

## Study of Black Humor and Psychological Aspects in English Literature

**Neha Vatsal, Research Scholar**

Career Point University

Hamirpur

[neha\\_vatsal@rediffmail.com](mailto:neha_vatsal@rediffmail.com)

**Dr. Saurabh Kumar**

Associate Professor

Career Point University

Hamirpur

[saurabh.eng@cpuh.in](mailto:saurabh.eng@cpuh.in)

---

### Abstract

Dark humor is designed to show critical subjects like casualty, disorders, dreadful cases, and taboos with unexpected comedic elements. The main purpose is to create comedy through harsh conditions, making black comedy popular among audiences. Individuals are helpless victims of circumstances and time; farce and substandard comedy are used as aspects of black humor. Black humorists try to impose a repetition on the radical stream of measures via jokes. Swift's undisputable uniqueness, the perfect unity of his production viewed from the angle of the very special and almost unprecedented emotion it elicits, the unsurpassable character, from this same viewpoint, of his many varied successes historically justify his being presented as the first black humorist (Breton, 16). Black humor looks like the fictitious bitterness-free phase of critical arguments and attacks. Gallows humor is also designed to strengthen the self-pride of anxious people and weaken the confidence of the tormenters. The paper aims to present the contemporary approaches of black humor and psychological relief theory in literature and media studies.

**Key Words:** humor, culture studies, media studies, psychological, relief theory.

### Introduction

Black humor is the haziest type of humor, which comically portrays horrific events. Renowned surrealist theorist, André Breton, explored the works of Jonathan Swift in his research. Breton noticed that Swift's writings of comedy and satire contained sarcasm and skepticism even on topics like death. He wrote a book on Jonathan Swift's works and called him an authentic designer of black humor. The book, *Anthology of Black Humor*, became popular among readers and critics because it portrayed a new concept of black humor.

Gallows humor became more popular with the publication of Bruce Jay Friedman's edited work *Black Humor* (Bloom, 80). Many prominent authors like Thomas Pynchon, J. P. Donleavy, Edward Albee, John Barth, Joseph Heller, Vladimir Nabokov, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Bruce Jay Friedman used dark humor in the form of novels, poems, tales, theatre, and compositions which juxtapose the conditions with morbid twists and create a humorous effect. After knowing the real purpose behind black humor, it became a popular literary genre and influenced the development of American literature in the 1960s. Dark humor gave a vision of a biased view of life reflecting brutality, violence, and viewpoint-crushing scenes of World War II (Alice, 18).

### **Philosophical background of black humor**

Sigmund Freud's relief theory of humor proposed that dark humor allowed individuals to release blocked feelings by transgressing social norms and expressing their hidden, repressed feelings. In his theory, he expressed that humor helps people to come out of discomforts like anxiety and worries. By making light of serious or distressing subjects, individuals can momentarily alleviate their emotional burdens and find relief through laughter (Jacobe, 216). Black humorists tried to enforce a pattern on this anarchic flow of proceedings via jokes. Vonnegut's *The Sot-Weed Factor* is created as a detailed, funny story that affirms the meaninglessness of life in the form of jokes. The laughter aroused by black humor is parallel to the mirthless laugh described by Samuel Beckett in his novel, *Watt*. In this work, he explains that bitter, hollow, and mirthless are the three forms of laughter.

"The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is  
the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which  
is not true; it is the intellectual laugh....

But the mirthless laugh. . . . .

is the laugh of laughs, the risks purors, the laugh  
laughing at the laugh. . . . .

the laugh that laughs. ...

that which is unhappy." (Eugene 67)

By using critical matters like death and violence hilariously, black humorists have twin intentions. Firstly, through dark humor, the gloomy vision is mingled with the comic and tragic scenes. Secondly, the ability to laugh at something terrible produces a sense of victory. Laughter thus becomes a way of rejecting defeat. The black humorists teach us how to live in a world devoid of hope.

### **General issues in black humor**

Black comedy writers visualize humor in the worst situations, such as deprivation, administrative bribery, death, violence, nudity, sexuality, disease, and murder. Gallows humor

shines on a crucial topic, such as war, terrorism, famine, etc., while others get to laugh at absurd circumstances. After World War I, black humorists and gallows writers mirrored the absurdity of modern life. Franz Kafka's works, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, represented the organizational hallucinations and pragmatic fear, which resonated with readers who observed humor in the isolation of life. Charlie Chaplin's movie *Monsieur Verdoux* presented the theme of dark comedy in which he played the role of a person who marries and kills rich ladies, presenting a darkly comedic take on serious themes. People faced great fears and disappointments during World War II and the Cold War. Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* is considered an influential masterpiece of dark comedy as it gives a detailed explanation of the absurdity and futility of war. Kurt Vonnegut's work, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, reflected the horrors of war and death with black comedy. The British comedic film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* involved the elements of dark humor, which questioned social customs and beliefs. Tina Fey used dark humor to satirize the entertainment industry in *30 Rock* and focused on personal problems that create mental illness and lead to personal failure. In the early 2000s, dark humor was used as a tool for community integrity issues and individual fights and efforts. Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* reflected the mingling of horror and black humor. Black humor also promoted collective anxieties like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and high-tech trouble. Bo Burnham, in his autobiography called *Inside*, shows the stress and anxiety of people during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The elements of black humor**

Numerous black humorists have applied components like depression, anxiety, and stress as key elements in black humor. Their main purpose is to amuse others and point out the funny side of harsh conditions in a cordial manner. Humor creates a unique effect on the aspects of public interactions, likeability, and attractiveness ratings. In the satirical novel *Catch-22*, the Soldier in White and the Soldier who maximized everything two times, the last two injured men who died together, became a source of comic relief for Yossarian and others at the time of depression, stress, and anxiety in the horrors of war. Humor was an effective approach for reducing anxiety under wartime circumstances. The use of gentle humor is considered a powerful approach used by dark humorists to address emotionally negative events.

Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse 5*, uses humor as a form of phrases to mock seriousness and create absurdity. When the Dresden bombing starts, Billy and his associate prisoners of war hide themselves in a meat store room and use it as a bomb shelter. The meat locker highlights that the hostages are not considered human by their hostage takers. As animals were formerly slaughtered in the Dresden slaughterhouse, so too, in theory, will many prisoners and civilians be killed — only the killers will not be Germans, but rather the American prisoners' fellow Allied soldiers. The use of benevolent humor and the lesser habitual use of dark humor focus on these particular re-evaluation approaches. Humor helps people manage stress by playing the role of an agent between negative circumstances and humor.

*Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is another example of amazing satire paired with Arthurian legend – bonding storytelling and historical representation. Here, humor works as an

interactive style that gently deals with stress and anxiety. One of the remarkable scenes of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is when Arthur and his men move towards a French castle and face offensive foul language from the French soldiers, who eventually stop their endeavor to get entry. This scene highlights the absurd nature of medieval warfare. The French soldiers' mocking is presented with obsolete insults, making the conflict feel as if it belongs to a modern comedy sketch rather than a historical epic. Humor is found to have stress-buffering effects. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a marvelous example of presenting satires on religion, slavery, and social class. Twain's humor shows negative associations between gentle humor and emotional suffering. One of the examples of satire in the novel is the scene where Huck pretends to be dead to fool people and float down the river as a dead body. People were scared of his prank, and because of superstitions, they thought he had been killed by witches. This scene contains black humor, satire, farce, and absurdities, which are associated with anxiety and stress. Irony and sarcasm are mostly correlated to emotional distress.

## Conclusion

Black humor is a powerful expression that allows people to oppose painful realities and experiences and recover the humor in life's hardest times. Dark comedy will likely adapt to new challenges, ensuring its relevance in an ever-changing world. Renowned humorists used elements like misery, fear, and anxiety as the backbone for black humor. These humorists' focus on the comic side cordially found in critical conditions. After World War I and the Cold War, dark humor authors reflected the irrationality of life. Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and *The Trial*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, etc., are the top examples of the absurdity and futility of war that display the horrors of warfare and killing.

## References:

- Asch, Solomon E. "Studies of Independence and Conformity: A Minority of One Against a Unanimous Majority," *Psychological Monographs*. 1956, vol. 70, no. 9, pp. 416. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093718>
- Baumeister, Roy F. et al. "Bad Is Stronger Than Good." *Review of General Psychology*. 2001, vol. 5, no.4, pp. 323-370. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.4.323>
- Bloom, Harold. *Dark Humor*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2010.
- Breton, André. *Anthology of Black Humour*. City Lights Publishers. 2021
- Bhimrao, Rautrao Shivkumar. "Satish Alekar's The Dread Departure: A Black Comedy via Distancing Effect." *Aayushi International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*. Feb 2018, Vol. 5, no. 2 , pp. 93-99. URL: [https://aiirjournal.com/uploads/Articles/2018/02/2846\\_14.rautao.pdf](https://aiirjournal.com/uploads/Articles/2018/02/2846_14.rautao.pdf)

Chevalier, Judith A. and Dina Mayzlin “The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book Reviews,” *Journal of Marketing Research*. 2006, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 345-354. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.43.3.345>

Godes, David and Mayzlin, Dina. “Firm-Created Word-of-Mouth Communication: Evidence from a Field Test.” *Marketing Science*. 2008, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 721-739. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1080.0444>

Herzog, Thomas and Bush, Beverly. “The prediction of preference for sick humor.” *Walter de Gruyter*. July 1994, Vol. 7, no.4, pp. 323-340. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1994.7.4.323>

Jacob, Rashmi. “Unveiling the Dark Humour and Self-Image of Generation Z in a Polymedia Context.” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*. 2023, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 215-225. URL: <https://www.the-criterion.com/V14/n4/LL07.pdf>

Karim, Mohammad et al. “Humour in Chetan Bhagat’s The Girl in Room 105 and One Arranged Murder: A Study With Special Reference to His Creation of Dark Humour and Satire.” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*. May 2023, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 568-575. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1403.04>

M, Kavya and Thomas, Ann. “Christopher Moore: A Maverick Prankster.” *Journal of English Language and Literature*. 2019, vol.6, no. 1, pp. 147- 150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.61.147>

Martin, Rod A. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Elsevier Academic Press. 2007.

Mindess, Harvey. “The Panorama of Humor and the Meaning of Life.” *Sage Journal*. 1987, Vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 82- 95 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/000276487030003007>

Rahaman, Sharuk. “The Power of Laughter: A Study of the Comedies of Badal Sircar.” *The Creative Launcher*. August 2023, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 41-52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.4.05>

Raju, M. David. “Black Humour and Ennui in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English, August: An Indian Story.” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*. 2013, vol. 4, no. 8, pp. 195-204. URL: <https://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n6/Raju.pdf>

Ramachandran, V. S. “The Neurology and Evolution of Humor, Laughter, and Smiling: The False Alarm Theory,” *Medical Hypotheses*. 1998, Vol. 51, no. 4, Pp. 351-354. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9877\(98\)90061-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9877(98)90061-5)

Ruch, Willibard. (ed) Köhler, G. A. *A temperament approach to humour. In: Ruch W, editor. The sense of humor: explorations of a personality characteristic*. Mouton de Gruyter; 1998.

Shammi, P. "Humour Appreciation: A role of the right frontal lobe Get access Arrow." *Brain*. April 1999, Vol. 122, no. 4, Pp 657–666, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/122.4.657>

Shaffer, Peter. *Black comedy: a farce*. Samuel French LTD. 1997.

Sharma, Preeti and Antony, J. Naina. "Representation of Postmodern Trauma through the trope of Dark Comedy in the novels of Iris Murdoch, Muriel Sparks and Barbara Pym." *International Journal for Research Trends and Innovation*. 2023, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 168-174. URL: <https://ijrti.org/papers/IJRTI2302028.pdf>

Tianyu, Guo. "History of the study of Humour and Satire in Literature." *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*. 2021, Vol. 7, no. 6, pp. 511- 516. DOI: <https://doi.org/1021744/ijllc.v7n6.1978>

Veatch, T. C. "A Theory of Humor," *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*. 1998, Vol. 11, no. 2, pp.161-215. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1998.11.2.161>

Warren, Caleb and Berger, Jonah. "The Influence of Humor on Sharing." *Advances in Consumer Research*. Vol. 39, eds. Ahluwalia, Rohini et al. Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, Pp. 712-713. URL: <http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009247/volumes/v39/NA-39>

Webb, Eugene. *The Plays of Samuel Beckett*. Washington U. P. 1970.