

Review of International Geographical Education | RIGEO | 2020

RIGEO 

ISSN: 2146 - 0353

**Review of International
GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION**



www.rigeo.org

Gallows Humour: The Process of Making the Self in Everyday Life

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Abstract

If a person has some unsettled pain, or longing to be eased and to be fulfilled, he/she has knowingly, or unknowingly clung to his/her past with his/her mother/father, and the very thought might have relieved him/her with the knowledge that he/she is no longer alive, and it has been many years since. By referring to and acknowledging the past, he/she could attempt to reconcile with his/her present life which may be unfulfilled in various ways. Two key elements to be discussed and to be applied in the article are the references to the past and the use of humour. Before tracing the referral to the past and humourous incidents, and analyzing how they serve as tools to reconcile with the conflicting personae, it is essential to discuss the significance of art as a source of reconciliation, how in the world of art and literature reconciling with life is achieved, and how they become an inevitable medium to attain harmony and peace in one's life.

Keywords: Gallows Humour, Harmony, Peace, Psychological level, Socio-economic level

Introduction

The Russian dramatist Nikolai Vasilievick Gogol's artistic formula is that "art is a reconciliation with life" (15), Michael R. Kelly, an American author and Professor of Philosophy, in his article "*Art is a Reconciliation with Life*": *Gogolian Paradox and Aesthetic Credo* has searched for and treasured the perspectives of Gogol even amidst different contemporary opinions existing about him. Kelly believes that unlike other writers, Gogol refuses to admit the gap between art and life. Being hailed as a pre-eminent writer of realism in Russian literature, Gogol through his literary contribution has shared that both art and life have space for each other. The more space the better reconciliatory it becomes. He upholds the soothing and placating nature of art as the sum and substance of a real creative work. Any artistic

work lacking these two qualities cannot be called as a work of art at all. Though Gogol relies on the reconciling quality of art, he has not used it as a key element in his works, as in the words of Kelly, "... but rather serves as an extra textual function of his art" (16). His conception of reconciliation is not a mute acceptance of what had happened in the past but is an optimistic call for self-contemplation and inner change.

Michael R. Kelly talks about critics who have taken their studies on Gogol seriously, particularly about the critic Richard Peace who goes to the extent of applying Gogol's artistic formula to his biographical and psychological contents, and shows how he tries to reconcile with his own life through his art. Peace characterizes this aspect of Gogol's efforts to reconcile with life through his art which he does in portraying a contradictory world in literature. He can be grouped under writers who attempt reconciliation in their own different ways. This specific tenet has become very consequential when considering the artistic approach. While elaborating on referring to the past and the use of humour, examples from one's life and experiences, how he/she expresses certain sensitive and unforgettable past from his/her own life, be it tragic, or comic moments, and how it serves to reconcile with his/her past, shall be featured. This reconciling attempt seems to be a matured undertaking of the writers of different genres, and of different nationalities.

Materials and Methods

By analyzing the various works of Gogol, Kelly has stated that he can trace the presence of reconciliatory tone and the development of it till the end of the former's life. Such a conscious development of the art formula has also helped Gogol to gain momentum in the complexities present in life, specifically through humour. Kelly confirms this with Gogol's comedy *The Inspector General* where the latter has focused and commented on the reconciling leverage of art. In the introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Literature?*, David Caute opines on the function of literature as, "... literature, properly employed, can be a powerful means of liberating the reader from the kinds of alienation which develop in particular situations" (ix). When modern life is characterized by fragmentation and alienation, it is art that upholds the masses by freeing them from any ties that obstruct the inner harmony. As a way of integrating the fragmented life patterns, writers employ such a synthesis to bring back the unity with oneself, with others and

with the environment. Gogol proposes that art that supports man to cope with such a world which is also capable of transfiguring and liberating the fragmented people as well.

Results and Discussion

Thus, Michael R. Kelly's study about Gogol's aesthetic tenets accentuates the paradoxical nature of his works which are aimed to resolve the human complexities. Such a paradox even seems to be a necessary element of veritable work of art that can mend any kind of incomprehensibility. Gogol believes and proposes the unalloyed quality of laughter which has the supreme power to eliminate angst and to cure the hurtful circumstances. He opts for comedy, even for farce, where people can locate the quality of moral value which eventually takes them towards reconciliation. In his article of *Gogolian Paradox*, Kelly notes, "For Gogol, art is ultimately reconciliation with life to the extent that it serves as a catalyst to self-cognition and to our becoming living souls in a richer sense" (34). The idea that self-formation is achieved through reconciliation and thereby, estrangement of all kinds are either eliminated, or healed with an effort towards moral perfection is understood from the Gogolian paradox. His approach to art focuses on the need to have laughter through any art form which gradually illuminates the inner vision of being, and the recognition of it assures reconciliation with life.

Nikolai Gogol's dictum with reference to the reconciling quality of art, considering his pursuit of it in his comedies reminds readers that the artist must have felt the magical healing spell of humour. Humour is indispensable a tool for completing the reconciliation process where referring to the past brings an acknowledgment of the bitter past at the beginning, whereas humour can heal the wound. It can express the conflict and can exercise the control mechanism which acts as a shield against any infliction that occurs in society. Richard M. Stephenson in his article "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor" points out that only humour can function as a controlling measure by expressing the present value system operating in the society, and can effectively minimize the conflicts which exist at the class, race, or any other level of consciousness. He has come up with three levels of classification regarding the function of humour. The first one is the physiological level which uses wit to express the repressed passions. The second one is the psychological level where the assertion of ego, the release of inhibited emotions and the inception of humour as an apparatus to express hostility, displacement, and

more emotions, are dealt with. The third one is the sociological level which consists of conflict amidst intergroup and of the way control mechanism is employed to deploy the established notions of the majority in society.

Though Stephenson has explored the three levels of functions of humour, he has also agreed upon the possibility of humour having more functions as evolving and varying according to the situations. He has located the conflict and control functions of humour in the backdrop of social stratification. He calls the humour which comments upon the socio-economic levels of people as stratification humour. While referring to the medium of expressing conflict, he mentions in the above mentioned article, “The conflict function of humour is expressed largely by means of irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature, parody, burlesque, and the like” (569). So, his analysis is not only about humour through verbal jokes, but also about pictures, cartoons and caricatures. Humour as a conflict tool allows the hostile emotions that are accumulating, or are inflicted upon the minds of the minorities to be expressed, and in that sense, it acts as a relieving mechanism and emboldens the victims. The following cartoon (1) taken from *Poorly Drawn Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories* is drawn by the cartoonist Reza Farazmand who is based in San Francisco. Developed as a Web Comic series, PDL was first launched in the year 2008 which consists of comic strips of cartoons conveying stories of contemporary interests.

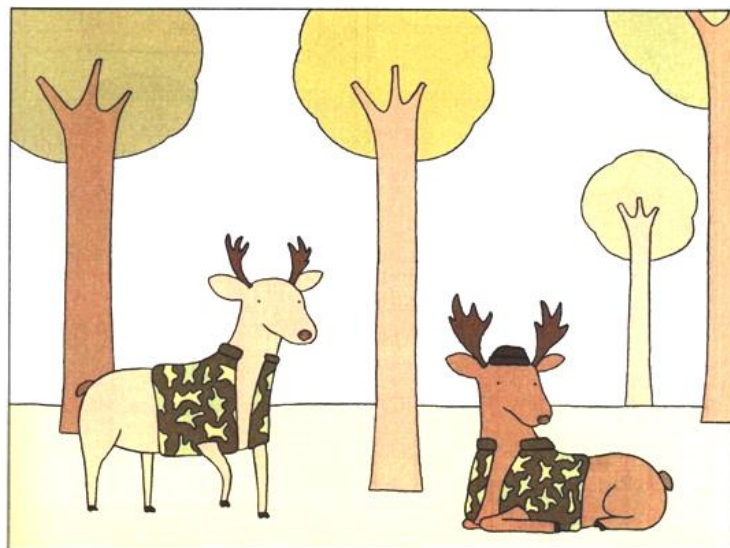


Fig.1. The Camouflaged Reindeers

The comic strip in Fig. 1 is very amusing to see as the idea against hunting, poaching and deforestation is conveyed through two camouflaged reindeers at the backdrop of a forest. As widely known, the camouflaging is a technique adopted by the military personnel for blending with the environment as a way of protecting themselves. Now, the reindeers adopting to that method makes the viewers think that they too want to protect themselves by blending with the background through which they express their strong feeling of disapproval against their being hunting down. It looks like a new way of protesting the injustice done to animals by the human species which constantly drag the animal wealth of the earth towards extinction. Despite the Government legislation against hunting and poaching animals for human benefits, the cruelty is still carried out in a full-fledged swing in various parts of the world. Through this cartoon, the artist has expressed the disapproval of a societal action, and a collective desire for controlling such violations of law. He strongly and ‘humourously’ records the conflicts existing between human beings and nature, and the former increasingly endangering the latter. Such a representation is both catchy and calculated as Stephenson says, “Humour as expressed in the controlled laugh or smile may serve as a means of communication, signaling the intent and nature of the communicating parties” (570).

Conclusion

Nothing is held as sacrosanct in the realm of humour. It peeps into the tabooed areas and in fact such tabooed and disgusting areas provide more opportunity for the rise of humour than in any normal situation. Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild in their article titled “Auschwitz Jokes” illustrate many Jewish jokes and examine the possibility of humour in the most grotesque moments. They define the reign of the Nazi in Germany as the most horrible time in the history of the despotic rules. They are aware and indeed, the world too is aware of the inconceivable punishments given to the human race in camps like Auschwitz, Dachau and Buchenwald during the extermination of the Jews. After reading the accounts of the Holocaust memories of the survivors, they wonder how humour emanated from the gas chambers which suffocated and killed thousands of Jews through poisonous gas. The inmates of the camp, even after knowing their fate which was going to be ended in few minutes, humoured about their condition. Nikolai Gogol and Stephenson’s examples throw light on the necessity of humour with life’s most

traumatic situations. That very humour category is termed as gallows humour which helps to reconcile with the present conditions of life.

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