

**Humour as a Nonviolent Resistance Strategy in *Murdoch Mysteries*  
TV Series**

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**Abstract**

Humour holds a significant role in our lives, making spirits bright and enabling people to overcome the obstacles of their plain daily existence. As a communication phenomenon that embraces countless forms and shapes, humour is widely believed to possess properties of releasing tension and creating good mood. It also operates like some kind of "ice-breaking" tool meant to relax and entertain people, being also connected with interpersonal attraction. For many people who have the capacity of finding humour even in the darkest details of their life, this is an efficient weapon to fight monotony, interpersonal confusion, and misery (Shibles 1997). Moreover, humour is also a successful nonviolent strategy of resisting injustice and oppression. Thus, mocking the enemy as a way of fighting back has turned into a historic tradition materialised in the public exposure to caricatures, anecdotes, jokes, stand-up sketches in addition to the classic jesting and satire (Sorensen 2008).

Exploited by both the mass-media and the film industry, especially in TV series, humour has the potential of responding to the audience's need to either recognize themselves and their destiny in the fictional characters and plot or to escape from the daily pressures of their unfulfilled lives. Some TV series facilitate access to some performance that is liable to help spectators/viewers to forget about the quotidian worries or they inspire ways of fighting themselves against oppressive situations through humour. Dedicated mostly to youngsters and adapted from a literary work, *Murdoch Mysteries* TV series fulfils both roles by providing varied samples of humorous

language and situations that that can approached from both traditional and modern, up-to-date perspectives. In line with the topic proposed for this paper, we will further review the main theories of humour to the purpose of projecting it as a social tool of resistance to different kinds of oppression.

**Keywords:** *humour, theories, resistance, oppression, Murdoch Mysteries, television series, jokes, laughter.*

### **1. Definitions and functions of humour**

There have been many attempts to give humour a proper definition that would be neither too schematic nor too scholarly. For instance, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines humour as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing, or absurdly incongruous”, while *The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary* simply refers to it as “the quality of something that makes it funny or amusing”. Taking these definitions into account, we can say that the perception of humour depends very much on the parties involved and on the cultural background of the audience.

Humour is a universal behaviour, and the good sense of humour provides some playful means of approaching taboo subjects. The cultural element holds a prominent place, given the fact that people do not make the same kind of jokes all over the world. There are significant differences from one country to another as far as the process of joking, the joke style and the content of the jokes is concerned. Even if humour brings people together to share a roar of laughter, it still demands particularly sensitive linguistic and cultural proficiency, since what is perceived as amusing in one culture could become totally inappropriate or offending in another. Humour may appear in daily interactions among people and it is not synonym to comedy, which is not instantaneous, but it represents an intentional media composition, framed in plays, novels, TV shows or movies. In order to understand humour better, it is necessary to remember that, fundamentally, it is

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a social phenomenon that cannot exist outside of discourse, it must be invented and interpreted as well. Humour is always found in 'something', it is always a characteristic of 'something' (Friesen 2020: 2).

One should make a distinction between humour and laughter, given that these terms are sometimes confused. On the one hand, laughter is designated as a physical action generated by a wide range of emotions (from joy to discomfort or even agitation), humour and laughter not being inherently connected (Friesen 2020: 3). On the other hand,

humour, conceptualized as a habitual behaviour pattern with the general tendency to laugh or tell funny stories, is a multifaceted construct that might be used, for example, to cheer up others as well as oneself or to engage in personal relations. (Leist & Muller 2013)

According to Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (2010, apud Friesen 2020), humour cannot be approached as isolated from social discourse and interaction. Sometimes, humour may supply the reader or the public with distractions and diversions, breaching the seriousness of life via a world of fantasy and infinite possibilities, but it is not separable from "the broad spectrum of communicative forms and processes or from the manifold issues surrounding social encounter and interaction in a multicultural society" (Friesen 2020).

### 2. Theories of humour

In order to approach humour, the main theories usually considered are the superiority, the relief and the incongruity theories. Some linguists consider the incongruity, or the surprise theory as a linguistic one, since it is connected to the way in which incongruity is perceived in the humorous texts, while the superiority theory emphasizes the social relationships, with their power, conflict, or

hierarchical issues. On the other hand, the relief theory places humour in relation with the unconscious, being considered a psychological approach to humour (Elden 2018).

These theories were partially approached by famous philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Kant, Kierkegaard or Aristotle, mostly as subchapters of works dealing with other topics than humour, so the interest switched to the effect of jokes on humanity from any perspective a specialist could analyse. One can find incongruities or ironies in the relationship between a speaker's statements, or between his statements and attitudes. There might be a clash between a speaker's statements and the gravity of a situation. And a person who seems to be sober is more prone to provoke amusement to the audience than one who jests often.

The first theorists of humour approached humour as an isolated experience, without pointing out the connections among the fields of creative work – humour/laughter, artistic vision, comic ingenuity and even scientific endeavour (Herring 2019).

### **2.1. From humour-triggering incongruities to the theory of incongruity**

Contemporary psychology considers humour as an important part of the processes – conscious or unconscious – that bring together various types of emotional feedback. Hence, humour sparks malice, providing some kind of inoffensive outlet for it in the shape of a delightful aesthetic experience (Robbins & Vandree 2009: 56-61). Moreover, humour entails some incongruities of the ones commonly identified by linguists (a) linguistic incongruities, (b) pragmatic incongruities, (c) narrative incongruities, (d) parody, (e) satire and (f) “unlocated” or “absolute” incongruities).

According to Robbins & Vandree (2009: 57), linguistic incongruities are considered those that contravene normal speech – stuttering for example, while pragmatic incongruities make the most of ambiguities, the conventional meaning of the language being

formulated to fit in with an unexpected, less conventional interpretation. With narrative incongruities, the stress is on ambivalence in the conventions of storytelling, the target of irony in parody is connected to the artistic means, while in satire, the target is oriented towards social conventions. “Unlocated” and “absolute” incongruities are somehow similar to satire.

It is important to mention that not all incongruities result in humour. Some of them, if they violate any kind of expectation, can generate fear or mistrust. Rothbart (1976) stated that

three judgements are necessary for an incongruity to result in humour and potential laughter. First, the environmental context must be safe, rather than dangerous. Second, the incongruous stimulus must be playful and inconsequential, rather than a serious challenge. And, finally, the incongruity should be solvable. By misattributing the humour to the incongruities and other non-tendentious components of the joke, the audience is able to enjoy the tendentious features of the humour without any feeling of guilt or shame (Rothbart 1976: 37-54).

It was Henry Bergson who synthesized the incongruity theory in his essay concerning laughter in 1980, stating that while culture, conduct and rules are anticipated, mechanical and almost mathematical, if put in contrast with human intelligences, which are unpredictable, we can notice how the three mentioned previously tend to defy norms. He emphasized the fact that humour is “a social experience, and not, as the other theories suggest, an individual experience to social conditions” (Herring 2020).

The incongruity theory focuses on the response to ambiguities, inconsistencies, and the element of surprise (this being the reason why it is also named the Surprise Theory of Humour). According to Bahaa-eddin Abdulhassan Hassan (2013), in his article *The Pragmatics of Humour*, humour is said to have the following elements:

1. A conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke;
2. An ambiguity at some level of language with semantic or pragmatic meaning or both;
3. A punchline which resolves the conflict.” (Hassan 2013: 551)

Hassan continues his argumentation by stating the importance of register as a means of producing humour, as an effect of the impact between the register used and the register expected or proper in the given situation. If jokes are neutral forms of humour and they are mainly context-free, irony appears as an aggressive form of humour and connected to the context. For example, in episode 9 of season 8 the television series *Murdoch Mysteries*, a stand-up comedian presents his special routine in a vaudeville show at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His jokes stir the laughter of the audience, since his show is the first of many to come in the business of entertainment.

*“I was talking to my friend. He said ‘my mother-in-law is an angel’. I said ‘lucky you, mine’s still alive’.”*

This example presents the setup (a man who is very fond of his mother-in-law and calls her *an angel*) and the punchline (the comedian who cannot stand his mother-in-law would rather see her materialise as an angel in heaven, meaning he would rather see her dead). The discrepancy between what is expected (the comedian to praise his mother-in-law) and what happens (the comedian wishes his mother-in-law were dead) makes the situation humorous, as it occurs in most of the jokes told around the globe.

In the TV series under discussion, we intend to find more evidence that humour arises from both incongruities and contradictions underlying the context.

### 2.2. The Superiority Theory

This theory originates in Plato and Aristotle times, when they underlined the fact that humour appears out of a state of thrill or euphoria felt by some people when they experience a sensation of supremacy over the others. It conveys the aggressive nature of the humorous effects and most likely involve belittling someone, satire, or sarcasm. The major argument of this theory states that a person or a group tends to derive pleasure from mocking their peers, because they consider that their own beliefs are superior to the others' beliefs. In his time, Plato-observed that people get enjoyment from the drawbacks or imperfections of the others (Morreall 2020).

The superiority theory refers to the emotional fluctuations, with the difference that here the benefits of the amusement are directed towards only one part, at the expense of another. Ancient philosophers considered that humorous scorn is psychologically appealing to an ethical hierarchy of jokes. Plato and Aristotle were among the first who touched on the psychological elements of mocking amusement; even if it permeates human communication, there are also dangers in producing humorous discourse because of the unequal distribution of humour benefits (Perks 2012: 124). When laughter is expressed in an inappropriate context, even if it is directed toward a person, a trait, or some behaviour, it could offend the target person and produce a perception of self-inferiority, generating potential emotive responses that include embarrassment.

There was also an **evolutionary theory** of humour that connects humour and laughter with a stage of superiority in human evolution and points out the enhancing of one's social standing through mocking at the others. The promoters of this theory present the benefits of telling jokes as follows: it rises the status of the humorous person, it lowers the status of certain individuals and it creates some sort of camaraderie and social unity (Perks 2012).

Weisfeld (1993) proposed a general humour theory suggesting humour provides valuable social information to others while

laughter provokes pleasurable feelings that positively reinforce the humourist. In return, the humourist gets forthcoming reciprocation by putting an ally in a favourable disposition. (Polimeni & Reiss 2006)

In enhancing the affiliative nature of humour, the evolutionary theory claims that laughter unites parties, especially when they share the same heritage and laugh at the expense of a stranger or someone who does not belong to the group (Herring 2020). For example, the rich joke about the poor, civilians joke about the army, some peoples laugh about other cultures or communities, these jokes bond groups socially and boost a sense of belonging.

### **2.3. The Relief Theory**

The relief theory is based on the premise that laughter has the power of liberating people from all the fears accumulated in thousands of years, be they sacred issues, prohibitions, etc.

Scholars agree on the fact that laughter plays an important role as a psychological factor essential for human well-being, but they try to get new insights into the causes of laughter as an unpredictable manifestation and the features of different types of humour (Hassan 2013: 554). Freud was the one who approached social relationships while making the analysis of humour, seeing jokes as tools of breaking barriers imposed by taboos and other community restrictions.

Although Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud were the early promoters of relief theory, bringing to the front an alternative outlook on the role played by humour in society, it is Plato and Aristotle who made the philosophical preparations for the interaction of positive and negative emotions that form the fundament of relief theory. They noticed that a speaker can use jokes as an effective linguistic strategy in order to improve the audience's disposition and release from a stressful topic of conversation.



Mostly associated with Sigmund Freud, who sees humour as a means of releasing negative energy or feelings of repression, based on the arousal-relief mechanism, this theory is mainly connected to watching cartoons, where the caricatures have the property of producing laughter, which, in its turn, relieves people's tension, usually in a context of emotions and feelings elicited by humorous events. Freud thinks that there is an underlying unconscious intent of the humour, rising from the psychological drive to release the repressed impulses and aggressive urges that finally may create a feeling of relief. He associates nontendentious humour with the humour of children who find enjoyment in playing with words and situations or making jokes for the sake of having fun. He sees the tendentious humour as a defence mechanism to release repressed energy in a socially acceptable manner.

Being a biologist and a sociologist as well, Spencer connected the two sciences in order to provide an explanation to the causes of laughter. He characterized laughter as a means of easing daily pressures and tensions and stated that humour, having the quality of addressing complicated and serious issues, can be considered an equilibrium keeper (Friesen 2020: 6). Nevertheless, when trying to discuss the discourse of sociological theory, it is important to describe the limits, taking into account the witticism attributed to Will Rogers, an American humourist who mentions the transgression of humour in his celebrated statement: "Everything is funny as long as it happens to someone else".

In his work *Will to Power*, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1967), outlined the social role of humour stating that the reason why man alone laughs is because "he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter", admitting that jocularity and suffering work together and are mirrored (Friesen 2020: 1).

### **3. Humour as a resistance strategy in *Murdoch Mysteries***

Starting from Bergson's reflections on the functions of humour and combining the theories of superiority and incongruity with the ones of nonviolent resistance to oppression, we can bring some evidence that

humor does have a powerful potential in facilitating outreach and mobilization, a culture of resistance and turning oppression upside down. How this power is exercised depends on the situation, but humor's main source of power is its ability to turn things upside down and present them in a new frame. (Sorensen 2008)

In line with the superiority theory, Ross (1998) explained that most of the humorous utterances are used in social interactions as a means of attacking another group or victim considered inferior. He considered humour and satire like some kind of battle between different people or groups of people in the society, while, from this point of view, Bergson saw laughter as a *social gesture with a social function*. (Hassan 2013:553). For Freud and Spencer as promoters of the relief theory, humour represents a kind of battle within ourselves "the discharge of arrested feelings into the muscular system... in the absence of other adequate channels."

These battles are also reflected in *Murdoch Mysteries*, a Canadian television drama series that premiered in January 2008. This series was based on the characters created by Maureen Jennings in her successful Detective Murdoch novels. It presents facts and events from Toronto, Ontario in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where a talented police detective solves many of the cases that he is assigned by using methods of detection ahead of his time. Each episode has its own plot and narrative elements, while the setting is sometimes changed, according to the development of the action. Even if each episode has internal unique elements, they are connected under a frame of continuity that allows viewers to recall details from previous episodes in a way that affects the expectations and interpretations of the jokes in the serial.

The prejudices deriving from the fact that the protagonist, Detective Murdoch, is a Roman Catholic striving his way of life in a city dominated by Protestants, and the difficulties he confronts as a result make way for a fundamental theme of the series. In parallel, until they

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get married, Murdoch's infatuation with Doctor Julia Ogden and his incapacity of convey his feelings (obvious in the eyes of his co-workers) brings forth another subplot, alongside with the romantic interest shown by Constable Crabtree to a new doctor who replaces Julia Ogden. Other subplots underlying several episodes are connected to women's suffrage movement in Canada and the discrimination of the racial minorities in Toronto at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

One of the constant ways of resistance and a cure for hindered spirits is found in dark humour, which involves laughing in face of death, despair and pain through sinister, absurd jokes.

In episode 8 of season 14 from *Murdoch Mysteries*, a couple of upstarts discover that their dominion appears on neither the American, nor the Canadian territory, so they become the sovereigns of their own country. When a dignitary is found dead, the Queen's brother-in-law, Henry Higgins, finds a piece of evidence that incriminates Queen Lucinda, who is first suspected of murder, then exonerated. Thinking that Higgins plotted against her, she forgets how she was herself almost killed for a crime that she did not commit and decides to execute Higgins.

Lucinda: *"You accused the Queen of murder! That is treason!"*

Higgins: *"I only did what I was told to. Your husband..."* Lucinda: *"Do not speak ill of the king! Now put yourself in the stocks. You are hereby sentenced to death."*

Ruth: *"Henny?"*

Higgins: *"Don't worry, Ruthie, we can't let this happen. Isn't that right, sir?"*

Brackenreid: *"Oh, you want my help now, don't you, Higgins?"*

Ruth: *"Is Henry to be executed?"*

Roger: *"I'm sorry, Ruthie, Ruthie's baby, but we must abide to the laws of New South Mimico. Given Henry is the one who does the execution, who is going to chop off his head anyway? He scarcely can*

*do it himself. Oh, Inspector, how would you feel about a new title? Chief of Justice and Security."*

Brackenreid: *"So, I'm the one who gets to chop off Higgins head? Worth considering, I suppose."*

Higgins: *"Sir!"*

Rupert: *"Lucinda, it's Henry! You know, Henry... Can you imagine him without his head?"*

In this example, dark humour is used to mitigate the gravity of the situation, in this case a death sentence of an in-law, visualising a scene that would amuse those in high spirits, but would upset those don't appreciate this sense of humour. According to Bergson's theory, the mood of the audience influences the perception of a joke, this fact adding another reason for a viewer to rewatch some episodes after a while, for a deeper understanding of subtleties.

This scene also renders just how cruel kings and queens could be, how they sacrifice their subjects when any sign of treason is suspected, even though it is not the case, how the court weaves lies and, in an absurd and funny way, everybody decides to execute everybody in a country that has only a king, a queen, several dignitaries and several servants.

Another sample of aggressive humour is offered in an episode when Lucinda Newsome, Rupert's wife, is suspected of having an affair with a deceased man and of killing him, because he had threatened to expose the affair. Just like a Medieval King, Rupert decides to have his wife judged for high treason and executed, according to his constitution. Higgins, as Minister of Justice, has to perform the execution. In the previous episodes, after the family fortune was squandered and Ruth Newsome, Higgins married Henry Higgins, Rupert Newsome married Lucinda Helmsworthy, whom he did not love and feared divorcing her. The Newsomes were always quarrelling with the Helmsworthys, this being the reason why Ruth disdained Lucinda and was excited about her execution, whereas Rupert was happy to meet the opportunity of getting rid of his wife without a divorce.

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Murdoch: *"He has a guillotine?"*

Higgins: *"It's in the Constitution. I'm not actually allowed to cut her head off?"*

Murdoch: *"Absolutely not!"*

Higgins: *"Thank God! Might as well be a little fun, then."*

Rupert: *"Henry, I'm the king of my own country and I ordered you: off with her head!"*

Ruth: *(clapping her hands cheerfully) "Yeeey!"*

The fragment shows the absurdity of the scene: a king expected to act according to the era he lived in acts as if he was a Medieval king and chops off the heads of everyone he dislikes just because he is the ruler. Henry Higgins's reaction is ambiguous, he knows that executing his sister-in-law would be wrong and illegal, but, at the same time, he enjoys being an executioner. Ruth, who barely shows any sign of mental brilliance or balance, would gladly watch her sister-in-law's execution, without considering that she might as well get executed at some point.

There are situations when this sense is imposed in a brutal way, for the mere reason that the person in position of authority was, in his turn submitted to oppression at an earlier stage of his life.

In episode 7 of season 7, a group of policemen ask their Inspector to ignore the rules, to make an exception and allow his constables to take off their helmets and unbutton their coats since the temperature went over 33 degrees Celsius in Canada. The Inspector would not hear of it, under the pretext that not wearing the uniform properly would represent an insult to the Crown.

*Surely, we, as public servants, can rise above the temperature. Like I learned to in Afghanistan. You think this is hot? This is a bloody blizzard by comparison!*

The Inspector refers to the Anglo-Afghan wars that he fought in, where scorching desserts distressed British soldiers used to rainy days

and cold summers. The Inspector also mocks his inferiors by reminding them once more how he faced the vile conditions when he was their age.

### **Conclusions**

The modern sense of humour as a complex phenomenon goes far beyond humorous creations to the emotive or cognitive response offered by people who can understand and recognize humour provided they have the appropriate cultural knowledge. Using humour as a strategy to prevent or counteract oppression involves a constant way of behaving in a conflict situation and has in view the long-term goals and the means of steering the conflict toward the desired outcomes.

As proven by the few examples extracted from *Murdoch Mysteries* TV series, when related to a political context, humour can prove to be an effective nonviolent strategy of resistance to oppression. Thus, there are cases when the persons in power positions threaten to terminate the lives of their servants and even of their kin, which imposes some prompt measures to “disarm” them before a tragedy happens. There are also situations when anger is released through ridicule and deprecation in order not to resort to violent means.

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