

Why do we attend to these interpretations? On Max Beerbohm's "The Feast"

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Abstract. I present two interpretations of Max Beerbohm's pastiche "The Feast." Both interpretations seem as if they cannot survive forceful questioning, which asks, "Why should we think that?" And yet we, or at least I, find them worth attending to. Why? I propose an answer.

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Santa Claus abroad

May not be so adored

Below I shall present two interpretations of Max Beerbohm's "The Feast," from his book of imitations *A Christmas Garland*. I then wish to consider why these interpretations are of interest, rather than being items worthy of dismissal.

Interpretation 1. The story involves a corpulent white man named Mr. Williams in a hut abroad on Christmas day. He is guarded by a native called Mahamo. Mahamo's people have a feast on that day as well. The story refers to various illusions, in a way which is not always easy to make sense of, and ends with the words "It was the last of Mr. Williams' illusions." I presume we are intended to infer that he is eaten by the natives. That is not what I am calling "Interpretation 1," however. It is assumed by the interpretation. The interpretation is the kind of thing I imagine said at a reading group. The interpretation is "Mr. Williams represents Santa Claus to them. The feasting upon him symbolizes the destruction of Santa Claus and

the rival system of customs associated with him, in favour of the tribe's local ways.”

Interpretation 2. This is the last paragraph of the pastiche:

As he turned in his flight he saw the goods so neatly arranged at his orders, and there flashed through him, even in the thick of the spears, the thought that he would be a grave loss to his employers. This—for Mr. Williams was, not less than the goods, of a kind easily replaced—was an illusion. It was the last of Mr. Williams' illusions.

(1912: 130)

Interpretation 2 is “No, Mr. Williams does not represent Santa Claus. Mr. William is a corpulent quite high achieving white man who is nowhere near the level of Santa Claus. What the tribe are saying is: we would make an exception to our local custom of feasting on such a fellow on this day if he were Santa Claus level, but he is not. By the way, the tribe's evaluation of Mr. Williams as a living being is probably the same as his employers – we can get another one easily enough.”

Why not dismiss? “What is the evidence for either interpretation?” someone might bullishly ask. “Mr. Williams is described as a corpulent white man and Santa Claus is also often depicted as a corpulent white man, but there is no claim that Williams represents Santa Claus or that they know who Santa Claus is. The natural interpretation is they do not.” Perhaps they have the idea of a corpulent man from another society of a certain level, for which an exception is appropriate, even if they don't quite have the concept of Santa Claus. “This is still just too speculative. There is no evidence that they are making such comparisons. And if they are not, there is no reason to accept either interpretation.”

Why do these interpretations interest us, or interest me at least, if the bullsh

critic has such a strong case?¹ Why not dismiss them? Here is a proposal: we have a way of detecting interpretations of interest and not of interest (e.g. “This is a commentary on a Roman battle”); given this way, the interpretations proposed are borderline phenomena. There is enough connection to the text and enough appeal for the reader of literature seeking knowledge of human nature to feel uncomfortable with dismissing them; but they are too speculative at present to answer the bullish critic. One is drawn towards the material as on the border between the dismissable and the not-dismissable. The fascination that borderline phenomena exert! But probably in any actual case there is a better interpretation than both.

Reference

Beerbohm, M. 1912. The Feast. In *A Christmas Garland*. London: William Heinemann.

¹ I am interested in an interest which survives the bullish critic’s case. Phrasing the question in terms of “Why do we attend to them?” or “Why are we interested in them?” probably does not make this clear.