

Petronius Satyrice 29

Petronius was the author of the novel *Satyrice*, and may have been the same Petronius who was the Emperor Nero's Arbiter of Elegance (though this is contested by scholars)¹. In *Satyrice*, the novel details in the first person the story of Encolpius, his two companions, and how they act within a number of circumstances, including an extravagant meal provided by Trimalchio². Trimalchio is a rich freedman whom Encolpius does not shy upon criticising within his thoughts as the festivities of the feast unfold³. The surviving text is incomplete and but the parts that survive demonstrate an attack on life in multiple levels, especially on the hollow aspects of society⁴. The novel has a great importance placed upon poetry also, with Petronius interspersing poems within the narrative which adds to critics' complaints about the fragmentary nature of the story arc⁵. The novel is based on fictional realism, but due to its satirical nature, some events would be exaggerated for humour⁶. In fact, at times Petronius even uses a more vulgar form of Latin to emphasise the satirical nature of the story, and how the characters don't 'fit' into the ideals of high society⁷.

On the whole, section 29 of the work describes some of Encolpius' observations and feelings upon seeing his surroundings⁸. It explores not only his own timid nature "plucked up courage", but Trimalchio's character via the wall art Encolpius notices⁹. His observation of Trimalchio's wall art gives the reader the backstory of the character Trimalchio quickly, from slave to rich freedman: "Then the painstaking artist had given a faithful picture of his whole career with explanations"¹⁰. It also shows that Trimalchio is proud of his achievements in life, as he portrayed the story of his success openly, (though not without embellishments: "Minerva had him by the hand")¹¹. However, this also shows that Trimalchio is a flawed character, as although portraying some success was deemed acceptable, this in depth look of his life would have been deemed as the wrong thing to do, for it would be too 'vulgar'¹². It helps set up Trimalchio's imperfections in the 'proper' way to do things for when he continues to make mistakes in later parts of the story- particularly as his dinner party¹³. Furthermore, the autobiographical decoration has symbolism linking to death. It is suggested that Encolpius is "entering a house of the dead" as he inspects the wall mural due to the connotations it holds relating back to Aeneas' journey to the underworld being foreshadowed by a mural of the Minoan Labyrinth¹⁴. The depiction of a life story is also something derived from funeral art, and furthers the idea of death and Trimalchio not having the 'proper' way of doing things- he doesn't understand the difference in decoration between life and death¹⁵.

The section of text is very closely focussed upon the mural, describing it in a good amount of detail for the reader to gain a clear image of what is being portrayed¹⁶. This in itself emphasises the

¹ Rose, 1971, p.5

² Petr. Sat.

³ Petr. Sat. 38

⁴ Petr. Sat.

⁵ Connors, 1998, p.1; Hubbard, 1986, p.190

⁶ Petr. Sat.

⁷ Connors, 1998, p.3

⁸ Petr. Sat. 29

⁹ Petr. Sat. 29

¹⁰ Petr. Sat. 29

¹¹ Petr. Sat. 29

¹² Connors, 1998, p.3

¹³ Petr. Sat. 70

¹⁴ Bodel, 1994, P.240

¹⁵ Bodel, 1994, P.242

¹⁶ Petr. Sat. 29

importance of the mural as it demands attention, which makes the ways in which it does not conform all the more clear. It is decorated as a Roman tomb would be, and for that reason it is great foreshadowing for later within the text during the feast, where Trimalchio's connection with the theme of death and mistakes becomes even more explicit¹⁷. For the feast is where Encolpius truly starts with his internal criticisms of Trimalchio's ways¹⁸.

The frieze also demonstrates the connection between Trimalchio and Mercury. Within the mural, Encolpius notes that Trimalchio was "holding a Mercury's staff"¹⁹. This self-deification would once more be seen as something done posthumously in funerary art, once more demonstrating Trimalchio's lack of understanding of how the society worked²⁰. Mercury being used as the deity of choice makes sense due to him being the one most frequently represented, likely as a reminder of the freedman's success in the business world and commerce²¹. Trimalchio's choice of patron deity is clear with the god being portrayed as having "taken him by the chin"- an action which demonstrates affection and has connotations for assistance and care to contemporary Romans²². Furthermore, his rich lifestyle was further represented within the text with "Fortune stood by flowing with her horn of plenty", due to the imagery it invokes suggesting one of financial prosperity and riches²³.

Encolpius is not the perfect character either, however. Which can be clearly seen with how skittish he is written, such as when it is described that he "nearly fell backwards and broke [his] leg" in response to a painting of a dog²⁴. This type of reaction demonstrates that Encolpius is not a flawless character and is therefore capable of mistakes, especially when considering such a sign would have likely been commonplace²⁵. Encolpius non-perfect nature being demonstrated so clearly ensures that it is also clear that he could potentially be an unreliable narrator for the events unfolding. This first-person narration only provides the thoughts of a singular character, which limits how far the reader of the text would understand the greater context of the world being created- they have to trust Encolpius' word, but also understand that everything is skewed due to his perspective.

In all, section 29 of Petronius' *Satyricon* focuses heavily upon the mural of Trimalchio and Encolpius' first reactions to it²⁶. It is the beginning of Petronius making Trimalchio's misunderstandings of Roman society clear, whilst also starting to demonstrate his more gluttonous side with the embellishments in the portrayal of his life story- something which would be expected of an ex-slave for they would want to celebrate their free life to the fullest²⁷.

¹⁷ Petr. Sat. 46; Petr. Sat. 29; Bodel, 1994, P.242

¹⁸ Petr. Sat.

¹⁹ Petr. Sat. 29

²⁰ Bodel, 1994, P.242

²¹ Bodel, 1994, P.246

²² Petr. Sat. 29; Bodel, 1994, P.251

²³ Petr. Sat. 29

²⁴ Petr. Sat. 29

²⁵ Holleran, 2011, p.260

²⁶ Petr. Sat. 29

²⁷ Petr. Sat. 29; Bodel, 1994, P.252

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