Unlacing Twain’s Kid Gloves

American storytellers often create stories based on common daily situations encountered by average people. Mark Twain was a popular humorist of the 19th Century and a well-known satirist. Through his essays and stories Twain derides himself while he cleverly reveals the follies of human nature through witty Horatian Satire. In his short story, “Buying Gloves in Gibraltar,” Twain reflects on a travel experience, and through the use of setting, diction, and imagery he crafts a revealing look at the way people will play into the hands of another when stroked by compliments to their ego.

Twain uses settings to build his satire. In the title of his story the setting alludes to the Rock of Gibraltar, gateway to the Mediterranean trade. Well aware that whoever controls the Rock of Gibraltar controls the trade, merchants and others sought control of this pivotal port (Gibraltar). Through this setting Twain pokes fun at how easily individuals can be manipulated when their ego is appealed to. Indeed, at the end of the story Twain sarcastically chides himself that he is “ready to be flattered out of your senses by every petticoat that chooses to take the trouble to do it!” (Twain).

In addition to the physical setting of his story Twain creates an emotional setting that symbolizes his increasing embarrassment. Noticing his on-looking peers enjoying themselves at his expense Twain says, “I wish they were in Jericho” (Twain). This reference to The Jericho Road alludes to a biblical setting of suffering. It is part of human nature for misery to love
company, which Twain illustrates by wishing his onlookers suffered with him in his uncomfortable predicament. Twain further develops this setting using kinesthetic imagery, comparing his embarrassment to hell which he alludes to by relating how warm he feels. After purchasing the gloves Twain says, “It was the warmest place I ever was in” (Twain).

The dialogue in the story then ironically ties to the settings. Tension builds throughout the story as the saleslady manipulates the conversation, appealing to Twain’s ego and compelling him to make a purchase he has no desire to make. She appeals to his ego by telling Twain the glove fits perfectly. The saleslady uses bold and flattering words to appeal to Twain’s masculinity saying, “Some gentlemen are so awkward about putting them on [and]…there is a grace about it” (Twain). In this way Twain playfully taunts his readers, sharing the easy manner in which people are caught up in status and concern over the opinions of others.

Ironically, from the very beginning Twain is acutely aware that the kid gloves are not a fit for him. He says, “I knew it was no such thing,” and continues absurdly to try to make his hand fit the glove. In spite of the saleslady’s declaration, “if they tear, you need not pay for them,” his ego, discomfort, and embarrassment increase and creates situational irony when, in the end, Twain shows complete disregard for common sense and purchases the shredded gloves to avoid disgracing himself in front of his peers. Twain teases his reader through the words of the saleslady, “Ah, you have had experience!” (Twain). He knows he is not alone in being caught up in words of vanity and that the conflict in this story is a familiar friend to many.

Using alliteration Twain draws the reader’s attention and states, “The remark touched me tenderly,” (Twain) which identifies the subtle manner in which words affect those to whom they are directed. Midway through the story Twain describes himself “hot, vexed, confused, yet still happy” (Twain). The inconsistency embedded in this phrase reveal conflicting emotion. As
Twain purchases the gloves, he states he feels “exquisitely mean” in his actions (Twain). This juxtaposition of contradictory terms further increases the tension and parodies the conflict experienced by individuals who act contrary to their better judgment and willingly go forward with unreasonable actions in an attempt to save face.

The gloves in the story are delightful visual imagery. The blue gloves symbolize Twain’s common sense to which “nothing was left but a melancholy ruin” (Twain). The words blue and melancholy both connote a sad state, which is the state Twain finds himself in. The saleslady lavishes her false compliments upon Twain who is determined “to deserve them or die trying” (Twain). Each compliment plied on Twain results in greater ruin of the glove. Each expanding breach in the glove symbolizes his inability to pull his wits together and use common sense. This image parallels the disintegration of his reason, although Twain continues to make great effort to conceal his awkward plight and says, “I was too much flattered to make an exposure and throw the merchandise on the angel’s hands” (Twain). The specific image of the kid gloves offered to the customer is significant. The term “Kid Gloves” denotes a delicate glove for men of fashion, but the expression “to handle with kid gloves” connotes handling someone in a calculated manner to elicit a desired response.

The irony of the tale completes itself at the close when Twain observes the glint in the saleslady’s eye and knows she is laughing at him through the window. Although he reproaches himself with “withering sarcasm,” Twain shortly forgets how he found himself in his predicament and contemplates returning to the situation “on the morrow” (Twain.) He laughs at the folly of how easy it is to forget a lesson learned. Twain’s skillful use of imagery, diction, and setting weave an ironic and clever tale of human nature. His humorous satire pointedly
illustrates the natural folly of individuals to willingly disregard all common sense when their ego is petted and stroked. He who controls Gibraltar controls the trade.
Works Cited

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