Article

Lugubrious Victorians, Ludicrous Narratives: The Function of the Comic in Jane Harris' *The Observations*

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Abstract: Given the socio-economic circumstances of the Victorian Era, one of its unassailable facts was that the conservative and solemn spirit of the time created a claustrophobic social atmosphere for some of its occupiers. Victorian, as well as Neo-Victorian novels register an exigency for laughter partly as a response to this solemnity. As a successful representative of the latter, Jane Harris' debut novel, *The Observations* (2006) narrates the dolorous life of an Irish girl, Bessy Buckley who is taken on as a maid in a Scottish manor and is asked to perform strange duties assigned to her by the mistress of the house. This study attempts to unearth *The Observations'* versatile approach to the notion of comic on three functional levels by resting on Alexander Bain's notion of 'ludicrous degradation.' Firstly, the study scrutinizes comicality arising out of situations in which clashes of value and meaning occur. Secondly, it explains how ludicrous degradation turned into humour allows for psychological release. Thirdly, it looks at how Bessy's sense of humour works as a coping mechanism and an antidote for Victorian pathos apart from being a literary source of amusement.
***Keywords*:** *comic; humour; Neo-Victorian; ludicrous degradation; release; pathos.*

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Introduction

The Victorian Era is known for its multifarious restraints on social and cultural life. Infested with moral impositions, diversified obsessions, racial biases and sexual taboos, one cannot deny the claustrophobic effects of the 19th century. Thinking along with The Queen's inclination to foreclose freedoms, prohibitions on what is regarded as "unseemly" pervaded even simplest activities such as family reading which may corrupt the domestic mores when practised unheedingly. Dr. Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825), the British physician and writer who gave English language the term 'bowdlerize', edited *The Family Shakespeare in Ten Volumes* in 1818 with a fair amount of expurgation of words related to body, clergymen, and religion. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* received its share of Bowdler's enthusiastic elimination of blasphemy due to Gibbon's conspicuous attacks on Christianity.

So, the term "bowdlerize" can be seen as a capsula of moral prudence that is prescribed to the upper classes of Victorian society. While this upper segment of society "enjoyed" inhibitions in their world of thought and action, the lower classes were crushed under savagely capitalistic motivations in order to deal with vital problems such as survival. The young chimney sweepers, homeless prostitutes, underpaid handloom weavers, cotton spinners and those who worked just in order not to perish constituted the dark side of the Victorian mindset. The accounts of the doomed orphans and child workers held an important part in the Victorian novels, some of which put forth the problem of prostitution quite differently than that of *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland. In short, this dark world contained a large space for pathos of many kinds as exemplified in Dickens' novels.

Depending on these social, moral, economic and religious insecurities we may think that neither The Queen nor the Victorian people had much reason to be cheerful or humorous. Besides, some men-of-letters were against laughing. Condemning the laughers morally and intellectually in *The Philosophy of Laughter*, George Vasey approached the phenomenon as a "no laughing matter" and claimed its effects on respiratory organs to be impairing. Perhaps because of its disconcerting effects, Victorian morality was against it. "As with grief, severe pain, extreme fear or blind rage, truly uproarious laughter involves a loss of physical self-control, as the body gets momentarily out of hand and regress to the uncoordinated state of the infant" (Eagleton 3).

Many Neo-Victorian novels, as well as their predecessors, make this strange correlation between humour and pathos, because laughter is a good way of criticising injustices, wrongdoings and other forms of bitterness in life. "The serious and mirthful are in perpetual contrast in human life. It is always a gratifying deliverance to pass from the severe to the easy side of affairs; and the comic conjunction is one form of the transition" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 251-2).

The subject of humour in this study draws its major source from Bain's notion of 'the ludicrous' due to its considerable emphasis on the role of class distinction and the inevitable tension it carries. Written in the nineteenth century, his superiority theory provides a more comprehensive explanation for humour than proposing one clear-cut base as to the what, the why and the how of humour. This study attempts to unearth *The Observations'* versatile approach to the notion of comic on three functional levels by resting on Alexander Bain's notion of 'ludicrous degradation.' Firstly, the study scrutinizes comicality arising out of situations in which clashes of value and meaning occur. Secondly, it explains how ludicrous degradation turned into humour allows for psychological release. Thirdly, it looks at how Bessy's sense of humour works as a coping mechanism and an antidote for Victorian pathos apart from being a literary source of amusement.

In the literature of humour, the theories proposed to explain and define the phenomenon have subsumed under three main headings, whose relation to each has been substantially untapped. However, there is no case of laughter which can be comprehended only through one of these views. The incongruity theory prevalently attributed to Kant and Schopenhauer is found by a majority of scholars of humour as the most 'plausible' account for laughter. Therefore, the merit of the superiority thesis and its implications have been more likely to be neglected compared to the other two. The element of 'superiority' is not a cog in the machine; on the contrary, there are comic instances where the principle that stirs up and shapes laughter is indubitably social inequality, which render notions of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' irremissible in Victorian and Neo-Victorian narratives.

Alexander Bain and the notion of 'the ludicrous'

Bain's two works partially dealing with humour and pathos *The Emotions and the Will* and *English Composition and Rhetoric* elaborate on the notion of 'the ludicrous' and how 'degradation' necessarily relates to it. Thinking of the fact that the superiority thesis of humour was prevalently attributed to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes who, commonly, had political reflections on their time, it might stand out as surprising that Bain was primarily preoccupied with linguistics, psychology and philosophy of mind, and was renowned for his products of engineering and inventions.

Although Bain, in his former work, starts to initiate the subject of humour first raising the question of power obtained from a "comparison with [inferior] others", his superiority thesis should not merely be perused in contours of social inequality. Even in what we regard as obvious incongruities, there is an element of inequality at work which is measured by the degree of value of seriousness attributed to the two incongruous components in question. "The Ludicrous in composition is for the most part based on the degradation, direct or indirect, of

some person or interest – something associated with power, dignity, or gravity. It is farther requisite that the circumstances of this degradation should not be such as to produce any other strong emotion, as pity, anger, or fear" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 104).

When ludicrous is combined with "wit" and "tender feelings" we reach humour as it is "not always permissible to degrade a person or thing by open vituperation or depreciatory adjuncts, some disguise or redeeming ingenuity is sought out" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 109). The inclusion of wit seems more than necessary in particular cases of required obedience. If we think of the fact that "servants were the largest category of workers for the greater part of Queen Victoria's reign" (Fernandez 2) the only tool for the maids to let out their justifiable aggression was humour.

The characterization of the 'servant' in *The Observations*

Harris, in an interview with Penguin Random House, states her source of inspiration in creating such a "coarse and untutored yet so thoughtful and engaging" character (Harris, *A Conversation* n.pg.). She suggests that her aunt's peculiar character was the idea behind Bessy's "optimistic" quality and "wicked sense of humour". In the comparison made between *The Observations* and some of prominent Victorian novels in terms of their characterization of socially discriminated female characters, the writer puts forth the distinguishing aspects of her protagonist: Bessy is "a servant girl with a shady past, an immigrant, someone who is definitely situated on the margins of society" which makes her quite different than many fictional Victorian characters exposed to discrimination. (Harris, *A Conversation* n.pg.)

The novel starts with a scene where a runaway girl named Bessy Buckley looks for somewhere to stay and work around Edinburgh highlands. On her way, she comes across Arabella Reid, who is the mistress of a country house nearby. Arabella decides to employ her as a maid when she learns that Bessy is literate. However, Arabella has a condition to employ Bessy. She must keep a daily journal in which she will note everything she does and what she thinks/feels about them during the day. For some time, Arabella treats the new maid with tender care which she has not been given by her mother. Arabella teaches her punctuation, gives her books to read, and gains her trust by telling her her own secrets. We discover that Arabella is also writing a scientific treatise *sub rosa*, titled *Observations on the Habits and Nature of the Domestic Class in My Time* which subverts Bessy's trust in and love for her dear mistress and throws her into a craving for revenge. Writing this treatise Arabella aims to prove that women like herself can also 'be' as potent intellectuals as men. Her overall aim consists of finding a pattern based on the relation between a servant's physical and mental

qualities, discovering ways to derive the utmost benefits from servants and writing a prescription for reaching the ideal servant.

A "shitty" death

Having read Arabella's condemning remarks about herself, Bessy dives into her mordant past in which Mr Levy figures as the sole provider of few good memories. After her short introduction of Levy as a "rich" but "modest" man whom Bessy believed herself to be his "heart's companion", and the times of "solace" shared with him, we begin to build a positive image – unlike Arabella – of this character and perhaps even feel, to an extent, appreciation for not treating Bessy badly. However, the death account of Levy, as Bessy describes it, does not perpetuate the image we had previously formed, on the contrary, it completely shatters every sense of nobility and seriousness Levy is laden with. Moreover, this surprising blow is followed by another kind of levelling when Levy is described to have died "on a pisspot" (Harris, *The Observations* 138).

The bathetic impression that Levy's final attempt at "a leathery pellet the size of a hazelnut" in his bedroom where "the two bones of his arse pointing at me" (137) leaves on the reader, deems an equation of death with excrement inescapable, pressing us into an uncontrollable laughter almost volcanic in nature. All meaning is lost. The gravity, every serious association we have made with the notion of 'death' is suddenly inverted. Death becomes a "shitty" nothing: Hence, the value attached to 'dying for something' – one's country, freedom, love, and other supremely regarded ideals within the imagination's reach, plummets down. "Meaning itself involves a degree of psychic strain, dependent as it is on excluding possibilities which swarm in from the unconscious. If excrement plays such a key role in comedy, it is partly because shit is the very model of meaninglessness, levelling all distinctions of sense and value to the same endlessly self-identical stuff" (Eagleton 17). However, Harris' comedic structure works more than in one way. Not only does it depotentiate our conception of death by distorting the concept's signification – an appalling notion to ponder upon for many – but also assigns a certain dignity to "his pellet" by preserving "Mr Levy's last act" in a "small velvet pouch" destined to "dry out over time" and "turn into a pinch of dust," (Harris, *The Observations* 515) as we are reminded at the end of the novel. This materialised nothingness is treated with extreme seriousness and care by Bessy and, decidedly, "[she] didn't want anyone to be staring at his last act, because it was his private matter and nobody's business but his own" (138).

The ludicrous à la Bain embraces both directions of humour: "[e]ither some elevated object is treated in a low and vulgar style, or a mean object in the style of things dignified; in both cases there is an effect of degradation" (Bain, *English*

Composition and Rhetoric 106). Perhaps the final step is completed with the absurd identification of the old man with the dried excrement.

Bessy's 'unsavoury' ballad

The second instance, differently from the first one, has a comic appeal both for the reader and several genteel characters figuring as James's guests for dinner. Bessy's first feeble move made out of frustration is the attempt to ridicule Arabella when she is asked to perform one of her "marvellous songs" to entertain the guests. "…nobody likes to be treated like a performing monkey. Missus didn't care two flips for me…. Well, I'd give her a performance, by hicky I would" (Harris, *The Observations* 176). The mistress's aim to impress, to show her own capability to "domesticate" and find something to brag about educating servants into an "ideal" form backfires as Bessy chooses to sing a vulgar song whose lyrics tell the story of a man who cannot help but evacuate the excessive "intestinal gas" in "appropriate places" (176).

The occasion showcases an abundance of what Bain regards as constituents of "the genuine comic": "false…dignities", "show without meaning", "hollow pretensions", "self-importance", "hypocrisy" and "painful strivings to gain glittering positions" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 251) are almost personified by the hosts and the guests at the room among whom there are also a member of the parliament and a rapist vicar). The act overtly reflects the relationship between Mill's (147-8) notions of "action," "intention" and "motivation"; the act being 'singing the vulgar song', the intention being 'mocking', and the motivation 'being mocked' in the lines of Arabella's *Observations*. Although the Reids "look quite-ill" upon hearing the coarse content at first, "Mr Duncan Pollock began to chuckle and his chuckles grew until he was hooting with laughter. Seeing that he was enjoying himself, missus and master James started to laugh too, in fact Master James became almost hysterical" (Harris, *The Observations* 178). However, Bessy's action does not fully meet her intention, and proves to be an unsuccessful attempt at ludicrous degradation.

The guests burst into laughter, instead of reproving the mistress's apparently false claims to "domestication," since a Freudian sublimation of 'fart' becomes established in the witty lyrics of the song as 'art'. What makes the guests laugh, therefore is not a sense of "power or superiority" accomplished on Bessy's side, but rather "a sudden release from a state of constraint" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 250). The comic appeal for the reader may be, however, an assumed victory of proving Arabella wrong. Bain suggests that the ludicrous degradation does not necessarily be our own, "we can also laugh sympathetically, or where the act of degrading redounds to the glory of someone else" (249).

Going back to the release component in the humorous song, bringing 'fart' and 'art' together must necessarily be rethought in the light of the 'death' and

'shit' juxtaposition in the first instance. What causes release, first and foremost, is the elevation of a bodily discharge to the level of poetic beauty. This elevation will gain further importance when looked from the Victorian point of view which demarcates between body and mind (or soul). Mill's hierarchy of mental and bodily pleasures (Mill 140-1) is exemplary of this obsessive perception. One must also note the implications of the practice of covering table legs in the Victorian era.

Seen in this light, the role of the superiority thesis cannot be disregarded, as it partly constitutes the *raison d'etre* of the release theory. Release always calls for a transition from something regarded as serious, banned or repressed to something light, allowed and freed. The incongruity, on the other hand, between expectation and occurrence constitutes the interstice through which the release is actualized.

Revenge of "the ghost"

The third comic instance is intrinsic to several parodic aspects of the Neo-Victorian novel. *The Observations* cannot rate as a parody in the fullest sense with a particular 'hypotext' in Genette's terms (Genette 27). It nevertheless carries, a certain criticism of the gothic notion of 'ghost' as something repressed, hidden or underestimated by mocking it and turning it into a failed attempt at ludicrous degradation. The mocking effect becomes apparent when Bessy's sham ghost leads Arabella to insanity. Another parodic element is closely related to Arabella's forceful desire to imitate scientific discourse in her *Observations* and prove equal to men of the time while using Bessy as an experimental object rather than treating her as a person. The sham resulting in Arabella's incarceration in asylum opens a career in writing for Bessy which Arabella originally aspired to and the servants of the Victorian era were less likely to envision. The parodic aspect problematizing the inhuman treatment of the working class of the domestic sphere, therefore, will have a close relation to the dynamics of humour, hence, the superiority theory.

The comical aura around the third instance is different from the first two. Recognizing the innocuous recitation of the ballad, Smith suggests that "Bessy's mischievous nature drives much of the early comedy, but the novel reveals more sinister forces at work" (172). It is not only her realization of having been an experimental subject to Arabella's grand plan that shocks Bessy, but also the mistress's declaration of her true intentions behind "coaxing" and "bonding" processes (Harris 119) carried out recklessly while the maid believes her affection and interest to be genuine. The prejudiced condescendence condemns her for being "superstitious" (Harris, *The Observations* 112), "raw material with no common sense" (109) and "deadened, lacking in some element, perhaps emotion" (108), which makes Bessy no-match for Nora's assumed excellence. Perhaps the

worst of humiliations is being called "the lowliest of prostitutes" (127), whom Arabella only once sees "as a person" (115).

This perception reflects an entrenched social disdain for maids and the notions they represent in the nineteenth century. "A servant is a servant…one would be hard pressed to remember their names" (96). Maids are simply characterised by their physicality, and the presence or lack of virtues expected from Victorian servants such as faithfulness, obedience and honesty. "The very sight of Morag now turns my stomach. I am sure the poor girl cannot help being so ugly but I do wish that she would disappear so that my gaze would never have to alight upon her again. She is truly a wretch. I will be glad to see the back of her" (102). The fact that Morag seems shrewd enough to discern the oddity in her mistress's "sit down" and "stand up" tests incurs Arabella's distaste for her.

Reading these sentences, despite her heart-felt affection for Arabella, evokes the inevitable and irrefutable reality of inequality, and an immense heartbreak for Bessy, which makes her sick and confines her to bed for a few days. However, Bessy is not like Genet's two maids, Solange and Claire who dream of – and also enact – strangling their mistress with dish gloves and dismembering her. Her 'humour,' as pointed out by Bain, regarding the nature of the phenomena, is not antagonistic and still involves a degree of kindness since "the essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender, fellow feeling with all forms of existence. This is widely prevalent, although not the only mode of converting ludicrous into humour" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric*107). Although Bessy's "childish prank" goes out of control and ends up with Arabella's incarceration, it is never aimed at her devastation *ab initio*.

Having read about Nora's death, Bessy immediately starts to form a plan in order to ridicule her mistress and avenge herself against Arabella's baseless and hurtful claims. Arabella's intellectual excellence, which she believes to have crowned her mental equivalence with men is downthrown with Bessy's comic plan. "One frequent occasion of laughter is startling, or seeing someone get startled, than which there is no more startling reflection of superiority on the part of some agent" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 250). However, the device does more than give Arabella a single satisfactory fright. Moreover, it bereaves her of her reason and drags her to insanity. A sort of Foucauldian power-knowledge dynamic here works to help Bessy casting aspersions on Arabella's sanity, since she learns that Arabella is afraid of ghosts and Nora's death can make a ghost story connected with her most favoured maid (Nora) easier.

Two of Fernandez's introductory questions, "What could servants have possibly contributed to the Victorian home by their powers of reading and writing? And what dramas of literacy could be staged in fiction and non-fiction, around masters and servants?" (1) give us here, what I think is Harris's major motive. Arabella's aspired usurpation of Bessy's literacy, on the one hand enfeebles the mistress and her scientific enquiry, and on the other strengthens the

maid against Arabella's tyranny; it is a truly a comical reversal that, thanks to Arabella's plans, Bessy gets a chance to meet Dr. Lawrence and write her history to be published. Hence, Bain's ludicrous degradation not only ensures Bessy revenge, but also publicises her as a servant-writer in a Victorian society.

Arabella's madness and the curtain of secrecy behind Nora's death, however, replace the prevalently humoristic narrative with escalating pathos. "The Tender Feelings are awakened by objects of special affection, by displays of active goodness, by humane sentiments, by pain and misery, and by pleasures, especially such as are gentle rather than acute. In highly pathetic situations, several of these modes are combined" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 99). Arabella's pangs of conscience for Nora's rape, impregnation and suicide which leads the mistress to a wilful wounding of Reverend Pullock, render Arabella an identifiable and even pitiful character for the reader.

The ending is meaningful in a way that justifies the intrinsic humour of life itself. Similar to Rose's commentary on Hegelian history as "a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim action and discordant outcome (Rose 71), life has a comic trajectory of its own if one can see the comedic within the tragic.

Humour as a coping mechanism

The reason behind Bessy's disappointment and indignation of being labelled as "the lowliest of prostitutes" (Harris, *The Observations* 127) is not only the humiliation these words inflict, but more dominantly, Arabella's alleged compassionate behaviour towards Bessy which turns out to be a bait to establish trust.

What makes Bessy so attached to her mistress – apart from her deceptive remarks and bodily signs of endearment – that she decidedly seeks to ruin Arabella's plan? The reader gets the necessary answer only towards the middle of the novel where Bessy starts to narrate her own doleful history and her formidable relationship to her mother. "Much of what went on in those days is a source of great shame for me. It is difficult to write about and I am sure not a very pleasant read! Indeed, it makes me feel queasy to remember some of the terrible things that followed and I dread writing about it" (Harris, *The Observations* 152).

To the social sphere outside home of a Victorian maid, is added an abusive mother, who goes as far as to enact incest with her daughter in order to gain money, and leaves her defenceless against the men she brings home. It is true we feel pathos – what Bain calls "tender feelings" – for Arabella and especially Nora; but a heavier kind of pathos is experienced at the knowledge of Bessy's ill-fated childhood. But as opposed to Nora and Arabella, Bessy manages to decide her life's destination despite her mother – who at last comes back to ask for money –

and her traumatic childhood. Bessy's humorous temperament rescues her from sharing a similar end with Nora. "[A]s soon as old Whacker discovered that 'the love of his life' was carrying a child, away off he jigged out town taking his jack with him, never to be seen nor heard again, well I don't suppose his jack made a sound. Mind you perhaps it nickered" (Harris, *The Observations* 142). Her humour allows her to laugh away the grotesque details of her unfortunate experiences at the most dreadful moments. "I knew better than to get involved in disagreements between Brigid and her men, I had done so once before and got a bruise on my arse the size of Canada for my trouble" (148). Bessy can discover the comic aspect within the severely tragic moments of her life. "The life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, and when only its most significant features are emphasized, is really a tragedy; but gone through in detail it has the character of a comedy" (Schopenhauer 322). Schopenhauer's pessimism regards the comical aspect of life as a "mockery" on human bitterness, as it devoids him even of the "dignity of tragic characters." However, tragic and comic perception bear more profound outlooks on one's way to evaluate certain situations one has gone through. It is a must for the humorous temperament to see the funny side of the obstacles and miseries one finds oneself immersed in. Making fun of tragic components of man's life gives him a certain pleasure for overcoming difficulties and gaining victory over what he believes to be his "ordeals." "Emotion of power," stemming from the feeling of being superior not only to someone, as Bain points out, but also to something that hits him as especially challenging, gains its possessor a merited zest for life.

Conclusion

The account of Bessy Buckley shows that humour can turn haplessness of life into chances for fortuitous yieldings. Transition from ludicrous degradation to humour is made complete with evasion from harmful hostility, an addition of tender feelings for the other and wit. Humour as a sublimation of frustration necessarily retains either a desire of superiority or at least, as we have seen in Bessy's narrative, a wish to compensate one's loss of dignity by castigating the opponent. Bain's superiority thesis of humour is particularly an epideictic approach to the Victorian notion of comic as the era was a sight for class distinction and restrictive 'moral' values. The ability to mock one's own miseries at one's own expense transforms the tragic components of human life into comic ones.

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