

The Humour-Pathos Link from Late-Victorian Aestheticism to Modernism and After in British Literature

Ioana Zirra 

Department of English, University of Bucharest, Romania
ioana.zirra@lils.unibuc.ro

Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts (I)

Abstract: By using Freud's theory of humour (1927) and his *Jokes in their relation to the unconscious* (1905), we follow the dominant features of the humour-pathos nexus from the late Victorian to the postmodernist literary decadence, taking in our stride the two peaking twentieth century modernist texts published by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce in 1922 Britain. We begin with Oscar Wilde's popular *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) in relation to Walter Pater's less well-known autobiographical novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), showing what relation the latter has with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The modernist genial humour of Eliot's 1939 *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is contrasted with Tom Stoppard's in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and with the dark humour closer to pathos in *The Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) by Ted Hughes.

Keywords: aestheticism; *hêdonê*; pathos; modernism; pure humour; satirical humour; absurdism; postmodernism.



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.1.5>
<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/> ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
Volume 13 | Issue 1 | 2023 | © The Author(s) 2023



Published by Bucharest University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Aestheticist humour and pathos in Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater

The study of the relation between humour and pathos in ages of decadent literature, namely in our late modern age, can begin with Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), a well-made play which masterfully articulates and handles with perfect ease dramatic satire in the comedy of manners and the farcical extravaganza. As a farce, this play proposes a game with masks and dandies harking back to the Shakespearean "What's in a name?" soliloquy. It also brilliantly evinces the main virtues of comedy as a didactic dramatic genre whose solid argumentative texture is grounded in clearly exposed commonplaces. The Wildean polemic with Victorian high seriousness and, for him, stultifying morality, is ironically invested in both humorous and pathetic characters. On the humorous side, Wilde triumphs by stale mate over Victorian gentility through inventing Lady Bracknell - an august colossus with crumbling limbs, excelling in ridiculously absurd eloquence coined from disparate shards of respectable upper middle-class discourse. On the other hand, the countryside governess, Miss Prism, is the obtuse, pathetic embodiment of ordinary middle-class aspirations and customs. And since satire exaggerates whatever humour nonchalantly and hurriedly delivers from the tip of the tongue, both these ridiculous and pathetic mainstream Victorian types speak ponderously, while the utterly dominant discourse of Algernon Moncrieff, as the play's aesthetic critic, moves with the concentrated, never hesitant, grace of humour, *Witz* in Freud's German, in the 1905 essay translated *Jokes in their relation to the unconscious* - *Witz* becoming also "wit" in English. It immediately evokes the spate of Wilde witticisms quotable in whole contexts or on their own.

In his fictional, dramatic text, Wilde's humour moves, swift as lighting, to collapse the two poles of Walter Pater's doctrine: pathos and impassibility. They were incredibly held together by a recondite, heavily historical, sophistry taught to late Victorian aesthetic critics, among them Wilde himself. The Paterite recipe for aestheticist pathos admixed with impassibility, which, according to the 1885 autobiographical philosopher's novel, titled *Marius the Epicurean*, Part I, Chapter 9, went under the name of "New Cyrenaicism", included: "great seriousness—an impressibility to the sacredness of time, of life and its events", "[n]ot pleasure, but fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness—energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and sorrow even". Wrapped in "the determination, adhered to with no misgiving, to add nothing, not so much as a transient sigh, to the great total of men's unhappiness", which, essentially, amounted to "hêdonê—the pleasure of the ideal present, of the mystic now" and the "absorption so entire, upon what is immediately here and now"; it lent to the practicing aesthete "a peculiar manner of intellectual confidence, as of one who had indeed been initiated into a great secret". But, on the other hand, in

the constitution of the philosopher's aestheticist pathos there also entered "a denial of habitual impressions, as the necessary first step in the way of truth" (in all likelihood derived from Heraclitus)", an "exceptional loyalty to pure reason and its 'dry light'", and, "neither frivolity nor sourness, but induc[ing], rather, an impression, just serious enough, of the call upon men's attention of the crisis in which they find themselves" (according to Aristippus of Cyrene, the Hellenistic philosopher unearthed and brought centre-stage by late Victorian decadence).

Fictionally woven, tamed for stage use in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, these ideas actuate a density of male and female dandies, all of whom busy themselves with perfecting the pleasure of their ideal present understood as a mystical moment of domestic privacy; which, moreover, consolidates one's desirable individuality by sheltering the self behind masks from the banality of public life and respectability. Algernon Moncrieff and his friend Jack Worthing invent pathetic doubles, the latter's brother who gets into the most dreadful scrapes and the former's invalid friend, called Bunbury, hence "Bunburying" as the name of the hide-away mask-game of the male dandies; by contrast to them, the feminine masks chosen to embody highfalutin, fashionable ideals are embodied in the romantic name Ernest, as seen when Gwendolen declares to Jack Worthing, who goes by the name of Ernest in town, in Act One:

GWENDOLEN

...We live (...) in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you. (Wilde 263)

In Act Two, Cecily Cardew is no less fashionable and idealistic in her first real dialogue with the suddenly materialized lover, whose puppet-like strings she had actually formerly pulled in her diary for a long time.

ALGERON

...I don't care for anybody in the whole world but you. I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?

CECILY.

You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

ALGERNON.

For the last three months?

CECILY.

Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

ALGERNON.

But how did we become engaged? (Wilde 286-7)

....

ALGERNON.

My letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

CECILY.

You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener. (Wilde 287)

Pathos embraced, pathos avoided: Paterite accents in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*

It is perhaps not surprising to find Walter Pater's twentieth century modernist posterity in T.S. Eliot and James Joyce (with the latter demonstrably and deliberately being influenced by Pater), though the twentieth century would have to wait for postmodernism for the manifestation of a Wildean posterity – in Tom Stoppard's irresistible comedy of 1966, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

In *The Waste Land*, high modernism brings forth in its observations (to recall the full title of Eliot's "Prufrock") the concern for discerning the momentum of the mystic now at a time of intense torment and self-reproaching memory and desire. The power of Eliot's threnody for the decaying culture-land is due to its blending intense pathos with the idiom of the perfect aesthete, who is forced to contemplate from the distance, through tormented recollections, what separates him from all known perfections. These turn into chastising "fragments shored against the ruins" which spell out the degradation of intellectual *hêdonê* to become sterile pleasure and promiscuous desire. *The Waste Land* deepens pathos by bathos while throwing the images of tradition into the hugely defacing mirror of the Great War aftermath. Eliot's lament transfixes his reader with his hollow, rotten mystic now in composing "The Waste Land" – which can be punningly regarded as the *Vaast Land* because it is an encyclopaedic epic, a literary time capsule storing the disrupted proofs of our civilization for the tense, threatened future, as is Paul K Saint-Amour's term, in the title of his 2015 book; the future is tense in case our interwar civilization were, in time/tense future, annihilated by man-made nuclear disaster. "Mixing memory and desire", *The Waste Land* short-circuits the literary and artistic gratification of the cultural libido and allows grinning pathos to fill the stage at the contemplation of the whole civilized world's panorama being turned on its head by the war wounds. Pathos reigns supreme in *The Waste Land* because, not only does the repenting,

hurt ego *not* “refuse to let itself be compelled to suffer” (as it does in humour, which arises in order to “represent the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability”, see Freud, *Humour* 162) but, in addition, the modern spirit is prescribed a sophisticated aesthetic flagellation. Such a return to past flogging practices pioneered the paradoxical modernist cultural palingenesis, whose self-chastising words engendered the new idiom expressive of a decadent, negative-sign perfection. Because, just as Eliot’s emblematic *Waste Land* does, Woolf’s novels look pathos in the eye, drawing from unfathomable darkness mystically perfect moments (to use Walter Pater’s words in *Marius the Epicurean*).

By contrast, James Joyce’s ego “refuses to let itself be compelled [just] to suffer” – which prompts him, firstly, to shed, in *Ulysses*, two brands of pathos endemic to Ireland. The Bloomsday artist rejects both the syndrome of Irish paralysis captured in *Dubliners*, and the religious transcendence vector developed (without fruition) in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Instead, there is (often wry) humour in his construction of a cuckolded husband and an as-yet failed great artist who, between the two of them, write the epic of the modern world’s *Alltag* (as Wolfgang Iser called it¹). Especially, in the Bloom spouses, the modern world proves to be unashamed of its ultimate hidden corners of consciousness. The choice of an ordinary day in the life of an assortment of domestic and artistic characters testifies to the writer’s intention to silence the recognized Irish pathos by a new brand of commitment to what, for Marius the Epicurean was, “dry light”, “neither frivolity nor sourness,” “[n]ot pleasure, but fulness of life, and ‘insight’ as conducting to that fullness—energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and sorrow even”. These, without “including noble pain and sorrow” are the factors that keep the twentieth and twenty-first century reader entertained for the book’s eighteen very different episodes (of which only three, “Aeolus”, “Cyclops” and “Eumaeus” are totally devoid of stream-of-consciousness discourse, if we do not count the directly dramatized flashes of the two protagonists’ subconscious life in “Circe”). The key to the enjoyment of *Ulysses* is the mixture of factors already outlined by Pater under the label of “hêdonê (...)—the pleasure of the ideal present, of the mystic now” already seen above as the “absorption so entire, upon what is immediately here and now”, that it imparts “a peculiar manner of intellectual confidence, as of one who had indeed been initiated into a great secret”. In James Joyce’s literary universe, the modernist hêdonê bypasses “the noble pain and sorrow even”, which, in Pater’s description of the young Marius the Epicurean, crowned the fullness

¹ To avoid interrupting the discourse flow, Iser’s study mentioned here is “Doing Things in Style: An Interpretation of ‘The Oxen of the Sun’ in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*”, from *The Implied Reader* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). A version of this essay is included in Brooker, Peter and Peter Widdowson, *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996.

of experience. And even when, as in Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction, noble pathos is not avoided, it is sublimated, engulfed in "the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability" (which is also one of the triumphs of the ego that explain humour, according to Freud).

In this connection, Joyce's experimental modernist fiction, actually stages this invulnerability that the victorious ego asserts with the means of comedy – given that *Ulysses* focuses on the petty details of everyday life. These take us to the other end of the scale than the ideal, or on its reverse, rather. For – comedy characteristically uncovers inhibitions, weaknesses, deformities, as Freud 1905 states, judgment coming to illuminate while emphasizing them (Freud, *Jokes and their Relation* 3). How does stream-of-consciousness handle inhibitions, weaknesses and deformities? Before judging them, the flowing consciousness illuminates and condones inhibitions and weaknesses, one's own and others', while deformities are either recorded with a straight face, or treated with sympathy, which inclines the balance away from humour, towards pathos. In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus has empathetic thoughts in connection with his poor student Sargent, in the book's second episode, "Nestor", and the modern Odysseus has more than transient sympathy for the blind stripling whom he encounters in the street early in the day (see the episode "Lestrygonians," *Ulysses* 8.1075-1107), and who is allowed to surface in Bloom's hallucinations of the episode "Circe" (see *Ulysses* 15.1600).

In a species such as the novel is, one which lowers the noble genres and amalgamates the results amorphously, what happens to both idealist and comic writing should not amaze anyone. The idealistically regarded tokens of sobriety and seriousness meant to avoid commonplace pathos that were recommended to the end of nineteenth century aesthetes by Pater are retained in the twentieth century, but with a difference. While securing "the pleasure of the present, of the now" and by "the absorption, entire upon what is immediately here and now", stream-of-consciousness has eliminated the adjectives left out by the suspension marks in the first quotation: "ideal", which accompanied "the present", and "mystic", before "now". The resulting aesthete's "peculiar manner of intellectual confidence, as of one who had indeed been initiated into a great secret" is, of course, the condition for sharing pleasure in reading stream of consciousness prose. As regards comic textures, where "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom" (according to Jean Paul Richter, quoted in Freud, *Jokes and their Relation* 4) – the same rule manifests itself, for example, in the numerous jokes that flourish in Leopold Bloom's stream-of-consciousness. Though, unfortunately, there is no room for illustrating them here, what can be attempted, nevertheless, is to show how the freedoms of the two male protagonists of *Ulysses* reflected in their stream-of-consciousness discourse are articulated as the two halves of a whole: the Paterite "fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness–energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and

sorrow even.” Bloom’s fullness of life and fullness of energy, variety and choice of experience, which carefully and deliberately keep at bay pain and sorrow, ends up absorbing into his adult’s more complete and genuine fullness of life due to experience Stephen’s inclination towards noble pain and sorrow, as in the coda of the Pater quotation”. We surmise that it will be after Stephen meets Mr Bloom as the right father figure for him that his loneliness breeding pathos can be enlarged to contain also the adult fullness of life enabling him to give substance, in *Ulysses*, to his outcry that closed *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” And he can do his because the young creator’s self has met and absorbed the readiness of Bloom’s stream of consciousness to come near comedy and to produce humour by transcending pathos. The result is *Ulysses* as the novel that transmits and adapts to the modernist century Walter Pater’s doctrine for the education of the aesthetic critic.

One further prescription in this line of education was, as previously mentioned, “a denial of habitual impressions, as the necessary first step in the way of truth”. This is a source of humour in Joyce’s intensely satirical episodes which battle with entrenched (=habitual) ideologies and discourse-types of *Ulysses* to set right the balance of clear-sighted truth. Blind Irish ultra-nationalism is the target of the “Cyclops” satire, and, in “Oxen of the Sun”, the disastrous results of colonial history is what the polyvalent satire boils down to. It is interesting that, in the latter case, Stephen has a name for his anti-colonial satire: the postcreation. It consists of intertextual tongue in cheek commentaries that attach themselves to attack the colonizer’s heritage. And so, Stephen postcreates the factually precise medieval historical records of Ireland’s church and state colonization (by the English and by the Catholic Church when it had the only English Pope ever) in a savagely offensive but copiously amazing fable with Plantagenet and Elizabethan bulls invented in the same fourteenth episode with oxen in the title. Posited as the colonized’s parasite feeding on the brilliant colonizers’ legacy, the Irish parasitical text enjoys an equally notorious posterity, which, by a typical satirical exaggeration, comes to be considered sacred: as sacred as procreation, because “[i]n woman’s womb word is made flesh but in the spirit of the maker all flesh that passes becomes the word that shall not pass away” (*Ulysses* 14.292-3). Stephen applies the same treatment to Shakespearean biography in the ninth episode, “Scylla and Charybdis”, where he gears an impressive number of Shakespearean and scholarly sources for inventing an unforgettable tall tale.

As regards the Joycean satire of blind ultra-nationalism, it is manifested in a list of names coined to ridicule Irish heritage themes by exciting homeric laughter, especially as the names that evoke old Irish lore (local Hibernian/Milesian memories) are combined with many non-Irish ones familiar from other cultures

– the result being a perfectly laughable assortment of non-sequiturs that make one guffaw continuously. What – or rather who – supports this enumeration, very similar to the Borgesian entry from an imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia, is a giant: a mythical Cyclops (the embodiment of Finn McCool or Cuchulainn), modelled on Irish warriors who went naked into battle and hung the scalps of the beheaded enemies around their waists:

From his (the Cyclops’) girdle hung a row of seastones which jangled at every movement of his portentous frame and on these were graven with rude yet striking art the tribal images of many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity, Cuchulin, Conn of hundred battles” (and the list continues with ancient literary heroes and real Irish historical names very familiar for Irish cultural identity scholars; but it grows upon a random reader through what follows) “the Village Blacksmith, Captain Moonlight, Captain Boycott” (familiar English Chartist Movement aliases, then), “Dante Alighieri, Christopher Columbus, S. Fursa, S. Brendan, Marshal MacMahon, Charlemagne, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the Mother of the Maccabees, the Last of the Mohicans, the Rose of Castile, the Man for Galway, The Man that Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo, The Man in the Gap, The Woman Who Didn’t, Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon Bonaparte, John L. Sullivan, Cleopatra, Savourneen Deelish, Julius Caesar, Paracelsus, sir Thomas Lipton, William Tell, Michelangelo Hayes, Muhammad, the Bride of Lammermoor, Peter the Hermit, Peter the Packer, Dark Rosaleen, Patrick W. Shakespeare, Brian Confucius, Murtagh Gutenberg, Patricio Velasquez, Captain Nemo, Tristan and Isolde, the first Prince of Wales, Thomas Cook and Son, the Bold Soldier Boy, Arrah na Pogue, Dick Turpin, Ludwig Beethoven, the Colleen Bawn, Waddler Healy, Angus the Culdee, Dolly Mount, Sidney Parade, Ben Howth, Valentine Greatrakes, Adam and Eve, Arthur Wellesley, Boss Croker, Herodotus, Jack the Giantkiller, Gautama Buddha, Lady Godiva (Ulysses 12.176-197).

“[E]xhibit[ing] the main characteristic of the jokework – that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions” (Freud *Jokes and their Relation* 98), Joycean satire clears the public discourse space with liberating humour, whether in his narrative postcreative fables, or when superimposing, as in the above agglomeration of cultural identity marks, exaggeration and excess over the necessary brevity that good jokes should have, like caricatures, with their shortcuts to the essence.

From modernist to postmodernist British humour: T.S. Eliot vis-a-vis Tom Stoppard and Ted Hughes

In this connection, one wonders what distinguishes the humour of the inventory-piece titled “The Naming of Cats,” meant to produce another kind of laughter at the beginning to T.S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*.

The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter, It isn’t just one of your holiday games;

You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter
 When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.
 First of all, there's the name that the family use daily,
 Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James,
 Such as Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey—
 All of them sensible everyday names.
 There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,
 Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:
 Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter—
 But all of them sensible everyday names.
 But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular,
 A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,
 Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,
 Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?
 Of names of this kind, I can give you a quorum,
 Such as Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat,
 Such as Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum—
 Names that never belong to more than one cat.
 But above and beyond there's still one name left over,
 And that is the name that you never will guess;
 The name that no human research can discover—
 But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.
 When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
 The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
 His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
 Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
 His ineffable effable
 Effanineffable
 Deep and inscrutable singular Name. (Eliot, *Old Possum* 24)

The above is an instance of humour understood, in Jean Paul Richter's terms already quoted by Freud: "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom". The comparison with the jokes put in a satirical frame by Joyce in his enumeration permits isolating the freedom of pure humour, differing from satirical humour which subjugates its target to the satirist's superior judgment. This points to the difference between empathy, which in pure humour is the result of the shared freedom, and irony, whose humour is, of course, patronizing, as is well known. Because Eliot is anything but an aesthete (outside *The Waste Land*, where he appears, at most, as a defeated aesthete!), his is a brand of convivial humour that uses national commonplaces to express what Freud saw as the liberating and compensatory functions that link humour with a sense of grandeur (caused by the triumph of narcissism). The grandeur in [humour] clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability.

Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of

obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. (Freud, *Humour* 162)

In addition to proving the point about the link between narcissism and the humorous liberation of the ego, we find in Eliot's jocose national British epic of 1939, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, together with the propensity for panoramic literature, the mark of what Freud called, in 1927 also, the possession of dignity "a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes" (Freud, *Humour* 163). This is why it is not a mock-heroic epic, because its tone is one of genial, light-verse patriotism – with not even mild satirical overtones. Eliot's humorous prestidigitation imparts national dignity to the domestic cat space ...purred in music-hall rhythms. It is dominated by the biblical patriarch *Old Deuteronomy* "who lived a long time".

He's a Cat who has lived many lives in succession.
 He was famous in proverb and famous in rhyme
 A long while before Queen Victoria's accession.
 Old Deuteronomy's buried nine wives
 And more—I am tempted to say, ninety-nine;
 And his numerous progeny prospers and thrives. (Eliot, *Old Possum* 36)

This dignified, venerable cat links genealogically the Old Testament with England's proverbial monarchs and witnesses the decline of the British village, harking back to the Tiresias scene of *The Waste Land*. But Eliot's centrism immediately counteracts this with portraits of the terrible cat Growltiger, "The terror of the Thames" (an occasion to mention as many familiar locations on the Thames as in the conclusion to "The Fire Sermon" in *The Waste Land*) and of "Macavity, the mystery cat" or "the Napoleon of crime", who prowls prestigious British political institutions, the Foreign Office, the Admiralty and the Secret Service, rehearsing their statutory connection:

And when the Foreign Office find a Treaty's gone astray,
 Or the Admiralty lose some plans and drawings by the way,
 There may be a scrap of paper in the hall or on the stair—
 But it's useless to investigate—*Macavity's not there!*
 And when the loss has been disclosed, the Secret Service say:
 'It *must* have been Macavity!'—but he's a mile away. (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 42)

The picture of central London political life and of traditional English entertainment is complete with the portrait of Gus, from Asparagus, "the Cat at the

Theatre Door”, who “joins his friends at their club/ (Which takes place at the back of the neighbouring pub)” and “loves to regale them, if someone else pays, /With anecdotes drawn from his palmiest days.”

This allows the present review to move further, introducing, with Tom Stoppard’s 1966 comedy “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead”, a density of jokes and sophisticate ironies defining for postmodernism.

The decadence of English drama in mid-twentieth century, the apparently serious theme of the play, is made explicit in the promotion to the protagonist position of Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who appear as a pair of perfect absurdist clowns (in the best Beckett tradition). The two Elizabethan minor characters – who are meta-theatrically known in 1966 to be dead – direct the audience to the heart of the postmodernist matter: the literature of exhaustion reinvents itself as literature of replenishment, to use John Barth’s terms contemporary with Stoppard’s play. This performance is achieved by Stoppard’s script playing the two components of tragicomedy against each other constantly in the characters’ brisk exchanges of either gratuitous or carefully intertextual jokes.

Comedy gets the upper hand by endless punning, cheap games and proliferating jokes in the margin of the original tragic script. Practically, the balance is tipped in the opposite direction from comedy just by the six Tragedians. But the typically absurdist strategy of emptying standard roles of their meaning, of removing the characters’ identity marks and purpose, makes the Tragedians contradict the parts prescribed to them by the Player, their mouth-piece who defines tragedy as a type of performance “with no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy is”: instead, the Tragedians lend themselves to a seedy performance (in the “love scene, sexual and passionate, between the Queen and the Poisoner/King, turning on stage into a homoerotic encounter).

At best, what remains of the tragic momentum of the prototype script are jokes on the theme of death – as in in the cues exchanged between Guil and Ros about the marriage of Queen Gertrude to Claudius while King Hamlet’s body was still warm:

ROS: Your mother’s marriage.

GUIL: He slipped in. [He=Claudius]

(Beat.)

ROS (lugubriously): His body was still warm. [Old King Hamlet’s body]

GUIL: So was hers. (Stoppard 41)

The postmodernist playwright manages his performance of playing comedy against tragedy constantly because *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* acts both as a parody of *Hamlet* and as a pastiche of *Waiting for Godot*. The Shakespearean parody is more than clearly illustrated for example in the inclusion

tale quale, without warning, of bits of the *Hamlet* text featuring Polonius, Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius and Ophelia - from the end of Act 1 to the beginning and middle of Act 2 of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The effect is that of a textual legerdemain that drains out tragedy of its force and turns it into a kind of mime. One detail which points to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* being a pastiche of *Waiting for Godot* is the use of the New Testament as a source for sick jokes, as in Guil's prayer: "Give us this day our daily cue...", very similar to the lengthier tragicomic exchange between the undistinguishable clowns Gogo and Didi invented by the master of absurdist humour, Beckett:

VLADIMIR: But you can't go barefoot!

ESTRAGON: Christ did.

VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it. You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!

ESTRAGON: All my life I've compared myself to him.

VLADIMIR: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!

ESTRAGON: Yes. And they crucified quick. (Beckett 44)

In 1970, in *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, Ted Hughes expands such savagely humorous intertextualities with the Bible programmatically. Steeped in the horror of his second wife's suicide, Ted Hughes vents his private anger by inventing Crow, a dark, deeply ironical alter-ego of God, who is entrusted with the mission of casting a terrible shadow over the human link with God that the Bible teaches. The poems "Crow's First Lesson" and "A Childish Prank" are perfect samples of pathos underwriting postmodernist humour. The result is, of course, savage, savage irony and self-indicting gallows humour. In "Crow's First Lesson", a Genesis *à rebours*, is triggered by the project of humanising Crow, when "God tried to teach Crow how to talk. /'Love,' said God. 'Say, Love.'" But at every attempt of God uttering the word "Love", predators of the sea and the air come to life when Crow only manages to convulse, gape or retch instead of speaking; to crown it all, he makes man come up with his "bodiless prodigious head/Bulbed out onto the earth, with swivelling eyes, /Jabbering protest" and has "woman's vulva drop over man's neck and tighten"; this is the prelude to the battle scene of their copulation. "The two struggled together on the grass. /God struggled to part them, cursed, wept--/Crow flew guiltily off." In this poem, Crow is an inept clumsy learner who ends up playing a practical joke on God unintentionally (since he flies guiltily off). But in "A Childish Prank", Crow tampers with God's raw matter for the creation of the human kind, which is "the Worm, God's only son", cutting it "into two writing halves". What happens in this poem must have been inspired by the psychoanalytical sense that women lack a phallus (like in the Derridean interpretation of Ophelia's fate through an etymological-*cum*-psychoanalytical reflection of the Greek name O'Phelia/lacking a phallus), because Crow "stuffed into man the Worm's tail half/ With the wounded end hanging out" and "He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman",

“deeper and up”, “To peer out through her eyes/ Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly/Because O it was painful.” The utmost intensity of blasphemous irony is reached in this poem when Ted Hughes plays the part of an extreme postmodernist trickster and equates the soul which God was to give man and the Word to a worm – the worm, “God’s only son”. The word “childish” in the title is meant to tone down the enormity of the prank, which is actually the act of an inchoate creature as Crow is, who, seeing that God was sleeping and “Man’s and woman’s bodies lay without souls/Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert/On the flowers of Eden”, played God in jest. And the poem ends with “God went on sleeping” followed by “Crow went on laughing”.

We see in these two kinds of comedy the two characteristic extremes that postmodernist fun oscillates between: dark comedy (which has pathos in its immediate subtext) and (even though only apparently) light comedy, the comedy of more or less innocent tricksters. The two kinds are in constant competition, like two contending strong wills, because decadent humour is disputatious, in addition to courting pathos as seen in the Crow poems and in the abundance of death-related cues in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

In this, postmodernist humour differs from the convivial, kindly, comforting brand of humour met with in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, which seems to answer the description at the end of Freud’s 1927 study of humour: “[I]t is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego. [...] And finally, if the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering, this does not contradict its origin in the parental agency” (Freud, *Humour* 166) And if postmodernist humour is scathing, this is due to its propensity to move in the proximity of suffering.


Conclusion

With help from the Freudian texts on jokes and humour of, respectively, 1905 and 1927, British humour and pathos have been interpreted in terms of their link with an elevated, refined *hêdonê* inherited by the twentieth century from late Victorian aestheticism. It was possible to follow the transformation of high modernism into postmodernism and of light humour into sharp satire after the outburst of pathos expressed with aestheticist means in *The Waste Land* and after the experiment and performance of hushing youthful pathos with adult humour in *Ulysses*; nevertheless, in *Ulysses* one already meets with what was to become the postmodernist preference for ironic amusement instead of serene, gratifying (pacifying?) humour. It should come as no surprise that postmodernist fun grows from a thick layer of savage irony as a mode of defence against pathos in an age influenced by the absurdist fashion – one which rejects precisely the fullness of life, of energy and of experience which sparked the aestheticist decadence and the modernist revolution alike.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Ioana Zirra  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5940-1461>

Works Cited:

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*.
http://www.samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part1.html Acces.
Aug. 1, 2023
- Brooker, Peter and Peter Widdowson (eds.). *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf. 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Humour". *1927 Almanac* 1928, 9-16. e-text.
---. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Free eBook from
www.SigmundFreud.net Accessed Aug. 1, 2023
- Eliot, Thomas, Stearns. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. London: Faber and Faber. 1948[ninth edition] Project Gutenberg Canada. e-book.
---. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2022.
- Hughes, Ted. *From the Life and Songs of the Crow*. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "Doing Things in Style: An Interpretation of 'The Oxen of the Sun' in James Joyce's *Ulysses*", in Brooker, Peter and Peter Widdowson (eds.). *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf. 1996.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin, 1992.
---. *Dubliners*. London: Penguin, 1992.
---. *Ulysses*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986. e-book.
- Lacan, Jaques. "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*", in Brooker, Peter and Peter Widdowson (eds.). *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996.
- Pater, Walter. *Marius the Epicurean*. Project Gutenberg e-book, 2021.
- Saint-Amour, Paul, K. *Tense Future. Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. e-book.
- Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Plays*. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1966.

Notes on Contributor(s)

Ioana Zirra teaches Victorian and Twentieth Century Literature in Britain, Irish identity, Celtic cultural memory and Anthropology at the University of Bucharest. These are subsumed to the theory of modernity, whose free narratives she studied in her PhD Dissertation (“Narratives in the Margin of the Theory of (Post-)Modernity. Constructing an Architext”, Bucharest University Press, 2008). Of late, she has also been reading *Ulysses* by James Joyce, re-editing with added notes for the centenary year 2022 the first translation of the novel into Romanian, done in 1984 by the poet Mircea Ivănescu.

Citation: Zirra, Ioana. The Humour-Pathos Link from Late-Victorian Aestheticism to Modernism and After in British Literature. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 13(1), 2023: 52-65. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.1.5>