; he is carried into the dining room to the sound of music; he plays a board game with gold and silver coins in place of counters; and he picks his teeth with a silver quill (Petronius 26, 32–33). Later, a clerk reads aloud the daily accounts of his estates as if they were the official gazette of Rome (Petronius 53). Each action is a performance staged for his guests, and each falls flat under scrutiny. The silver toothpick flaunts wealth, though it sets the reader's teeth on edge. The water clock transforms what should be an interior meditation on mortality into theatrical ostentation.

The dinner-table conversation further exposes the gap between performance and substance. Trimalchio and his fellow freedmen, including Hermeros and Niceros, speak in *sermo vulgaris*, a colloquial Latin full of popular idioms, grammatical irregularities, and slang. Trimalchio himself discourses on astrology and mythology with complete self-assurance, and the satirical effect comes from the distance between these elevated subjects and his garbled treatment of them (Petronius 39). When he ventures into mythology, he

muddles the story of the Trojan War and confuses the prophetess Cassandra with the child-killer Medea (Petronius 52, 59). Yet not all of the freedmen's talk is presented merely as an object of ridicule. Their speeches have also been read as a vivid record of the values of a socially mobile group (practical, proud of hard-won wealth, and contemptuous of useless learning), and Hermeros's angry rebuke of Ascyltos for laughing at the company turns the satire back on the educated guests (Petronius 57–58; D'Arms).

Trimalchio can purchase educated slaves who recite Homer; however, it becomes apparent as he stumbles through his own retellings that he cannot purchase an understanding of Homer. The dialogue thus exposes the central tension of his social position as the narrative presents it: Trimalchio has the trappings of culture but not its substance. Historians have cautioned, however, against reading this literary portrait as a straightforward picture of Roman freedmen. Paul Veyne argued that Trimalchio's career illustrates the real social ceiling that wealthy freedmen faced, while John D'Arms showed that his commercial activities closely resemble those of the elite itself (Veyne; D'Arms). Henrik Mouritsen has likewise emphasized that the image of the vulgar, upstart freedman owes much to elite literary stereotype (Mouritsen). Petronius's satire draws on that stereotype, but its relation to social reality remains a matter of debate.

Situational Irony and Plot: The Theatre of Excess

Similar to the satire of Horace, the situational irony of the Cena Trimalchionis operates on multiple levels. The plot is composed of a series of theatrical set pieces, each more extravagant than the last. A dish arranged to represent the twelve signs of the zodiac reflects Trimalchio's attempt to bring astrological learning to the table (Petronius 35). When a boar is carved, live thrushes fly out into the dining room (Petronius 40). When a seemingly ungutted pig is sliced open, a startling avalanche of sausages and blood puddings spills out (Petronius 49). Trimalchio insists that his guests be awed, and that they credit their awe to his ingenuity. The dinner party, ideally a space of cultivated social exchange, becomes a stage for one man's craving for admiration. The guests, however, play along: Encolpius and his companions applaud, flatter, and eat, and their complicity is part of the joke.

The climax of the narrative is Trimalchio's rehearsal of his own funeral. He has his will read aloud, describes in detail the elaborate tomb he has commissioned, and finally stretches out on a couch and orders his household to mourn him as though he were already dead (Petronius 71–78). His self-regard is captured in the epitaph he plans for the tomb, which boasts that he "never listened to a philosopher" (*nec umquam philosophum audivit*, Petronius 71). Trimalchio regards this boast as laudable (for him, the study of philosophy signals a life wasted in poverty), though for Petronius's educated readers it is perhaps the most damning self-indictment in the text. Some readers have seen in Trimalchio's preoccupation with death and commemoration a lingering anxiety about his former status as property. The text lends some support to this reading, since the epitaph insists on titles, wealth, and public honors that a freedman could display but never fully convert into elite standing. Such an interpretation remains, however, an inference about a fictional character rather than something the text states.

Tacitus describes Petronius as Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*, the courtier whose judgment determined what counted as refined at court (Tacitus, *Annals* 16.18). If the identification is correct, Petronius wrote from a position of cultural authority that was itself precarious: Tacitus records that he was forced to take his own life in 66 CE. It is tempting to read the Cena as reassuring an aristocratic audience that true *humanitas* (in this context, civilized cultivation) is not a commodity that can be bought. Yet the satire does not spare that audience's representatives. Encolpius and Agamemnon, who claim the culture Trimalchio lacks, appear as flatterers and freeloaders, and the narrative's irony, as Conte argues, is directed at the narrator's pretensions as much as at the host's vulgarity (Conte). The Cena may therefore have amused elite readers with a caricature of a freedman while also inviting them to laugh at the emptiness of their own cultural claims.

William Wells Brown's *Clotel*

William Wells Brown, who escaped from slavery in 1834, was writing primarily for an antislavery Northern audience, though his novel *Clotel* was first published in London, where Brown was living at the time (Greenspan). Petronius's narrative draws much of its humor from a freedman's failed imitation of elite culture; in *Clotel*, Brown turns the techniques of satirical narrative against the slaveholding elite itself. His novel uses Highet's elements not to mock social aspirants but to expose the mythology that sustained slavery. As in the previous sections, a Roman author writing from within the free elite and an African American author who had been enslaved use similar methods to achieve starkly different aims.

The Detached Observer and the Proxy for Justice

In Encolpius, Petronius created a narrator whose detachment is compromised by cynicism and self-interest. The omniscient narrator of *Clotel*, by contrast, guides the reader through the social landscape of the antebellum South with a composure punctuated by irony, noting what the characters say and what they do, and pointing out the gap between the two. Where Encolpius registers Trimalchio's vulgarity with ironic amusement, Brown's narrator responds to the realities of slavery with occasional eruptions of outrage. The narrative is constructed to prod the reader's conscience by exposing the violence and commerce concealed beneath the surface of Southern gentility. Throughout the novel, Brown's narrator asks his readers, especially in the North, to measure their professed morality against the realities of slavery.

This narrative positioning is especially significant given Brown's historical context. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, he decided to remain in England, where he had gone on a speaking tour (Greenspan 203). As a fugitive from slavery living abroad, Brown had no legal standing as a citizen in the nation he was criticizing; under its laws, he remained property. (British supporters purchased his freedom in 1854, after which he returned to the United States.) Within this context, Brown constructs a narrator whose detached but pointed voice gives him a moral authority that the social order of the antebellum South would have refused him in person.

Character Development and Dialogue: The Performative Masters

Where Petronius achieves his satirical aims through the fictional upstart Trimalchio, Brown builds his satire around a figure all his readers would have known: Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. When Brown was writing his novel, Jefferson's presidency lay less than half a century in the past. Rumors had circulated since Jefferson's own time that he had fathered children with an enslaved woman, Sally Hemings, and had enabled the release of those children. (These rumors have since been substantiated by DNA evidence and historical scholarship; see, among others, Annette Gordon-Reed's 2008 history *The Hemingses of Monticello*.)

In the novel, Brown imagines that the eponymous Clotel and her sister Althesa are Jefferson's daughters by his enslaved housekeeper, Currer, and that all three women are sold at auction after the death of their owner. Clotel is initially the more fortunate of the two sisters: she is purchased by a young white man, Horatio Green, who professes to love her, and they have a daughter, Mary. When Horatio pursues a political career, however, he marries a white woman, whose jealousy leads to Clotel's sale, while Mary is kept as a servant in her father's household. Althesa marries a white physician, but because he never legally frees her, their daughters are sold into slavery after both parents die of yellow fever. The fact that the "two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder" (Brown 68) imbues the novel with irony and generates a dissonant effect in the reader. Thomas Jefferson was regarded as one of America's most effective and intelligent political leaders, and Brown's readers were forced to reconcile the dire circumstances of his purported daughters with Jefferson's lofty moral standing.

In a highly publicized escape widely reported at the time, Ellen and William Craft, who were born into slavery in Georgia, fled using a daring tactic: Ellen, who was light-skinned, disguised herself as a white gentleman, and William posed as her slave. In this guise, they traveled by train and steamboat to the North, and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, they fled to England, where Brown knew them. Brown adapted the episode for his novel, having Clotel and an enslaved man, William, use the same technique to escape. However, while the Crafts' story ended happily, Clotel's does not. Returning to Virginia in disguise to rescue her daughter, she is captured and taken to a slave pen in Washington; she escapes, but, cornered by her pursuers on the Long Bridge, within sight of the Capitol, she leaps to her death in the Potomac River.

Clotel is particularly rich in satirical irony, delivered in a tone that manages to be both comical and overtly critical. As one minor character says: "'When I went to sleep last night, I belonged to Governor Lucas; but I understand dat he is bin gambling all night, so I don't know who owns me dis morning.'" Brown's omniscient narrator then steps in: "Such is the uncertainty of a slave's position. He goes to bed at night the property of the man with whom he has lived for years, and gets up in the morning the slave of some one whom he has never seen before!" (Brown 70). Brown is equally unsparing in his sarcasm toward a nation that professes liberty while tolerating slavery: "They have tears to shed over Greece and

Poland; they have an abundance of sympathy for 'poor Ireland'; they can furnish a ship of war to convey the Hungarian refugees from a Turkish prison to the 'land of the free and home of the brave.' They boast that America is the 'cradle of liberty'; if it is, I fear they have rocked the child to death" (Brown 101).

Juxtaposition: Narrative Irony and Its Uses

Petronius and Brown both rely on the ironic gap between what characters claim and what the narrative reveals. In the Cena, that gap exposes a freedman who cannot convert wealth into cultivation and, more quietly, a narrator and companions whose cultivation does not stop them from flattering a rich host for a free dinner. In *Clotel*, it exposes a republic whose founding documents proclaim liberty while the daughters of its most celebrated author are sold at auction. Petronius's irony is diffuse, distributed among host, guests, and narrator, and it does not obviously argue for any change in the social order. Brown's irony is focused and purposive: it aims to move readers to oppose slavery. Here again, similar narrative techniques serve different ends. For Brown, writing as a fugitive whose legal status in his own country was that of property, satirical narrative offered a means of public critique that his position otherwise denied him.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how Roman satirists and African American orators, performers, and novelists used the three modes of satire defined by Gilbert Highet: the satirical monologue, the satirical parody, and the satirical narrative (Highet 3). Across six texts and traditions separated by centuries, continents, and social position, comparable rhetorical techniques recur. These are not identical structures, and their recurrence does not demonstrate independent convergence. Douglass and Brown drew on a rhetorical education shaped in part by classical models, and some devices, such as anaphora and ironic understatement, are common to persuasive and comic writing in many traditions. What the comparison shows is how similar techniques could be adapted to very different social positions and purposes.

The satirical monologue, whether delivered by Umbricius at the Porta Capena or by Frederick Douglass at Corinthian Hall, moves from an assertion of reluctant authority to a sustained outburst of indignation that sets formal argument aside in favor of rhetorical accumulation. The satirical parody, whether in Horace's verse or in performances on the plantation, imitates the forms of the dominant class closely enough to expose their contradictions. The satirical narrative, whether set in Trimalchio's dining room or in the slave markets of *Clotel*, employs an observer, characters whose speech exposes the gap between what they say and what they do, and a plot full of situational irony that reveals the absurdity of social hierarchies built on coerced labor.

Yet in all three modes, the texts diverge profoundly in their social orientation. Juvenal's *Satire 3*, Horace's *Satires 2.8*, and Petronius's *Satyricon* are products of the Roman literary elite, written by authors who, whatever their individual origins, wrote for readers within or close to that elite. Each draws comedy from outsiders (foreign rivals, a wealthy but inept host, a freedman millionaire) who try to claim a place in elite

society. Yet none of the three can be read simply as a defense of privilege. Umbricius is a persona whose resentment the poem invites readers to examine; the guests at Nasidienus's table behave no better than their host; and Encolpius and Agamemnon are as much objects of Petronius's irony as Trimalchio is. The Roman satires thus reinforce elite boundaries while also exposing the pretensions of those who police them.

Douglass and Brown, by contrast, direct the same formal techniques against the social order itself. Douglass's speech does not seek to preserve the existing hierarchy but to undermine its foundations, and Brown's novel confronts white readers with the moral contradictions of a slaveholding republic. The cakewalk belongs in a category of its own, closer to performance than to literature, and our knowledge of it depends largely on later testimony; nevertheless, it too used satire to unsettle the social forms of the ruling class. In every case, whether the medium is oratory, fiction, or dance, satire supplied a means of critique that more direct forms of protest could not safely provide.

What, finally, does it mean to describe satire in these settings as a means of survival? The comparison suggests that the term must be used with care. For the enslaved performers of the cakewalk, and for fugitives such as Brown who could be returned to slavery under federal law, satire's disguise and indirection could be a matter of literal safety, allowing critique to be voiced without inviting reprisal. For Douglass and Brown, satire also served a social and political purpose, sustaining a collective identity and a public argument against slavery. That it offered psychological relief to those who produced or enjoyed it is plausible but difficult to demonstrate from the texts alone. For the Roman satirists and their readers, "survival" is not the appropriate term: the satires dramatize the anxieties of a privileged class about social mobility and help to maintain its sense of distinction, but their authors faced no comparable threat.

Highet's framework, developed to categorize the literature of classical antiquity, proves useful for this comparison because it directs attention to the formal choices that satirists make: who speaks, what is imitated, and how a story is arranged. It is less helpful in explaining why those choices were made or how audiences responded, questions that require historical evidence about authors, readers, and performers. Further research on reception, such as how Juvenal's and Petronius's readers understood their speakers and how enslaved communities understood the cakewalk, would help to test the distinctions proposed here. Within these limits, the comparison suggests that satire was not merely a literary ornament but a flexible instrument, one that could reinforce social boundaries or contest them depending on who used it, and for whom.

REFERENCES

Anderson, William S. *Essays on Roman Satire*. Princeton University Press, 1982.
Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.
Braund, Susanna Morton, editor. *Juvenal: Satires Book I*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
Brown, William Wells. *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. Partridge and Oakey, 1853.

Colaiaco, James A. *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July: Speaking Truth to America*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Conte, Gian Biagio. *The Hidden Author: An Interpretation of Petronius' Satyricon*. Translated by Elaine Fantham, University of California Press, 1996.

D'Arms, John H. *Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome*. Harvard University Press, 1981.

Douglass, Frederick. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July? Extract from an Oration, at Rochester, July 5, 1852." In *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855. masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_abridged_med.pdf.

Freudenburg, Kirk. *Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Freudenburg, Kirk. *The Walking Muse: Horace on the Theory of Satire*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Giannella, Nicole J. *The Mind of the Slave: The Limits of Ownership in Roman Law and Society*. University of Michigan Press, 2026.

Gordon-Reed, Annette. *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. W. W. Norton, 2008.

Gowers, Emily. *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*. Clarendon Press, 1993.

Greenspan, Ezra. *William Wells Brown: An African American Life*. W. W. Norton, 2014.

Highet, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton University Press, 1962.

Horace. *Satires*. Translated by A. S. Kline. Poetry in Translation. 2005. www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceSatiresBkIISatVIII.php.

Juvenal. *Satire 3*. Translated by A. S. Kline. Poetry in Translation. 2011. www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/JuvenalSatires3.php.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 1977.

Mouritsen, Henrik. *The Freedman in the Roman World*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Petronius. *Satyricon: Selections Including the Cena Trimalchionis*. Edited by Geoffrey Steadman. 2025. geoffreysteadman.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/petronius.mar2025.pdf.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press, 1990.

Shero, L. R. "The Cena in Roman Satire." *Classical Philology* 18, no. 2 (1923): 126–143. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/262555.pdf.

Stearns, Marshall, and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. Macmillan, 1968.

Tacitus. *The Annals*. Translated by A. J. Woodman, Hackett, 2004.

Veyne, Paul. "Vie de Trimalcion." *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1961, pp. 213–47.

Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying*. Simon & Schuster, 1994.

White, Shane, and Graham White. *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. Cornell University Press, 1998.