

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
TRIMALCHIO

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Trimalchio (in Petronius' *Satyricon*) **extravert**

Overview Petronius (27-86 A.D.) was a Roman courtier in the time of the Emperor Nero, serving as consultant, advisor, even friend, but inevitably at risk in the high stakes and high living environment of that licentious ruler. Petronius was not, though, simply a playboy—that came in the latter part of his relation to the Emperor—but seems to have served effectively as Governor of Bithynia, and is other demanding administrative jobs. He came to be called the court's *arbiter elegantiae, judge of taste*, for his artistic and critical judgments were invariably sharp, erudite, and merciless. His judgments of individuals were also dangerous, and many a foe—eventually a fatal cabal—grew up in the atmosphere of the court, until he was finally overwhelmed by his enemies.

Character Trimalchio is the outstanding extravagant character to pass through the pages of Petronius' first century B.C. novel, the *Satyricon*. In the book Trimalchio plays the chief part only in the section called *The Dinner Party of Trimalchio*. Trimalchio, an ex-slave become arrogant, through providing services others would (and did) consider too shocking to consider, is known for throwing lavish parties, in which sex and food, among other things, are pushed to the extreme: live birds sewn up inside a pig—and released as the delicacy of the evening; a dish to represent every sign of the zodiac.

Parallels Shakespeare comes first to mind, for his creation of larger than life, fully rounded characters like Falstaff and the Wife of Bath, each of which exceeds Trimalchio in taste for life, if not in grossness. Both of these Shakespearean characters embody an awareness of themselves, which is the ultimate touch of the human condition. Somerset Maugham, in *Of Human Bondage* (1915) creates a life-loving character, Thorpe Athelny, who raises a large rambunctious, vital family, in whom he inculcates his own fascination with life and the ideas that give it richness. Eating, drinking, and philosophizing, he emulates a Trimalchio of our time.

Illustrative moments

Compassionate Trimalchio, an ex slave, has accumulated wealth, a huge mansion, a classy chorus girl wife with a taste for porn and plenty of practice, and a talent for holding large, extravagant, and raunchy parties. But he is not simply a lech and a lust; he has a philosophy. 'He has a time piece in his dining room, and a trumpeter especially provided for the purpose keeps him constantly informed how much of his lifetime is gone.' Throughout the 'dinner' he hosts, at the center of the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio takes care of others, both his guests, and those who will inherit from him: he is a sensuous and extravagant life-lover but a careful guy—in his way.

Reveller Within his party environment, Trimalchio gives play to fun and games: he enjoys tossing green balls onto the floor, gets a kick out of pissing in the gilded chamber pot that a couple of eunuchs hold out before him, and out of wiping his urine covered hands in the hair of the eunuch lads. 'Moving to the center of his main hall, Trimalchio let himself be drenched with unguent, then wiped off not however with ordinary towels but with pieces of blanketing of the softest and finest wool.' He capers among his fellow revelers, whipping up the spirit of the evening—'evening's for fun, day's for play.'

Camp In high camp style, we might say, 'wrapped in a wrapsascal of scarlet frieze, he was placed in a litter, preceded by four running foot men, and a wheeled chair, in which his favorite rode, a little old young man, sore-eyes and even uglier than his master.' Trimalchio vanishes briefly with his love entourage, then returns to the dinner table for the major feast of the evening. Displaying the wine choices available for the evening's dinner, Trimalchio stops briefly to masturbate, meanwhile reflecting on the passage of great wines which olive their mortal consumers. It is a call to joy! 'Drink and make merry while you may.'

Showman Trimalchio prides himself on his exquisite and tricky cuisines, which form the showpieces of his dinner—the place where his own artistic capacity shines. He delights in surprising the guests with such as this: ‘a dish was brought in with a basket on it, in which lay a wooden hen, her wings outspread round her as if she were sitting.’ Trimalchio alleges a fear that the peafowl’s eggs, on which the hen is sitting, may be half-hatched. Are they edible? The guests are given half-pound spoons, and told to break the eggs. And what is concealed in the pastry eggs but a very fine beccaficco, ‘swimming in yoke of egg flavored with pepper.’

Discussion questions

Does Petronius like Trimalchio? Or does Trimalchio push the boundaries of crazy hedonism too far?

In what ways does Trimalchio care for his guests? Is he interested in them as real people or simply as organisms to stuff with food?

What role does Encolpius play, in opening out Trimalchio for us?