

## Essay: *The Satyricon: Dinner with Trimalchio* by Petronius

In his satirical novel, *The Satyricon*, Petronius spoofs social manners and tastes. Of what remains of the original text, his satire is at its best in the section, "Dinner with Trimalchio." Gaius Trimalchio, is a successful, self-made millionaire, but he is continually trying to prove his goodness and worth to others. However, he is self-indulgent to excess. Even his actions of generosity, as seen at the dinner party, are excessive, pretentious, and ostentatious. Among the various devices Petronius uses to satirically reveal the foolishness of Trimalchio's character, is through absurd contrasts, ludicrous exaggerations, and delightful visual images as described by the narrator, Encolpius.

Before Encolpius actually sees Trimalchio, he is told that Trimalchio has a clock—a rare and expensive item then, which confirms his wealth—in the center of his dining room table, and that he has a trumpeter "all dressed up to tell him how much longer he's got to live" (963). Without any commentary from Encolpius, the image of employing a man to blow a trumpet to count off the hours one believes he's got to live, is rather ludicrous. Thus, before the reader actually meets Trimalchio, this particular image of him evokes a sense that his sanity is somewhat suspect. From this first, rather silly image of Trimalchio, Petronius adds layer upon layer of increasingly more absurd images.

Trimalchio is finally spotted by Encolpius outside the baths. He is a balding old man in slippers and a red shirt throwing around green balls with some long-haired boys. He is accompanied by a retinue of slaves and two eunuchs, whose functions appear pointless and aimless. [The number of slaves he's seen with seems out of proportion to the needs of one man. Also, the color of his dress and the color of the balls (red and green) are opposites, or complementary colors, which draw attention.

What we see of Trimalchio after this first scene should dispel any doubt we may have till now that he lacks a sense of proportion and social propriety, for he publicly relieves his bladder—in view of anyone in the area— into a silver chamber pot which is carried by one of the eunuchs. After this most conspicuously tasteless act, he enters the baths and is later "smothered in perfume," and he is rubbed down, not by one, but by three masseurs. They rub him down not with fine linen towels, but with bathrobes of the finest wools. In addition, the masseurs are drinking wine, quarreling, and spilling most of the wine, which Trimalchio claims they are drinking to his health (963). So, he continues to display his propensity for opulent excess and lack of social restraint.

Trimalchio is carried off from the baths by four couriers, dressed strangely "with lots of medals," and a musician with a tiny set of pipes "whispering a tune in his ear" as he is carried along (964). He's carried into his dining room to the sound of music and deposited upon a pile of stuffed cushions, as he picks his teeth with a silver toothpick. This image adds another layer on to the previous images. That the musician plays a set of *tiny* pipes is in contrast to the lavishness of being carried by four slaves to music and picking his teeth with a *silver* toothpick. This contrast lends amusement to the scene.

Encolpius usually describes objectively the unusual and humorous goings-ons and the actions of Trimalchio and his guests, as if he was reporting them like a journalist. Indeed, the images created by Petronius are ridiculous enough to go without commentary. However, to add to the humor of the scenes, Petronius has the narrator occasionally interject subtle subjective comments, which are usually dry and quick.

For example, when he observes Trimalchio earlier playing with the balls, he subtly lets the reader know that things are out of the ordinary and peculiar by making the comment, "We noticed other *novelties* [italics mine]" (963), then continues on to narrate the activities of the slaves, who are picking up and counting the balls. He ends the description of this scene by saying, "We were still admiring these *elegant* [italics mine] arrangements. . ." (963). Encolpius does not use negative words, like "ridiculous," "absurd," or "insane," which are the concepts we are to draw from the scenes. Instead, he uses the same words that Trimalchio himself perceives of his own actions: *novel* and *elegant*. Since the actions themselves appear anything but novel and elegant, the contrast lends to the absurdity; and, thus, Petronius present the humor of the scene without hitting the reader in the face with it.

The reader has seen from the beginning that this is a man whose actions are not restrained by decency. Nothing seems to be sacred to Trimalchio's sense of social dignity because he violates a delicate social taboo when he relieves his bladder in public. The satire lies in the contrast that Trimalchio feigns himself to be educated, refined, and splendid. But, within these first several scenes, the reader is in on the joke about him and anticipates with delight to see how this buffoon will continue to make a fool of himself. Because he has so far shown himself to be tasteless and ostentatious, his actions throughout will merely cement this opinion by the reader. However, Petronius shows us to what depth Trimalchio stoops in the pursuit of his idea of grandeur.

Later in the dinner, Trimalchio stoops still lower in his lack of social decency by violating even grosser social taboos than he did before. When he returns to the dinner table after a trip to the toilet, he tells all present in crude detail about his business there. But we are shown that his visit there was not just a quick trip to relieve his bladder again, because Encolpius mentions that he entered "dabbing his forehead." This, of course, gives the impression that he experienced some difficulties there. Trimalchio verifies this by announcing that his insides haven't been "answering the call for several days now," and that he's been taking a laxative. He assures everyone present that the laxative just worked. Trimalchio continues to stretch the bounds of this taboo by telling the guests that they are to feel free to relieve themselves of their "wind" ---("even in the middle of dinner," he says)---because he's known a lot of people who have died from "holding themselves in" (971). Petronius doesn't drop this disgusting subject even here for Trimalchio blunders on to indict his wife by saying that she "generally keep[s] me up all night with this sort of thing" (972). This kind of description leaves to the reader's imagination all the erupting noises and the other crude associations which accompany this kind of problem. The humor is a double-decker because it's not only once again showing Trimalchio's lack of social politeness, but he commits an even greater offense by showing his wife in a most ungracious manner---one that most of us prefer left very private. The reader is relieved that it isn't him who was revealed in such an indignant light. Encolpius caps this scene with remarking how everyone "thanked him for being so generous and considerate." Again, the contrast of "generous" and "considerate" applied to such an offensive scene conjures up giddiness at the suggestion.

Throughout the dinner, Trimalchio never misses a chance to display his wealth, but ignorantly, of course, increases his image as an inane fool. When he returns to the dinner after visiting the toilet, he washes his hands in perfume, rather than water. More than showing his pretentiousness at trying to show that he can afford to use perfume as lavishly as water, the real humor here is the absurdity of even thinking perfume as a substitute for water. Who would want to bathe or wash in it? Trimalchio's sense of grandeur seems to have no perspective. Elizabeth Haight, in her book *Essays on Ancient Fiction*, says of Trimalchio: "The whole character of Trimalchio is drawn with irony: he wishes to be so splendid; he appears so ludicrous" (108). The reader has seen this in the manner of his dress and in his actions. But this is even surpassed by the tasteless nonsense images that Petronius so artfully creates to surround Trimalchio.

Nowhere is there anything negative mentioned about Trimalchio, but Petronius shows clearly that he has few good qualities. Through absurd contrasts, ridiculous exaggerations, and indecorous, colorful scenes, Petronius creates a wonderful satirical portrait of his character, Trimalchio. Thomas Cutt says, "the story of Trimalchio and his elaborately ostentatious festal entertainments

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is . . . a widely read masterpiece of literary craftsmanship" (14). Part of that mastery lies in the fact that many of Trimalchio's foibles are typical of mankind in general; thus, the portrait still carries validity and immediacy yet today.

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