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## **BLACK HUMOUR**

**"It is called Black Humour, and I think I would have more luck defining  
an elbow or ham sandwich..."**

- apocalyptic comedy ?**
- dark comedy ?**
- pathologic comedy ?**
- nihilistic comedy ?**
- tragic farce ?**
- the comedy of the absurd ?**
- ..... ?**

"It is called *Black Humour* and I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich. I am not, for one thing, even sure it is black. It might be fuchsia or eggshell and now that I look at the table of contents I think some of it is in brown polka dots..." (Bruce Jay Friedman)

**Black:** "...bad, wicked, evil, awful, unspeakable, unscrupulous, bad-tempered, threatening..."  
("The Oxford Thesaurus", 1991)

**Humour:** "Latin *humere* meant *be moist*, source of English *humid*, which originally meant *liquid*. In due course it to be applied specifically to any of the four bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, cholera, black bile), whose combination according to medieval theories of physiology determined a person's general health and temperament. This was the sense in which English acquired the word via Anglo-Norman *humour*, and it gradually developed in meaning via "mental disposition at a particular time, mood" and "inclination, whim" to, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the main modern sense *funniness*.

("Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins", by John Ayto, 1990)

## **Introduction**

The French surrealist poet and critic André Breton first coined the phrase *humor noir* in the late 1930's. He used this phrase to describe what he perceived as an age-old sensibility and rebellious, which has served to question and undermine societal norms.

Black Humour is primarily concerned with the heightened consciousness of the absurd and so are the protagonists are typically antiheroes, characters of the innocent, or insane. The two-dimensional characters wander through nightmarish worlds of unpredictable events and fantastic coincidences where images of disintegration, disease and horror monopolise consciousness. Often their conversations appear odd when they juxtaposed against the impossible, bizarre and typically appalling events that provoke them. In such worlds, it is "almost no trick at all", discovers the Chaplin of *Catch-22*:

*"...to turn vice into virtue, and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all."*

In a moment of intuition the Chaplin comprehends the ridiculous parallelisms that defines reality as it is identified in Black Humour literature.

Does Black Humour belong to the realm of abnormal psychology? Is laughter which springs from pain, horror, incongruity and misfortune unhealthy?

Laughter is a form of ridicule, reflecting a feeling of disinterested superiority.

Sigmund Freud observed that laughter is repressed, unconscious energy released by the superego.

Black Humour occurs when a person who suffers pain or misfortune seems indifferent or even amused by the experience. The incongruity between form and content transforms the emotional energy of fear and pity into laughter.

Black Humour is used as a perspective which uses a certain sort of biting and often grotesque humour as a tool to attack the easily sentimental, or the unthinkingly rationalistic- it is used to provoke and as a profoundly disturbing, and often hostile weapon. Black Humour expects no positive function or result. The destruction of moral and ethical orthodoxies are one of the main functions. So it demonstrates the void which lies at the heart of all orthodoxies: Black Humour will operate by setting up expectations, in order to negate them. The more systems it can find to destroy, the more disorientating will be the effect on the receiver- and disorientation is precisely the effect sought.

Black humour also means continuing to live rather than committing suicide, and optimism is nothing more than laughing darkly at a tragically insensitive environment. Black Humour cannot be described as being pessimistic or simply lacking an affirmative moral voice. Rather, it lives outside these limits in a terrain of terrifying candour concerning the most extreme situations. Writers use this term to mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these. The Black Humour of the 1960's focuses on the entropy in society's social, political, and economic systems. No subject is sacrosanct; myths, taboos, theologies,, philosophies, and ideologies are twisted, blasphemed, or lampooned.

Freud observed that the major concern of humour is the negation of suffering. He considered humour to be superior to wit. But wit is often hostile, sometimes in a skilful, artful, highly developed, sophisticated meanness and viciousness. The cynic is a typical type of wit. The cynic either pulls down something lofty and noble to an everyday level, or sees the mean motive behind the noble act. Wilde once said: "If a man is too unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might as well speak the truth."

Jokes about death and horror all tend to show that the cynic is tough; that he can take it; that he is not afraid of things that worry the rest of us. But, of course, he is even more afraid; he is permanently preoccupied with the fear that he is joking about. The cynic tries to get on familiar terms with Death, or

God, or Cancer, or anything else which might worries him. Aggressiveness in humour is a general phenomenon; cruelty in humour, especially Black Humour, is more specifically English.

One of the most often quoted example of English literary cruelty is Swift's *Modest Proposal*. There are too many beggar boys in Ireland, says Swift, and it would be more desirable to find a fair , cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth. And why stick to children of beggars when there are too many poor children in the kingdom, everywhere ?

Swift's solution is a simpler one: "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London that a young, healthy Child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a Fricassee, or a Ragout."

This is not cruelty but a very good satire. His red-hot anger and ice-cold contempt for a society which condemns children to death through poverty comes clearly through.

Humour, on the other hand, is a liberation from the wounds of life, not a release for lawless desires, and it does not necessarily causes pain at the expense of others.

Matthew Winston´s essay "Humour noir and Black Humour" is symptomatic of humour's notorious promiscuity (absolute confusion). Winston devides the darker Black Humour of the last two decades (which has specialised in the blending of frightfulness and farce) into "*absurd* black humour" (where the accent is on the "humour") and in "*grotesque black* humour" (where the emphasis is on the "blackness").

With the following two examples I will try to make this distinction more easy to understand:

The first poem is called *Defenestration*, it is written by R.P. Lister (p.362, *Comic and Curious Verse*)

I once had the honour of meeting a philosopher called McIndoe  
Who had once had the honour of being flung out of an upstairs window.  
During his flight, he said, he commenced an interesting train of speculation  
On why there happened to be such a word as defenestration.  
There is not, a special word for being rolled down a roof into a gutter;  
There is no verb to describe the action of beating a man to death with a putter;  
No adjective exists to qualify a man bound to the buffer of the 12.10 to Ealing,  
No abstract noun to mollify a man hung upside down by his ankles from the ceiling.  
Why, then, of all the possible offences so distressing to humanitarians,

Should this one alone have caught the attention of the verbarians?

I concluded (said McIndoe) that the incidence of logodaedaly was purely adventitious.

About a thirtieth of a second later, I landed in a bush that my great-aunt brought back from Mauritius.

I am aware (he said) that defenestration is not limited to the flinging of men through the window. On this occasion, however, it was limited, the object defenestrated being, I, the philosopher, McIndoe. Consulting the *Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, I found the following definition of the word "defenestration": "...the act of throwing a person or a thing out of a window." The meaning of this poem and the intention to write it could have been this definition. It is absurd to have word describing the act of throwing a person out of a window. That does not mean that the poem is absurd, even though it can be when the reader does not know that this word really exists. The poem plays with the idea of this word and the writer wonders why there aren't more words like this, which is rather humoresque, than black.

The second poem is called *Mistaken Identity*, written by J.B. Morton (p.376 , *Comic and Curious Verse*).

He smiling film-star stood, to meet  
The mob that surged along the street.  
Before the man could say a word  
They charged him like a maddened herd,  
And knocked him down and trampled him,  
And almost tore him limb from limb.  
Then, laughing wildly through their tears,  
They ripped his clothes for souvenirs,  
Snatched bits of trouser, strips of shirt,  
And left him lying in the dirt.  
But one, whose wits were wide awake,  
Knew they had made a slight mistake,  
And thus addressed the hideous throng:  
"Hi! Wait a bit! We've got it wrong!  
Oh, damn it all! Take it from me,  
He's not the one we came to see."

The described scene in this poem is rather black. A crowd believes to see a film-star, then they charge him, knock him down, rip his clothes, then they let him lying in the dirt, suddenly they realise that they

have made a mistake, because he is not the famous person they thought he is. The scene is described in a brutal and drastic way. But what is important is that the reader can still laugh about this scene

But the kind of humour Freud has in mind may be described as disaster-humour, so that one can distinguish from two other kinds of humour:

- The whimsical-humour (wunderlich/verrückt) of eccentric minds:

This kind of humour is a fusion of oddity and kindness, the typical protagonists are immune to reality, suffering and maturity. They are loveable, infantile and sexless, their minds are lunacies.

- The sanguine-humour (optimistic) of fans of cakes and ale:

These kind of characters are rather different, they are very self-confident and they also have no pain. They generally enjoy a healthy sexuality and have an extraordinary sense of humour. Often they are like innocent children for whom life is a never ending carnival.

Disaster-humour always involves some kind of devictimization. In short, it is an index of thoroughly humane vision. It invites us to regard the ordinary and the lowly with amused but compassionate and affectionate attention, and it suggests that human dignity can be justified at even the lowest level of society.

The following poems (p.425, *Comic and Curious Verse*) are examples for this kind of humour:

*Quiet Fun,* by Harry Graham

My son Augustus, in the street, one day,  
Was felling quite exceptionally merry.  
A stranger asked him: "Can you tell me, pray,  
The quickest way to Brompton Cemetery?"  
"The quickest way? You bet I can!" said Gus,  
And pushed he fellow underneath a bus.

\*

Whatever people say about my son,  
He does enjoy his little bit of fun.

*Indifference, by Harry Graham*

When grandmamma fell off the boat,  
And couldn't swim (and wouldn't float),  
Matilda just stood by and smiled.  
I almost could have slapped the child.

The basic modes of Black Humour are the satiric, the ironic, the grotesque, the absurd, and the parodic. Irony is a constant catalyst of Black Humour in that it regularly functions as a bridge between the comic and the tragic. Irony, like Humour, is variously a literary device, a way of looking at life. Like Humour it focuses on the discrepancy between the real and the ideal, and like Humour it has traditionally been one of the chief devices of satire for this reason. Like the ironic, and like Humour in general, the grotesque too is based on incongruity. Satire and irony cross the line dividing self-confident humour from Black Humour only in extremes; the grotesque is usually a form of Black Humour.

All the forms of Black Humour tend ultimately towards the absurd.

So what is Black Humour, anyway? Even though it is hard to define, two points of agreement can be made: Black Humour involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules situations, value systems, and traditions, Black Humour offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses.



**And now for  
something  
completely  
different:**

**Fringe and Flying  
Circus**

It all started around the year 1955 in Cambridge and Oxford. Cambridge was the springboard into professional theatre. They put on programs which were called "Footlight revues" which were very prestigious. The Cambridge University Footlights Club was rather elitist, new members were invited to perform at an audition, when they were thought suitable they were invited to join. Some individual colleges staged their own revues and informal "smoking concerts". There also had been a couple of visits to the West End of London by the Footlights Club. It is amazing to discover how many of the familiar funny faces of modern television came from Cambridge, and to a lesser extent Oxford.

The so called *Oxbridge Mafia* parved the way for the satire-boom in the early 1960's.

The demand must have existed, when *Beyond the Fringe* in '61 first appeared in London. After ten years of Conservative government with no prospect in '61 of its ever ending, the middle class felt some vague guilt for the discrepancy between their prosperous security and the continuing misery of those persisted in failing to conform, by being black, or mad, or old. To relieve their consciences without actually voting for anything which actually might have reduced their privileges. *Beyond the Fringe* was a successful constituent of the general attack during the 1960's on the previously taboo subjects for comic treatment, including named politicians and corrupt commercial operators, British sexual "hang-ups" of all kinds, and, naturally, the mass-media. Why ever it was, audiences fell upon the show deliriously, like starving men. The show made its audience laugh at unthinking attitudes of respect which up till then they themselves had shared.

*"Some years ago, when I was rather hard up, I wanted to buy myself a new pair of trousers- But, being rather hard up, I was quite unable to buy myself a new pair. Until some very kind friend whispered into my earhole that if I looked sharp about it I could get myself quite a nice second-hand pair from the sales department of the London Passenger Transport Board Lost Property. Now before I accepted this interesting offer I got involved in a great deal of fastidious struggling with my inner soul, because I wasn't very keen to assume the trousers which some lunatic had taken off on a train going eastbound towards Whitechapel.*

*However, after a great deal of moral contortion, I steeled myself to the alien crutch, and made my way towards the London Passenger Transport Board Lost Property Sales Department in Postman Square, praying as I did so, "Oh God, let them be dry-cleaned when I get there." And when I arrived there, you can imagine my pleasure and surprise when I found, instead of a tumbled heap of lunatics' trousers, a very neat heap of brand new, bright blue corduroy trousers. There were four hundred of them! How can anyone lose four hundred pairs of trousers on a train? I mean, it's hard enough to lose a brown paper bag full of old orange peel when you really want to.*

*And anyway, four hundred men wearing no trousers would attract some sort of attention...."*

The sketches performed were satirical, rather biting and had become later a more cynical social awareness.

The first series of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was recorded in 1969 and shown on BBC-1.

In so far as the series has any particular approach, it is to mock the techniques of television. The programmes regularly parody the use of captions and the then current BBC-1 trademark, which was a revolving globe. The new found freedom in the sketches led to several techniques which were new in themselves:

- Reversal sketch: the idea was to take a basic premise and then to reverse it.
- Format sketch: they took a recognisable style of presentation (quiz-shows/discussions) and then emptied the content out of it, by replacing it with something ludicrous.
- Escalation sketch: another idea was to take an idea and then to allow it to get it wildly out of hand, so that absurdity builds on absurdity.

*I'm sorry, Ill read that again: the following extract is a foreshadow of the coming surrealism of Monty Python, p.123, From Fringe to Flying Circus:*

*"...John: What is it-what is it?*

*Mary: Oh, John-can't you see what I am doing to you?...Why are you laughing?*

*John: I always laugh when you do that to me.*

*Mary: Oh John-talk to me!*

*John: I'm sorry, I've got things on my mind-I'm tired-I'm worried about the chickweed-it was thoughtless of me, I know, but God knows I haven't had much sleep skinning that bison last night...*

*Mary: Which bison-not George?*

*John: No, Henry.*

*Mary: So Henry's dead.*

*John: Yes.*

*Mary: I can't say I am sorry, he was mean, even for a bison.*

*John: I'm going to sleep.*

*Mary: John-talk to me-say something to me-say you hate me, say I'm ugly...*

*John: Which?*

*Mary: Say I'm ugly.*

*John: You're ugly.*

*Mary: You're only saying that-you don't really mean it! You don't care-you never think about me-...*

*John: Yes, I know...*

*Mary: I wouldn't mind if we had a baby.*

*John: I'm sorry, but I prefer bisons-good night.*

*Mary: John-what's happening to us?*

*John: I know you know.*

*Mary: You know?*

*John: Yes.*

*Mary: Oh God. John-*

*John: Yes?*

*Mary: What do you know?*

*John: Well, I could be wrong.*

*Mary: You mean about me and Nigel?*

*John: Oh, I was wrong! I thought it was Rupert.*

*Mary: You're right-it is Rupert-I can't remember names.*

*John: Anyway, I do know about last Friday.*

*Mary: Last Friday?*

*John: Yes-he was in my bed, wasn't he.*

*Mary: How did you know?*

*John: He kept pushing me out.*

*Mary: You mean you were there too?*

*John: You didn't even notice? Oh, God!*

....

*Mary: All right-but I've something else to say-I don't want Mother in the front room any longer.*

*John: But, Mary-*

*Mary: It's no good-you've got to bury her.*

*John: But she is still useful-she still feeds the dogs.*

*Mary: No, no-they haven't touched her for weeks.*

*John: But, Mary-can't you see...*

*Mary: She's not my mother.*

*John: Well, she's not my mother.*

*Mary: Oh!*

*John: Mary?*

*Mary: Yes?*

*John: What's your second name?*

*Mary: Cleethorpes.*

*John: Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I seem to have made some sort of silly mistake-I'm awfully sorry about this...."*

An important aspect is also intonation ( seriously pronounced, exquisitely judged pauses), because it can cause a certain grade of ambiguity. But as a conversation/sketch /etc. goes on the uncertainty is resolved , and the receiver should then be able to classify the given statement (under-statement/contrast to the meaning).

The language of humour is powerless without the speech of humour:

Jokes are told, somewhere beyond the text is a voice, telling, delivering, timing. But there is also another aspect when sketches are told and shown on TV. The audience has to identify the wordpuns,

etc. with its reference. Should others miss the allusion they may still be satisfied by the visual comedy and the general absurdity of the situation.

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