

Gallows Humor: A Very Dark Form of Word Play

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Introduction: Why is Gallows Humor so Prevalent?

One of the things that makes us satisfied in life is that our lives are filled with routines. We know when to get up in the morning. Every morning our routine tends to be the same as every other morning. We distinguish between week-day routines, and week-end routines, but whether is a week day, a Saturday, or a Sunday, we know what to do and when to do it. Even though our routines vary on Saturdays, that variation is the exception that proves the rule. Because our days are so filled with routines, we need a diversion. At night time, that diversion comes in the form of dreams. During the day, that diversion is often experienced through gallows humor. Gallows humor, whether it is in stories about real life, or stories in fiction allows us to have very strange and dangerous experiences without actually being in danger.

Methodology

This article is based on epiphinal anecdotal evidence. Even though the evidence is anecdotal, I have selected examples on the basis of verisimilitude. Verisimilitude is a higher form of truth. If you want to know about the civil war, you can read a non-fiction book like *Stillness at Apomati*, or a fiction book like *Red Badge of Courage*.

The non-fiction book will contain more factual truths about times, places, numbers of people killed or wounded, etc. But the fiction book actually takes you into the civil war. If you have empathy, you will feel the emotions and identify with the other soldiers.

Gallows Humor in Real Life

Sometimes gallows humor is grounded in reality. In 1883 Judge M. B. Gerry sentenced Alfred E. Packer to death for cannibalism after a blizzard had closed the Donner Pass, trapping an expectation of settlers en route to California. A reporter ran from the courtroom to a local bar and announced that the Judge had said, "There were only seven Democrats in all of Hinsdale County and you, you son of a bitch, you get five of them." This quote was picked up across the nation and made both Judge M. B. Gerry and Alfred E. Packer famous. The Alfred E. Packer Cafeteria at the University of Colorado at Boulder made souvenir sweatshirts saying such things as "Serving all of mankind," and "Keep your eyes on your thighs." The cafeteria even had a plaque commemorating the name of Alfred E. Packer; however, it had to be removed because it was deemed to have been "in bad taste."

Gallows Humor in Fiction

In Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian*, Guy Grand buys a huge newspaper company and converts the newspaper entirely to readers' opinions. In Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Yossarian protests the brutality of war by sitting naked in a tree. In John Barth's *The Floating Opera*, Todd Andrews contemplates his own suicide as he works out a puzzle involving \$3 million and 1129 pickle jars filled with excrement. Thomas Pynchon in his *Gravity's Rainbow* tells a joke about a boy born with a golden screw in his navel. A voodoo doctor finally gives him a potion that sends him into a wild dream, and when he wakes up, the golden screw is gone. In ecstasy, he jumps out of bed and his bottom drops off.

Mark Twain's "War Prayer" and Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" are two other examples of gallows humor. Mark Twain begins his "War Prayer" by saying, "O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells." He goes on to ask God's help in covering the fields with "the pale forms of their patriot dead," and drowning the thunder of guns with "shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain." He asks God to "blast their hopes, blight their lives," "water their way with their tears," and "stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet," and then he ends the prayer with "We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen."

Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* satirizes the commercialization of death by showing how the California funeral industry turns burials into Hollywood extravaganzas. At "Whispering Glades," caskets come in three grades: waterproof, moisture proof, and dampness proof. The park is divided into zones, each having its own work of art. The "Poet's Corner" for example has "Xanadu Falls" and is dedicated to Homer. The movie becomes darker as it focuses on Aimee Thanatogenous, whose first name is French for "beloved," and whose last name relates to Thanatos, the Greek God of death. When the Guru Brahman sarcastically tells her to go to the 14th floor, his office, and jump out of the window. She does so. Ironically, as she jumps, she injects herself with embalming fluid, just to make her death certain.

Even children's literature can contain some pretty dark gallows humor. Each of Daniel Handler's *Lemony Snicket* books has a dark dedication to "Beatrice." They read as follows: To Beatrice—

Darling, Dearest, Dead.... For Beatrice—You'll always be in my heart, in my mind, and in your grave. For Beatrice—When we were together, I felt breathless--Now you are. For Beatrice—Our love broke my heart, and stopped yours. For Beatrice—When we met, my life began--Soon afterwards, yours ended. For Beatrice—Summer without you is as cold as winter--Winter without you is even colder. To Beatrice—My love flew like a butterfly, until death swooped down like a bat-- As the poet Emma Montana McEllroy said: "That's the end of that." For Beatrice—When we met, you were pretty, and I was lonely--Now, I'm pretty lonely. For Beatrice—Dead women tell no tales--Sad men write them down.

But who is this, Beatrice? Could it be the same Beatrice that Dante Alighieri dedicated his *Divine Comedy* to? At age 9, Dante Alighieri met Beatrice Portinari, and fell in love. They greeted each other on the street for 16 years. However, Dante was promised to another woman, Gemma. In 1290, at age 25, Beatrice died. Dante took refuge in writing to and about Beatrice. Dante dedicated his *Divine Comedy* to Beatrice, who in the novel served as his guide through Paradise. With Gemma, he had a daughter named Antonia. She became a nun, and took the name of Sister Beatrice.

When the American Library Association awarded Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* its 2009 John Newbery Medal, it described the story as "A delicious mix of murder, fantasy, humor, and human longing," in which a child "marked for death by an ancient league of assassins escapes into an abandoned graveyard," where he is protected and raised by creatures not of his own ilk. The first thing the 18-month-old boy needs when he arrives in the graveyard is a name. Caius Pompeius, who was buried in the Graveyard 100 years after the Romans first came to England, wants to name him Marcus, because he looks like Pompeius's Proconsul. Josiah Worthington suggests the name of Stebbins, because he looks like his head gardener. Mother Slaughter, whose tombstone is so weathered and covered with lichen that it now reads only LAUGH, thinks the boy should be named Harry because he looks like her nephew. But Mrs. Owens, who has agreed to care for the boy, says firmly, "He looks like nobody." And Silas, who is a kind of leader in the graveyard, concurs, "Then Nobody it is. Nobody Owens." In everyday use the name is shortened to Bod, sometimes misheard as Boy. Bod's guardian is Silas. Silas makes himself truly useful by leaving the graveyard at night and returning with food and supplies for Bod. When he decides that it's time for Bod to learn to read, he brings in two alphabet books and *The Cat in the Hat*. Then he has Bod practice his lessons by finding each letter of the alphabet on a headstone. It's lucky for Bod that Ezekiel Ulmsley's tombstone is still readable. The last chapter in the book is entitled "Everyman Jack," and contains characters with such names as Jack Frost, Jack Tar, Jack Dandy, Jack be Nimble, and Jack Ketch. In *The Graveyard Book*, these "Jacks of All Trades" are all trying to assassinate Nobody Owens.

Gallows Humor in the Movies

When novels are made into movies, sometimes the gallows humor is even more grim. Woody Allen's *Bananas*, (which is described as being "more moving than prunes"), makes fun of the military solutions that the United States invokes on third-world countries. As a parody of a parody, the movie also contains Howard Cosell's play-by-play description, as though on *Wide World of Sports*, of the consummation of the marriage of Fielding Melish and Norma, an ingenue devoting her life to third-world causes. Other Woody Allen movies that include gallows humor are *Annie Hall*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Deconstructing Harry*, *Love and Death*, *Mighty Aphrodite* and *Zelig*.

Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry* is a fairly early example of gallows humor based on mis-identification. Harry Rogers is an apparent murder victim whose body is found over and over again, buried, exhumed, and reburied. In the anticlimactic ending, Harry is discovered not to have been murdered at all. Other examples of Hitchcock's Gallows Humor include *Rebecca*, and *The Birds*, both based on novels by Daphne DuMaurier.

In John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, Robin Williams plays the role of T.S. Garp, while Glenn Close plays the role of Garp's mother, Jenny. Jenny is a nurse who gets herself pregnant by taking advantage of an injured and dying soldier, Technical Sergeant Garp, who had been brought in from his downed airplane with a permanent erection. Jenny has a very detached attitude towards sexuality, as can be seen when she conducts an asexual interview with a puzzled prostitute. When she writes a book that becomes a feminist bestseller, she uses the profits to establish a shelter for abused women--and one man--a transvestite named Roberta (played by John Lithgow). Roberta used to be a wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles. Roberta appears to be the most "normal" person in the shelter. Everyone else in the shelter has had her tongue cut out in honor of a little girl who had been raped and had had her tongue cut out so she could not tattle. So, all of the ladies in the shelter had their tongues cut out in honor of the little girl. Garp's heritage as the son of a pilot is a motif that runs throughout the movie. It opens with a happy scene of Baby Garp being tossed again and again into the air. During his childhood, Garp tries to fly by jumping off a building. When he gets married and he and his wife are out with the real estate agent looking at a house to buy, a small plane crashes into the roof. Garp knows this is the home for them because of the infinitesimal chance of the same house being hit twice by an airplane.

Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* satirizes war. At one point, a fight breaks out between the characters and the group is severely admonished, "You can't fight in here; this is the war room." The missile complex in *Dr. Strangelove* is named Laputa, an allusion to the island of the impractical scientists in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Hydrogen bombs that are being prepared for "Operation Drop Kick" are named "Hi There" and "Dear John." POE is an acronym for both "Peace on Earth" and "Purity of Essence." Closing of the Doomsday Gap is seen as a deterrent to war.

Monty Python and the *Holy Grail* is a satire about the romances, the wars, and the quests of the Middle Ages. When King Arthur fights the Black Knight, he cuts off the knight's arms and both of his legs, but the Black Knight still taunts King Arthur and wants to continue to fight. In the movie, heavy artillery is used for the hunting of pheasants, and during the war games in the living room, all the furnishings get blown up. To demonstrate Sir Guy's richness, a restaurant episode shows the waiters ignoring all the other patrons while giving full attention to Sir Guy. Sir Guy is equipped with a wet suit and safety belts, and after a lusty battle with caviar meatballs, has to be hosed down. Sir Guy fills a large tank full of excrement and then throws \$100 bills into the excrement to see if men in suits will dive in after the money. They do. In a boxing match, the fighters end up kissing each other, and the announcer says that the crowd seems to be sickened by the sight of no blood. During their adventures, the knights have to cross the bridge of death, where three questions are asked: "What is your name?" "What is your quest?" and "What is your favorite color?" Much of the humor comes from how difficult these questions become for some of the knights. The violence,

killing, and bloodshed are all justified in the name of Christianity. In an anachronistic ending, the police arrive, dressed in modern British uniforms, and load King Arthur and the others into a paddy wagon.

Characters in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* are given such names as Nautius Maximus, Biggus Dickus, and Incontinentia Buttocks. The movie takes place in Bethlehem during the time of Christ--or more specifically, on Saturday afternoon at tea time. The film satirically targets religion, ritual, and blind faith. When Brian of Nazareth is asked if he is the Messiah, he says, "No," and the villagers respond, "Only the true Messiah denies his divinity." Brian becomes a sacred icon, along with his sandal and his gourd. When the Christians ask, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" the response is "aqueducts, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, peace." There is confusion over whether Myrrh is a "balm" or a "bomb." The Israelites are referred to as the "Red Sea pedestrians." When the Christians write on the walls of the palace, "Romans eunt domus," meaning "Romans go home," the Romans who see the graffiti are totally oblivious to the meaning as they go about correcting the grammar. The movie ends with Brian and other Christians hanging from crosses, but doggedly singing, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

Fargo (by the Coen brothers) is another movie that contains episodes of gallows humor. My favorite dark moment in the movie is when some killers are trying to get rid of the body by stuffing it into a tree chopper. The irony is that as the chopped-up body leaves the chopper, it colors all of the surrounding snow red. Sengai Podhuvan's *Slumdog Millionaire* also has some dark comedy, irony, and paradox.

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* is a parody targeting pulp fiction, religion, and the criminal world. The setting is Los Angeles, some of it at Jack Rabbit Slim's place--"a wax museum with a pulse." Four interlocking stories circle around a cast of bumbling robbers, real gangsters, the Boss, and the Boss's wife, whose hairdo and dress are perfect for the cover of a sleazy novel. In all the episodes, Marsellus, the Boss, watches jealously over Mia, his wife. A man who gives her a foot massage is later pushed from the roof of a building. Mia is so passive and ineffectual that viewers don't know whether the phrase "taking care of the Boss's wife," means killing her, protecting her, or providing her with sex. In a memorable scene, two gangsters go over a speed bump, causing a gun to go off in the face of a man they were guarding in the back seat of their car. Ironically the mob has to clean up the splattered blood by hosing themselves down at the actual home of the author, Quentin Tarantino.

Another shocking episode in *Pulp Fiction* is the history of Butch's gold watch. His father, who during the war was captured and held as a POW, hid the precious gold watch in his anus for five years. Just before being executed, he passed it on to another POW who also hid it in his anus for a number of years. At last, the watch makes its way home and the grateful and loving Butch keeps it on his bedside table. The violence of *Pulp Fiction* is almost like the violence in a Tom-and-Jerry cartoon. In one scene, bullets whiz back and forth, but through what looks like divine intervention, Vince and Jules remain alive and unharmed. Also, right out of a cartoon is the scene where Butch is looking for a weapon. First, he finds a hammer, then a bat, then a chainsaw, and finally a huge Samarai sword. Other dark comedies by Quentin Tarantino include *Kill Bill*, and *Reservoir Dogs*.

For example, in *Reservoir Dogs* each of three criminals is aiming his gun at another criminal so that when they all pull their triggers at the same time the entire gang will be destroyed [1-20].

Conclusion

There are many reasons why Gallows Humor is so ubiquitous. It allows to experience exciting and dangerous situations without our actually being in danger. It gives us empathy into the lives of people who experiencing very difficult events. One of the things that makes us human is that we are story tellers. And as story tellers, we can tell stories about things that have happened. But more importantly, we can tell stories about things that have not happened. And Gallows humor is a dramatic way to tell an interesting story. It allows us to see outside the box. It is creative and innovative. It is uniquely human.

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