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## **Commodified Communion: The Shatter Of Societal Charisma In *Timon Of Athens***

### **Abstract**

Societal Charisma is taken very seriously as something without which one cannot survive. Excessive expectation from society and aiding it with monetary sources does not always necessitate the ideal condition of being reciprocated in the same way. More often such a cold sycophantic outlook tempts the affected individuals to develop a rebellious cynical attitude against society in general. They cease to believe in it and abandon the idea of contributing to it. For them, such uptake is another extreme of virtue. I utilized Diogenean philosophy of Cynicism as a theoretical pulpit to address such contention in the light of *Timon of Athens*. I also applied Melvin Seeman's Five Variants of Alienation as a supportive framework to substantiate Timon's estrangement from society as another extreme of virtue from his former philanthropy. The research method used in the study is qualitative and hence, content analysis is used to interpret the text.

**Keywords:** Societal Charisma, Cynicism, Sycophantic Social Attitude

A person does much to conform with society. He tries to come up with every act of nobility to have society at his side. With the reversal of fortune, it turns its face away from that person, therefore, abandoning him. He delves into a state of despair over the reality of his deeds of societal coherence. A cynical portrayal of an individual is observed which implies that society is nothing more than a bunch of greedy fortune-grabbers who gather at the feet of Fortune. In the play, a break from societal ties is seen as the result of greed and ingratitude on the part of society. And so the rightly deserving vituperations against the hypocrisy and moral corruptions of society are observed. In Timon's speech, the voice of pessimism is observed to be the outcome of societal injustice. He spits forth hate and revulsion in turn. He depicts the example of a man who has been snapped out from his dream of societal strengthening of bonds and affection to the reality of his ruined prosperity and the baseness of the public. Diogenian thought of Cynicism proves beneficial in detecting and observing the shatter of societal charisma in the eyes of a man who favoured people by giving them so much. It plays a pivotal role in analyzing the philosophical retaliation in an individual as a result of extreme societal rejection. Society indispensably plays an effective role in awakening and letting loose the cynical drive in an individual as a transfer from the optimistic social attitude.

The unravelling of obsequious behaviour of society after the depletion of one's wealth as a consequence of societal courting shatters a man psychologically inside-out. Timon's cynical attitude is an adoption of virtue after he is done with provisioning society to conform with it. On the whole, he detests society. He thinks them to be nothing but a pack of wild animals who patronize a philanthropic soul before attacking it

emotionally and morally. Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* is about the transference of a good-hearted man into a man-heater.

I intend to unravel the nature of cynicism awakened in Timon as a result of societal hypocrisy. I endeavour to establish a case against society by analyzing his philosophical retaliation as a cynic from a Diogenian mirror. The current research will help unveil the different aspects of a cynic who was forged as a result of societal villainy. It will help have an insight into how being a cynic is another extreme of virtue for a former philanthropic individual.

I explore how societal charisma is a bane for a well-provisioned individual who gives away so much. I intend to discourse on the nature of the cynical drive and how it moulds an individual to philosophically retaliate after societal turndown in Timon's case. I intend to reflect on the disillusionment of a societal fanatic and how it makes a cynical attitude an inevitability for him. I intend to develop on how turning into a cynic is another adoption of virtue for Timon.

As a canonical work, Shakespeare's play has developed an immense array of precedence in terms of research. Pierce (2002) in his paper *Tragedy and Timon of Athens* gives his remark in the following words, "Timon is in many ways typical of Shakespeare's tragedies. It focuses on the fall of a major figure, ending in his death. Its mood is certainly dark, and it explores public issues such as the rights and duties of a citizen, the ideals of friendship, and the philosophy of cynicism" (p. 81).

Blits (2016) in his paper *Philosophy (And Athens) in Decay* asserts that Timon's appraisal of the mutual bond among men is invoked by a flattering wish that he may make requests of objects which please him, so that they may have a chance to show their love for him. However, the abundance of Timon's wealth prevents the gestures of goodwill from being reciprocated. Timon soothes his friends implying that the deities will help them through opportunities and shows his gratitude to Fortune for having such friends, which resonates a grim irony (541).

A former part-time professor of philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua.J. Mark (2002) stated in his article entitled *Diogenes of Sinope* mentioning that Diogenes was the man who came to meet Antisthenes by whom he was denied from being his follower. Antisthenes finally gave way to his dedication and accepted him. He took his lodgings in a large pot used for brewing wine (para. 4). He kept a wooden vessel that served for eating and drinking which later he threw away after he saw a boy drinking water with both hands (para. 5).

Itani (2021) in an article, *Diogenes of Sinope, The Philosopher Troll* sheds light on his societal perceptions mentioning that Diogenes had a very bitter and austere opinion about the adoption of manners in society. He held them to be pretences used by people to hide their true nature. To him, society was a superficial gathering of individuals lacking in virtue. He adopted the life of a nonconformist in Athens, taking the objective personally to defame the so-called milestones of culture and norms (para .9).

David Hernshinow (2017) in his paper, *Cash Is King: Timon, Diogenes, and the Search for Sovereign Freedom* shedding light on societal delusions remarks that in his days of prosperity, Timon held the interests of everyone above everything, calling himself to be

a true friend of the society. Even though Timon asserts that his interests are no different from his friends, this only destabilizes his acquaintance with those who owe him so much. In the example of Ventidius, it can be seen that Timon refused to take any repayment from him after his inheritance. For critics, he serves the role of the 'Big Man' found prevalent in non-Western cultures, who give without the expectations of any return until their wealth is entirely exhausted. An enticing analogy though, it is very deceptive. So much of it is seen in Timon who is deep in debt for everything he has laid (p. 60-61).

Clifford (1980) in his paper *Timon of Athens': The Iconography of False Friendship* argues that the knot of friends is a must for the strengthening of society itself. Alas for Timon, who has built castles in the air based on 'bare friendship' realizes his failure only too late. From the peaks of generosity, he falls under the representation of a man-hater, a repulsion that cannot be subdued even through the example of his loyal steward (p. c182).

Elz (2016) in *Contained Immanence: Shakespeare's Timon of Athens between Tragedy and Romance* stipulates Timon's dispense of his wealth as an objective of changing money into a more symbolic form. He wishes to harness the transformation and circulation of wealth for the containment of unity in society. However, this plays a significant role in limiting his understanding of society (p.11).

Kolb (2018) in her article, *Debt's Poetry in Timon of Athens* states Timon to be blind from the imminent cracks on his fortune as a result of extravagance and debt. His visual pomp had misled a debtor such as himself along with the creditors. Timon is greatly surprised as creditors barge at his door for he had been subject to so much praise that it made him oblivious to his actual conditions (p. 408).

William Richardson (1784) in his work *On the Dramatic Character of Timon of Athens,* " *Essays on Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters* sheds light on Timon's generosity which has no value in the eyes of those he cares about. He lived under the delusion that he resided in their hearts, which later brings forth nothing but disappointment. Timon suffers in great agony for he had invested sincerely in society (p. 106).

To contribute to the precedence of research in the light of this play I intend to have an insight about Timon from the Diogenian angle of cynicism. I intend to discourse on the shatter of societal charisma in his situation and alienation as adoption of virtue on another extreme.

The research is based purely on the paradigm of Qualitative research. Content Analysis has been done by taking the excerpts from the primary text and the secondary sources. The secondary sources consist of relevant material on the internet, books and newspapers, and magazines.

Diogenes' theory of cynicism has been as the theoretical framework for the current research. Like his mentor Antisthenes, he believed in consciousness, the significance of self-improvement in one's actions and the dismissal of everything that was considered excessive in life, such as personal property and socio-economic class. As an ascetic, he lived the life of a destitute whose greatest pleasure lay in questioning societal norms and values. Diogenes did not subject himself to the rules of the system; instead, he opted to obey his inner voice. For this cause, the ethnic slur "dog" was given the name "Cynic".

Cynic means 'dog-like' in Greek. He upheld the stance that his voice of protest must ring louder for it to be conveyed correctly.

He lived in the streets of Athens as a beggar, rendering the virtue of great poverty. He taught disdain for all individual accomplishments, social ideals and structures. But his quick humour and biting satire were very effective in exposing the decadence, incoherence and dual expectations of Athens culture. He frivolously lauded the qualities of a dog as an animal who would eat anything. It does not have to think about where to sleep. It can distinguish between friend and foe. It can carry on natural body functions publicly without any hesitation. In the theory of Cynicism, Diogenes maintains that the goal of life is to lead the life of virtue, cohering with the natural world with the demands of only bare necessities for living. It means denying all traditional aspirations for well-being, money, grandeur and enjoying a life free from the worries of provisions and land.

I have also applied Melvin's Seeman's Five Variants of Alienation in a supportive manner to substantiate Diogenean cynicism in Timon's condition as adoption of virtue to another extreme after the departure from social fanaticism. The current research analyzes the shatter of societal glamour in Timon of Athens. It will discuss societal atrocities and shed light on the cynical attitude as adoption of virtue of another extreme for a philanthropic soul as Timon. I limit my study to the characters and dialogues of *Timon of Athens* by Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton.

*Timon of Athens* has enjoyed acclaim as a result of being hypercritical about society. At the commencement of the play, the songs of the prosperity of Timon are being heard from the lips of a poet, a painter, a jeweller and a merchant. Each of them has some ornament to sell to him for generous monetary returns. For the poet, it is his words, for the painter it is his masterpiece, a jewel by the jeweller and the goods from the merchant. His generosity attracts all sorts of people from the Athenian society, from the low fawners to the surly Apemantus, a critical man. In his latest composition the poet has directed his verse for Timon depicting that this generous man is on the vantage point of fortune, which will prove to be deceptive on his downfall:

When Fortune in her shift and change of mood  
Spurns down her late beloved, all his dependants,  
Which labour'd after him to the mountain's top  
Even on their knees and hands, let him slip down,  
Not one accompanying his declining foot. (1.1, 104-108)

Timon is told by the messenger of his friend, Ventidius that his supplicant has been confined by those to whom he owed money and so Timon takes this as a responsibility to pay his loan to liberate him. Later, an old man comes and tells him how Lucilius charms his daughter. Timon comes up with terms to persuade the old man to marry his daughter to Lucilius. He offers money to the father to ease things up. Lucilius is grateful and feels greatly indebted to Timon. Timon is observed to be giving his wealth to the people at a pace impossible for anybody to have earned it. He has the company of lords and senators all of them expectant of receiving costly gifts from him which he bestows without any care. He considers them friends on unconditional terms,

...We  
are born to do benefits: and what better or  
properer can we can our own than the riches of our  
friends? O, what a precious comfort 'tis, to have  
so many, like brothers, commanding one another's  
fortunes! O joy, e'en made away ere 't can be born!  
Mine eyes cannot hold out water, methinks: to  
forget their faults, I drink to you. (1.2, 439-446)

Ironically, Timon can be observed to be a person who lived in a utopian world of social unity. His time of prosperity as a result of his abundant wealth, made him fail to realize that he was living a fool's dream. Even one can grow sceptical after reading this play whether his acts of philanthropy and generosity were an actual benefit for society. This does seem to imply in a manner, for his coffer only seems to outflow or extend to those who undoubtedly did not deserve it. They can be termed to be thieves in polite garb. The progression in the reading of the play also takes one back to the start of the play, where the representatives of different professions have come to Timon with their articles, with a sincere hope that they will be able to fool him into buying their articles which they want to dispense. Their over-exaggeration of the quality of products is a criticism of the baseness of society. The wealth of a well-provisioned man attracts retailers of all sorts. It is just like a well-nectared flower that attracts bees of all kinds. Only in Timon's case, the 'bees' do not pollinate the flower.

While Timon's party is attended by raving flatterers and women dancing, masquerading as Amazons, the lords also join them. Flavius tries to make his master aware of the desperate matters at hand but is waved off. As Flavius is giving the small casket of jewels to Timon which is to be whiled away in good gesture, he thinks of how he is giving out of an empty coffer. Timon owes more than he can pay and all his lands are mortgaged. Conversing with himself, Flavius declares that he had destroyed himself by giving more to his so-called well-wishers than struggling against his persecutors. While everyone is 'graced' with a gift, Apemantus remains behind. According to Timon, he too would have got himself a valuable present had it not been for his cold behaviour. The philosopher mocked Timon saying that no one would denounce Timon if bribed, which would then make Timon's downfall even more obvious. He further emphasized how he desired that men gave equal attention to wisdom than they did to deception:

**APEMANTUS:** No, I'll nothing: for if I should be bribed too,  
there would be none left to rail upon thee, and then  
thou wouldst sin the faster. Thou givest so long,  
Timon, I fear me thou wilt give away thyself in  
paper shortly: what need these feasts, pomps and  
vain-glories? (1.2, 610-15)

He dolefully raves accessing the situation that Timon would not listen to reason:

"Thou wilt not hear me now; thou shalt not then:

I'll lock thy heaven from thee.

O, that men's ears should be

To counsel deaf, but not to flattery” (1.2, 621-625)

Adair Toteff (2015) in his book *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* provides an actual insight into Timon’s excessive engrossment in societal affairs which played a primary role in monetarily killing himself. According to him, when a person is no longer thought a prospering individual, he is considered to be deprived of having an influential power in society. Though having an influence enables a person to come up with performing remarkable tasks, it must be kept in mind that such charismatic glamour is often temporary. He can only maintain his persona of being a great virtuous man as long as he can perform those remarkable tasks (353-357).

In the later part of the play, it is observed how his decrease in monetary terms begins to awake him gradually from the slumber of a social benefactor. He realizes that he is now no longer important in the Athenian social circle. His very dwelling which was once the come and go area of people with monetary demands for the excuse of social unification had changed into a place where creditors buzzed like mosquitoes asking for the payment of their debts which were not sought in his days of prosperity. It is in this phase he questions his steward, surprised that he was not fully aware of the state of his expenses. Flavius sincerely addresses his master reminding him how many a time he came up with the state of his accounts at which point the subject was diverted to other channels. Timon would throw away any valuables in return for a small present, which even made his steward shake his head and cry in anguish. The little remains of his wealth were not enough even to supply for the partial payment of his debts. When he asks for all his land to be sold, there too fortune gives a sullen look for all his lands were forfeit under heavy debts. He had been such a spendthrift that his steward replied, “O my good lord, the world is but a word: Were it all yours to give it in a breath, How quickly were it gone” (2.2, 841-843)!

Hence messengers are dispatched by Timon to all those people upon whom he bestowed an abundance of wealth. Surprisingly all of them happen to be out of wealth or have other problems to attend to. All his ‘friends’ according to Flavius, “answer, in a joint corporate voice” expressing their ‘regrets’ for not being able to help him (2.2, 230). This sad spectacle leads to the awakening of the cynical drive inside him. It starts to give the outlook of an individual who is being forged in the Diogenian fire. When the last endeavour made at Lucilius, whom Timon financially supported in his days of scarcity fails, Timon seemed to be in shock. This last effort seemed to have thrown him from the edge of welfare into the deep gorges of cynicism. His philosophical retaliation as a result of societal turndown is observed to be in development. He has become a cynic who is seen under a Diogenian shadow to be understanding society as nothing but a bunch of sycophants.

Like Diogenes, he realized what is called society is nothing but a collective forging of men who did not come in terms with truth and virtue. According to him, society cannot do much or in Timon’s case, nothing to make an individual good or enable him to retain his virtue. Diogenes is famed for walking in open daylight with a candle in his hand searching for a man or what is mostly interpreted in contemporary times, an honest man. I observe Timon also carries the same light but in a different form i.e. wealth. Only this caused him to be much deluded into thinking that he had many sincere people around him. And when that ‘light’ is blown out by the air of extravagance he finds himself alone under

the sun. He loses his faith in society, never to trust it ever again. Timon's last banquet is a ceremonial proclamation of being broken in the wear and tear of societal hypocrisy to become a cynic. Only in this vein, does he takes even a more austere turn. Diogenes attended himself in society, taking a huge jar as his residing abode, and satirizing people. Timon is observed to have chosen to live outside society, wandering in the forest and satisfying his hunger by digging for herbs. He treads upon the footsteps of Diogenes, "I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals" (p. 63).

However, In Timon, one can see an even ascetic turn for he shunned every guest in his last feast by throwing boiling water on them seething as if to chew them raw bellowing and calling them,

Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites,  
Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears,  
You fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time's flies,  
Cap and knee slaves, vapours, and minute-jacks! (3.6, 1534-1537)

Diogenes rebuked the Sinopeans by condemning them in turn to staying at home as a retort for banishing him. Although this was done on different grounds, Timon is observed to adopt a similar stance with different motives. He had been abandoned by society when he was in dire need of it and in turn, he made a call for banishment by condemning it to its dwelling and taking his leave for the forest into seclusion. It had been too much for his philanthropic soul that he could not bear it in his heart to associate or even to interact with society it ever again.

Timon's adoption of this extreme of austerity in the Diogenean vein aligns very much with what Melvin Seeman expresses about powerlessness as a tantamount aspect that leads to alienation. In Timon's case, the trust in society was too great. This trust grew to be short-lived as a result of his depletion of wealth. His consumption of wealth with the intent of giving it to society strengthened the aspect in his mind that his kindness will be reciprocated with kindness. In his paper for the *American Psychological Review* entitled *On The Meaning of Alienation*, Seeman (1959) stipulates his view about powerlessness which leads to alienation, "The expectancy or probability held by the individual that his behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks" (p. 784). Seeman's view gets to have a befitting share in terms of justifying the shatter of the utopia of societal communion in Timon's psyche. The shocking outburst of stoicism from society determines in the light of the play that philanthropy does not beget philanthropy as a necessity of poetic reciprocity. He, therefore, adopted a more austere path of abandoning society, to live in the wild.

Diogenes had by the tutelage of Antisthenes perceived that one had to stay apart from the extravaganza of oily tongues and sycophantic traps of society yet he did not abandon himself from the vicinity of Athens. Timon moved a step even further. He could not even bring himself to bear the presence of such a society. Timon's madness is also due to the reason that he cannot bring himself to accept the fact that he had had so poor a repayment from society for his virtue. He gives up his life in Athens not for the mere fact that he has none of the financial means to pacify his debtors but also for the reason that he

felt himself to be a meaningless individual. His judgement gets clouded and therefore does not know what to believe. While talking about meaninglessness as one of the five variants of alienation Seeman sheds light on the spectacle of the trauma of such an alienated man. For Seeman, there is little chance that any positive assumption about the future behaviours of society can be made.

Timon, while enduring the wilderness used herbs to satisfy his hunger. By a quirk of fate, he finds a horde of treasure buried by someone a long time ago. He experiences an immense wave of energy. He starts thinking about how he can restore himself to former glory with such a horde and have all the societal prestige restored for himself again. He could get back to life again. But just then he remembers the indifference of the Athenian society. He gets an insight into how wealth would have the sycophantic society hovering about him again. In Seeman's words, it can be termed as, "a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about future outcomes of behaviour can be made" (p. 786). In Timon's situation being cynical becomes an imminent resolve for a societally-alienated individual. While talking to thieves he satirizes the 'divine' faculties of nature. He reflects in the most ironical manner which moulds him to be cynical in the Diogenian sense. Diogenes of Sinope was known for his satirical way of giving advice. Timon follows in the footsteps of cynics but with an austerity. His lesson is learnt not by philosophical tutelage but what his social life had taught him. Timon 'inspires' the thieves to steal as much as they can from society and justifies thievery as a natural phenomenon. He gives examples of the sky, the earth and other such faculties in terms of how they 'steal' from each other. His speech changes the heart of the thieves to a great extent and they take some of the gold offered by Timon. The thieves leave thoughtfully with a mind of giving up their profession in future. He revels in normlessness which Seeman states that for Durkheim such a condition is the failure of society where its norms and traditions are no longer suitable for the regulation of an individual (p. 787). Alienation is Timon's defiance against the rejection of society where he abhors further exploitation. It is his philosophical retaliation that marks the makings of a cynic. He not only abandons the hope of replenishing his prestige but also the desire for it.

Hence, the current study sheds light on how societal glamour can be a misery for a philanthropic person. It ails such an individual to that extent where he rebels with the ideology of society as a whole. Turning cynical, following Timon's condition seems the only available option. It makes an individual abandon societal conformity almost as if it is a disease.

I performed this study, intending to uphold the notion that rendering monetary benevolence for societal coherence and expecting the same in return, most importantly in the hour of need is a futile exercise. My inspiration for the study is derived from the societal behaviour of contemporary times where the well-off individuals have the standing of a 'Big Brother' in society. They are philanthropic and compassionate to those who are in need whether they are affiliated with them or not. They bestow gifts upon those who are well-provisioned. However, when the tide turns, the 'Big Brother' figures find out the truth about monetary endeavours for societal conformity, to be way different than what they had expected. They are abandoned to their deplorable state. Talking behind their backs about



their former glory is the only tribute they are given in turn by society. Whenever societal factions interact with these individuals, they are given a cold shoulder. A cautious and superficial gesture is made to them in the name of cordiality. Such alms are given to them by society so that one day it can turn back to approach them in its hour of need should Fortune smile upon them again. Nonetheless, the philanthropic souls become broken, never to set their face on societal expectations ever again. I have therefore used the Cynical thought of Diogenes and Seeman's Alienation theory as a theoretical framework to discuss this dilemma.

While performing content analysis I have endeavoured to seek answers to my research questions which have evolved due to the qualitative nature of my work. These questions have also played a vital role in helping me keep my study focused. The shatter of societal coherence in the individual's hour of crisis despite having done so much for the people and its becoming a forerunner to adopting a hostile cynical attitude towards society has captured my interest.

The current research has enabled me to recommend studying classical literature from multiple perspectives. The dialogues of the play in question can be subject to different socio-political frameworks to better understand the social behaviours of individuals in varying circumstances. In the light of *Timon of Athens*, I would recommend a deep critical insight of the behavioural patterns of society in the light of dialogues of the play from a diversity of psychological perspectives, which according to me, would prove useful for therapeutic purposes to rescue such individuals from the bowels of cynicism. I hope my work will prove indispensable for other researchers to study this classical text further in its fertility.

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