

**ETHNIC STEREOTYPES MOCKERY IN JEROME'S HUMOUR.
THE CASE OF *THREE MEN IN A BOAT* AND *THREE MEN ON THE
BUMMEL***

Irina PUȘNEI,

PhD student

“Dunărea de Jos” University, Galați,
Romania

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Abstract

The broad humour area often extends its boundaries over topics which are usually thought as forbidden because of breaking some ethnic norms or risks of offending the representatives of certain ethnic or social groups. Yet, humour remains one of the safest areas where prohibited issues are risen since it brings some relief to the joke teller when he takes the liberty of revealing them, as well as to the audience who acknowledge the issue as existent. Ethnic stereotypes frequently served an object of mockery that is why this section is of great interest in contemporary studies of humour. Taking the Ethnic Theory of Humour as a starting point, this paper seeks to explore the ethnic stereotypes which build the script oppositions in J. K. Jerome's ethnic jokes and to check the applicability of Davies's premises to Jerome's subtle manner of mockery of British and non-British ethnicities.

Key Words: ethnicity, stereotype, Ethnic Theory of Humour, script opposition.

Among the many features of British humour lies the tendency to highlight one's ethnic otherness by means of targeting the stereotypes of the ethnicities belonging to the English-speaking humour area. Cristie Davies (1990, 1996, 2002), the author of the Ethnic Theory of Humour, showed major concern towards this aspect of humour aiming "to uncover the implicit cultural 'rules' which permit the switching of ethnic jokes between some groups but not others, and to suggest social explanations for these patterns and rules". He acknowledges the existence of its multiple variables and their authors' intentions which may vary from being "a safety valve to pushing the situation toward an explosive confrontation" (Davies, 1990 qt by Nilsen, 1991: 14-5). The great significance of his exploration of diverse ethnic jokes lies in his evidence that patterns of extremes and opposite scripts in humour reveal common regularities or stereotypes of different ethnic

groups. The empirical dimension of his research consists in expanding Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) to the analysis of situations where the scripts are applicable to the social reality of the ethnic groups in question. For instance, Davies's attempt to relate people's primary actions such as working, eating and drinking, sexual life and warfare to diverse ethnic and social factors resulted in the observation that some cultural models of social situations determine the production of similar jokes/anecdotes based on similar script opposition. Thus, Davies's (2002: 12) assumptions that the joke centers on the incongruity between the norm and the extremes such as stupid—canny, naive—cunning, drunkenness—teetotalism, cowardice—militarism, determine, generate and reduce social integrity, disparity, and arbitrary prejudice. Given the Davies's Theory of Ethnic Humour, the present study of ethnic jokes in Jerome's novels will focus on determining the script opposition by means of conducting qualitative analysis of the selected corpora in terms of characters' ethnic affiliation and stereotypes as well as the potential reasons behind their being chosen as targets. The results will demonstrate whether the premises of Davies's theory are applicable to Jerome's ethnic jokes analysis.

According to Davies's first hypothesis, stupidity jokes occur in all cultures and target ethnic groups sharing the some or bordering territories and speaking similar or related languages and dialects. There is a grain of superiority in the intention since the author of the jokes disparages the targets. Our attempt to apply this hypothesis to Jerome's humour targeting ethnicity results in finding that his humour targets rather indifference or pretended interest, naïveté and ignorance. Consider the instance below:

You tell them one or two items of news, and give them your views and opinions on the Irish question; but this does not appear to interest them. All they remark on any subject is, "Oh!" "Is it?" "Did he?" "Yes," and "You don't say so!" (Jerome, 1889: 119)

One of the commonest features of ethnic humour targets Irish stupidity (Davies 2002: 9). In this particular case, the clues pointing to Irish ignorance contribute to developing a script which may be further considered as a social fact. Jerome's humour, however, is not that straightforward as the typical ethnic jokes tend to be. It is more implicit as the audience has to match their assumptions concerning the character's indifference against their behaviour and phrases depicted in the present context which proves them being so. The analysis of Jerome's humour targeting ethnic stereotype proves that it may mock not only the bordering ethnicities but also his own:

But the man who has spread the knowledge of English from Cape St. Vincent to the Ural Mountains is the Englishman who, unable or unwilling to learn a single word of any language but his own, travels purse in hand into every corner of the Continent. One may be shocked at his ignorance, annoyed at his stupidity, angry at his presumption. But the practical fact remains; he it is that is anglicising Europe (Jerome, 1901: 350).

This example targets the incompetence of the English at foreign languages and their inborn arrogance being so. Nevertheless, Jerome is very careful with ethnic self-disparagement

that is why he places this stereotype on the background of their being the major disseminators of English on the continent. Thus, the incompetence and ignorance of the English is diminished in comparison with his value as missionary of English. Another way Jerome chose to subtly reveal stupidity is that of presenting the stereotype from the viewpoint of a character who belongs to a different ethnic group:

The landlord excused himself by saying he thought we looked like English. It is no figure of speech. On the Continent they do sincerely believe that every Englishman is mad. They are as convinced of it as is every English peasant that Frenchmen live on frogs (Jerome, 1901: 354).

In this context, the landlord is the embodiment of the most German who perpetuates the stereotype of all the Englishmen being mad. "Madness", in this context, refers to otherness or strangeness in terms of behaviour, habits, reactions, etc. The concept of stupidity being targeted in Jerome's ethnic jokes is versatile since it refers to incompetence, ignorance, and otherness rather than to some kind of mental incapacity. All in all, the analysis of Jerome's jokes partially refutes Davies's claim that joke tellers target ethnic groups other than theirs.

One more aspect of the stupidity hypothesis is the acknowledgement of some ethnic groups as naïve because of the lack of knowledge and experience resulting from poverty. In the context of Jerome's ethnic jokes, the Cockney groups are regarded as lacking sophistication and being easily impressed:

To a cockney, who had never seen higher ground than the Hog's Back in Surrey, an account of Snowdon must have appeared exciting (Jerome, 1901: 265).

The second hypothesis is constructed on the idea that the canny script of ethnic jokes is related to the target ethnic group's adaptation to technological progress and to their excessive eagerness and thrift. The canny script occurs in Jerome's humour rather than depicting ethnic groups as cunning. In the anecdote about a Scotchman's proposal, this script is revealed in his straightforward acknowledgement of being coarse, aggressive, and unfaithful with the intention to lower his lassie's expectations and further criticism towards his personality. Despite the apparent self-deprecatory manner, Scottish pseudo self-criticism unveils deliberate cunning intention:

"I'm but a puir lad, Jennie; I hae nae siller to offer ye, and nae land."

I'm nae but a puir ill-seasoned loon, Jennie."

"An' it's a puir best that mine'll be, Jennie, and I'm nae sae sure ye'll hae ower muckle even o' that. We're a' weak, sinfu' creatures, Jennie, an' ye'd hae some deefficulty to find a man weaker or mair sinfu' than mysel' (Jerome, 1901: 256-7)".

Thus, skillful self-deprecation reveals the cunning nature of the Scots which has a sociological explanation; the Scots needed to be crafty, cunning and canny to preserve their geographic, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Starting from a low, the Scots are strongly linked to this stereotype and confirm Davies's hypothesis of Scots belonging to the canny and cunning script of ethnic humour.

The third hypothesis of Davies's (2002: 10) refers to the ethnic joke scripts of the target's social, economical, religious or military historical background. What is more, this type of jokes reveals the joke teller's attitude towards these issues.

The script opposition of drunkenness and teetotalism is partially reflected in Jerome's humour since the representatives of the ethnicities in his novels are indulging the vice of drinking to a certain extent. The English, for instance are pictured as accepting and easily being tricked to buy expensive drinks at exaggerated prices:

It is a foolish revenge, seeing that it is not the German who as a rule drinks it; the punishment falls upon some innocent travelling Englishman (Jerome, 1901: 387).

Different from the English, the Scots appear to be picky and fault finding about alcoholic drinks:

You remember what the Scotsman said when for the first time in his life he tasted real whisky: 'It may be puir, but I canna drink it'; so it is with your German (Jerome, 1901: 362).

Despite their fastidiousness, the Scots are stereotyped as a heavy drinking ethnic group. In Jerome's novels, a Scotchman's confession of his alcohol addiction proves the practicality of script targeting this vice:

It's a sair thing for wife an' bairns when the guid man canna keep awa' frae the glass; an' when the scent of the whusky comes to me it's just as though I hae'd the throat o' a Loch Tay salmon; it just gaes doon an' doon, an' there's nae filling o' me" (Jerome, 1901: 257).

Besides alcohol addiction, Jerome's anecdote depicting constant drinking in Scotland is craftily rendered by means of wordplay based on the expression was "never dry" which figuratively "stands for never sober". The beautiful analogy with the Scottish wet weather is stylistically valuable:

"What suits me best," I said, "is mountain air. What say you to a walking tour in Scotland?"

"It's always wet in Scotland," said George. "I was three weeks in Scotland the year before last, and was never dry once all the time — not in that sense" (Jerome, 1901: 212).

Frequent gatherings ending heavily with drunk participants target not only Scottish, but also Welsh and German ethnic representatives who are depicted as ridiculous and inadequate while being placed in following comic situation.

He said his father was travelling with another fellow through Wales and, one night, they stopped at a little inn, where there were some other fellows, and they joined the other fellows, and spent the evening with them. They had a very jolly evening, and sat up late, and, by the time they came to go to bed, they (this was when

George's father was a very young man) were slightly jolly, too [...] (Jerome, 1889: 102).

The comicality lies not in the gathering itself but in the consequences which degrade the characters to the level of inadequate creatures unable to control the situation. In the examples below, the script of drunkenness is assigned to a whole social group— the students:

The Kneipe is what we should call a stag party, and can be very harmless or very rowdy, according to its composition. A man invites his fellow-students, a dozen or a hundred, café, and provides them with as much beer and as many cheap cigars as their own sense of health and comfort may dictate, or the host may be the Korps itself (Jerome, 1901: 372).

For instance, the German student may get drunk and fall asleep in the gutter with no other penalty than that of having the next morning to tip the policeman who has found him and brought him home [...] The German student, conscious of the rapid approach of oblivion, uses all his remaining energy to get round the corner, where he may collapse without anxiety (Jerome, 1901: 324).

The great ethnic diversity being ridiculed on the account of drunkenness in Jerome's novels is indicative of the fact that this vice is characteristic not only of separate ethnic or social groups but constitutes a major social and critical issue which spreads beyond ethnic, social, gender and other boundaries.

The target military background is revealed in the binary script opposition of militarism and cowardice. The main ethnic group, targeted by Jerome, is the English since they appear as conquerors and fighters for freedom. On the one hand, they are pictured as courageous with warrior aggressive spirit Consider the instance below:

He, of course, made frantic struggles for freedom — the birthright of every Englishman, — and, in doing so (I learned this afterwards), knocked over George; and then George, swearing at Harris, began to struggle too, and got himself entangled and rolled up (Jerome, 1889: 98).

The Scots, who are also known for their historical resistance in the many wars fighting for their geographical boundaries, appear as dignified rivals:

Montmorency gave a cry of joy — the cry of a stern warrior who sees his enemy given over to his hands — the sort of cry Cromwell might have uttered when the Scots came down the hill — and flew after his prey (Jerome, 1889: 135).

On the other hand, the English appear in the novel as being less cruel than other ethnic groups in terms of execution. They appear rather terrified by the sight of blood though not of the death itself:

George, the opposite to Harris, is British to the core. I remember George quite patriotically indignant with Harris once for suggesting the introduction of the guillotine into England.

“It is so much neater,” said Harris.

“I don’t care if it is,” said George; “I’m an Englishman; hanging is good enough for me” (Jerome, 1901: 278).

While English and Scottish militarism bears a possessive character in terms of conquering or defense, the Germans are ridiculed as wasting their military skill on entertainment:

These are the general bi-weekly Mensurs, of which the average student fights some dozen a year. There are others to which visitors are not admitted. When a student is considered to have disgraced himself by some slight involuntary movement of the head or body while fighting, then he can only regain his position by standing up to the best swordsman in his Korps. He demands and is accorded, not a contest, but a punishment. His opponent then proceeds to inflict as many and as bloody wounds as can be taken. The object of the victim is to show his comrades that he can stand still while his head is half sliced from his skull (Jerome, 1901: 370).

Given these forms of ethnic humour targeting English and German militarism with the latter becoming a prevailing target in Jerome’s novels, it can be concluded that militarism may be regarded as a form of irrationality which is used by humourists as an object of ridicule.

The social aspect of ethnic humour scripts is to be noted in the binary opposition *law-abiding* and *breaking the law*. Despite lacking any theoretical background in the field of ethnic humour analysis, our practical observation of Jerome’s ethnic jokes shows that British ethnic groups are generally targeted as neglectful:

The healthy Briton takes his pleasure lawlessly, or it is no pleasure to him. Nothing that he may do affords to him any genuine satisfaction. To be in trouble of some sort is his only idea of bliss. Now, England affords him small opportunity in this respect; to get himself into a scrape requires a good deal of persistence on the part of the young Englishman (Jerome, 1901: 314).

As most of the jokes focusing on divergence from the norm, this instance reflects the existence of some social reasons behind it. Thus, the Briton’s inclination towards breaking the law can be explained by the fact that there is no temptation to do so because of no severe legal restrictions. To highlight their carelessness, Jerome counterposes Britain’s neglect to German’s absurd obedience which reveals the problem of their blind conformation to the German law:

But in Germany a boy will walk for miles down a lonely road, hedged with fruit trees, to buy a pennyworth of pears in the village at the other end. To pass these unprotected fruit trees, drooping under their burden of ripe fruit, strikes the Anglo-

Saxon mind as a wicked waste of opportunity, a flouting of the blessed gifts of Providence (Jerome, 1901: 383).

In targeting German's exaggerated obedience, there lies the joke teller's intention to reveal the common stereotype that this ethnic group is exceedingly reserved and foolishly righteous. This is also indicative of some social issue such as legal ignorance or even stupidity. This is definitely hyperbolized in the below instance with the intention to bring to light this social issue, to further acknowledge and solve it.

I do not know if it be so, but from what I have observed of the German character I should not be surprised to hear that when a man in Germany is condemned to death he is given a piece of rope, and told to go and hang himself. It would save the State much trouble and expense, and I can see that German criminal taking that piece of rope home with him, reading up carefully the police instructions, and proceeding to carry them out in his own back kitchen.

The research data demonstrate that two ethnicities have become the main targets of Jerome's jokes with Germans being ridiculed for their law-abiding nature which contrasts the English law-infringing character.

Jerome's jokes were grouped according to the character's ethnicity and also according to the characteristic were ridiculed; in some cases a joke mocked more than one vice. After determining the main tendencies on the popularity of the butts of the joke, an in-depth analysis was conducted to explore the possible social reasons behind it.

In the vast universality of the main postulates of Davies' theory of ethnic humour, aspects of its social genesis were tested against the corpora selected from Jerome's novels. The study observed the ridiculed subjects and the extent of ridicule in Jerome's humour as far as stupidity and canniness, alcohol consumption, law-abiding and lawlessness are concerned. Thus, it was noted that most of the scripts are not very specific and are not always placed in binary oppositions. Yet, the joke teller is aware in most cases, of the target's vices, capacity and ethnic specificity and contrary to Davies's claim, may belong to the ridiculed ethnic group.

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