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Research methodology : an interdisciplinary approach

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3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

At the outset of this project there stands a crucial question: what is satire and how can literary scholars recognise it? Dickson-Carr provides an answer by saying that satire can be understood as a combination of social critique and acerbic humour (*African American Satire* 11). Yet, much like opening a matryoshka doll, this answer only raises a new and similarly challenging question: what is humour? For, clearly, humour is an equally complex notion and just as difficult to characterise. A number of theories attempt to provide partial explanations of humour, yet there are only a few sophisticated models appropriate for literary research into the matter.¹⁷ In general, we can say that these models are derived from superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. Out of the three, I have chosen to look at incongruity theory because it enables the most detailed examination of humour and satire. In particular, I have opted for the General Theory of Verbal Humor (hereafter GTVH), which is a contemporary linguistic version of the incongruity theory. By doing so, I give preference to linguistic theories over literary ones. Although there are literary versions of incongruity theory (such as those proposed by Thomas Hobbes and Henri Bergson), these theories have not been chosen because of their inherent flaws.¹⁸ On this point, I agree with Lowe, who suggests that “virtually all ‘literary’ considerations of humour use rather old-fashioned tools” and that humour theorists should employ “a larger, more interdisciplinary critical arsenal” (449). Accordingly, I have chosen to pursue this “interdisciplinary” approach by examining Reed’s satire on two fronts: first, I use GTVH to identify

17 As Hempelmann suggests, meaningful research of humour is “only possible with a sophisticated model” (382).

18 For more information on the matter, see Davies (“Humour Theory and the Fear of Being Laughed At” 60).

parts of texts which can be considered satiric; second, each episode of satire is then matched to one of 22 satirical techniques which Leonard Feinberg describes in his seminal monograph *Introduction to Satire* (1967). The rationale for this interdisciplinary approach is to present a more concise map of Reed's satire than would be allowed by employing a solely linguistic or literary method. As for the organisation of the following pages, they start with a brief explanation of GTVH, continue with a summary of its reception by humour theorists, and proceed with a discussion on whether or not it can be applied to the analysis of longer literary texts.

3.1 General Theory of Verbal Humour: The Case for Incongruity

GTVH was proposed by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo in 1992. It came into existence as a revised version of Raskin's semantic script theory of humour (SSTH), which he postulated in 1982. At the heart of both theories lies incongruity, i.e., a mismatch between, at least, two parts of a joke. In a later revision of GTVH, Attardo et al. describe the theory as follows: "a joke text (T) is funny if T contains one or more incongruous elements any of which may or may not be fully or in part (playfully or not) resolved by the occurrence of the punch line, which may or may not introduce new incongruities" (Attardo, Hempelmann, and Maio 27). According to this interpretation, a joke is humorous when at least two pieces of information contradict each other. Attardo et al. suggest that incongruity is vital in this process and without it a joke would not be found amusing.

Let us now examine this concept on a practical example – the famous doctor's wife joke, which has been used to illustrate SSTH and GTVH for over a quarter a century: "A man wrapped in a hat and scarf makes his way to the local doctor's house. 'Is the doctor at home?' he asks in a hoarse voice. 'No,' replies the doctor's pretty young wife. 'Come right in'" (Partington 28). At first, it appears that the man is wrapped in a hat and scarf so as to keep warm and prevent the worsening of his illness. Yet, once it transpires that the doctor is not at home and that, in spite of this, his wife invites the man inside, it becomes apparent that what is to follow is an act of adultery rather than of medical care. The readers of the joke are thus misled by two conflicting scripts:¹⁹ the foreground script (the second script in a humorous text, which, in this case, is the script of *adultery*) is in contradiction with the background script (the first script in a humorous text – in this case, the

¹⁹ Raskin and Attardo understand a script to be a "standardized generalized episode" (qtd. in Partington 30) which is instantly recognizable to the readers as they have become familiar with it in the past and since then have had many opportunities to recognise it again.

example of *medical care*).²⁰ From a linguistic point of view, the conflict of scripts can be described as follows: “[foreground scripts] provide a cognitive link to the preceding text, but at the same time they violate the expected, conventional pattern of a gradual increase in informativeness” (Brône, Feyaerts, and Veale 216). It is then commonly believed that the violation of the readers’ expectation amuses the readers. Yet, this may not always be the case.

3.2 GTVH: Its Limitations and Strengths

The claim that incongruity automatically causes humour has been doubted by some humour theorists. For example, Archakis and Tsakona note that “people react to incongruity in various ways, only one of which is laughing. Fear, pity, moral disapprobation, indignation, disgust, confusion, and problem solving are equally possible reactions to incongruity” (44). Veale goes even further and asks if “incongruity is actually needed to achieve humor” (“Incongruity in Humor” 421) as he believes that humour is achieved via the readers’ willing participation in the joke with the joke teller or the author. He posits that a certain type of social conditioning is crucial for the occurrence of humour:

Our social conditioning means it is gratifying to see narratives where pomposity is deflated, excessive authority is thwarted, modesty is rewarded and arrogance is punished. It should not be surprising then to see a listener choose, when given the freedom, an interpretation with the most satisfying trajectory. (“Incongruity in Humor” 425)

In a similar vein, Archakis and Tsakona mention that “laughter reveals that people choose to adopt a ‘playful’ (i.e., humorous) attitude towards incongruity, rather than a serious one” (44). These ideas present a refinement to humour theory: no longer is humour an automatic response which takes place every time an incongruity is fed to readers. On the contrary, the readers themselves are believed to be the key to humour. It is very likely that when given enough reason to laugh at somebody’s expense they will do so.²¹ Yet, this response can no longer be expected to be automatic.

20 To prevent possible confusion, henceforth I will be using the terms background script and foreground script instead of first and second script. The terms were proposed by Viana (523), who provides more details on background and foreground scripts in her paper called “Asymmetry in Script Opposition.”

21 Veale describes the process with the following words: “the punch line [i.e. the segment of a text in which two scripts clash] is not a crisis of interpretation that forces a retreat, but an opportunity that

Another possible limitation of GTVH has been noted by humour scholar Elliott Oring, who advises against the rote dissection of humour into pre-prepared categories of foreground and background scripts: “Once it is felt that one knows what parts a joke should have, the identification of these parts can become a rote procedure with the jokes being plugged in pre-established categories” (219). Such a point is certainly valid, yet it needs to be said that Oring reveals a flaw in humour theorists’ use of GTVH but not in GTVH itself. In conclusion, since the limitations of GTVH are minor, I have decided to use it as the sole definition of humour in my analysis.

3.3 On the Critical Reception of GTVH

Ever since humour theories based on incongruity “became the dominant perspective in humour research” (Popescu 41), GTVH has been well received in academia. It has even been suggested that GTVH is “the most widely held theory of humor” (Berger 7). However, since GTVH was developed via research of fictional jokes, this limitation with respect to input data might have resulted in skewed findings. This notion does not escape Morreall, who advises against inferring generalisations from just one source of data and using the resulting findings as the proverbial silver bullet to describe all features of humour:

Fictional jokes are to humor research what fruit flies are to genetics, and the frequency with which humor scholars analyze them is understandable. They are repeatable texts that can be understood without knowing anything about the situations in which they are told ... Nonetheless, it is risky to draw conclusions about all verbal humor from studying prepared fictional jokes, just as it would be risky to draw conclusions about all insects from studying fruit flies. (394)

Yet, the dependence of GTVH on fictional jokes can also be an advantage for literary research into humour because fictional jokes and Reed’s fictional satirical episodes are not entirely dissimilar. Both are self-contained: they provide their readers with all they need to know in order to decode them as either humorous or satirical. Hence, when it comes to some types of Reed’s satirical techniques—such as non-standard sexuality and argument-based satire—their episodes can be decoded as satirical even without the knowledge of what happened on previous pages of the respective novel. Similarly, to recognise a joke, listeners do not need to hear the whole conversation during which a joke is shared: just hearing the

allows a willing listener to collaboratively engage with the speaker in the creation of humor” (Veale, “Incongruity in Humor” 422).

whole joke is enough for its recognition. This means that both fictional jokes and Reed's satirical episodes can be "understood without knowing anything about the situations in which they are told" (Morreall 394).

Another similarity between fictional jokes and satirical episodes is their stylised nature. Oring remarks that fictional jokes "are stylized kinds of communication" (207), suggesting that fictional jokes do not occur spontaneously in speech. Instead, they need to be devised first and uttered later. The same can be said of Reed's satirical episodes, which are also highly stylised, devised first, and only later inserted into novels. Because of the similarities between fictional jokes and Reed's satirical sequences, I believe that it is acceptable to use GTVH to analyse other humorous material than just fictional jokes. In this respect, I agree with Levonian, who concludes that GTVH "prove[s] to be a useful tool also for the analysis of longer literary narratives" (90). Hence, this project relies solely on GTVH for the analysis of Reed's satirical episodes. Since the humour-part of the definition of satire has now been examined, let us now proceed to the scrutiny of the definition of satire in its entirety.

When the sun stands striding at high noon,
 then up from the waves he comes—
 the Old Man of the Sea who never lies—
 under a West Wind's gust that shrouds him round
 in shuddering dark swells, and once he's out on land
 he heads for his bed of rest in deep hollow caves
 and around him droves of seals—sleek pups bred
 by his lovely ocean lady—bed down too
 in a huddle, flopping up from the grey surf,
 giving off the sour reek of the salty ocean depths.
 I'll lead you there myself at the break of a day
 and couch you all for attack, side-by-side.
 Choose three men from your crew, choose well,
 the best you've got aboard the good decked hulls.
 Now I will tell you all the old wizard's tricks ...
 First he will make his rounds and count the seals
 and once he's checked their number, reviewed them all,
 down in their midst he'll lie, like a shepherd with his flock.
 That is your moment. Soon as you see him bedded down,
 muster your heart and strength and hold him fast,
 wildly as he writhes and fights you to escape.
 He'll try all kinds of escape—twist and turn
 into every beast that moves across the earth,
 transforming himself into water, superhuman fire,
 but you hold on for dear life, hug him all the harder!
 And when, at last, he begins to ask you questions—
 back in the shape you saw him sleep at first—
 relax your grip and set the old god free
 and him outright, hero,
 which of the gods is up in arms against you?
 How can you cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?

Odyssey (Fagles, 447–77)