Drainage in a Time of Cholera: History and Humour in Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames*

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Abstract

Matthew Kneale’s 1992 novel *Sweet Thames* demonstrates how neo-Victorian fiction lends itself to comic treatment. The narrator/protagonist, Joshua Jeavons, pursues two goals – obtaining public approval of his crank scheme to solve London’s sanitation problems and locating his estranged wife – with a manic zeal that, according to Henri Bergson’s theory of humour as stemming from mechanical action, qualifies him as an object of comedy. Yet while Jeavons’s obsessive behaviour may make him appear a laughable eccentric, it does not place the reader at an impassable distance. Instead, because it typifies (while exaggerating) tendencies in Victorian life and society, it gives the reader a sense of close contact with that bygone world. The narrative hinges on Jeavons’s process of self-emancipation from the conventional pieties that have imprisoned him, leading him to a radical transvaluation of his society’s values. He thus progressively sheds his initial identity as a comic anachronism. In this respect, Kneale’s novel resembles John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969). However, owing especially to the idiosyncratic voice Kneale has contrived for his first-person narrator, his novel enables a more intimate, less condescending engagement with the Victorian past.

Keywords


Any re-creation of bygone times – the imaginative feat attempted by neo-Victorian fiction – can lend itself to comic treatment. The characters represented, with their ‘quaint’ locutions and ‘dated’ customs, can easily strike us – to borrow a phrase from that eminent Victorian, Thomas Hardy – as time’s
laughingstocks. This principle applies in obvious ways to Joshua Jeavons, the narrator/protagonist of Matthew Kneale's 1992 novel *Sweet Thames*. Jeavons spends most of the novel, set in 1849, engaged in a comically twinned pair of seeming fool's errands: his attempt to secure official approval for his grand drainage scheme, meant to solve London's acute sanitation problems, and his desperate search for his wife Isobella, who has mysteriously run off. Both endeavours reveal his failure – at once lamentable and funny – to perceive the realities controlling his life. What drives home the humour is Jeavons's 'period' voice, which monopolises the narrative.

Jeavons, a draughtsman employed by the architectural firm of his father-in-law, Augustus Moynihan, has devised a pet scheme for disposing of the waste, or "effluent" as he calls it (Kneale 2001: 11 and *passim*), of the London sewers by collecting it and marketing it to farmers as manure. He has entered his project in a municipal competition, and is frustrated by its failure to obtain a positive hearing. A further cause of frustration is Isobella's reluctance to consummate the marriage; after he attempts to force her compliance, she vanishes from the dinner party Jeavons has arranged to 'sell' his project to a group of prominent townsmen. Through his frantic pursuit of his drainage scheme and his equally fraught efforts to retrieve his wife, Jeavons is reduced to penury and distraction. Eventually he makes two crucial, linked discoveries: his drainage project has been utterly misconceived, and Isobella is the traumatised survivor of sexual abuse at the hands of her father.

Thus outlined, Kneale's narrative confirms Patricia Pulham's contention that

> the neo-Victorian novel [...] is [...] always a form of detective fiction: a crime, event, personage, or text from the past functions as the catalyst for the retrieval/revision of that past in order to discover some new clue that will change our perceptions in the present.

*Pulham 2010: 159*

*Sweet Thames* is shadowed by the spectres of crime (rape/incest) and disease (a cholera epidemic), and Jeavons's sleuthing on both counts has (as I will argue) strong implications for our perceptions both of his age and our own. And yet from the start, Jeavons the 'detective' impresses us as laughably clueless.

Attempts to define humour are apt to provoke scepticism. Speaking of the myriad theories of comedy that have been proposed over centuries, Kirby Olson maintains: