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*SUMMARY OF THE PhD THESIS
BLACK HUMOUR: A STYLISTIC
APPROACH*

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This dissertation might be described as an exercise in applied stylistic analysis, whose main aim can be stated quite briefly: to present black humour intrusions in different works of literature, which are considered relevant for the chosen topic. The approach with which it shall be concerned draws from linguistic stylistics, the exemplifications being taken from literature, and this discipline will provide the general perspective adopted in the discussion.

By applying stylistic linguistic methods to literature, it will be demonstrated that linguistic stylistics leads to a deeper and more far-reaching understanding of many aspects of literature. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there shall be excluded those considerations of interpretation and artistic effect which are the immediate concern of literary criticism.

The present study links the two approaches by extending the linguist's literary intuitions and the critic's linguistic observations and making their relationship explicit, as linguistics does have something to contribute to literary criticism, just as literary criticism has

something to contribute to linguistics, the two disciplines being interconnected and most often than not inseparable.

The main method of analysis in the present dissertation will be eclectic, selecting only relevant individual stylistic features that help in building the stylistic identity of each author that is investigated as far as black humour is concerned, and in doing this, it will rely on fields such as lexicology, semantics, morphology, syntax or pragmatics.

Given the high degree of complexity of the approached subject matter, the present dissertation will only focus on the most relevant representatives of black humour in literature, starting with Jonathan Swift, who is considered by literary critics, in particular by André Breton, the author of the well-known book, *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, to be a genuine pioneer of black humour in literature, going on to three famous American black humorists, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut and William Golding, who are black humour classicists, fact ascertained by Bruce Jay Friedman in his famous anthology, *Black Humour*, and concluding with black

humour as depicted in drama of the 20th century by Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee.

As it can be noticed, more 20th century novelists and playwrights have been chosen, because the style of black humour in 20th century fiction is much more apparent and pervasive, due to the horrifying experiences that World War II provided. Thus, the disillusionment, the hopelessness, the feeling of meaninglessness and absurdity and futility of human existence, the quest for identity that followed World War II also became manifest at a stylistic level in literature, giving rise to genuine black humour.

The theoretical considerations on style, stylistics and black humour in the second chapter of the dissertation will lay the groundwork for the analysis to follow.

In *Stylistics, a Working Tool in Approaching Literature*, there will be presented some theories of style in a nutshell, which will lead, in the subsequent chapters, to the detection of black humour idiosyncrasies for a number of representative writers for this genre. It will also explain the difference between literary and linguistic

analysis of style. Further on, this chapter will set forth a checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories, which will include the practical tools used within this dissertation in order to perform an analysis on different black humour intrusions in certain literary texts.

The Style of Black Humour will focus on some theoretical observations regarding the development of black humour. Although André Breton's vision of black humour was limited, his *Anthology of Black Humour* is the first pertinent study that has at its core the concept of black humour and it is considered to be of an utmost importance for the analysis to follow, especially for earlier black humorists such as Jonathan Swift.

Subsequently, the focus will be laid on the idea that black humour is, in fact, a medley of interrelated concepts such as irony, satire, grotesque, parody or absurd. Black humour is never found in its pure form in a literary work, the above-mentioned concepts acting as catalysts of black humour.

Thus, the stylistic analysis started from the prerequisites that black humour in the form of satire is to be found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and A

Modest Proposal and in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* while black humour in the form of irony is prevalent in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* is marked by the grotesque, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* is characterised by the absurd while in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5*, black humour in the form of parody prevails.

The approach firstly deals with Jonathan Swift, the most famous early black humorist, and the chapter *Jonathan Swift's Satire and Black Humour* concentrates on his famous book *Gulliver's Travels* and on his pamphlet *A Modest Proposal*, bringing forth the specific features of his black humour: the perfectly balanced complex syntactic structures, the opposition between the quantitative and qualitative elements, epithet build-up and their climactic arrangement, the cultivation of the absurd, the extensive use of allegory, of enumerations, of paradox, of puns, of repetitions, of clichés or of inversion.

Although black humour, as a literary device, can be traced back to the extravagant satires of the 5th

century, the present thesis will lay the emphasis on modern English and American black humorists, who are considered the most relevant for the style of black humour proper.

If with Swift, black humour may be considered soft, directed more towards parody, irony, satire but also towards aggressiveness and morbid and grotesque details, with Heller, Vonnegut or Golding, the next analysed authors, black humour is darker and directed more towards its black side and, most often than not, has a mocking apocalyptic tone.

The chapter on Joseph Heller, *Black Humour as a Means of Achieving Incongruity in Joseph Heller's Catch-22*, will open with some considerations on the three classical theories of humour, which play a significant role in the analysis of humour. In the absence of theoretical research devoted specifically to black humour, the three theories of humour are applied, i.e. the incongruity, catharsis and superiority theories, to the phenomenon of black humour and proof is brought that these theories are appropriate and relevant for black humour, too.

The reversal of expectations and a twisted logic that lie at the core of the incongruity theory of humour applies to Heller's black humour, whose novelty in the use of black humour was stylistically achieved with the help of obsessive repetition of words, sentences and catchphrases; of the passive voice in order to obtain impersonality; of the clash between the ideas and the words used; of grotesque images and of words which have a great force of assertion; of intersentential, intrasentential, affixal or non-affixal negation; of paradox; of numerous rhetorical questions that usually either do not receive an answer or they receive a nonsensical one; of mingling of the denotative and connotative meanings; of circular reasoning or of non sequiturs.

Kurt Vonnegut's stylistic uniqueness in point of black humour stands in his telegraphic schizophrenic manner of writing *Slaughterhouse Five*, which is openly asserted even from the title page.

The chapter *Kurt Vonnegut's Telegraphic Schizophrenic Black Humour in Slaughterhouse-5* demonstrates that his style is minimalist and dry, that he

tends to write in short, declarative sentences, that he consistently uses the reported speech in order to draw a distinction between the main character's interpretation of events and reality and that his novel has a random, skipping and hard to follow timeline, which may however be disentangled by detecting the skilful use of tenses or of definite and indefinite reference. Another very important idiosyncrasy of his black humour is style shifting.

Style shifting is also a technique used by another classic black humorist, William Golding, in his novel, *The Lord of the Flies*, meant to emphasize the two main contrasts of the story, i.e. savageness versus civilisation, but with Golding, style shifts from everyday language and slang used in the dialogues of the boys from the island to the artistic language employed in the author's narration.

The chapter *Black Humour as the Unifying Thread of William Golding's Lord of the Flies* reveals the fact that the above-mentioned novel is also rich in symbolism, that it expansively uses personification and allegory, which are the main stylistic devices used.

William Golding masterfully manages to change the rhythm of the action: he alternates the feeling of the slow passage of time by using long, elaborate, graceful sentences with the deliberately accelerated rhythm, by using short exclamatory sentences with a great force of assertion in order to highlight the boys' increasing savageness.

Character names are obviously purposely chosen and character description becomes manifest at a linguistic level as well: the positive characters are described by means of rather complex lexical and syntactic structures, while in the description of the negative characters there is a marked absence of morphologically complex and abstract nouns and adjectives.

Subsequently the concern turns to black humour as reflected in the drama of the 20th century, and the following chapter, *Black Humour in 20th Century Drama – Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee*, examines two of the most relevant playwrights for the topic of the dissertation: Edward Albee and Samuel Beckett.

The 20th century black humour in drama will be looked into, on the one hand, from the point of view of

the influence The Theatre of the Absurd had on it, relying mainly on the common assumption for both Beckett and Albee that the complex system of signs cannot actually communicate meaning, and, on the other hand, from the perspective of the two writers' views of life and death and its manifestation at a linguistic level.

The stylistic analysis of the black humour present in two famous Beckettian plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*, will be concerned with the exploitation of the cognitive metaphor and with other particular traits of each play; Beckett's original type of black humour is made up of symbols, metaphors, intellectual and colloquial language. His writing represents a paradox in itself that gives rise to black humour, as it is recondite, grotesque, sometimes clear, sometimes obscure, sometimes tragic and sometimes comic. In his plays, Samuel Beckett experimented with language, he invented a new kind of language, not bound by grammar, syntax or logic; his language is just an endless string of signifiers whose combination form a unique type of black humour.

On the other hand, the approach to Edward Albee's play in the chapter *Absurdist Black Humour in*

Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is made mainly from a pragmatic point of view and the stylistic analysis demonstrates the obvious infringement of Grice's cooperative principle, and of the maxim of quality, in particular, by means of irony, and afterwards the analysis concentrates on the combination of foul language with jargon, childlike and academic language and on a number of other stylistic devices.

Selecting a specific linguistic perspective for each author, i.e. lexical, semantic, morphological, syntactic or pragmatic, and placing it at the core of each text-related stylistic analysis of the eight literary works, serves the purpose of the present dissertation in revealing the versatile, ever-changing and resourceful character of black humour.

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