Thomas Rowlandson’s World—How People Are Depicted *

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Introduction

Thomas Rowlandson, an English caricaturist in the eighteenth century, is sometimes said to be essentially superficial in his perception of life. He has less satirical power than Hogarth and Gillray. This comment, however, does not mean his work is less valuable than those of his two rivals. He drew a lot of caricatures of the daily life in the eighteenth century and showed the life and the people of the age vividly.

It may be true that Rowlandson’s work appears to be superficial at the first glance. He seems to show us merely pretty girls and ugly old men and women who were seen everywhere in the streets in the era. But looking at them further makes us notice how thoroughly and precisely he knows about true human nature and how skillfully he depicts the manners and customs of the people of the age. In this sense he is a real commentator of the age. Different is the way of commenting between him and Hogarth. Rowlandson’s work is not emblematic, while Hogarth’s work is, and so it is necessary for us to have some knowledge of the Bible and other literary work to understand what Hogarth meant in his work. On the other hand Rowlandson doesn’t use pictures within pictures in so complicated a way as Hogarth. It does not mean Rowlandson’s work is less valuable. The way of depicting is just different. Heintzelman said

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1 Wolf, Edward C. J., Rowlandson and his illustrations of eighteenth century English literature, Einar Munksgard, Copenhagen, 1945, p.56.


3 Ibid, p. 14
that his personality and type of work coincide perfectly with the temperament of the people and the transitions in their art and literature⁴. He uses such contrast as beautiful and ugly, old and young, strong and weak in his drawings skillfully⁵. This contrast is his great feat. It shows us the characteristic of the people of the age and their inclination. It also reveals his viewpoint of his society.

Although he seems to be no serious satirist, in reality he was indeed a sagacious artist of great penetration into human nature and kind consideration for the weak and the poor. In this paper I would like to describe how well he knows human nature and how skillfully he depicts it in his drawings by using his characteristic contrast.

1. The Young and the Old

The young and the old are his favourite motif. Young pretty women are apt to be seen by men in his work. In The Life Class (Plate Number 1), there is a beautiful nude girl posing for the art class, surrounded by the grotesque men who are looking lecherously at her.

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⁵ Paulson, etc.
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*Lady Hxxxxxx* (Plate Number 2) is another example. The young artist is looking at her through an eye-glass and drawing her. Beside her is the old man pointing at her hidden pubic area. That is what the young artist is going to draw. The lewdness is enhanced by the statue of a satyr and nymph embracing in the background and a pair of ancient heads who are kissing at the lower left.

Those are the scenes of art classes, but *The Swing or Rural Sports* is a country scene where normal people spend their holiday enjoying themselves. It is an adaptation of Fragonard’s *The Swing*. A pretty girl who is enjoying swinging is seen by a crowd of men, who, looking upward, seem to be anxious to take a glimpse of her hidden lower part. A dog is also barking with excitement. We can hear the hustle and bustle in the drawing.
He also draws an old minister or college professor alluring a young lady. In *The Amorous Tutor* (Plate Number 3) the old tutor is keener to something else than to teaching. His eyes are gazing into the pupil’s bosom. A burning candle shows this is an evening class. Rowlandson illustrates the tutor’s lasciviousness very skilfully by emphasising the physical contrast between the young and the old, the ugly and the beautiful.

The common thing of these three drawings is that the young girls are all pretty and they are seen by men, some of whom are old and ugly, some young. We can imagine the way young women were treated in the eighteenth century society through those drawings.

These drawings would also give us an idea of the lewdness of the society. Rowlandson has an insight into human nature, especially male desire in their deep mind. He knows very well what men think and desire. These pictures show this. Having not realised that insight of his himself, he may have drawn as his intuition directed him, but he successfully penetrated into the real intentions of men and represented them well.

Young women were not only seen but also were deceived into prostitution. Especially those from the country were victims of the world. Hogarth’s first successful serial moral play *Harlot’s Progress* (Plate Number 4) depicts how those women were deluded into becoming prostitutes. The story begins with a scene in which a maiden, who has newly arrived in London from York, was
tempted cajolingly by a bawd to come to her house. In the background an old lecher with a procurer watches them with anticipation. Her father, a minister on horseback, preached a sermon to some girls in the wagon, not knowing the corruption of his daughter’s innocence. A dead duck in the basket in the lower right and a falling bucket in the straw ropes symbolise her harsh future. This scene seems to have been very familiar among eighteenth century people, and the theme recurs in the stories such as Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, Richardson’s *Pamela* and Hawkesworth’s stories in his *Adventure*.

In Rowlandson’s *Introduction* (Plate Number 5), a heroine is in the hand of the old bawd and she is being introduced to an ugly lecherous old man. Here the contrast of beauty and ugliness, and young and old is used to good effect. It is the contrast that makes the young innocent girl more miserable. The prettier and more feeble she looks, the more confirmed is her miserable life. We read
Hogarth’s *Harlot Progress* from the first plate to the sixth plate and then we understand his intention of the work, while we just look at Rowlandson’s *Introduction* and then we realise the heroine’s cruel lot. Some would sympathise with her circumstances and claim the necessity of social reform. Some would think of it as a mere usual scene of the age and ignore it. The interpretation depends on the individual.
The vivid contrast of the young and the old is provided in one of the six drawings of *The Comforts of Bath* (Plate Number 6), in which Rowlandson represents a fashionable life at the popular resort town of middle west of England. In this drawing a sick old man with his gross body and legs swathed in flannel is having his portrait painted. Behind the door the girl and the officer are kissing. The girl may be the old man's young wife. Inconstancy was omnipresent in the eighteenth century and a cuckold existed not only in the verbal sense but also in the practical sense.

![Plate 6](image)

The same motif is supplied in one of the drawings of *The English Dance of Death* (Plate Number 7). In it the painter becomes the Death. The old man, who is now less fat, is as ugly as before. Behind the screen a young couple are enjoying their pleasant chat. It seems that they feel more comfortable and look more relaxed. That is because they are completely free from anxiety of being
caught in adultery. The portrait of the old man tells the fact. The old man is kissed by the Death, which suggests he is going to die soon. A pair of horns in his head signifies his young wife’s infidelity. Cuckolds are far from unrealistic beings.

As Paulson mentions, Death is already sitting invisible at the shoulder of everyone of Rowlandson’s fat, diseased, over-indulgent people in their world of dissipation and rapid flux. He shows the absurdity of the pompous old man who likes to have his portrait painted. Even if he is great, rich or powerful, he is never immortal. Rowlandson knows it very well and tells us the fact in his drawings. It is very satirical that the old man doesn’t know the fact he is not only captured by Death but is also cuckolded. He uses a picture within a picture

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Plate 7

Paulson, 93
in this drawing, but no special knowledge is necessary to understand this situation. Rowlandson himself is by no means a moralist, but he catches human absurdity instinctively and draws it in his works by using the striking contrast seen in those pictures. This is Rowlandson's priority and his attractiveness.

An infidelity is sometimes caught, the result of which is a duel or killing as in *The Discovery* (Plate Number 8). This drawing almost duplicates Fragonard's composition of *L'Armoire* and the boy was caught hiding in a cupboard on his knees entreating forgiveness of the old man. Hogarth also draws the similar scene in *The Marriage a la modes*. In it an earl's wife is caught in her affair with his lawyer, which causes a duel between the earl and the lawyer. The earl is stabbed to death, the lawyer runs quickly out of the window, and the earl's wife entreats his forgiveness. This is one of six serial prints of the work, so we cannot evaluate of the effectiveness of this scene without looking at the rest of the pictures. But I can say this scene would not arouse our sympathy for the earl who was killed, in addition to being cuckolded.

Plate 8
Rowlandson's young man, on the other hand, looks more miserable than Hogarth's earl. It may come from the contrast of young and old as well as fat and thin. The old man is bigger and fatter, looking stronger than the younger one. The latter is begging the forgiveness of the former with his mouth wide open. Beside them a young wife is weeping bitterly. It is this composition as well as contrast that leads us to feel pity for the young couple rather than the cuckolded one.

Rowlandson seems to have suffered from an unconquerable obsession that the old are ugly and dirty. The old men in his drawings have acromegalic faces, gouty, dropsical limbs, bloated bodies with protruding eyes. Thus Rowlandson's old men become the characters appearing in cartoons. Cartoons exaggerate our nature. They magnify the absurdity, greed and lecherousness of us human.

2. Cheerful and Grim

His exaggeration is rendered successfully in Serving the Punch, which shows people drinking and being served (Plate Number 9). To the sober, all the drunken people perhaps look grotesque like those in this drawing. Their heads, which resemble a bunch of grapes, are typical with Rowlandson. This drawing brings out human nature of the people very well when they are drunk. This is a sort of cartoon, but might be seen as more realistic because of the exaggerated expressions and actions of the drunk.
Excessive drinking is one of the distinctive features of the eighteenth century. The poor drank beer, and for a time, gin. From approximately 1720 to 1750 gin was consumed in sufficient quantity to term the period that of "gin madness". Drinking gin became one of the social problems as we see in Hogarth's *Gin Lane* (Plate Number 10). The drunken mother who is dropping her baby catches our eye first, which is appalling. A man who is almost starved to death but still holding his glass firmly in his right hand in the lower right adds to the grimness. On the left above the drunken mother are a keeper of a pawn shop, a carpenter and a housewife: the carpenter is selling his saw and the woman kettles. In the centre is a burial scene. In the building in the upper right a man has committed suicide by hanging himself. The reason of his suicide is his great debt to buy his gin. The collapsing building in the upper right symbolises all the corruption of this district of the city. This is indeed a successful piece of work of Hogarth which represents the horror and foolishness of excessive drinking.

Plate 10

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Rowlandson also drew a lot of drunken scenes, but in a more humourous way. The typical example is one of the *English Dance of Death* (Plate Number 11), in which several prostitutes are being served alcoholic drinks. They all look happy and enjoy themselves, with the couple hugging each other in the lower left, but soon we notice that the real master of this pub is Death, who is providing the deadly drinks diligently behind the pub lord. Then we move to the lower right and we see a man and two women collapsing to the floor. They are deadly drunk. This drawing shows the fearfulness and foolishness of overdrinking as successfully as Hogarth's *Gin Lane*. But the way of representation is different.

The first thing which catches our eye is those women who are waiting for their drink delightfully. The cheerful scene comes first, and then comes the grim scene into our eye. Rowlandson uses the contrast very skillfully in the composition of this drawing, but this time the contrast is not young and old, beautiful and ugly, but cheerful and lively versus grim and frightening. Young women being served in the centre look happy so that it alleviates the foolishness and disaster of overdrinking, but it becomes all the more satirical when we realise...
the meaning of the components. The couple now enjoying themselves would be
destined to have the same experience of those falling down on the floor of the
right-hand side. Death appears humourous but in fact He brings us death sooner
or later. All are well contrived with the good proportion of two thirds of joyful
scene and one third of grim scene. The word satire derives from satura mening
medley and this drawing by Rowlandson is a typical of the satire in the sense of a
medley of the joyful and the grim in one picture.

Hogarth tried to reform social sins through his drawings such as Gin Lane.
His drawings and prints are often called 'pictured morals'. Most of his work
includes some moral precepts. Rowlandson, on the other hand, had no such
intention. He of course depicted as many scenes of gambling and duels as
Hogarth, but he has no intention to instruct others through his work. On the
contrary he himself was an incorrigible gambler for a time.® As a result of it his
fine fortune was gone and with his health impaired, he reached the lowest point.
Because of his own absurd experience he seems to have no right to claim that he
is a moralist. He just enjoyed seeing gamblers and drew them if he was pleased
without any moral intention. But he had a keen eye for the weakness, animalism,
absurdity of human nature®, so that we could slowly but surely realise the true
human nature by looking at his drawings. In a paradoxical way he himself was a
propagandist for human virtue®.

3. High and Low

Rowlandson dislikes sham elegance. He is always on the side of the middle or
lower class. His trait maybe comes from his own experience of low life around
1793™. Significant is Wolf's comment that Rowlandson at the same time satirises

® The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson with an introduction by Gert Schiff, The Cythera
® Ibid., p.xxiii.
®® Adrian Bury, however, said he was no propagandist for human virtue. (Bury, Adrian, Rowlandson
Drawings, Avalon Press, 1949.,p.10.)
™ Edward C.J. Wolf points out that The Comforts of Bath gives middle class viewpoint on the life at
that fashionable watering-place. Dr. Syntax is a middle class Don Quixote. (Rowlandson and his
illustrations of eighteenth century English literature, p. 78.)
those *nouveaux riches* who are pursuing the aristocratic idea$^{12}$. Thus his favourite subject is a scene in which upper-class people are in a state of panic. In *Persons and Property Protected* some people are pouring out of the overturned carriage with one lady exposing her backside. In *Exhibition 'Staircase', Somerset House*, people are tumbling down on the staircase in the art museum. At a university library scene a college don, failing to keep balance, is falling from the stool with some books around him. Rowlandson makes fun of them by showing their panic-stricken stupid faces. His featuring contrast, beautiful and ugly, is again rendered so effectively that we feel how panicked they are in such a clumsy and awkward situation. All those people themselves are naturally serious and earnest so they are made great fun of in these drawings. This is one of the characteristics of Menippean satire which points out foolishness of pedantry.

Another of Rowlandson’s favourite subjects is medical consultation. *Amputation* (Plate Number 12) gives us a clear idea how operations were carried out in the eighteenth century. Surgery was conducted without anesthesia in those days. The patient was given a glass of brandy and as the picture shows, he was restrained by three or four assistants$^{13}$.

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$^{12}$ Ibid, p.78.

$^{13}$ Schwartz, p.134.
Transplanting of Teeth (Plate Number 13) depicts a scene at a dentist’s. In the centre of the picture a dentist extracts a sound tooth from the mouth of a ragged chimney-sweep boy in order to transplant it into the cavity of the fashionable lady who sits next to him. Behind her two other poor children had their tooth extracted for some money as the notice says, ‘Most Money Given for Live Teeth’. The contrast between the poor ragged children with no shoes on and the pompous ladies reinforces the vanity and foolishness of the wealthy ladies.

Plate 13

It would be a social principle that the wealthy practise charity, but in this situation, the relationship of a charitable donor and a recipient is reversed. The wealthy get the sound tooth of the pauper to satisfy her vanity for beauty in defiance of lack of hygiene and the possibility of an infectious disease. This act
crosses the border of their social class. This picture satirises successfully the foolish vanity of the wealthy\textsuperscript{14}. This is also a message from Rowlandson that he is on the side of the poor. The poor children on the left-hand side represent Rowlandson’s position.

Gert Schiff ascribes the change of his style to his own life, saying: His own disillusion made his wit more biting, his grotesqueries more savage. From now on there was a hint of obsession in his insistence upon the ugliness of the idle rich from whose rank he had fallen; he overemphasized the deformation of gout and gluttony in his men, the lasciviousness in his women. There may be humor but there is certainly no kindness in the way he ridicules the gaudy metropolitan couples and the plump provincials in search of recreation in \textit{The Comforts of Bath} \textsuperscript{15}.

The poor and the wealthy, the strong and the weak relationship is also reflected in the publishing world. In the eighteenth century the old aristocratic patrons were replaced by a new reading public. Dr Johnson’s letter to Lord Chesterfield symbolises the replacement of the readers, from some aristocratic patrons to middle-class people and booksellers. Literature became a profession or a trade. By 1760 the patron had been seen as a creature of tawdry pretensions, and put to ridicule in the fooling of comedy. His day was done, and was courted no more. Instead, there was the public for authors to salute as master\textsuperscript{16}.

Thus authors who had new masters of the reading public came to have another master, publishers. Publishers tried hard to dig up good authors, but no publishers were willing to incur the risk of publishing the works of inexperienced and unknown writers\textsuperscript{17}. Publishers were placed above those unknown writers in their power relationship. “The lot of the literary man in the first half of the century was not an enviable one. Drudge of the bookseller, parasite of the patron, he passed his days compiling, editing, translating — ‘For ever reading,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson}, p. xxiv-xxv.
\item Ibid., p.109.
\end{itemize}
never to be read” 18. A lot of young unknown writers, so-called Grub Street hacks, had to work for and curry favour with publishers.

This miserable situation of authors are illustrated by Bookseller and Author, Starving Poet and Publisher and The Tax Gatherer. The theme of all of these is the penury and humiliation of bondage to the booksellers. The Tax Gatherer (Plate Number 14) shows the miserable life of a poor, elderly author and his family. A corpulent official demanding taxes, two children hugging each other in the foreground, sobbing against the big tax man, the author’s young wife with a baby in her arms, all are expressing the predicament of the family. Even the dog is assuming a hopeless attitude. Rowlandson’s usual contrast of a thin author and a big fat tax collector is used effectively in this situation.

Plate 14

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18 Paston, George, Social Caricature in the Eighteenth Century, Methuen, 1905, p. 58.
Another thin author appears again in *Bookseller* and *Author* (Plate Number 15), in which the relationship between a thin author and a fat publisher is suggested by the contrast of a thin author and a fat publisher. The fat successful publisher with his hands in the pockets of his jacket listens with an indifferent air. The other shabby man showing his manuscript explains its content desperately with a hat under his arm. A customer on the left side pretends to read a book, eavesdropping on their conversation. The obsequious manner of the author seems to make him feel superiority to the author. We can see the power relation among publishers, readers and authors in this drawing. First come the publishers, next readers and the last authors. This may be a scene Dr Johnson, Laurence Sterne and other writers encountered when they were unknown and inexperienced. Rowlandson here is also on the side of the weak and the poor.

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4. Conclusion

Rowlandson, as is a pictorial commentator of everything of the eighteenth century, never failed to hit all the main characters of the age: rakes, beaux, bold courtesans, and a bawd. Rowlandson's masterpiece *Vauxhall Gardens* (Plate number 16) introduces all the necessary members of those days. The garden used to be a very popular pleasure garden on the south bank of the Thames. In the drawing Dr Johnson with his friends James Boswell and Mrs Thrale are eating in the arbour. Even the Prince of Wales is boldly flirting with a member of the demimonde. Mrs Robinson is there as well. Prostitutes and bawds are fondling the customers on the right. These figures show what the atmosphere was like in this garden.
The value of this picture is, however, not only the portraits of those celebrated and familiar people of the age. It also represents the social attitude towards women in the eighteenth century. Diana Donald mentions two ladies in the centre at whom a young gentleman with an eye glass and a naval veteran with an artificial leg are gazing, saying, "It should be noticed that they are unescorted, thus a prey to insulting male attentions, ... she (a lady wearing a riding dress) indubitably came to represent in the public mind the type of the independent woman who, in her canvassing of the lower orders of voters, 'never seemed to be conscious of her rank' nor of the traditional bounds of "female delicacy' " 20. Thus Rowlandson's drawings show the change of social value and social attitude of the century.

It may be true that Paulson said, "The level of denotation is much lower than in Hogarth" 21, but Binyon's comment may be too hasty a conclusion: He was no critic; he had hardly 'a point of view'. Nor was he a social satirist, like Hogarth, nor a political satirist, like Gillray 22.

Rowlandson was above all interested in his fellows' humour, pompousness, vanity, rudeness and peculiar attitude. It seems to me that he had a superb talent of discerning the weakness and absurdity of human beings instinctively, and putting what he caught on the paper without any intention of moral instruction. But whether he had an intention to be a social satirist or not, he is indeed an ingenious one because he reveals our weakness, avarice, absurdity, lewdness, in short, true human nature. He has not only a great ability to penetrate human nature but an uncommon skill to represent it well.

With his acute sense Rowlandson's drawings reflect the latter half of eighteenth century London's life of wealth and poverty, glitter and squalor so well that he enables us to reproduce the age very vividly.

Paulson's comment is true in that sense: We are indebted for the marvelous record which he left of the England he knows, perhaps the most important contribution to our knowledge of the manners of the Englishman during the

20 Diana Donald, p.138.
extraordinary years from 1780-1825\textsuperscript{23}.

Rowlandson's work shows the people who really existed and were very common in the daily life of the eighteenth century. He was born a half-century later than Hogarth, so by viewing Hogarth's work and Rowlandson's together, then the whole eighteenth-century daily life and people of the age would be reproduced to the full extent.

\textsuperscript{23} Paulson, p.8