

Beyond the Jester: Pocket's Multi-dimensional Trickster Identity in Christopher Moore's *The Serpent of Venice*

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Abstract

The paper titled, "Beyond the Jester: Pocket's Multi-dimensional Trickster Identity in Christopher Moore's *The Serpent of Venice*" tries to dissect the trickster traits embodied in the character named Pocket, a fool in the novel. The paper defines as well as briefs out the major characteristic features attributed to the trickster figure in general. Pocket, the fool portrayed by Christopher Moore is different from that of Shakespeare's fool. Shakespeare depicted Pocket only as a supporting character; whereas Moore's Pocket is the main

character. Moore characterized Pocket as a foolish, crude and crazy figure with good intentions which resembles a trickster. Tricksters are generally treated as the mythical characters commonly found in the folktales and mythology that carries specific traits that makes them different from that of a fool or jester or even clowns. Tricksters are also considered to be a source of humour or laughter that through their tales transmit some moral values. Pocket in *The Serpent of Venice* takes in some features which make it similar to the so-called mythical figure, trickster. Thus, the paper intends to analyse how trickster qualities like ambiguity, shape-shifting, sexual appetite, lying, boasting, and messenger/imitator of Gods and so on are present in the characteristic of the fool, Pocket which makes him different from Shakespeare's representation.

Keywords: Trickster, Sacred being, Messenger of Gods, Ambiguity, Sexual Appetite

Introduction

Christopher Moore, the American writer famous for his comic fantasy novels often employs everyman type characters revolving around the supernatural world. Except for some works, all the others depict incidents taking place in the same universe and also characters are being carried from novel to novel. Some of his famous works include *Practical Demonkeeping* (1992), *Coyote Blue* (1994), *A Dirty Job* (2006), and *Noir* (2018) and so on. Moore has written a series based on the character Pocket, the fool, namely *Fool* (2009), *The Serpent of Venice* (2014), and *Shakespeare for Squirrels: A Novel* (2020).

Christopher Moore in the afterword of *The Serpent of Venice* have said that,

“*The Serpent of Venice* was inspired by and draws upon three works of literature: *The Cask of Amontillado*, a short story by Edgar Allan Poe; and *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello: The Moor of Venice*, by William

Shakespeare. Also, there is no little contribution from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which was the inspiration for my previous novel *Fool*, in which Pocket, Drool, and Jeff first appears" (317).

The Serpent of Venice, a story set in Venice is based on three of William Shakespeare's best-known plays namely, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. The protagonist of the novel is Pocket who is treated as a fool who also appears in the trilogy too. This particular work can be categorised as a tragedy and a comedy and the story is an amalgamation of emotions like lust, revenge, greed etc. *The Serpent of Venice* begins with the ending of the novel *Fool*, where Pocket is married to King Lear's daughter Cordelia. Unfortunately, Cordelia is murdered. And in *The Serpent of Venice* we come across many instances where Pocket meets Cordelia's ghost. Thus, Pocket comes to avenge her death and also prevent the Senators from a war. The serpent in the title is named Vivian who saves Pocket from the tides. One peculiarity is that Vivian can communicate only with Pocket and he helps Pocket to avenge his plot and prevent the war.

Christopher Moore in his works represented the fool, Pocket entirely different from that of Shakespeare's depiction. Pocket was the court-jester of King Lear. Moore has written the novel from the perspective of Pocket and has given Pocket his own space to express his thoughts, feelings and motive. Unlike other foolish or jester figures, Moore depicted Pocket as the one who is not dressed in bright colours, rather who wears a black coloured jacket. Thus, Pocket is hailed as a Black Fool in Moore's novels. Pocket is considered to be an "all-rounded fool through his wardrobe, props, abilities and commentary" (Kramer, 44). Moore portrayed Pocket as a crude, intrusive and foolish character. He is also lustful in nature, but carries some good intention for his actions. At the same time, Pocket can be hailed as a comic figure too. Pocket is illustrated as a character who is very confident and also the one who is not afraid of others.

Some of the other major characters within the novel are Antonio, a Venetian merchant; Brabantio, a senator and also father of Desdemona and Portia; Iago, a soldier; Emilia, wife of Iago; Rodrigo, a soldier and friend of Iago; Desdemona and Portia, daughters of Brabantio; Othello, a Moor; Shylock, a Jew and moneylender; Jessica, Shylock's daughter; Chorus, the narrator. From the above mentioned characters, it is evident that Christopher Moore has combined the Shakespearian characters. The setting of the novel is the Amontillado Sherry from Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Cask of Amontillado* where we see that Pockit is being attacked by the three Venetians. Carl Hiaasen, one of the American journalists and novelists in an interview for *New York Times* commented that, "Shakespeare and Poe might be rolling in their grave, but they're rolling with laughter. Moore is one of the cleverest, naughtiest writers alive".

In tandem with these insights, it is evident that reading Christopher Moore's *The Serpent of Venice* gives the experience of comic relief as Moore tried to mash-up both tragedy and comedy. Christopher Moore's language is also remarkable where he made use of witty dialogues, puns and also he is known for his bawdy prose style. His depiction of the supporting characters in the narrative is also noteworthy as he presented them as his own creations.

Trickster

One of the entertaining characters apart from the fool or jester found throughout the literature is trickster. They have the ability to take up any form like a God, a human or even an animal. Tricksters usually appear in folktales or mythology. William J Hynes and William G Doty, the major proponents of trickster studies in their magnum opus *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1993) identified some forms in which the trickster figures appear like,

“Animal-Person (particularly Blue Jay, Coyote, Crow, Fox, Hare, Mink, Rabbit, Raven, Spider, Tortoise), Anti-Hero, Confidence Person, Demiurge, Lord of the Animals, Numskull, Old Man, Picaro, Selfish Buffoon, Selfish Deceiver, Swindler, Transformer” (24).

Normally, it is observed that tricksters appear as animal figures in most of the folktales as well as mythology, but they take many other forms too. Further, they are frequently depicted as male figures even though there are female trickster figures like Kitsune the fox, Aunt Nancy (Anansi the spider), Loki, the Norse God who sometimes appears as female trickster, Eris from Greek mythology and so on. Hynes and Doty attributed six qualities that are very common to almost all the tricksters across the world. They said that tricksters are “fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous” in nature; they are “deceiver/trick-player; shape-shifter; situation-invertor; messenger/imitator of the Gods; and sacred and lewd bricoleur” (Moore, 34). Apart from these mentioned qualities there are many other features possessed by these figures. For instance, they are regarded as boasters, foolish beings, problem-creators, rule-breakers and so on.

The trickster tales stimulate some kind of social as well as moral values. In other words, the trickster tales for children pass on some moral lessons too. In this regard, trickster tales are considered to be carrying an instructive function. Kimberly Blaeser in the article “Trickster: A Compendium” asserts that,

“The fascinating aspect of this instructive function of the stories is that the performance of the tales manages to transform the learning process into a communal, joyful, active process. Trickster errs, we learn. The stories relate the faulty thinking of the trickster figure so that we may recognise the folly of our own erroneous thinking. Tricksters save us from mistakes by making them for us-in story” (56).

Trickster figures are a source of laughter as their actions involving tricks, supernatural power, rule-breaking traits etc leads to laughter. They are treated as intelligent fools or clowns irrespective of their foolish deeds. Fools/Clowns are usually portrayed as a tool for entertainment or comic relief. Besides being a comic figure, tricksters are depicted as someone who conveys some social messages. Trickster figures represent human follies in such a way that readers are made aware of their behaviour through such tales. In other words, by depicting human follies, trickster tales convey some messages to the human beings as they pinpoint the negative side of an individual.

Some of the most famous as well as common trickster figures found in folklore and mythologies are Coyote, Anansi the spider, Loki the Norse God, Ivan the Fool, Nanabozho and so on. In works of literature, trickster figures survive as a character archetype and they usually appear in fairy tales for children. Archetypes are the universal figures which represent the unconscious ideas. According to Carl Jung, the trickster is one of the four archetypes. Apart from that, William Shakespeare employed the traits of a trickster in his characterisation of the fool or jester that appears in his plays. Shakespeare depicted the trickster in two ways in his plays. One form of the trickster is the destroyer or the one who foils the plans of the protagonists. For instance, Robin Goodfellow or Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the mischievous tricksters. Another form of trickster as portrayed by Shakespeare is as the wise or tricky fools who are indulged in challenging authority and conventions. For example, Shakespeare's the Fool in *King Lear* is the one who often challenges King Lear's power. Apart from Puck and the Fool, Iago from *Othello* and Viola from *Twelfth Night* can also be attributed as the trickster figures in Shakespearean plays. Animated cartoon characters also resemble the characteristic features of tricksters. The most famous cartoon character is that of Bugs Bunny.

Plot of Pocket, the Fool

The Serpent of Venice begins with the character Pocket on a ship that is sailing towards Venice. Through the narrative it is understood that his wife Cordelia is murdered. Thus, Pocket's intention is twofold towards his journey to Venice. One is to avenge his beloved's death; and the other, to convince the senators to get back from the Crusade. After reaching Venice, Pocket meets Senator Brabantio, along with Antonio and Iago. Brabantio and Pocket are not on good terms, because it was Pocket who helped Brabantio's daughter Desdemona marry Othello, the Moor. As a revenge, Iago and Antonio plot against Pocket. Iago attacks Pocket and throws him in front of the monster Vivian. Vivian tries to attack Pocket, but at a later stage Vivian extends his hands to help Pocket to fulfil his target. Then, Pocket somehow escapes from Vivian and reaches in the hands of Jessica, daughter of Shylock, the Jew. Jessica takes care of Pocket and by the time Pocket gets back his health, he falls in love with Jessica. At times, Cordelia's ghost visits Pocket and warns him against indulging in any kind of sexual relationship with other women. But towards the end, when Pocket accomplishes his goals, Cordelia appears again and grants him permission to live with Jessica.

Analysis

The story begins with the three Venetians eagerly waiting for the arrival of the fool, Pocket. It is said that a fool is always accompanied by someone, and here in the case of Pocket, it is a monkey, Jeff; and the fool's apprentice, Drool. Tricksters are those creatures who always try to break the rules and taboos of the society, but in the case of Pocket we hear the soldier addressing the fool as, "He'll think nothing out of order then when he sees no attendants" (Moore, 6). It means that the fool or Pocket will cross the border only if there are

attendees to accompany him. It is then we see the arrival of Pocket as he is being described as,

“a wiry little man dressed in the black-and-silver motley and mask of a harlequin. By his size, one might have thought him a boy, but the oversized codpiece and the shadow of a beard on his cheek betrayed his years” (Moore, 7).

Pocket is dressed in a black coloured jacket which makes him different from other kinds of jester or foolish characters. Everyone addresses Pocket as Fortunato, but Pocket rejects that name. He asks others to call him by his name, Pocket, because Fortunato is the name which his dog calls. He also reminds others that Fortunato is not his nickname. Then we see an argument going on between Pocket, the puppet and the soldiers regarding the fluency of French language. This particular scene invokes slight humour as tricksters are those who can arouse humour wherever he is present. Thus, here Pocket takes up the task of arousing humour. Pocket asserts that, “...I am raised by nuns in the bosom of the church. Could speak and write Latin and Greek...” (Moore, 10). From this statement uttered by Pocket, one can conclude that Pocket belongs to the church. In other words, Pocket is a scared being. Tricksters too carry the trait of sacredness with them as sometimes they act as the messenger of the Gods. Likewise, Pocket acts as the messenger of the Gods in this novel. From this scene, another similarity between Pocket and the trickster that one can identify is that of mocking. When other characters talk about their abilities, Pocket mocks them and it is when he says that he can read as well as write both Latin and Greek. Tricksters are also indulged in mocking others. Almost all the trickster characters carry with them this feature of mocking others. This particular feature of trickster i.e. mocking others can be treated as the cause for laughter or humour in most of the trickster tales. The pleasure that one gets from mocking or insulting others is one of the features of humour.

Another feature of Pocket that we come across in this novel is his ambiguous nature. Pocket got confused with a word he uttered during a conversation. Pocket also says that he uttered that particular word repeatedly because he thought that others would know the meaning of that word. According to Hynes and Doty, one of the very common features of a trickster as mentioned in their work *Mythical Trickster Figure* (1993) is ambiguity. Upon analysing the character of Pocket, the fool the same trait of ambiguity is evident. As said above, Pocket was confused with him and also made others in a dilemma. Tricksters are always regarded as a kind of foolish character, and here, in this novel as well, we find that Pocket carries some foolish traits with him. Pocket also points out that he takes up various titles, but 'fool' is a constant and never changing title that he carries. Christopher Moore in his cast has named Pocket as a fool.

Next we come across another trait of a trickster, i.e., sexual desire/appetite. For instance, Pocket is served wine by the soldiers, but he in return says that, "Let's have a taste, then, although without its poured by a properly wanton, olive-skinned serving wench..." (Moore, 12). Pocket wanted the wine to be served by a woman whom he described as an "olive-skinned" lady, especially "the delicious Desdemona" (Moore, 12). Here, Desdemona is compared to a delicious dish to be tasted. From this it is very clear that Pocket too wanted a woman for pleasure which rightly asserts the appetite for sex as well as hunger. Pocket after having the wine, slightly transforms his behaviour and attitude. Thus pointing out another peculiarity of the trickster figure, i.e., shape-shifting. Here, Pocket behaves as if he was a teenage girl. Even though Pocket doesn't change his shape to a girl, he changes his attitudes and behaviour like that of a young girl. Such transformations have been attempted by Pocket earlier also when he says that he is being adorned by his doge. It is clear from this that Pocket used to transform his behaviour in front of the dog. Another instance of Pocket's sexual appetite is seen when Pocket says to Drool to "treat a whore like a lady and a lady like a

whore” (Moore, 100). Here, two sides of Pocket are revealed. At one point Pocket shows respect to women as he says to Drool to regard the whore as a lady, and another is the sexual desire where he asks Drool to consider the lady as a whore. It indirectly points out the sexual desire hidden inside Pocket where his view about a lady as a whore is revealed.

Meanwhile, Antonio, the Senator and Iago were plotting against Pocket when Antonio states that Pocket is the one “who, while wildly annoying, does seem to bring mirth and merriment to those around him” (Moore, 14). Trickster usually creates joyful as well as funny moments around him through his tricks and shape-shifting abilities. Likewise, Pocket used to create joyful situations among those who surround him. Portia, daughter of Brabantio, has sent Pocket towards the Senator to know their secret plans regarding the Crusade as well to keep them “flustered, frustrated and insulted” (Moore, 23). The tricksters have the ability to create confusion, chaos, and also can transform a situation to another mood. Tricksters are also problem makers. Thus, the same thing is done by Pocket too. Pocket tries to get the Senator distracted from planning for the Crusades and also problems are created for them. In a conversation with the Moor, Pocket says that, “I am outside the law” (Moore, 28) which directs towards the taboo-breaking trait of the trickster.

Later we find that Pocket has been saved by Jessica from the sea. Jessica hides Pocket in her room. From then on Pocket started telling lies to Jessica. Pocket says that he is a troubadour who was shipwrecked. Another instance of lying is seen when Pocket appears in front of Shylock. When Shylock enquires about Pocket, he tells that he was Lancelot. Lancelot was actually Jessica’s lover. Telling lies is one of the major features attributed to the trickster figure. Thus it is seen in the character of Pocket. But, after some time Pocket reveals his true identity to Jessica. Trickster carries good as well as bad traits along with them. They play tricks or tell lies not to harm or hurt others but they do everything for a purpose. They at times tell lies and the next moment they act as a perfect being. Pocket introduced himself as

Lancelot in front of Shylock whereas Jessica presented him as a slave in front of her father. And also, Jessica said that he was a Jew. Thus, Shylock was confused regarding that name. Shylock pointed out that, "Lancelot is not a Jewish name...Jews do not own slaves" (Moore, 73). The lies told by Pocket as well as Jessica created ambiguity for Shylock. As already mentioned, tricksters incites dilemma and confusion which is one of the most common traits of a trickster.

Jessica mocks Pocket by saying that, "...you are annoying" (Moore, 70). Tricksters are generally annoying in nature or in other words, tricksters are problem-makers or disturbers, likewise Pocket with his mannerisms and behaviour annoys Jessica. Their actions create disturbances in others which even irritate themselves. Self-praising or boasting is yet another characteristic that is found in trickster figures. There are many examples where we see Pocket praising himself. For instance, Pocket in a later stage started boasting about his skills and intelligence to Shylock that, "...I know maths and I can read and write... Latin, Greek, and English, plus a smattering of Italian, and fucking French" (Moore, 73-74). By this statement it is clear that Pocket is a smart guy who is good at reading and writing. Usually, fools are considered as those who do not possess any kind of skills, but in the case of Pocket he is intelligent. Tricksters take up the binary qualities with them, for instance, they can be good and bad at the same time; and also can act as a foolish as well as an intelligent being. Thus, it can be rightly concluded that Pocket imbibes some of the attributes of a trickster.

The general conception about fools or tricksters is that they become the victim of mockery and mock others too. Here, in this novel, Pocket also had to face such an insult. Pocket has been addressed as a "horrible, shifty-eyed creature...a rascal of the lowest order" (Moore, 96). Tricksters are usually treated as a being of lowest order and the same is seen with the case of Pocket who is hailed as a rascal who comes from the lowest order. Insulting or misusing is a humiliation faced by both fools as well as tricksters. From the interpretation

of the character Pocket, it is evident that he is being widely misused because of his “roguish charm and clever wit” (Moore, 248). Moore portrayed Pocket as a playful and mischievous character, but his roguishness carries a kind of charm by which others get attracted towards him. By ‘clever wit’ the writer means that Pocket is smart enough to transform certain situations through his witty intelligence. Tricksters are good at wickedness and wittiness as they play tricks upon others to achieve what they want and also have the ability to outsmart any dangerous situation using their intelligence.

Even though adults regard them as a foolish figure, children do love the mischief done by these beings. Trickster tales are very famous among children because those tales arouse humour among them. The same thing is applicable to Pocket as “he was much loved in his native land, and the children sang songs of his kindness” (Moore, 96). Trickster tales are commonly found in folktales as they pass on some moral lessons and transmit the cultural knowledge. Even though they create all kinds of problems and misdeeds, they are lovable creatures. Pocket is loved by his native land and children sang songs in his praise.

Hynes and Doty’s features of a trickster included the one feature namely, the messengers of Gods. In this novel, Pocket becomes the messenger not of Gods, but of a ghost Cordelia, his ex-wife. At a later stage, we see Pocket talking to a ghost who was his dead wife Cordelia as she often appears in the dreams of Pocket who gives support and advises him what to do and not. It was Cordelia who asked Pocket to support the Moor to get the hands of Desdemona. From this it can be concluded that Pocket sees Cordelia’s ghost. Thus, it can be regarded as one of the features of trickster, i.e. imitator of the Gods. The vision of Cordelia is similar to that of God’s presence in Pocket’s dreams. Pocket obeys the words of the ghost, or in other words, Pocket obeys God.

Tricksters are often compared with fools. In other words, at certain instances these two words are used as synonyms. In *The Serpent of Venice*, we see Pocket being hailed as a fool on many occasions and not just a fool, but as a “black fool” (Moore, 192). It is because Pocket always wears a black coloured jacket. For instance, in a conversation with Marco Polo, Pocket says that he is “a lighthearted fool” (Moore, 248). Pocket himself addresses him as a fool, but a fool with some humanity hidden in him. A trickster too does all kinds of foolish things but without harming others.

Conclusion

Trickster/Fool/Clown/Jester is sometimes used as synonyms. But there are varying differences between these figures. In a sense, all of them are comical figures but they take up many other roles according to certain situations. Like for instance, fools do all kinds of misdeeds, whereas trickster does it with some specific intentions. Fools’ aim is to entertain but trickster entertains as well as conveys moral messages. Tricksters are a form of the fool. Fools or Clowns are always accompanied by an animal; likewise tricksters too carry with them a creature as an apprentice. Fools do not possess any social status or power whereas, tricksters do as they imbibe some kind of supernatural ability. It is because they are mythical creatures who are treated as sacred beings. In addition to all the characteristics attributed to tricksters, they are also credited with inventing fire, language, sacred songs and so on. But fools are always known for their foolish acts.

By reading Christopher Moore’s *The Serpent of Venice*, it is observed that there are many similarities between the character Pocket and a trickster figure. Firstly, tricksters are depicted as foolish characters in almost all the fictional work. Likewise, Pocket is addressed as a fool because of his foolish behaviour and actions that can be spotted throughout the novel. Pocket is also known as the “Black Fool” in Moore’s novels. Secondly, ambiguity is

another trait that can be attributed to both trickster and Pocket. There are many instances where Pocket gets confused with himself and makes others in a state of confusion with his actions. Thirdly, the trickster trait of sexual desire can also be attached to Pocket. In this novel, sexual desire is shown by Pocket through his words. Pocket does not physically assault any women but his words do. Tricksters are generally regarded as the masters of transformation, where he/she can change their shape to another; or can transform a situation to another and so on. Such instances are spotted in this novel too. Shape-shifting or transformation is the fourth quality that can be attributed to Pocket. Next, we can say that qualities like boasting as well as lying are evident in both trickster and Pocket. Sometimes, tricksters lie with a purpose without hurting anyone. The same thing is applicable in the case of Pocket. Like tricksters, Pocket takes along with him a monkey and an apprentice too.

Apart from the above mentioned traits that are common to both the trickster and Pocket, there are many other similarities between them. Moore has intelligently depicted the character of Pocket where it becomes evident that he is the protagonist of the novel and also he is the one who gives a comic relief for the readers. Trickster features can also be identified from Moore's other novel based on the character Pocket namely, *Fool and Shakespeare for Squirrels: A Novel* too. Moore has also written novels depicting tricksters directly like *Coyote Blue*. Likewise, trickster figures are employed by many writers from various parts of the world directly or indirectly in their literary works. Some writers used trickster as a comic relief while some others used them as a tool of resistance.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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