

Hate in the Novels and Short Stories of P. G. Wodehouse: Psychologically Sublimated or Downplayed Through Humour?

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Whether seen as an emotion or a long term sentiment, hate is in itself a motivator for destruction. This means that the hate target is assessed as having innate negative characteristics that cannot be changed and therefore the target has to be destroyed. Consequently, hate implies that some individuals are not given the chance to become better human beings or are denied the right to try to change for the better. It may also imply the perception that some individuals deserve to be hated and thus destroyed physically, socially, or symbolically. It goes without saying that in an ideal world intergroup hate and hate in interpersonal relationships do not exist. However, since unfortunately hate does exist in our world, the question that arises is: Is it worth feeding on such a negative emotion? Could people find a way to laugh about their hate and their goals associated with hate in order to contain their hostility towards the persons of hatred? In this paper we aim to analyse the way in which P. G. Wodehouse, “the greatest humorous writer the world has ever known” (Connolly, 2004: 1), succeeds in pointing out the ludicrous futility of hate and of its expression in interpersonal relationships.

1. Introduction

Considered “the most destructive affective phenomenon in the history of human nature” (Fisher, Halperin et al., 2018: 309), hate is a powerful negative emotion closely related to anger (Fitness; Fletcher, 1993), but also to love, since similar areas in the brain are involved with both love and hatred (Zeky; Romaya, 2008). Due to this complexity, hate has been defined in various ways, as an emotional attitude (Ekman, 1992), a normative judgment (McDevitt; Levin, 1993), a form of generalized anger (Frijda, 1986) or a motivator for the devaluation of others (Rempel; Burris, 2005).

Whatever its definition, hate represents a significant emotion in intergroup and interpersonal relationships, since it displays a pattern of appraisals and action tendencies whose goal is to eliminate or destroy the hate target. Thus, although it may have a self-protective role, helping people to validate their beliefs in a just world (Fisher; Halperin et al., 2018), it is not rare that hate leads to violence, crime or disparaging speech.

However, the world might be a better place if people engaged more deeply in a process of self-reflection in order to understand that hate might dissipate significantly or metamorphose into a non-hateful butterfly if they took a humorous stance on it. If when we hate someone our perceptions of that person become more negative (Aumer; Bahn et al., 2015) and, according to Sternberg and Sternberg (2008) we experience anger, disgust and devaluation of that person, then why not deliberately change our perceptions of that person in order to no longer feel hate? And what better way to change these perceptions than filtering them through the iridescent fabric of humour?

In this paper we aim to illustrate this process of dissipating hate through humour – whether it is about psychological sublimation or diminishment of hate – by resorting to the sublime linguistic material provided by some of the short stories and novels of P. G. Wodehouse, the greatest humorous writer the world has ever known” (Connolly, 2004: 1). More specifically, the novels discussed will be *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934) and *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934), and the short stories will be extracted from the collection *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930). Our analysis will make use of some of the most important theories of humour, namely Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of humour (1960), the incongruity theories of humour and the reversal theory of humour, the last one focusing on the two types of humour described by Apter and Deselles (2012), namely disclosure humour *vs.* distortion humour.

2. Psychological Sublimation or Diminishment of Hate Through Humour in *Thank You, Jeeves, Right Ho, Jeeves* and *Very Good, Jeeves*

2.1. The Psychoanalytic Theory of Humour in Relation to Hate

If hate may lead to violence and if violence feeds on aggressive impulses, then it seems natural to analyse the relation between hate and aggressive impulses. Could people find a way of weakening these impulses or expressing them in a socially accepted manner, instead of repressing them and thus fuelling their hate?

According to Freud (1960), laughter represents one of the defense mechanisms to which the ego resorts in order to protect itself from the inhibitory energy necessary for the repression of the unconscious aggressive and sexual impulses of the id. The witty cognitive devices triggered off by the scenarios of the jokes distract the superego and thus these impulses get to be expressed and enjoyed instead of being repressed.

Next, we will analyse several instances of humour extracted from the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*, and from the collection of short stories *Very Good, Jeeves* in order to illustrate the release of the aggressive impulses in the form of laughter. Referring to the topic of violence in Wodehouse’s “comic, yet highly intelligent view of human existence” (Hall, 1974: 35), Hall points out the fact that “In his characters’ conversation and in his imagery, Wodehouse makes reference to all kinds of violent happenings, including many unpleasant forms of death” (1974: 44).

Indeed, in *Thank You, Jeeves*, for example, there are several expressions of desire to engage in violent actions and several allusions to aggressive behaviour or attitudes:

He couldn’t have been glaring at me with more obvious distaste if I had been the germ of dementia praecox. (Wodehouse, 2008c: 15)

Brinkley was at the keyhole, begging me to come out and let him ascertain the colour of my insides. (Wodehouse, 2008c: 153)

Similar examples of humorous aggressive behaviour or attitudes can be found in the novel *Right Ho, Jeeves* and in the collection of short stories *Very Good, Jeeves*:

Lucius Pim was not a man I was fond of – in fact, if I had had to choose between him and a cockroach as a companion for a walking-tour, the cockroach would have had it by a short head (...). (Wodehouse, 2008d: 152)

Am taking legal advice to ascertain whether strangling an idiot nephew counts as murder. If it doesn't, look out for yourself. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 61)

'I propose, if and when found, to take him by his beastly neck, shake him till he froths, and pull him inside out and make him swallow himself.' (Wodehouse, 2008b: 125)

'In about two seconds,' said Tuppy, 'I'm going to kick your spine up through the top of your head.' (Wodehouse, 2008b: 167)

She gazed at me, but without the lovelight. 'Oh, for goodness' sake, go away and boil your head, Bertie!' (Wodehouse, 2008b: 228)

In these examples, in light of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the cognitive and imaginative routes required in visualizing the exaggeratedly aggressive scenarios described by Wodehouse's characters, allow the reader to distract their attention from the fact that they could derive pleasure from observing the physical mayhem that may befall other people, and thus the inhibitory energy that would normally be required in order to repress the aggressive impulses and the guilt caused by such a blameworthy behaviour, becomes redundant and is released in the form of laughter. Similarly, in real life, by means of the same psychological mechanism, the endorsement of a humorous hate speech might discourage the hater from engaging in violent actions. Thus, the hate is sublimated into an ingeniously humorous hate speech that elicits amusement.

Of course, this is one possible way of interpreting the humorous load of the aggressive scenes painted by Wodehouse. Referring to the same issue, Hall sets forth another interpretative solution, pointing out that "Much of the humour of passages like these derives, of course, from the obvious ridiculous physical impossibility of the hoped-for events" (1974: 42). In this case, the ludicrous physical impossibility of the aggressive behaviours may highlight the futility of hate and thus diminish its intensity.

Whatever the interpretation might be, it is obvious that Wodehouse, in dealing with aggressiveness and violence, appeals to the mitigating force of humour. Wodehouse's world is not brutal. It is luminous and meant to cheer us all up.

2.2. The Incongruity Theories of Humour in Relation to Hate

Sometimes the perceptions of the person one hates may be changed in such a way so as to create a mental incongruity regarding the image of that person, which eventually may elicit laughter and thus diminish hate.

According to these theories, the humorous nature of a stimulus resides in its being incongruous, unusual, surprising or different from what one would normally expect in a

particular situation, which leads to the simultaneous activation of two contradictory perceptions of the same event, situation or idea. Arthur Koestler (1964) called this mental activation *bisociation*, a concept that we will try to illustrate in relation to hate by analysing several instances of humour extracted from the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*.

An incongruity effect is achieved in the novel *Right Ho, Jeeves* when aunt Dahlia, being exceedingly angry with Bertie, asks him to do something for her, but in fact, although the reader is led to believe that aunt Dahlia is asking a favour, she is actually asking Bertie to go and kill himself because he is a “dithering idiot” (Wodehouse, 2008b: 128). Wodehouse constructs the incongruity gradually, which contributes even more to the hilarity of the situation and consequently to the diminishment of the anger felt by aunt Dahlia and perceived by the reader. The fragment where Bertie’s being asked to do his aunt a favour collides with his being asked to commit suicides deserves to be quoted in full:

‘Are you going for a stroll?’ said Aunt Dahlia, with a sudden show of interest. ‘Where?’ ‘Oh, hither and thither.’

‘Then I wonder if you would mind doing something for me.’

‘Give it a name.’

‘It won’t take you long. You know that path that runs past the greenhouses into the kitchen garden. If you go along it you come to the pond.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, will you get a good, stout piece of rope or cord and go down that path till you come to the pond –’

‘To the pond. Right.’

‘– and look about you till you find a nice, heavy stone. Or a fairly large brick would do.’ ‘I see,’ I said, though I didn’t, being still fogged. ‘Stone or brick. Yes. And then?’

‘Then,’ said the relative, ‘I want you, like a good boy, to fasten the rope to the brick and tie it round your damned neck and jump into the pond and drown yourself. In a few days I will send and have you fished up and buried because I shall need to dance on your grave.’ (Wodehouse, 2008b: 127)

Sometimes it is Wodehouse himself who, through the voice of one of his characters, points out the incongruous elements of a certain situation, laden with aggressive cues, as if he were trying to make sense of it and this approach makes the incongruity more salient and thus more humorous, which eventually diminishes the violent nature of that particular situation. This occurs in the novel *Thank You, Jeeves*, in the episode in which Brinkley, Bertie’s valet, wants to kill him because he takes him for the Devil:

Brinkley was at the keyhole, begging me to come out and let him ascertain the colour of my insides; and, by Jove, what seemed to me to add the final touch to the whole unpleasantness was that he spoke in the same respectful voice he always used. Kept calling me ‘Sir’, too, which struck me as dashed silly. I mean, if you’re asking a fellow to come out of a room so that you can dismember him with a carving knife, it’s absurd to tack a ‘Sir’ onto every sentence. The two things don’t go together. (Wodehouse, 2008c: 153)

The incongruity embedded in all the above-mentioned instances of humour bears a strong resemblance with what Apter and Desselles (2012) call disclosure humour. Next we will analyse several humorous passages from the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*, assessing their comic load in relation to hate from the perspective of the two types of humour described by Apter and Desselles, namely disclosure humour vs. distortion humour.

2.3. Disclosure Humour vs. Distortion Humour in Relation to Hate

According to Apter and Desselles (2012) these two types of humour bear on the reality-appearance dichotomy and on the diminishment of the identity at stake. Thus, when the diminishment of the identity comes from the perception of the reality of the situation, this leads to disclosure humour, whereas distortion humour follows from the diminishment of the identity produced by the perception of the appearance of the situation.

In disclosure humour, an identity is initially perceived as having a certain characteristic and afterwards it turns out that this characteristic is only apparent and an incompatible characteristic is the real one. In relation to hate, this incompatible characteristic is a negative feature of the hate target, but since the cognitive synergy produced by the overlap between reality and appearance implies the diminishment of the identity at stake, this also leads to the diminishment of hate.

In the novel *Thank You, Jeeves*, an example of disclosure humour accompanied by the diminishment of hate is conveyed in a dialogue between Bertie and young Seabury, Chuffy's cousin, a brazen child of whom Bertie is not particularly fond. Indeed, Bertie's feelings about cheeky boys are best described in another Bertie-Jeeves novel, *Joy in the Morning*: "There's a boy who makes you feel that what this country wants is somebody like King Herod" (Wodehouse, 2008a: 110).

The dialogue between Bertie and young Seabury goes as follows:

'Mother and I are living at the Hall again.'

'What!'

'Yes. There's a smell at the Dower House.'

'Even though you've left it?' I said in my keen way'. (Wodehouse, 2008c: 30)

In this example the cognitive synergy between appearance and reality unfolds as follows: what first is considered to be the reality of an exterior smell that causes young Seabury and his mother to move house turns out to be only an appearance. The new reality, Seabury's inherent smell, comes to light leading to a new interpretation and eliciting laughter. Obviously, this new interpretation is diminishing, resulting in the downgrading of the identity at stake, namely young Seabury, and consequently in the diminishment of the disgust felt toward him.

In the case of the second type of humour described by Apter and Desselles, namely distortion humour, the diminishment of an identity is obtained through the imaginative variation, diversification or exaggeration of its real characteristics. It is worth noting that the resultant exaggerated qualities are only apparent and the original attributes remain real. Moreover, as Apter and Desselles point out

For humour to occur there must again be cognitive synergy, meaning that the original characteristics must continue alongside the new ones and both be clearly related to the same identity in a plausible way, thus creating a synergy. There is a sense in which in

disclosure humour one is taking an interpretation away, while in distortion humour one is adding an interpretation. (Apter; Desselles, 2012: 424)

The most obvious examples of distortion humour are caricature, satire and parody. They all involve exaggerating the characteristics of a certain identity, which leads to their disparagement. But the exaggerated version of the identity has to retain connection to it in such a way that the original and the distorted copy are held simultaneously in the listener's, reader's or viewer's mind. In the case of the present analysis, if the original – the hate target – and its distorted copy are held simultaneously in the mind of the person who experiences hate, disgust, contempt, this may lead to the diminishment of such negative emotions.

Wodehouse's comic style teems with this kind of humour and the novel *Right Ho, Jeeves* is no exception in this regard. A special type of distortion humour resides in indirectly varying or exaggerating the real characteristics of a certain identity by creating a hypothetical scenario which could come into being if the opportunity presented itself. The scenario is not likely to happen. It is just a whim of a character's imagination, but the result is that the reader is incentivized to envisage its possible fulfilment and laugh:

I am not saying, mind you, that had the opportunity presented itself of dropping a wet sponge on Tuppy from some high spot or of putting an eel in his bed or finding some other form of self-expression of a like nature, I would not have embraced it eagerly; but that let me out. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 77)

At the moment, no doubt, she might be wishing that she could hit him with a bottle, but deep down in her I was prepared to bet that there still lingered all the old affection and tenderness. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 82)

I could not but remember how often, when in her company at Cannes, I had gazed dumbly at her, wishing that some kindly motorist in a racing car would ease the situation by coming along and ramming her amidship. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 108)

The exquisite code of politeness of the Woosters prevented me clipping her one on the ear-hole, but I would have given a shilling to be able to do it. There seemed to be something deliberately fat-headed in the way she persisted in missing the gist. (Wodehouse, 2008b: 112)

It is worth noting that in all the above-mentioned examples, the reader is made aware of the fact that the original qualities of the situation remain real throughout the distortion, since the distorted copy is just a hypothetical scenario. However, the interpretation added is humorous because the reader holds in their mind two realities at the same time, one in which the scenario does not occur and one in which the scenario is likely to occur. Moreover, the distortion involves a significant dose of aggression, which increases its funniness.

In all these instances of Wodehousian humour in relation to the expression of hate, the writer seems to teach his reader a lesson. Maybe people would hate less if they could laugh more about the absurdity of their hate.

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