

WATER JOKES IN JEROME'S HUMOR. THE CASE OF *THREE MEN IN A BOAT*

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Abstract. *Humour is versatile; it covers various areas, takes various forms and serves various purposes. Humour diversity can be traced in J.K. Jerome's travelogue novel "Three Men in a Boat" which accounts for the three friends' trip along the Thames in form of anecdotes and funny incidents that happen to them when rowing the boat. Given this specific setting, the aim of this paper is to explore the water-related jokes, to consider the implication, and to analyse such factors as intention, disparagement, circumstances, superiority, incongruity, and relief, which produce a humorous effect and heighten the readers' amusement.*

Key words: *humour, disparagement, superiority, incongruity, relief.*

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Rezumat. *Umorul este un fenomen complex care abordează diverse tematici, poate apărea sub diferite forme și urmărește diverse scopuri. Complexitatea umorului poate fi urmărită în romanul de călătorie al lui J.K. Jerome „Trei într-o barcă”, care relatează călătoria a trei prieteni de-a lungul Tamisei încadrate într-un șir de povestiri, amintiri și incidente amuzante în timp ce vâslesc într-o direcție nedeterminată. Având în vedere acest cadru peisajistic, scopul acestei lucrări este de a explora glumele înrămate în diverse peisaje ale Tamisei, de a identifica implicațiile acestora și de a analiza factori precum: intenția, derâderea, circumstanțele, superioritatea, incongruența, eliberarea, care produc un efectul comic al glumei și sporesc amuzamentul cititorilor.*

Cuvinte cheie: *umor, derâdere, superioritate, incongruență, eliberare.*

Jerome's Novel and the Historical and Ideological Context. Jerome Klapka Jerome's travels to Russia, America, and especially Germany broadened his regards of foreign culture and inspired his humorous and open-minded spirit. His travelogue novel "Three Men in a Boat" reflects experiences and impressions embodied in humorous anecdotes, witty remarks, caricatures, allusions, gender-bound mockery, irony and satire.

During the Victorian period and its later decline, the British citizens were offered opportunities for recreation and amusement in their leisure time. Given the increasing accessibility of vacation time among middle and working classes as well as the popularity of the recreational travel such as boating, steamships, biking tours served as leitmotifs for both novels. The popularity of active leisure activities resulted from the increasing popularity of biology in the Victorian era and with the exaggerated concern for health and good shape maintenance. Moreover, the men's

growing social life recreation activity and interest in the careful choice of colours and clothing straight cuts indicate the development of their homosociality into what was later coined as “new men” who distorted the image of traditional breadwinner, diligent and hardworking Robinson as a reversed image of the traditional Victorian man. These factors preconditioned the creation of Jerome’s characters who were real men: J (the author), George Wingrave and Carl Hentschel who often went boating together in their free time. The image of the traditional Victorian woman has undergone social and mindset changes conferring more independence, freedom, and initiative to the “neue Damen”. Parodies of the imperial heroic seafaring male and late Victorian New Women, both novels are regarded as everlasting in terms of humour and the manner of its delivery.

The following part of this paper moves on to describe in greater detail the connection between the historical context and the humorous implicature, the ways the joke settings can reflect the cultural specificity of a particular period of time and the reasons why the degraded expectation and the humorous surprise lay the basis of Jerome’s subtle punchlines. Likewise, some of the social weaknesses and human imperfections, which are deliberately derided, will be analysed in their ironic contexts and discussed from the perspective of the narrator’s superiority, self-disparagement and incongruity elements. Inconsistencies such as degraded expectation and happenings, words contradicting their intended meaning, and deliberate ambiguity are to be identified discussed in the section that follows from the viewpoint of the value of incongruity in humorous effect production.

Water-Related Jokes and their Humorous Implicature. A significant number of jokes in Jerome’s travelogue “Three Men in a Boat” are water-related in terms of setting since the actions develop during the characters’ trip along the Thames and their stops overlooking various landscapes. Other water-related jokes mocking the weaknesses of human nature and producing the effect of degraded expectation place the man in the middle of nature (ocean, sea, rainy weather) and highlight the human insignificance against it despite the numerous attempts to prove the opposite.

Thames has always played a central role in the English culture. Authors such as Buerly¹ and Sinclair² acknowledge the “centrality” of Thames in many literary works due to its popularity as a travel destination for the upper classes which became accessible for the middle and working classes in the late nineteenth century due to the growing industrialization. Given these circumstances, Jerome

¹ A. Buerly, *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism*, University of Michigan Press, 2013, p. 88.

² M. Sinclair, *The Thames. A Cultural History*, Andrews UK Limited, 2012, *passim*.

illustrates the accessibility of a trip down the river for three middle-class men through the wordplay "To suit sb to a T" including it in Harris's careless manner of talk: "Harris said, however, that the river would suit him to a "T". I don't know what a "T" is (except a sixpenny one, which includes bread-and-butter and cake *ad lib.*, and is cheap at the price, if you haven't had any dinner). It seems to suit everybody, however, which is greatly to its credit"³.

The funny effect of the wordplay is produced due to the ambiguity which results from the homophony of "T" and "tea". Thus, the readers need to elicit the connotative meaning of the idiom "to suit somebody to a T" in order to grasp the duality of meaning and therefore to appreciate the joke.

Yet, the initial stereotype of travels along the Thames being indicative of success and welfare served as an inspirational reason for mocking the exaggerated concern for fancy boating costumes. Consider the examples below: The river affords a good opportunity for dress. For once in a way, we men are able to show *our* taste in colours, and I think we come out very natty, if you ask me⁴.

It was my misfortune once to go for a water picnic with 2 ladies of this kind. We did have a lovely time⁵.

The first example clearly demonstrates the high value of dress and the obsession for fashion when going down the river whereas the second implicitly hints at the narrator having some troubles when keeping company with two fashionably dressed ladies by means of using "my misfortune". The implied meaning is rendered through verbal irony which contrasts what is said "We did have a lovely time" with what is implied (the narrator didn't have a lovely time). The instance below illustrates that the ladies did not have a lovely time either because of the insensible man who took Jerome's place after he abandoned rowing: When he spread more than pint of water over one of those dresses, he would give a pleasant little laugh, and say: "I beg your pardon, I'm sure;" and offer them his handkerchief to wipe it off with⁶.

The derision of dress inappropriateness is done in a subtle manner by switching the fault on a different agent than the original one (the ladies). Thus, the humorous effect is produced by changing the focus on the "unbrushed tree trunks", "dusty grass", "insensitive rowers" and turning the fashionable ladies into "early Christian Martyrs".

Contrary to the above-described reputation of Thames as a favourite place for entertainment and fishing, many jokes in J.K. Jerome's novel mock its dirty

³ Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in Boat*, London, Penguin Books, 1889, p. 18

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 67-68.

condition. According to Jeffries⁷, after 1830, the Thames stopped being a favourable place for fishing. This phenomenon is derided in the following instance: The river abounds in pike, roach, dace, gudgeon, and eels, just here; and you can sit and fish for them all day. Some people do. They never catch them. I never knew anybody catch anything, up the Thames, except minnows and dead cats, but that has nothing to do, of course, with fishing!⁸

As mentioned above, Jerome's subtlety in mocking the river's dirty waters consists in producing the effect of degraded expectation and in veiling the implied meaning. The joke setting lists the species of fish that apparently could be fished in the river. The punch sets the surprising reality that it's only minnows and dead cats being caught. The implication, thus, needs to be elicited by the audience as the idea of "filthy Thames" is wrapped in the fishermen's illusory failure in catching the previously listed species of fishes.

Some jokes target the Thames water as being dangerous for health and resulting in water-borne infections. With this purpose in mind, Jerome used several forms of jokes. One of them produces the effect of ambiguity through the wordplay illustrated below: Oh, please could you spare us a little water?" "Certainly," replied the old gentleman; "take as much as you want, and leave the rest [...]" "Where — where do you keep it?" [...] "Oh!" exclaimed George, grasping the idea; "but we can't drink the river, you know!" "No; but you can drink some of it," replied the old fellow. "It's what I've drunk for the last fifteen years"⁹.

The wordplay is based on the polysemy of the word "water" which denotes the drinking water that the character was looking for and the river water that was not drinkable. The effect of ambiguity is produced by means of blurring the meaning of water and creating the illusion of misunderstanding between the interlocutors. The fact that Thames water is dangerous for drinking is implied in George's pretended misunderstanding at the gentleman's suggestion to drink river water. Therefore, the humorous effect is obtained when the readers realize that George's attempts to avoid drinking Thames water are vain despite his cautious attitude which the old man found quite snobbish. This situation results in a dramatic situational irony which contrasts the character's expectations but is disclosed only to the readers: We got some (water) from a cottage a little higher up. I daresay *that* was only river water, if we had known. But we did not know, so it was all right. What the eye does not see, the stomach does not get upset over¹⁰.

⁷ S. Jeffries, 'Water, Super-Sewers, and the Filth Threatening the River Thames', The Guardian [online] available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/22/water-thames-victorian-london-150-years-sewer-system>.

⁸ Jerome K. Jerome, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

The ironic effect is obtained through the contrast between what was expected and what happened. Moreover, the characters seem to have been ignorant to the fact that they eventually drank river water and this makes the situation even more amusing for the readers who experience the feeling of superiority when laughing at the characters' naiveté.

Other instances of verbal and situational irony targeting Thames dirty water have been expressed through descriptions which implicitly render the situation and therefore, make the readers smile at the author's subtle manner: We had made the tea, and were just settling down comfortably to drink it, when George, with his cup half-way to his lips, paused and exclaimed: "What's that?" [...] Harris and I followed his gaze, and saw, coming down towards us on the sluggish current, a dog. It was one of the quietest and peaceablest dogs I have ever seen. I never met a dog who seemed more contented — more easy in its mind [...] ¹¹.

The implicit description of the dog makes the readers laugh despite the dog being dead due to the contrast between this fact and the way it was presented. Thus, the vividly described picture of a dead dog as "the quietest, the most peaceful, contented" results in verbal irony. On the other hand, the humorous effect is intensified when the readers find out that the characters had previously drunk river water and learn about the characters' ways of reacting to it.

A straightforward way of referring to the river dirt is illustrated in the instance below: All the dirt contained in the river between Reading and Henley, we collected, during that wash, and worked it into our clothes ¹².

This example is a combination of mockery and self-deprecation. The river dirt is openly referred to whereas the characters' incompetence in washing clothes can be read between lines. It is veiled in the brief remark about the Thames dirty water.

The trip along Thames chronicles some historical episodes with references to the legendary figures who add historical significance to the river and to the places along with it. Yet, these narrations are sprinkled with humorous remarks which make the "virtual travel into the past" ¹³ rather amusing: [...] Cassivelaunus had prepared the river for Cæsar, by planting it full of stakes (and had, no doubt, put up a notice-board). But Cæsar crossed in spite of this. You couldn't choke Cæsar off that river. He is the sort of man we want round the backwaters now ¹⁴.

In this example, the allusion to Caesar's determination in crossing the river is used as a joke setting which is targeting the places on the river where the water is stagnant. Hence, it is not only Caesar's perseverant nature to cross the river which

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 174.

¹³ A. Buerly, *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism*, University of Michigan Press, 2013, pp. 116-117.

¹⁴ Jerome K. Jerome, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

is alluded to but also the stakes which need to be stimulated artificially to foster navigation.

Apart from historical references, Jerome included many casual anecdotes which appear as flashbacks or as funny incidents during the multiple stops in the characters' trip along the river.

Some of these incidents are based on situational irony and relief as in the instance below: A stiffish breeze had sprung up — in our favour, for a wonder; for, as a rule on the river, the wind is always dead against you whatever way you go. It is against you in the morning, when you start for a day's trip, and you pull a long distance, [...] Then, after tea, the wind veers round, and you have to pull hard in its teeth all the way home. When you forget to take the sail at all, then the wind is consistently in your favour both ways¹⁵.

This example proves that situational incongruity can be amusing. The contrast between expectation and occurrence results in circumstantial irony which highlights characters' insignificance in front of nature. Thus, every reader can acknowledge one's own inferiority and feel relaxed at the idea that this is a common reality. The humorous effect is eventually obtained at the readers' relief and the idea of equality with the book characters who face similar challenges.

Other water-related ironic instances are also situational but besides the human weakness in front of nature, they carry a note of self-deprecation targeting one's awkwardness and incompetence. Consider the following example: One huge wave catches me up and chucks me [...]. And, before I've said "Oh! Ugh!" and found out what has gone, the wave comes back and carries me out to mid-ocean. I begin to strike out frantically for the shore, [...]. Just when I have given up all hope, a wave retires and leaves me sprawling like a star-fish on the sand, and I get up and look back and find that I've been swimming for my life in two feet of water¹⁶.

This example again illustrates the nature superiority on man and the effect of degraded expectation. Yet, the irony lies in the mockery of one's useless efforts to survive in shallow waters. Thus, self-deprecation results in amusement since the readers feel superior to the character.

The humorous effect is obtained in the cases of self-irony with accident involvement. The accidents always carry an effect of surprise. The instance below is a good illustration of how the man can the contrast between expectation and surprise produces the effect of degraded assumption: It was bitterly cold. The wind cut like a knife. I thought I would not throw the water over myself after all. [...] and, as I turned, the silly branch gave way, and I and the towel went in together with a tremendous splash, and I was out mid-stream with a gallon of Thames water inside

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p.118.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

me before I knew what had happened¹⁷.

Reading the first sentence, the readers can easily assume that the narrator is going to have a refreshing bath in the morning. The element of surprise occurs when the branch suddenly breaks and the narrator falls down into the water and this misfortune makes the situation hilarious. Thus, the character becomes inferior to the situation (accident) and it makes the reader laugh and rejoice in his superiority.

On their way along the Thames, the characters are often laughed at because of their incapacity of dealing with basic accommodation issues despite being equipped and having more than necessary provisions. As the storyline develops, the pleasures of the trip along the river are accompanied by episodes placing the characters out of their comfort zones and resulting in a series of amusing messy incidents: The rain is pouring steadily down all the time. It is difficult enough to fix a tent in dry weather: in wet, the task becomes herculean. Instead of helping you, it seems to you that the other man is simply playing the fool. Just as you get your side beautifully fixed, he gives it a hoist from his end, and spoils it all¹⁸.

The rain is used as a mocking tool to highlight the three river novices' naivety and weakness when facing the powers of nature. The humorous effect is produced when the expectation of seeing strong men easily accommodating and exploring the river surroundings is ruined. Even the characters' sudden decision of ending the trip, because of the several rainy days, is ironic. Thus, Jerome's narrative anecdotes about the characters' misfortunes and other humorous episodes shift the stress from the classical travelogue genre to a (self) ironic casual account of the three men's experiences and flashbacks which draws to a close not reaching the river's end.

Conclusions. This paper set out to analyse the water-related jokes in J.K. Jerome's novel "Three Men in a Boat" from the perspective of their setting, humorous, implicature, and the effect they produce upon the audience. The research has also shown that the jokes target water-picnic dress-code, Thames dirty waters, silly incidents on the river, and the man's weakness facing the power of nature. Some jokes are framed as part of anecdotes told by the narrator or characters; others take the form of wordplay, verbal and situational irony. The analyses demonstrate that the humorous effect results from the sense of superiority, incongruity, and relief the audience experience when reading. The instances of self-deprecation jokes feel amusing when the readers feel superior towards the one who is in trouble or faces some problems. Likewise, water-related

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

jokes targeting the river or the characters' incidents on the river, the readers experience a sense of relaxation at the idea that an issue is finally disclosed and laughed at. The water-related wordplay and ironic instances produce a humorous effect due to contrasting script and incongruity. The readers are surprised at the degraded expectations and the sense of ambiguity heightens the feeling of amusement. Taken together, these findings suggest that irrespective of the joke type, the humorous effect depends on the way the readers decode the implicature and the way humour theories are reflected in their perception of the comical.