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Tatiana Claudy

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Class Performance in the Nineteenth Century France Presented in Short Stories of the Nineteenth Century French Writers

by Tatiana Claudy

ILCS – I 300 – 01 Methods of Humanities Research and Criticism

Introduction

The topic of this essay is class performance in the nineteenth century France as shown in two short stories by nineteenth century French writers: “My Uncle Jules” (1883) by Guy de Maupassant and “Master Cornille’s Secret” (1879) by Alphonse Daudet. In these texts I have identified the following problems: Is there “natural” class performance or all class performances artificial by nature? Does class performance produce upward class mobility and, if so, does it work for any class? Can fantasies - a moving force behind class performance - produce reality? More generally, how can literature help us understand ways and methods that people used to navigate complicated class dynamics in nineteenth century France?

Methods and Theoretical Tools

Performances of class can be analyzed with the two models of class performance developed by Kevin Swafford in his article “Performance Anxiety, or the Production of Class in Anthony Trollope’s *The Claverings*.”: Trollope’s “natural distinction between the classes” (Swafford 47) (people perform class unconsciously by behaving naturally according to their social position) and Swafford’s “socially contingent and performative nature of class differentiation” (46) (people perform class by continuous conscious efforts to obey and follow societal rules of their class).



“Any text is intertextuality: other texts are presented in it . . . any text is a new fabric of by-gone quotes” (Roland Barthes).



Conclusion

The literature provides a plethora of information on class performance through the description of characters’ life styles, interpersonal communication, and fantasies, and theoretical models help to explore and evaluate textual evidence. The two theoretical models of class performance developed by Kevin Swafford proved useful in the analyses of class performances presented in “My Uncle Jules” by Maupassant and “Master Cornille’s Secret” by Daudet.

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“A part of the function of class culture and society is to generate, produce and maintain socially organized appearances and distinctions through symbolically coded performances” (Kevin Stafford)

Discussion

Trollope’s model works in “My Uncle Jules” as shown in 2 scenes on the ship: rich ladies ate oysters “in a dainty manner,” and Philippe tried to imitate them and “spilled all the liquid over his coat” (Maupassant 5). Swafford and Maupassant argue that ladies and Philippe perform an act of eating oysters, but ladies perform it “naturally” for they do not have performance anxiety due to their affluence and high social status. For Philippe, trying to conceal his socio-economic position, artificial performance is inevitable.

Daudet argue that Trollope’s model work in a rural society. Yet “natural” ways of peasants as shown in “Master Cornille’s Secret” were based on economic stability. Structurally class performance works the same way for any class: material necessity requires performance to acquire capital, and this is the universal truth.

For Trollope and Swafford, class performance does not lead to upward class mobility. Maupassant agrees with them: there is only perpetual performance concealing reality without producing material necessity. People are perpetually unhappy due to the absence of substantial changes in the structure. Daudet argue that upward class mobility is possible in rural societies as shown in “Master Cornille’s Secret.”

Maupassant used elements of “Cinderella” in “My Uncles Jules”: the poor Davranches hoped that “a good fairy” Uncle Jules would change their lives. Their boat trip is a parallel to the ball in “Cinderella.” The severe reality of the nineteenth century intrudes in their fantasy – they meet Jules on the ship, but he is penniless.

Stories’ Plots

“My Uncle Jules”: The Davranches lived in poverty waiting for Uncle Jules’s return to France with a fortune made in America. For 12 years they fantasized about spending Jules’s money. Once they took a boat trip and on the ship they saw a poor old sailor in whom they recognized Jules. The Davranches did not want impoverished Jules to recognize them - their only worry was to keep the secret from their children.

“Master Cornille’s Secret”: Master Cornille, an old miller, lost his business. To protect “the honor” of his mill, he loaded bags of trash on his donkey, marched in the village and boasted about his good business. When neighbors learned about his secret – that he lived in dire poverty – they started to send him grain and provided him with work till his death.