

A NOT SO SERIOUS LOOK AT HUMOUR

By

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What is humour? We don't really know although philosophers have been studying it for over two thousand years. But on the other hand, we don't really know what love and hate are either, so why should humour be any different? However, we can often recognise humour by its result and effect - laughter, and some analysts go so far as to claim that this is all we need to look for. We are thus led to the theatre manager's criterion for humour - it's funny if it makes people laugh and then the comedian gets paid.

It is not difficult to pinpoint the characteristics of humour. These are many and varied and include the HEARTS theory, so called from the initial letters of the six most important ingredients of humour.

- (i) Hostility: Stemming from the humorists sense of grievance.
- (ii) Exaggeration: As in the dress and gestures of a clown.
- (iii) Aggression: Aimed at a target group e.g. children → teachers; workers → management etc.
- (iv) Realism: Humour must ultimately be based on truth, honesty and human experience.
- (v) Tension: There must be a matter which gives rise to strong feeling involved.
- (vi) Surprise: The outcome must be contrary to the assumptions of the audience.

There are of course many other potential facets to humour, and we might mention fear of breaking of various taboos and, paradoxically, telling the audience what they really want to hear and even reinforcing their prejudices. Ultimately however, humour is a deep and probably impenetrable mystery, because all of the ingredients we have listed may be present and not provoke laughter, whereas they may all be absent and allow some very subtle factor to achieve the desired effect. My own opinion, for what it's worth, is that humour is simply the manifestation of the child in all of us, echoing the smile of recognition with whom the developing child greets its mother's appearance.

If it is not chauvinistic of me to claim that Ireland is the humour capital of the world, then perhaps I can also get away with claiming that Cork is the humour capital of Ireland. Though I have lived in Cork for only twenty years, I can honestly say that I have become quite smitten by the peculiar sense of humour that pervades the place from, 'ball hopping' through, 'Michael extraction' all the way up to 'being way ahead of you boy'. So in this short article I will concentrate on Irish humour in general and Cork humour in particular.

There is something about the atmosphere in Ireland that seems to give rise to humour, jokes and merriment. Foreigners remarked on it hundreds of years ago and things haven't changed very much in recent times. [Memo to our tourist bosses - why not market and exploit the situation, or are you content to leave it to the informal efforts of amateurs!] Ireland has given rise to at least three distinctive humorous art forms.

- (i) The Limerick - of which the following is a printable example.

*There was a young lady from Ryde
Who ate too many apples and died
The apples fermented*

*Inside the lamented
She had cider inside her inside.*

(ii) The Irish Bull.

A man lay dead in his coffin with a broad smile on his face. When his widow was asked to explain, she replied.

'You see he died in his sleep and he doesn't know he's dead yet. He's dreaming he's still alive and I'm afraid that if he wakes up and finds out he's dead, the shock will kill him.'

Now I reckon not even Boolean logic could make sense of that one.

(iii) The Malapropism: Richard Bramley Sheridan had a character in his play 'The Rivals' who made verbal blunders of a kind which are known to be rife in Ireland. She spoke of an '*allegory on the banks of the Nile*' and declared that '*comparisons are odorous*'.

A more modern example has Mrs. Malaprop introducing her daughter's intended husband with the immortal words,

'This is my daughter's fiasco.'

The Irish seem to be one of the few races on earth that have the ability to laugh in the face of death and the Irish Wake was by no means a gloomy affair. Indeed, cynics explain the origin of the three day wake as a device to ensure that the deceased was dead, and not just dead drunk.

Among Irish children there is a popular joke form concerning the adventures of a feckless trio, mutant descendants of the three wise men, the king's three sons or perhaps even the three stooges. They are commonly known as Paddy the Englishman, Paddy the Scotsman and Paddy the Irishman. Paddy the Englishman is a mere cipher, a figurehead to set the scene, Paddy the Scotsman is a more careful character, there merely to keep the action going. Paddy the Irishman is a folk hero, sometimes a genius, sometimes incredibly stupid, who invariably provides the punchline for the story. An example:

Paddy the Englishman, Paddy the Scotsman and Paddy the Irishman were stranded on a desert island. One day they found a magic lamp and when they rubbed it, a genie appeared and granted them one wish each.

'I wish I was back in London', said Paddy the Englishman and he was whisked away.

'I wish I was back in Glasgow', said Paddy the Scotsman, and he too was whisked away.

Said Paddy the Irishman 'I'm feeling very lonely here on my own. I wish my friends were back again!'

Irish humour is an extremely complex subject having its roots in the macabre rites of pagan antiquity, in the oppression the Irish people have suffered and, most of all, in the peculiar psychological outlook of the Irish who are happy only when they are sad and at peace with themselves only when they have a good battle to fight.

And so we turn to the humour of Cork, a topic that has received, to my knowledge, no serious study, academic or otherwise. The Cork mentality is a peculiar mixture of hospitality to strangers and yet deep suspicion of them. Every Corkman has a massive inferiority complex, but this of course is much bigger and better than other peoples inferiority complexes. Cork calls itself a city and yet every Corkman knows that it is the biggest village in the world. Cork

humour is earthy, uninhibited, ingenious, poetic, creative, and totally inexplicable. I cannot pretend to understand it - the best I can do is to present a series of genuine Cork stories which may help to throw some light on this complex subject.

Two old Cork women were discussing the weather.
'Very changeable', said one.
'yes' said the other, 'you wouldn't know what to pawn'.

Over the years The Cork Examiner has provided more than its fair share of humour, conscious and unconscious. Here are a couple of items from its obituary columns.

'The death has occurred in West Cork of Mr. John L. Sullivan, the well-known secret agent.'

Underneath an In Memoriam notice, lovingly inserted by, a grieving widow, was written,
'You'd be alive to-day if you did what I told you'
(The First example of post-mortem nagging?)

An old lady trading in the Coal Quay still does all her calculations in pre-decimal pounds, shillings and pence. She reckons that the new fangled money will never catch on there. With impeccable logic, she reasons why didn't they wait until all the old people were dead?

In the English Market off the Grand Parade an American tourist once paid for a dozen oranges, but when he opened the bag he found only nine. When he brought this to the attention of the stall holder she told him with a smile 'Yes, sir, three of them were bad so I threw them away for you'.

A Cork merchant spent his life savings on a trip to Rome, which included a visit to the Sistine Chapel. As the party gazed in awe at Michelangelo's masterpiece, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the Corkman was heard to remark 'Yerra, 'tis all right I suppose, but you should see the ceiling of the Munster and Leinster Bank in Cork'.

The following is reputed to be a conversation between two old shawlies, shouting loudly to each other across the width of Blarney Street.

'How is de husband, how is Mick to-day?'
'Improvin' all de time, tank God'.
'How is his diarrhoea?'
'tickenin', tank God, Tickenin'.

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