

SUBVERSION AND SURVIVAL: A STUDY OF HUMOUR AS AN INTEGRAL VALUE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKLORE

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Abstract

Humour is deemed as a universal value transcending social, cultural, economic and linguistic cultural human standards of behaviour. Its presence is highly notable and significant in African American Folklore despite the presence of tales depicting bondage, suppression, discrimination and violence. This article analyses such tales collected from oral traditions to establish the role of humour as a tool of subversion, and a mechanism to cope with the atrocities the Coloured Americans were subjected to. It investigates the tales with the assistance of the three classical theories of humour: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory of humour. The theories help in textual analysis of the tales by extracting the element that produces humour and highlighting the psychological condition of the characters. This study outlines how humour is an integral human value and can assist the oppressed to not only survive amidst a brutal social setting but also combat it through wit, laughter and comedy. Establishing the African American character as a humourist, the research suggests that humour is not something the community merely chanced upon, but a trope they used to surpass and withstand the subjugation. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of humour as a commentary on the social condition, a strengthening of communal bonds, and a celebration of the cultural heritage, thus demonstrating its role as a means of subversion and survival. Ultimately, this paper serves to depict humour as a pivotal human

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value in African American folklore, and a significant vehicle of turning the tragic into the comic for survival.

Keywords: African American; humour; wit; folklore; oral traditions

1. Introduction

Human values are the core identifiers of how a person or a group carries out their lifestyle. These values are both traditional and dynamic in nature and are crucial in determining one's conditioning, upbringing and personality. Shalom H. Schwartz specifies the six defining features of values in his eponymous Theory of Basic Values. The first feature, he points out, is that "Values are beliefs linked inextricably to affect" (p.2). This suggests that values are not merely abstract sentiments, but are capable of eliciting strong emotional responses. The second feature, "Values refer to desirable goals that motivate action" conveys that the people who uphold certain values are always inspired to pursue them (p.2). Third, Schwartz states, "Values transcend specific actions and situations" (p.3). This means that values are all-pervasive, unlike norms that pertain to specific environments. The fourth feature is that "Values serve as standards or criteria" to evaluate or select "actions, policies, people and events" (p.3). This suggests that values assist one in conflicting situations where decisions may be significant but one may be in a conundrum. Next, it is pointed out that "Values are ordered by importance relative to one another" (p.3). In other words, the values of people are significant in characterising them as individuals and marking hierarchies in society. The final distinguishing feature is that "The relative importance of multiple values guides action" (p.3). Put simply, an action impacts multiple values, and these values produce action depending upon their relevant importance. In light of this, this study classifies humour as a significant universal value.

Through centuries, countless philosophers, thinkers and critics have been studying the cause and the impact of humour. Their devised theories, to be discussed in the upcoming sections of the research article, prove that humour is not merely a laughing matter, but a pivotal human value. Humour, as per the analysis of Schwartz, meets all the conditions to be depicted as a human value. First, humour is widely known to elicit various emotional responses. For instance, as per the incongruity theory, laughter may be released at absurdities and surprises (Kant, 1931, p.223). Secondly, it provokes

action by stimulating one to defend oneself or to combat the other. This can be noted in the superiority theory of humour, where one seeks pleasure at the cost of the one deemed inferior, or when the oppressed laughs back at the oppressor seeking to combat oppression (Plato p.50; Aristotle, 1996, p.9; Hobbes, 1839, p.46). Third, humour is known to transcend all, social, economic, political and linguistic conditions, and pervades in different forms. Also aligning with the fourth feature, humour serves as an evaluative condition and impacts vital behaviours in society. For instance, satirical humour may serve a corrective role in society, disparaging humour may give the power to individuals to impose or fight suppression, and communal humour may strengthen social cohesion. As per the fifth feature, what a person finds humorous is descriptive of their personality and describes their social conditioning. For instance, a person finding humour at the cost of women may associate with the values of patriarchy. The sixth feature places humour in connection with the other values. This can be better understood through the relief theory of humour. As per this theory, humour is used to release other powerful emotions to find psychological relief (Spencer, 1911, p.410). Here, humour serves as a mechanism for coping with values which one disagrees with. For instance, when one tries to lie, following the value of dishonesty, laughter may be elicited as an alternate response to hide the prominent emotion. This can also be witnessed in the laughter of the oppressed who laugh to survive amidst atrocities. Thus, it would not be wrong to term humour as a prominent human value.

To depict the role of humour as a universal value and its impact on society, this paper analyses such tales collected from oral traditions to establish the role of humour as a tool of subversion, and a mechanism to cope with the atrocities that the Coloured Americans were subjected to. This study focuses on African American folktales to meet its objectives because these tales are adept with narratives of pain, suffering, bondage and discrimination. Despite that, humour surfaces as a dominant theme in all and it becomes even more crucial to study its presence and relevance in the African American context. The folktales, namely, "John de First Coloured Man: "A Laugh That Meant Freedom", and Why N***** Have Nothing", and "Why N*****s are Black" are selected at random from a large archive repository of the African American folktales. The arbitrary selection of the folktales pinpoints the universality of humour and its applicability to the folktales and highlights that the basic structure of folktales is consistent across the trope. The following sections of the paper will be practical demonstrations of the way folktales

employ humour through language, wit and self-deprecation to meet its applicable function.

2. Language and Humour

In her 1935 auto-ethnographical work, *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston presents a compelling collection of folktales. Although many tales incorporate humour, this one is extremely significant in its structure and depiction. The story narrates the tale of “John de First Coloured Man”, who was sold to a White man with the description, “He didn’t know nothin’ mo’ than you told him and he never forgot nothin’ you told him either” (Hurston, 2008, p. 79). The slave is depicted as unaware of the master’s language and constantly asks his master about what each thing is called. In order to seek pleasure from the slave’s oblivion and to deceive him, the master gives him an exaggerated, nonsensical and made-up response. For instance, when they go to a house, and the slave, having never seen one, asks the master what it is, he is told that it is the master’s “kingdom” (p.79). Next, when he enquires about the fireplace, the master tells him that it was a “flame ‘vaperator” (p.79). Similarly, the cat is described as “his round head”, the stairs as a “jacob ladder”, a “roller foot bed” as a “flowery- bed-of-ease”, a barn as a “mound” and a donkey as “July” (p.79). One day, however, when the master is asleep, John flames the fireplace with his smoking. This leads to the cat catching the fire and running to the barn. Due to the hay and the fodder, the barn is also enflamed, leading to the donkey getting agitated, which to John appears as if he’s eating everything. Running to the master the slave urges him to get up from his “flowery-bed of- ease” and come down from the “jacob ladder”, he also explains “I done flamed the ‘vaperator and it caught the round head and set him on fire. He’s gone to de mound and set it on fire, and July the God dam is eatin’ up everything he kin git his mouf on” (p. 70-80). When the master asks him to repeat more than twice, the slave gets tired and says “Aw, you better git up out dat bed and come on down stairs. Ah done set dat ole cat afire and he run out to de barn and set it afire and dat ole Jackass is eatin’ up everything he git his mouf on” (p.80). Thus, revealing that he knew language all along. He simply was playing along with the humour of his master. While the master thought the joke was on the slave, the former eventually turned into the laughing matter. In the urgency, however, the slave drops his garb and the deceiver becomes the deceived.

This tale is an example of the superiority theory of humour where

pleasure is elicited from malice. In Plato's *Philebus* (360 B.C.), Socrates in discussion with Protarchus states "Those who are weak and unable to retaliate when they are laughed at may rightly be called ridiculous" (1975, p.49). He also points out, "Laughter is pleasant and, on these occasions, we both feel malice and laugh" (p.50). This suggests that the master derived humour from his slave's weakness and inability to combat. Not only was the slave rendered defenceless due to the master-slave hierarchy they were in, but also due to the way language was used as a tool of control. One is reminded of George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984* (1949) which depicts Newspeak as a tool of limiting thought and opinion. Developed by the government to stifle and manipulate public expression and to preserve social regulation, the fake language limited the voice of the people. Not only did it serve to eliminate any rebellion but also influenced the views and beliefs of the citizens. This manipulation is akin to the behaviour of the master who sought pleasure in referring to simple things highly, for instance calling his "home" a "kingdom" and his "bed" a "flowery bed of ease". By doing this the master places himself higher on the hierarchical pedestal and finds humour in the slave's lack of knowledge. Mustafa Altun further explains how language sustains power dynamics:

Language has the power to oppress and marginalize people. Language may be used to oppress and exclude people. By maintaining societal hierarchies, discriminatory and disparaging language helps to perpetuate power inequalities. By using such terminology, people and groups are made to feel less human, which helps to maintain injustices and silence their voices. When racist, sexist, or homophobic insults are used, they not only demean people but also support oppressive structures. The dominant group maintains its supremacy and sustains social inequality by demeaning and marginalizing some groups via language (Altun, 2023, p.364).

In other words, language holds the strength to uphold power dynamics and further marginalise the oppressed.

Contrary to the efforts and the humorous attempt of the master, he becomes the target of ridicule. When it is revealed that John, the slave, was aware of the language already, one witnesses the incongruity theory of humour come into play. This theory can be understood through the opinions of Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) where he points out, "there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (1931, p.223). In other words,

humour in this folktale also arises due to the absurdity where a revelation contrary to the expectations occurs.

Here, the slave emerges as an archetypal trickster figure, who is depicted to “discombobulate the power figure” that sought to control him (Jefferies, 1994, p.292). The trickster is known to adopt two major roles:

One of the trickster’s goals is social nonconformity by redefinition of norms for life and existence in mainstream American society. Another aim of this archetypal performance is the use of high standards and resilience against mainstream expectations of failure, incompetence, or laziness (p.293).

While the common stereotype and the lowered expectations of the White master made him assume that the slave would be oblivious to his language, the trickster defied this expectation by demonstrating knowledge, capability, intelligence and importantly, humour. Through his wit, the trickster seeks pleasure in his bondage.

It is also vital to point out that while the master seeks superiority through the play with language, the slave mirrors the same. The power and humour attained through linguistics resonates with Thomas Hobbes’ opinion on humour. In his *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640), Hobbes points out “For what else is the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man’s infirmity or absurdity” (1878, p.34). In other words, humour is the pleasure derived from cultivating a better self-opinion than the other. When the slave successfully fools his master, he enhances his self-perception and attains superiority over his oppressor. His method of combatting the master’s dominance appears to be a subtle resistance and belittling the master by deceiving him. It also serves as a method of entertainment for him amidst monotonous and oppressive conditions. Thus, by using language to sustain power, maintain hierarchy, and seek pleasure at the cost of the inferior, the master is depicted to employ humour in African American folklore. However, the slave uses humour as a tool of subversion and coping.

3. Wit and Humour

The next folktale that captures one’s attention is, “A Laugh That Meant Freedom”, the narrative of a slave, Nehemiah, who like many others had a “reputation for keeping out of work because of their wit and humour” (Gates, 2018, p.366). The slaves like him were known to keep their masters amused constantly so that even if they

could not avoid the daily chores that enslavement brought about, they could at least avoid the physically laborious work. Nehemiah was known to be clever in avoiding arduous tasks and evading the master's reprimands with humour or funny stories (p.366). When David Wharton, who was recognised as the "most cruel slave master in Southwest Texas" heard about him, he decided to "buy" the slave and teach him a lesson.

On the first day of Nehemiah's enslavement, the master assigns him the task of picking four hundred pounds of cotton. Trying to escape the strenuous task, the slave bargains, "but ef Ah meks you laff, won' yuh lemme off fo' terday?" (Gates, 2018, p.367). The master, confident in his way with the slave promises him, that if he succeeds in making him laugh, he'd not only give a day off, but the slave's freedom. Impressed with the bargain, Nehemiah praises, "Boss, yuh sho' is uh goodlookin' man", to which the master retorts that he couldn't say the same about him (p.367). Though David Wharton assumes that he has won against the slave, he responds, "Oh, yes, Boss, yuh could yuh could, if yuh tole ez big uh lie ez Ah did." (p.367). In shock at the absurdity, the master laughs without thinking, leading to the freedom of Nehemiah.

Laughter has often been considered liberating. But this tale discusses freedom in a literal aspect instead of a psychological one. Distancing from the atrocious condition of slavery, the story presents a fictional account as Gates points out, "Wit and humour rarely sufficed in real life to lighten assigned labours, but here they appear capable of softening even the "most cruel" master" (Gates, 2018, p.368).

In order to explain what caused the rigid and the strict master to laugh, one might allude to the incongruity theory which proposes that laughter results from the shattering of one's expectations. Prominent German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in his *The World as Will and Idea* (1819) explains this further, "The sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (1909, p.76). In the context of the narrative, the incongruity presents itself in the master's unyielding confidence in being able to make the slave work. However, the reality is contradictory and breaks the master's conviction. Schopenhauer further elucidates the idea and states:

It often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through one concept, and the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the

objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view. It occurs just as often, however, that the incongruity between a single real object and the concept under which, from one point of view, it has rightly been subsumed, is suddenly felt. Now the more correct the subsumption of such objects under a concept may be from one point of view, and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous (1909, pp. 76-77)

Put simply, different concepts or ideas may be grouped despite their differences. In the case of the folktale, the master makes the mistake of grouping two elements, the slave's intelligence with his freedom and his incompetence with his bondage. Thus, having complete confidence that the slave will not be able to surpass the wisdom and the knowledge of the master, he accepts the challenge. However, this opinion is "one-sided" and the slave outsmarts him almost immediately. Suddenly, the master erupts into laughter due to the prevalent paradox and unexpected response. Schopenhauer refers to this as the "ludicrous" and further divides it into "flash of wit" and "folly" (p. 67). In this context "wit" is the sudden intellectual action, where one exposes incongruities, just as the slave cleverly did. "Folly", on the other hand, is the failure to understand these contradictions, or participation in the absurd without recognition, akin to the master's response, and his assumption of the slave being a fool.

However, this tale is not a mere narrative of laughter due to incongruity. In addition to the shock received due to the slave's wit and quick thinking, there exists another hidden trope of humour. When the slave compliments the master on his looks, he retorts, "I am sorry I can't say the same thing about you," (Gates, 2018, p.367). His response emerges from an assumed superiority from the confidence in his appearance, and a contradictory opinion about his slave. However, when the slave reveals that his appreciation is a blatant lie, he reverses the tropes of superiority. Marcus Tullius Cicero in his *On the Ideal Orator* (55 B.C.), points out, "In ugliness too and in physical blemishes there is good enough matter for jesting" (2001, p.373). He further explains that sometimes humour arises due to the malice emerging from the assumed physical inferiority of the subject. When the master notices this reversal in his assumption to be a "good-looking" man, unlike the slave, laughter is produced.

Thus, the incongruity and the superiority theory together assist in producing laughter in this folktale.

Once again, the slave emerges as a trickster figure in African American society. Referring to the defiance and the rebellion of the slaves, Rhonda Baynes Jeffries points out, "Because of the confining conditions of slavery, the trickster's role for African-Americans became primarily that of defiant representative of the oppressed group" (1993, p.293). The slaves thus aimed for a form of freedom in their being, a freedom which could only be attained by rebelling against the oppressive figures or dismantling the hierarchies. This also alludes to the dual goals of the trickster mentioned in the previous section, where slave serves as a symbol of resistance and resilience, and defying the stereotypes that surround them (p.293). In the case of the narrative, while the master assumed he could tame the slave well, and was confident in his mental superiority, the slave succeeded in achieving triumph and freedom through his wit. It is because of his humour and intelligence that not only could he win freedom, but could also combat the stereotypes surrounding the incompetence of the Coloured folk. By using humour as a means to attain nonconformity and to defy the bondage of slavery, the trickster not only survives but thrives and attains his liberation.

Through such folktales, the "folk" could provide an outlet for repressed feelings. Alan Dundes in his seminal work, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, points out:

In slavery times and afterward, N***** were not always free to laugh (or sing) openly. If a N***** wished to laugh out loud at his master, he might do so only at a considerable risk. So, he suppressed his desire to laugh and went to the "laughing barrel" where he could laugh to his heart's content without the fear of being heard (Dundes, 1990, p. xv).

Thus, akin to a laughing barrel, humour provided a refuge to the slaves. It also allowed the others, listening or retelling these tales to use humour as a safe vent of despise.

4. Self-Deprecation and Humour

The third kind of humorous folktale is the one where African Americans try to justify their despondency and race through self-deprecatory narratives. In the tale "Why N***** Have Nothing", it is told that after God was done making the world, he called people of different nations and races and asked them what they wanted. The White man mentioned that he "wanted to be pretty an' tuh boss everything", the Jews asked for wealth, and the Indians asked

for knowledge about hunting (Hurston, 2001, p.11). However, the Coloured man was resting and didn't appear before God. Tired of waiting, God sent his angels to wake him up and ask him what he wanted, to which the "n*****" replied "Ah don't want nothin" and went back to his slumber (p.11) As the title suggests this tale is used to justify the despondency of the Black folk, the lack that persists and blames it on their lack of effort to attain the wishes granted to them.

The next tale "Why N*****s are Black" humorously depicts the reason behind the dark skin colour of the African Americans and provides a jovial justification for the same (Hurston, 2001, p.12). It explains, that after the making of the world, God asked people of all nations to be present at a fixed time "and get they colour" (p.12). While the others reached at the appointed time, the African Americans fell asleep. The tale further continues, "When they did get there they wuz so skeered they wouldn't get waited on they started to pushing and shoving and acting crazy, and God pushed them back and said, "Get back!" They misunderstood and got black" (p.12). This thus shifts the blame of their skin colour to their own laziness.

Adding self-deprecatory humour serves under the umbrella of the relief theory of laughter, where, by laughing at their own stereotypical tales and poverty, the Blacks could seek respite amidst deprivation. Herbert Spencer in his *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* points out, "Laughter is a result of the pleasure we take in escaping from the restraint of grave feelings" (1911, p. 410). This means that when overwhelmed with serious matters, one may seek a redirection to release powerful emotions. Humour and laughter thus serve as a refuge in this escape. Sigmund Freud further draws upon the idea of "tendentious jokes" in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). He highlights how such jokes serve to convert repressed ideas into pleasurable ones. These are the archetypical jokes which one usually witnesses in slave narratives and folklore. He points out that these are matters one would usually be ashamed to comment upon, however, "we can only laugh when the joke has come to our help" (Freud, 1991, p.99). It is only because of humour, that such matters could be addressed. He expands:

Tendentious jokes are able to release pleasure even from sources that have undergone repression. If, the overcoming of external obstacles can in this way be traced back to the overcoming of internal inhibitions and repressions, we may say that tendentious jokes exhibit the main characteristic of the joke work- that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions more clearly than any other of the developmental stages of jokes (p.131).

Thus, humour in these folktales allows African Americans to laugh at their poverty and skin colour, which are grave matters otherwise. In addition to increasing their values of in-group association, it also creates an acceptance of unalterable conditions and enables them to sustain themselves amidst hardships.

However, self-degradation through folklore might appear to be a joke at the cost of Blacks rather than in support of them. In the above-mentioned folktales, it may seem as if the tales further disparage the Coloured Americans for their skin colour and despondence. However, such humour often benefits the marginalised groups, even if it appears to side with the dominant. Nancy Walker points out:

Self-deprecation is ingratiating rather than aggressive; it acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture — even appears to confirm it— and allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority. Thus the Jew or the black tells stories that play upon ethnic characteristics identified by the majority culture, not only to demonstrate an ability to “take” the joke but also to render it harmless (Walker, 1990, p.123).

Her opinion clarifies how humorous folktales of the African Americans, even if self-deprecatory, weren't a jibe at their own people but a depiction of their endurance, an exhibition to the Whites about their consciousness and an effort to render the stereotypes benign.

Providing justifications and accepting blame for their conditions of poverty and physical dissimilarity, African American folklore serves a multiplicity of functions. First, it is a satiric comment on the historical and social conditions which have treated the Coloured Americans with hostility, as if their skin colour was a result of their doing, or a matter of choice. It also depicts a sense of resilience where the storytellers sought to pacify themselves with justifications for questions to which they had no rational answers. This humour serves to establish a sense of identity, self-worth and communal bonding by uniting the people suffering similar atrocities and hardships.

5. Conclusion

This research article depicts humour as a pivotal human value, in the African American discourse. The first folktale in question, “John de First Coloured Man” refers to the superiority theory of humour to depict how malice might elicit pleasure, and the incongruity theory to showcase the significance of absurdity. It also depicts how the slaves derived gratification from deceiving the master and emerging as the trickster figure, and seeking entertainment amidst atrocities. Thus,

showcasing language and humour as a means of both, sustaining and subverting power, maintaining and disintegrating hierarchy and as a means of coping. The second folktale, “A Laugh That Meant Freedom” is a metaphor for the liberating impacts of laughter and an indicative of the wit that the slave possessed. Employing the incongruity theory of humour, the slave again emerges as the trickster figure. It also highlights how the oppressed created humour at the cost of the oppressor by reversing the generalised stereotype, using the superiority theory of humour. The third and the fourth folktales, “Why N***** Have Nothing”, and “Why N*****s are Black” are the type of narratives where the African Americans use self-deprecatory humour to justify conditions of poverty and their dark skin colour. Employing the relief theory of humour, the folktales comment upon the social hierarchies and unfair segregation, serve as a coping mechanism, and strengthen communal bonds.

It is interesting to notice that despite the conditions of bondage and slavery, humour serves multiple roles in the African American context. In addition to being a significant method of resistance and resilience, it also is depicted to strengthen the communal bonds and celebrate the cultural heritage of the Coloured Americans. In light of this, it can rightly be called a mechanism of subversion and survival about the folktales, especially. Thus, this study depicts that humour is a pivotal human value in African American folklore and a significant vehicle for turning the tragic into the comic for survival.

To conclude, it can be witnessed that African American folklore uses humour through language, wit and self-deprecation to subvert the power dynamics of bondage, to survive amidst atrocities, to cope with oppression and to foster the ties of the community. Humour, hence, is not just an element that the folktales chanced upon, but a consciously chosen value inculcated in the oral traditions.

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