

The Usage of Black Humour in Psychotherapy

Vesna Lecher-Švarc

Specijalistička psihijatrijska ordinacija »Dr. Vesna Lecher-Švarc«, Zagreb, Croatia

ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors describe and discuss the relationship between humour and suicide. Humour in the context of suicidal and other depressive events is a controversial and, at the first sight, an inappropriate theme. But, the relationship can be found in many ways in the sphere of the so-called black humour. Black humour is the main type of humour used in suicidal themes. There are thousands of caricatures and jokes with this motive that can be successfully used in psychotherapy. The psychotherapeutic value of humour lies in the fact that humour like laughter and sleep can represent normal autoplasmic adaptation. But black humour is not only a source of aesthetic experience, as the identification of the humour consumer with the caricaturist or the author of the joke is of basic importance and has a therapeutic value. Looking at suicidal caricatures and listening to black humour jokes can produce aversive feelings in a potentially suicidal person and it can explain the attitude of other people toward his/her eventual act. In this way, humour can prevent auto-destructive intentions.

Key words: *humour, suicide, caricatures, wit, psychotherapy*

Introduction

Humour is a controversial, and may be, at the first sight, in some way morbid and inappropriate theme in the context of suicidal and other tragic and very depressive events. However, in this context it can be seen in many ways in the sphere of so-called black or Galgenhumor or gallows humour, (Galgen – germ. gallows). There are thousands of caricatures (cartoons) and jokes with this motive that can be successfully used in psychotherapy.

It is interesting to see what psychoanalysts have to say about this topic¹⁻⁴. Freud^{5, 6} makes a difference between joke and humour. Joke or wit (Germ. *Witz*) is a brief story which usually ends with word or phrase that has a double meaning, leads to a pleasurable experience and generally culminates in laughter. Caricature or cartoon is a joke in pictorial form, often more effective. Humour, according to Freud^{5, 6}, is characterized by a certain »grandeur«, which a mere joke does not have. (Black) humour is not only a source of aesthetic pleasure, in which a discharge of mental energy takes place as a consequence of its form and not of its content. In case of black humour content is just inevitable. But this grandeur lies in the core of black humour, as well as generally, in a narcissist triumph, a victory of the ego: We are alive, and

a suicide person (a suicide) does what he/she does. With the help of humour, even a potentially suicidal person is able to avoid his/her suffering. Freud^{5, 6} illustrated this point by telling the story of a criminal who said while being led to his execution: »The week starts badly – it rains«. To be killed by society, metaphorically as was the case of *Van Gogh*⁷, for instance, or by oneself, gives almost the same result in the end.

Black humour is the main type of humour used with suicidal themes. It is generally a literary term that refers primarily to a kind of bitter and often outrageous satire. Much black humour on suicidal themes is directed against people's greed, narrow-mindedness, complacency and hypocrisy. Black suicidal humour frequently satirizes human attitudes, social institutions, including government bureaucracies, the military, large corporations, even medical system, depicting them as dehumanizing organizations and persons. Black humourists often attack the absurdity they see in life itself, as well as ills of the society. The awareness of human mortality including, of course, suicide is basic to black humour giving many of the works (caricatures, cartoons, jokes, wits, etc.) a desperate, even hopeless tone.

Short historical overview

Black humour as a popular public practice became prominent mostly in the 1960's. But literary critics have found elements of black humour already in the writings by the English writer Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver Travels* (1726) and by the French philosopher Voltaire in the *Candide* (1759) as well as in the writings of some earlier authors. Antecedents of black humour include the comedies of Aristophanes (5th century BC), François Rabelais's *Pantagruel* (1532). Features of black humour appear particularly in the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, an experimental drama movement that emerged in France in the 1950's and early 1960's. Black humour, or black comedy in visual (caricature) or written form juxtaposes morbid (as suicide surely is) or ghastly elements to the comical ones. Though in 1940's the French surrealist André Breton published *Anthologies de l'humour noir* (Anthology of Black Humour, many times enlarged and reprinted), the term did not come into common use until the 1960s. Later it was applied to the works of some American novelists, called black humourists, including Vladimir Nabokov, Nathaniel West, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut.

The Theatre of the Absurd, which appeared in France during the 1950's, was probably the most influential movement in drama after the end of World War II. The absurdist rejected conventional notions of plot, characters, dialogue and logic in favour of dreamlike metaphors that did not try to imitate surface reality. They hoped to express the (even suicidal) disorientation of living in a universe they saw as unfriendly, irrational and meaningless, and therefore absurd. A number of these comedies include elements of black humour. The most famous play of the Theatre of the Absurd was *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett. In this work, two tramps pass the time uncomfortably while waiting for someone named Godot, who never arrives. The plays of Eugene Ionesco, particularly his *The Bald Soprano* (1953) also violated conventional dramatic form. Jean Genet portrayed human behaviour as a series of ceremonies expressing sexual and political desires for violence and domination.

So, the term black comedy has been applied to playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd (especially to Eugène Ionesco as in *Les Chaises* (The Chairs, produced in 1952)). Its exponents, certain European and American dramatists of the 1950's and early '60's, accepted the Existentialist philosophy (e.g. Albert Camus said: »The only philosophical problem is suicide« and later he committed suicide). Albert Camus' view, in his essay »The Myth of Sisyphus« (1942), was that the human situation is essentially absurd, devoid of purpose. Though no formal Absurdist movement existed as such, dramatists as diverse as the ones previously mentioned, shared together with Harold Pinter, Arthur Adamov and few others a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose and to control its fate. Humankind in this view is left feeling hopeless, bewildered, and anxious. The comedies of mentioned authors were played in theatres all over Europe.

Among more recent literary works, the novel *Catch 22* (1961) written by Joseph Heller, is a notable example of a satire on absurdity of war and bureaucracy, in which the main characters fight the horrors of a warfare over the Mediterranean during the World War II with hilarious irrationalities matching the stupidities of the military system. Other novelists who worked in the same vein include the already mentioned Kurt Vonnegut, particularly in his *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) and Thomas Pynchon in his novels *V.* (1963), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). In addition to these literary works, a number of motion pictures (like the screened *Catch 22*) exhibited elements of black humour, notably an exemplary film by Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), a comedy of militaristic errors that ends in global nuclear destruction.^{3,4}

Suicide as topic of black humour

The suicide black humour must not be necessarily verbal. Often it is a caricature or cartoon where suicidal situational humour does not need to be described by words. By far the greatest amount of such humour is not told, but seen. The ideas that inform caricatures, cartoons, jokes (and theatrical plays) with black intonations, also dictate their visual aspects and structure. Absurdist cartoonists-caricaturists (as well as play writers) therefore moved away from most of the logical structures of traditional caricature-cartoons (and theatrical plays). While there is little dramatic action conventionally understood, in black caricature-cartoon it can be quite opposite. The characters (suicidal persons or people close to them), often frantically perform their work which serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence, except death (from their own hand, especially). Black humour cartoons-caricatures with suicidal themes reveal the inadequacies of verbal communication. The absurdity and irrationality (of suicidal) behaviour give the (black humour) caricature sometimes confusingly funny features or an obscure surface, but at the same time it contains hidden serious messages of metaphysical distress. The impact of ideas as expressed by the Surrealist, Existentialist and Expressionist Schools of thought can be easily discerned in such style, as well as connections to many works of literature, particularly the writings of Franz Kafka (1883-1923), a writer widely regarded as one of the major figures of 20th-century literature.

Types of black humour with suicide topic

It is very hard to know exactly why people can laugh to black humour or why anything that is funny should cause people to think about suicide in that way. Jokes, caricatures or cartoons, or best comic stories are among the most popular form of black humour, which in literary theory is included in the so-called trivial, banal, folk type of literature and art.

Black humour, however, is paradigmatic of suicidal situation. Often the suicidal humour is called the black

humour with the unexpected happening. Another black-humorous kind of suicidal situational involves the incongruity of elements (putting together unrelated things). Many types of humour can include elements of black humour on suicidal theme and motives such as: wit, pun, satire, sarcasm, irony, farce parody, hyperbole, repetition, comparison and contrast, etc. Verbal humour takes many forms. It can be gentle and kind, or it can be harsh, beating and biting (latter one mostly in black humour). There is no exact distinction between these various types of humour à propos black components of suicidal humour.

A wit (joke) differs from most humour in being purely intellectual, philosophical, rather than relying on incongruities that come up naturally. Most humour produces a smile, but wit can usually cause people to break out in sudden laughter. As a rule a wit is considered inferior if it embarrasses someone (for instance a suicidal person), if it makes something sacred (death, death by own hand, etc.) to appear common, if it makes a person's weakness (in life struggle) the cause of laughter, if it uses vulgarities in that sensitive matter to be funny or if everyone cannot join in the enjoyment of the joke (of account of suicide, for instance).

Among other related type of humour with the elements of black suicidal humour are for instance puns, or double meanings, which furnish this kind of situation with much of black humour as ingredient. Puns are plays with words, in which one word is said when another one is meant.

Satire is a genre of literature and arts, which hold up human weaknesses, vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings to ridicule them, including suicidal persons. Usually, satire attempts to cure the foolishness (in suicides especially), by making other people laugh at it.

Sarcasm is much more brutal form than satire. It often takes the form of an uneasy, bittering and biting speech, or a sharp utterance designed to cut or give pain.

Irony is a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It usually implies the opposite of what is apparently being stated. Irony may begin as a compliment or a simple statement, but it conceals sting in a remark. It is usually expressed by a characteristic tone of voice and is often an understatement.

Farce, slapstick or buffoonery is a simple type of comedy in which the actors behave in a rough and foolish way using frequently physical action and horseplay which can also involve various pranks on suicidal humorous themes.

Parody and burlesque change the wording of a well-known story or song to produce comic results also sometimes to make foolish suicidal attempts.

Mimicry imitates another suicide person's habits, gestures or speech for comic effect.

Hyperbole is one of expressive mechanisms and rhetorical devices used in black suicidal humour. Hyperbole is simply exaggeration. Sometimes it includes a twisting or distortion of the reality and truth like in other forms of

art, for the sake of black humour. Common expressions in everyday life are often hyperboles.

Repetition is also a popular way of gaining black intonated laughter, but it does not produce a very high grade of humour. In many jokes told, a thing happens twice in exactly the same way. But the third time it happens differently and the point of the story is revealed.

Comparison and contrast often give rise to black humour. They are almost the same as incongruity. The expression to fall on a sword (fig.): to commit a suicide – shows comparison, but is not humorous at all.

Explaining the mechanism of black humour

Black humour, or humour in general, is by definition a form of communication in which a complex mental stimulus illuminates, amuses or elicits the reflex of laughter. Most black humour, from the crudest practical joke to the most elegant witticism and inherent philosophical or comic anecdote, comes from the sudden perception of a relation between two consistent, but mutually incompatible contexts. The sudden clash between those two different contexts produces the comic effect because it compels the consumer (spectator of visual form, or listener of jokes, or theatrical comedies), to perceive a given situation in two consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time. But besides that, it gives a surprising and sudden insight into the absurdity of a situation (for instance of suicide). This creative type of mental activity seems to be naturally enjoyable to human beings, at least in the context of a humorous appreciation of life (and death, especially suicidal ones). There are bewildering varieties of moods (especially depressive and mainly pessimistic in black humour), involved in different forms of humour (black humour is only one of its forms), but whatever the mixture, it must contain one basic and indispensable ingredient: an impulse, even if only faint, of apprehension, aggression or even malice (latter two especially in black humour variant). Sometimes the aggressiveness in humour is obvious, as in children's practical jokes, or in the comic falls or mistakes of adults. At other times it may be subtler, as when a pun suddenly makes an earnest conversation to appear ridiculous. The elements of aggression and apprehension are so universally common in humour that some scholars and authors have theorized that its function is to discharge these emotions in a socially acceptable manner.

Laughter (which is sometimes used as a synonym of humour) serves as a safety valve for the overflow of redundant tensions (also in potentially suicidal people).

In the case of modern suicidal humour, there can be an atavistic element, which has been described by cultural anthropologists in simple cultures. Namely, anthropologists have often shown that male humour in illiterate tribal communities is quite cruel by modern standards. The anthropological literature is rife with accounts of tribesmen laughing at torments of wounded animals (analogous to suicidal persons in modern situations), and

playing painful practical jokes against one another. This form of play is often too abrasive or disruptive for larger or less closely knit social groups, so that increasing urbanization has tended to produce less physical and more verbal humour.³

Humour in visual arts (caricature – cartoons on suicidal themes are paradigmatic), reflects the same logical structure as in verbal (literary) form. Its most primitive form (and also metaphorically speaking), is the distorting mirror at the fun fair, compressing a person into the shape of a toad. The mirror practically provides both his/her familiar self and a lump of plasticine that can be stretched and squeezed into any absurd form. The mirror distorts mechanically while the caricaturist does so selectively, employing the same method as the satirist – exaggerating characteristic features and simplifying the rest. Like the satirist, the caricaturist – cartoonist reveals the absurdity in the familiar, and, like the satirist, he/she must exaggerate. His/her malice is rendered harmless by the knowledge that the monstrous potbellies and bowlegs drawn are not real. Real deformities are not comical but arouse pity. But it is all on a superficial level, while the philosophical message is suppressed. Besides that, it can be argued that the humorous and humourless examples are not akin in frame shifting and that jokes involve more complex frame shifting than normal verbal utterances.

Concluding remarks - black humour in psychotherapy

It may be true that in black humour a suicidal individual sometimes uses his sense of humour in his relation to other people, and behaves in a way an adult would towards a child. He/she can smile at the trivial sufferings by declaring them nonessential. But in a suicidal person his suffering should not be seen in any way as trivial, if he is still in the presuicidal state or Ringel's syndrome⁸. The presence of (self)-aggression discharged by the superego against the ego on the self is responsible for this mentioned pleasure. However, the superego consists not only of the conscience, but also of the ego-ideal. With help of this ego-ideal it may respond in a positive manner to the actions of the individual (praising, consoling, etc.) Freud (1927)^{5, 6}.

Grotjahn (1957)⁹ identified the humourist as belonging to the masochistic type (a suicidal person is in masochistic mood, too), as follows: »He behaves as if he knows the misery of this world, but resolutely proceeds to disregard it. He remains aware of this valley of tears, but behaves as if it is still the Garden of Eden. He proceeds not by denying the existence of misery, but by pretending to be victorious over it«⁹. He illustrates to us (and to suicidal person as well!) the hope for the victory of infantile narcissism over all experience. His/her victory is only partial and temporary; what he/she may gain in inner strength and kindness, he/she will lose in the world of reality and adjustment. He/she may be free but not necessarily happy or well-adjusted to his environment⁹. The psychotherapeutic value of humour lies also in the fact

that humour as well as laughter and sleep can represent normal autoplasmic adaptation. (Autoplasticity denotes a form of adaptation directed toward altering the total personality rather than the environment). Black humour is not a source of aesthetic experience. Freud^{5, 6} regarded the aesthetic experience as dependant more on form than on content, and examined in detail certain specific examples as manifested in jokes, humour, and comedy. He wrote in 1905^{5, 6}: »The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure«.

The identification of the humour consumer with the cartoonist – caricaturist, or the author of the joke is of fundamental importance and has therapeutic value. The consumer (listener of the joke) requires the caricaturist - cartoonist (teller) in order to have this humorous kind of discharge. Looking at suicide caricatures – cartoons and listening black humour jokes can produce aversive feelings in a potentially suicidal person and make him see the attitudes of people toward his intended act. So humour can prevent his auto-destructive intentions.

Humour in logotherapy⁷ can help in treatment of suicidal patients. Namely, freedom of will can be seen in two uniquely human capacities: self-detachment and self-transcendence. Self-detachment is ability to view oneself as if from a distance, to momentarily detach from self-consciousness and observe oneself and the conditions of the situation on their own merits.

Self-detachment expresses itself in humour (and heroism). Humour involves the ability to see one's own behaviour from a birds'-eye view, to see a lighter and, at times absurd side of life's follies and foibles (what suicide can also be). Such humour is not hostile or self-deprecating. Rather, it both acknowledges and accepts the limitations of being human.

Subjects for humour abound: one's unfounded fears, endless primping and preening, exaggerated storytelling and inflated self-importance¹⁰. All this personality and behaviour characteristics can be found in a suicidal person. Although the paradoxical intention* is strictly forbidden, and considered as dangerous *vitium artis*. in the treatment of (para)suicidal behaviour, humour is sometimes found in logotherapy, e.g. when a client exaggerates his symptoms with humour and when exaggeration is an illustration of self-detachment at work. Although inappropriate and dangerous when used with endogenous (biological) depression, paradoxical intention may be effective with a wide range of neurotic symptoms, such as phobia, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive behaviour (so often found in suicidal persons), and other types of problems, as it stimulates the patient's self-detachment through mobilization and utilization of human capacity for humour.

* paradoxical intention is a therapeutic technique that builds on the human capacity for self-detachment to break the vicious cycle, which traps people in psychogenic neuroses, in which the patient is encouraged to do, or to wish to happen, the very things he fears.¹¹

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V. Lecher Švarc

Private Outpatient Clinic For Psychiatric Care, Pavla Lončara 1, 10290 Zaprešić, Croatia
e-mail: vesna.lecher.svarc@gmail.com

PSIHOTERAPIJSKA UPOTREBA CRNOG HUMORA

SAŽETAK

U ovom radu autori opisuju i analiziraju vezu između psihoterapije i prevencije suicida. Humor u kontekstu suicida i drugih depresivnih događaja može na prvi pogled izgledati kontraverzno i neprimjereno. Kada se takve teme koriste u šalama, humor se naziva crnim humorem. Mogu se pronaći tisuće karikatura i šala s tim motivom, koje se uspješno primjenjuju u psihoterapiji. Psihoterapijska vrijednost humora bazira se na činjenici da humor, poput smijeha i spavanja, može predstavljati normalnu, autoplastičnu adaptaciju: prilagodbu na samoga sebe. Ovisno o interpretaciji autora humora, crni humor može biti izvor estetskog iskustva. Identifikacija klijenta, korisnika humora s karikaturom ili autorom šale, od osnovne je važnosti i ima terapijsku vrijednost. Gledanje suicidalnih karikatura i slušanje šala koje pripadaju crnom humouru mogu izazvati odbojne osjećaje kod potencijalno suicidalne osobe, a mogu joj i objasniti stav drugih ljudi prema suicidalnom činu. Na ovaj način crni humor može pomoći u sprečavanju autodestruktivnih namjera.

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Tel: (385 1) 55 35 121

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Oslobođeno plaćanja poreza odlukom Ministarstva kulture i prosvjete Republike Hrvatske
(Broj: 532-03-1/92-01, kl. oznaka: 612-10/92-0-890, od 15. listopada 1992. godine)

COLLEGIUM ANTROPOLOGICUM is the official journal of the Croatian Anthropological Society,
published by:

- Croatian Anthropological Society
- Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb
- Croatian Association of Medical Anthropology – Croatian Medical Association
- Commission on Medical Anthropology and Epidemiology of the
International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences
- Department of Natural Sciences of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts
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Yearly subscription rate is 200 KN for Croatia and US\$ 35 for abroad. Subscription for institutions is 400 KN for Croatia and US\$ 50 for abroad. Postage is 3 \$ for Europe and 5 \$ for other countries. The amount is payable to the account of the Croatian Anthropological Society, IBAN: HR85 2340 0091 1000 1070 9, Swift code: PBZGHR2X (foreign currency) and no. 2340009-1100010709 (KN), Privredna banka Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia.

The journal is published quarterly with the financial support of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport of the Republic of Croatia.

Typeset and printed by: **LASERplus** d.o.o., Zagreb, Brijunska 1a
& Stega tisak d.o.o.

Printed in 300 copies.