

Motives for Children's Mortality in Modern Dark Humour

Nickolay N. Gubanov

National Research University
Bauman Moscow State Technical University (BMSTU)
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: gubanovnn@mail.ru

Lyudmila Rokotyanskaya

National Research University
Bauman Moscow State Technical University (BMSTU)
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: lo_rokotyanskaya@rambler.ru

Nickolay I. Gubanov

Tyumen State Medical University (TyumSMU)
Tyumen, Russian Federation
E-mail: gubanov48@mail.ru

Larisa Cheremnyh

Tyumen State Medical University (TyumSMU)
Tyumen, Russia
E-mail: gubanov48@mail.ru

Abstract—The dark humour popularity is widespread significantly in XX-XXI centuries. The role of mass media with its tragical events detailed elaboration as well as underlying social and cultural alterations could be detected as possible causes for the current event. First of all, we could speak about alteration of the attitude in the society towards laughter and humour, from negative in general to generally positive. Due to this fact the dark humour being and ambiguous one became quite a usual event for us. Significant part of dark humour jokes is dedicated to children (to themes of children's mortality, disability, paedophilia, etc.) Samples of such dark humour could be found both in the folklore of the last century and in up to date stand-up comedian's soliloquies. We give the analysis of possible reasons for the popularity of motives for children's mortality and children's suffering which are represented in the genre of dark humour. We consider the influence of the news mass media as well as an alteration of society's attitude towards problems of a child, childhood and children's mortality are the most significant reasons for above popularity.

Keywords—dark humour; children; childhood; sadistic rhymes; dead babies' jokes cycle; stand-up comedy; cartoons

I. INTRODUCTION

Children are the most common characters for the modern dark humour. A lot of jokes are dedicated to children with disabilities, children — victims of paedophiles, children with cancer and of course — to hungry African children. On the website of one of the American stand-up clubs, we found out a humorous but enough fair remark: "Dark humour topics could range from dead babies to mental illness...but mostly — dead babies"¹. It is unconditional that the suffering of a child is not the only subject of dark humour but it is one of the most common in this genre. To make a deeper analysis of this phenomenon we will examine specific samples of dark

humour which are associated with children and children's mortality.

II. DEAD CHILDREN IN FOLKLORE, CARTOONS AND STAND-UP COMEDIES

Dark humour is not an invention of our time — one could find samples of such jokes in texts of ancient authors, for example — Cicero. However, the beginning of genre active development as well as the emergence of the term "dark humour" falls on the period of late 19th to the beginning of 20th century. At the same time, popular samples of black humour of this historical period are bound to be associated with children. These are popular in pre-revolutionary Russia rhymes about Steppe ragged (Struwelpeter) and cycles of jokes about "Little Willie" and "Little Audrey" which got widespread in English-speaking countries [1]. Nevertheless, the full development of dead children humour will occur much later. It will happen only in the second half of 20th century.

The famous "sadistic rhymes" — funny stories about dead boys and girls appeared in USSR in 70-80's of the 20th century. Rhymes became popular amongst adults and children with top heyday in 80-90's. Nevertheless, most of authors acknowledge that the genre itself was created by adults. Many researches were devoted to the "Sadistic rhymes" as well as numerous explanations of the reasons of their incredible popularity. Here are some of them: the aged psychological requirements, active moot of war theme and the horrors of fascism, the Afghanistan war and the "crossed out fates of little boys", "the adult myth about the triumph of a terrible event ironic reproduction", a parody for safety, a counter-propaganda trend of rhymes, "excellent clarity of the poetic system" [2]. Please find below several samples:

"A little boy walked on a construction site,

A dump truck drove up to him his slide.

¹ Stand Up NY, URL: <https://standupny.com/dark-humor/>

There was no scream and there was no beep,

Only boys' boots stick out of heap".

"The little boy sat onto the roof,

He shouted: "I am Karlsson!" and then sheer off.

The blood as a river flows on the ground:

With down engine the accident was bound".

It is curiously enough but it should be noted that approximately in 60's the dark folklore about young children appeared in USA. The foreign counterpart was created in the form of a cycle of riddles about dead babies:

"What is it: red and sitting in the corner? "The baby chewing the razor blades".

"What is it: green and sitting in the corner? "The same baby after two weeks".

"What is it: red and white, red and white, pink, pink, pink? — Baby in the blender".

"What is it: red and green, red and green? "A baby in a lawnmower".

"What is it: blue and sitting in the corner? "Baby in a plastic bag".

Numerous items of technological progress such as blenders, plastic bags, razor blades, waste shredders, etc. are the main reason of "babies' deaths" in American folklore. While as in our "rhymes" the death is caused by the unqualified handling of weapons (machine gun, grenade, dynamite), as well as death from electricity, death on a construction site, on the roof and in many other places where a curious child could wander. Soviet children play with wartime items and American children play with technological progress items.

American folklorist Alan Dundes lists the likely reasons for the popularity of jokes about dead babies in his work: the active mass media coverage of the Vietnam War, the fear of new technologies and the protest against children as such. In his work Dundes especially stresses the role of women's emancipation, sexual education, legalization of abortion and the growth of the contraceptive market. There is a significant difference in modern society between the socially approved age for the birth of children and the age of physical readiness. School sex education has made teenagers more aware of the unwanted pregnancy risk but it has created additional phobias. According to the opinion of the scientist it also has created the wave of dark jokes. In Dundes opinion such kind of humour is a tool in the fight with the object of phobia - an unwanted baby. Humour "unhumanizes" the child and destroys it with the help of modern technologies [3].

However, the Dundes' theory does not quite fit the Russian realities. In our rhymes both children and adults die: for example, due to the inaccuracy of children while using the weapons found. ("The little boy found a machine gun / Nobody lives in the village at once").

So what could be found in common in American and Soviet folklore?

- The first is the fact that there is a child in the focus of both cycles. Despite the fact that there are completely adult political "sadistic rhymes" it should be acknowledged that the most popular and common samples of sadistic folklore are devoted specifically to children. "Sadistic rhymes" and "dead babies' jokes" are notable samples of dark humour exploiting the theme of children's deaths.
- Heroes of both cycles are abstract, faceless and almost inanimate objects: "little boy", "little girl". In the American version it is just a "baby". Probably, such a level of abstraction is the key to the success of dark humour [4]. Psychologically it is easier to perceive the bloody rhyme as humour as higher the level of abstraction is.
- Rhymes are full of shocking savour of the physiological details of disgusting death. The destructiveness is the distinctive cue of this genre.
- Both local and foreign researchers note the influence of military events as well as their active mass media coverage. Local "sadistic rhymes" related obviously. Since the mid-20th century the number of tragic information which is transmitted via TV broadcasts and news blocks increased. Shocking and outstanding events became favourite ones amongst journalists. Researchers of so-called "humour of catastrophes" (i.e. humour based on real tragic events such as acts of terrorism, catastrophes, destructive natural disasters, death of celebrities) declare the role of mass media in the growth of dark jokes rating [5].

It can be assumed that the background of these cycles appearance is not the phobia of pregnancy itself but rather the phobia of the sudden child's death from everyday use items. And there was not even a thought about the risk of such items — the pack from the supermarket, the father's blade, the mother's blender. There is a possibility that American media were filled by news about such unprecedented children's deaths during the historical period when those dead babies' jokes appeared. As for the Soviet specifics — we can assume the presence of the same horror from news about children's death on the construction site, basement, roof, and of course when finding wartime "toys".

The motive of the "little boy" death is also present in modern patterns of dark humour. Let's take for example the popular animated series "South Park". As is the case with dark folklore the main characters of the animated series are the little boys — Cartman, Kyle, Stan, Kenny and Butters. The series speaks about the current topics of the present life and maintains all features of dark humour which causes the classic for this genre confusion of feelings — shock, disgust, laughter. So in one of the series Cartman drank ashes of his deceased friend Kenny diluted with milk as since he thought that this is some kind of cocoa powder. In another one a little boy Butters imitates his death in front of a crowd of adults throwing a pig corpse off the roof of a skyscraper. Parents

bury these "remains" in the old Indian cemetery like in the movie "Pet Cemetery" and when Butters returns home to confess to his parents about his lies they decide that he is an evil one who has risen from the grave. However, the most interesting motive is the death of the "little boy" Kenny which is repeated from series to series. In each episode Kenny dies in the most ridiculous way: Ozzy Osbourne bites his head off for the means of outrageousness; the police shoot him dead when he comes to them with a white flag; an ambulance knocks him down; the space station "Mir" falls down on him; he is deadly pecked by turkeys; he survives a car accident, but the train immediately knocks him down; and in one of the series, he even dies of laughter. At the same time, it is worth noting that Kenny is the least-disclosed character. The only thing that is known about him is that he is poor. His speech is also poorly distinguishable due to the hood that covers almost all of his face. So like the "sadistic rhymes" case — Kenny is the entire same abstract "little boy". On the one hand, the level of abstraction is much lower here: anyway Kenny has got a name, appearance, parents, and friends. On the other hand, the total absurdities of the events which are taking place with Kenny are much higher than what happens to children in sadistic rhymes. This creates the atmosphere of unreality that facilitates the perception of dark humour. Moreover, the cartoon allows the viewer to abstract from reality and gives a better perception of dark humour as since it is not so difficult technically and psychologically to kill a fictional cartoon character (as well as abstract "little boy" or "little girl").

In the genre of modern stand-up comedy there are represented dark jokes which are dedicated to children also. Let us cite as an example a number of extracts from famous stand-up comedian's speeches:

"Why does God allow so many innocent kids to be shot to death? That's something that a lot of people ask. And I have a possible answer. And you're not going to like it. But maybe maybe maybe... God is allowing so many of our kids to be shot to death so that they can go to heaven where they then service ISIS terrorists and suicide bombers as far as the 72 virgins are rewarded with" [6].

"People who fly a lot like I do, they all say the same thing. They say: Anthony, there's nothing worse than a baby on an airplane. Nothing worse! But I disagree. I can give you guys 4 examples of when having baby on an airplane was awesome! They were all on 9/11" [7].

(перевод: "Люди, которые, как я, много летают всегда повторяют одно и то же. Они говорят: "Энтони, нет ничего хуже ребенка на борту самолета. Ничего хуже!" Но я не согласен. Ребят, я могу привести вам 4 случая, когда присутствие ребенка на борту самолета было восхитительно. Все они были 9 сентября").

"Like about a month ago, some kids in my neighborhood were playing hide-and-go-seek, and one of them ended up in an abandoned refrigerator. It's all anybody talked about for weeks. I said: "Who cares? How many kids you know get to die a winner?" [8].

"We just found out my little brother has a peanut allergy. A peanut allergy which is very serious, I know. But still. I fill like my parents are totally overreacting. They caught me eating a tiny little bag of airline peanuts, and they kicked me out of his funeral" [9].

Dark stand-up comedian's jokes are often present at the junction of two themes — the terrorist attack and the death of a child. In the fact, death from a terrorist act is not the most common thing. Mr. L. Svendsen writes: "About 3,000 of North Americans were killed by terrorists during 2001 and however terrible it could be we should also remember that in the same year, 700,000 of North Americans died from diseases of the cardiovascular system and 550,000 died from cancer". However, the ridiculed themes are the same as exactly what is often discussed — the content of the world mass media. New dark jokes about terrorism appear due to active coverage of terrorist attacks in the mass media. The role of the media is also great when we speak about children's mortality. Mr. Svendsen notes: "The horror stories which are hammered into children's mind are no longer about trolls and witches but rather about paedophiles and unfamiliar people in general. Mass media especially mooted this topic in the late 80s and in the 90s imposing a reality in which all children were in grave danger of possibility to become a victim of a paedophile attack" [10].

III. CONCLUSION

The role of mass media as well as underlying social and cultural alterations could be detected as possible reasons for the theme of children's mortality. [11] [12]. Children used to be the key value which concentrates all the attention of modern people. In the book which is dedicated the history of childhood Mr. P. Ariès notes that modern society is "obsessed" with the problems of children: "There was no such children's care in Medieval civilization because there was no such a problem as a child itself: after the breastfed period or a while later a child becomes a native mate of an adult" [13].

A rather curious soliloquy of the American stand-up comedian George Carlin is dedicated to themes of extra attentive attitude to children, "crazy hype in the mass media" and "neurasthenic craving for the idea that whole world must spin around children". We will cite only a small part: "Kids are like any other group of people; a few winners, a whole lot of losers! There are a lot of loser kids out there who simply aren't going anywhere and you can't save them all, you can't save them all, you gotta let them go, you gotta cut them loose, you gotta stop overprotecting them cause you're making them too soft!" [14]

Attitude towards children and childhood have changed significantly: from the complete indifference to over-care and unprecedented cares about upbringing. According to Mr. P. Ariès's opinion, it proves that "the manifestation of excessive love which became general in the 18th century". Difference of funeral methods shows us changes in attitude towards children. Mr. P. Ariès notes that against the medieval tradition of children's funeral in mass graves with no identification the monuments on children's graves of the

XIX-XX centuries looks especially “pompous”. While looking at these monuments today or reading American books of solace relating to that time we feel how the children’s death became as unbearably painful for the living. These little creatures which were neglected by the world of adults for many centuries now engraved with extraordinary realism and vivacity in stone like glorified generals and cardinals. This realism gives the tearful visitor the illusion of the physical presence of a deceased child.” [15]

Dark humour varieties being a very specific genre started to gain popularity only from the mid-20th century. The development of dark humour was significantly influenced by numerous facts: general changes which occurred in the society’s attitude towards laughter and humour; extra detailed mass media coverage of optional tragic events as well as a change of the attitude towards death and mainly — to children’s death [16]. The death of abstract “little boys” and “little girls” is a favourite topic of dark jokes represented from folklore to stand-up comedian soliloquys. Dark humour gives us a cynic inherited signal that today’s children are probably the main focus of care, anxiety and phobias of modern people.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Dundes, "The Dead Baby Joke Cycle", *Western Folklore*, vol. 38(3), pp.145-157, 1979. DOI:10.2307/1499238
- [2] M. Lurie, "Soviet Children’s Humorous Folklore: The Techniques of the Comic", *Permitted Loughter. Socialist, Post- Socialist arñ Never-Socialist Humour*, Ed. by Arvo Krikmann and Liisi Laineste. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, 2009, pp. 333 – 368.
- [3] A. Dundes, "The Dead Baby Joke Cycle", *Western Folklore*, vol. 38(3), pp.145-157, 1979. DOI:10.2307/1499238
- [4] N.I. Gubanov and N.N. Gubanov, "Criminal behavior: biological, social and personal conditionality", *Vestnik slavianskikh kultur — bulletin of slavic cultures-scientific and informational journal*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 53-66, 2018.
- [5] N.N. Gubanov, N.I. Gubanov and L.O. Rokotyanskaya, "Factors of Black Humour Popularity", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSES 2018)*. Series “Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research”, vol. 283, pp. 379-383, 2018. DOI: 10.2991/cesses-18.2018.85
- [6] D. Cross, "Making America Great Again", Netflix. Available at: <https://www.netflix.com/ru/title/80108759> (March 14, 2019)
- [7] A. Jeselnik, "A Million Shoes", Comedy Central. Available at: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/amvcqw/stand-up-anthony-jeselnik--a-million-shoes> (March 14, 2019)
- [8] A. Jeselnik, "Jokes About Death", Comedy Central. Available at <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/6eyqxm/stand-up-anthony-jeselnik--jokes-about-death> (March 14, 2019)
- [9] A. Jeselnik, "Peanut Allergy", Comedy Central. Available at: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/7obmdn/stand-up-anthony-jeselnik--peanut-allergy> (March 14, 2019)
- [10] L. Svendsen, *Filosofiya straha [Filosofi om frykt]*. Moscow: Progress-Tradition, 2010, 288 p.
- [11] N.I. Gubanov and N.N. Gubanov, "Apollo's challenge as a driving force for educational development", *Vestnik slavianskikh kultur — bulletin of slavic cultures-scientific and informational journal*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 22-34, 2018.
- [12] A.N. Nekhamkin and V.A. Nekhamkin, "Counter-factual modeling of the past in everyday cognition", *Dialogue with Time*, no 65, pp. 336-352, 2018. DOI: 10.21267/AQUILO.2018.65.20778
- [13] P. Ari ès, *Rebenok i Semejnaya zhizn' pri starom poryadke [L'enfance et la famille sous l'Ancien R ègime]*. Ekaterinburg: Ural University Publishing House, 1999, p.127.
- [14] G. Carlin. *Children* (rus sub). YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkU6QYm0n5o> (March 14, 2019)
- [15] P. Ari ès, *Rebenok i Semejnaya zhizn' pri starom poryadke [L'enfance et la famille sous l'Ancien R ègime]*. Ekaterinburg: Ural University Publishing House, 1999, p. 202.
- [16] B.N. Zemtsov and T.R. Suzdaleva, "History as a Science", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSES 2018)*. Series “Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research”, vol. 283, pp. 752-755, 2018. DOI: 10.2991/cesses-18.2018.166