

# Humour and Death

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## The psychodynamics of dealing with death and dying

The diversity in different death-scenarios and in handling corpses is overwhelming.

Ph. Aries (1982) described how unlike dying was in the Middle Ages compared to today, whereas N. Barley (1995) demonstrated an entertaining insight into various funeral rites from an ethnologist's point of view.

In light of this vast variety in different customs, regulations and fantasies, it's obvious that dealing with the intangible and menacing death in religious, artistic or medical ways, was always quite the creative challenge.

It is common to cry during a funeral, at times people even laugh, dance and eat – sometimes even the corpse itself -, they copulate, sing, servants and spouses are being killed – it seems like virtually every thinkable activity is being tested. Priests of different religions offer promises of paradise or threaten with hell, bioethicists discuss euthanasia, physiologists

attempt to define the exact time of dying, relatives share the inheritance, mourners mourn and jesters jest.

The least thing needed in all this is a psychoanalyst trying to uncover the hidden motives of this colourful ado. S. Freud already wrote a lot about our fear of dying, among other things about the so-called death instinct. Like in most other fields, specialists try to distinguish themselves in this area, for example the thanatopsychologists or experts of palliative care. The presented text tries to show some correlation between the joke and humour on one side, and dealing with death and dying on the other.

In the following there is a short outline on the function of the joke and humour from a psychoanalytic point of view. After that, the most important psychic strategies for coping with the menace of death are presented and reviewed, investigating how the joke and humour can support these strategies. Distinctive examples try to show how jests, jokes and a humorous attitude help coping with the intimidating end to our lives. He laughs best that laughs last.

## **Joke**

S. Freud's "The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious" and "Three Essays on the Theory of

Sexuality” were published at the same time, even though the latter was received much more intensely. Incidentally this was the same year of 1905 in which Ch. Morgensterns ludicrous “Galgenlieder” (Gallows Songs) were published, a decade before the eve of Dadaism. In both works the earnest, rational defence is discarded in favour of quickly opening up inaccessible, more frowned upon sources of desire. S. Freud noted a certain similarity between the joke and the dream early on, for example when he wrote to his friend Fließ on the 11.9.1899: “...dreams are intolerably funny... they are so out of necessity, because they’re jammed, because something is in their way.”

In both phenomena, in the dream as well as in the joke, hidden contents get dragged out of the unconscious and into the light, through a sort of backdoor. This backdoor bypasses all the ordinary barricades of inhibition, repression and defence. When these tabooed, primary processual contents get dragged into the glaring light of consciousness they have to be secondarily costumed out of necessity. However, while the dream is a strikingly individual, so to say private phenomenon, the joke is a social process. The joke subsists on communication with other people.

*“A joke is thus a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once. Everything in jokes that is aimed at*

*gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye to the third person, as though there were internal and unsurmountable obstacles to it in the first person."*

In his study on the joke, the father of psychoanalysis especially emphasizes the avoidance of effort-inhibition during the sudden flash of suppressed, unconscious contents. In relation to the death of others, many macabre or cynic jokes about the deceased relate to a suppressed homicidal wish, for which some examples are now given.

Also, the resistance of the individual towards the relentless authority of death flashes in these kinds of jokes.

Often, jokes are antiauthoritarian, even touching the topic of class struggle, something which S. Freud already noticed:

*"What these jokes whisper may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality. And in our days it has been said in forceful and stirring sentences that this morality is only a selfish regulation laid down by the few who are rich and powerful and who can satisfy their wishes at any time without any postponement."*

With impressive historic examples, H. Dahmer further elaborated on this social-revolutionary aspect of the joke. He writes: *“The joke is an assassination attempt on social convention. When he ignites, he breaches the walls of social constraint. The flash of a witty idea is followed by the thunder of the laughter of those, whom the jester made his accomplices...”*

*Sexuality, laughing and crying are sensual, because they are anarchic”* (2006, S 56)

This anarchic facet is not limited to political jokes only, but is also shown in japes about the gloomy, constrained and festive ceremonies related to dying and to funerals.

## **Humour**

In his book concerning the joke, S. Freud touches the topic of humour only tangentially. While, in his opinion, the joke clears and thus spares oneself from inhibitions and defences, humour helps separate painful and sad emotions from ones’ imagination. As an example he quotes the gallows humour of a scoundrel who is led to his execution on a Monday and thinks to himself:

*“What a great way to start off the week”.*

It is obvious that this remark serves the purpose of pushing away all the anxious and desperate emotions

regarding the impending execution, as if things weren't that bad after all.

Even though, after that, Freud didn't occupy himself with the topic of the joke and humour for a very long time, he followed up on the topic of humour more than twenty years later in a short essay.

Amusingly he draws onto the same example of gallows humour. Thereby he finds a fascinating, decisive new approach, which seems especially insightful for the role of humour as a comforter in the face of death and is thus revisited and somewhat refined in the following.

In his work on humour, S. Freud talks about methods that the human inner life developed in order to escape from the restraints of thoroughly real suffering.

He mentions the escape into insanity, intoxication, the immersion into oneself and ecstasy through which the ego tries to withhold itself from humiliation and insult. He argues that humour belongs to these methods through which the ego tries to shield itself from the humiliating reality.

The joke supposedly always has a magnificent and elevating side to it, it victoriously proclaims the narcissistic invincibility of the ego.

As an explanation, Freud now draws on his newly developed Structural Theory. The super-ego is an heir to parental authority. In the case of suffering-defying

humour, the psychical emphasis is relocated to the superego, which now comforts the ego as if it was a little kid: *“Look, this now, is the world that seemed so dangerous. Childs play, just good enough to joke about it!”* (1927d, S 389)

However, S. Freud doesn't follow up on this benevolent aspect of the superego, instead he settles for the reminder that: *“...we still have to learn a lot about the nature of the super-ego.”* (1927d, S 389)

To seize on this reminder one has to look at the theories on the early infantile pre-stages of the development of the super-ego, for example the English Object relations theorists. In the very first interactions between a mother and her child, the desire to return to the mother's womb by being devoured, if one wants to put it like this, and killed, play just as big a part as the desire to devour the mother and therefore kill her. It is obvious that the later echo of these early experiences of devouring and being devoured are massively fearful but also sensual emotions.

Presumably this is where the deep roots of our own sentiments regarding the fantasized and actual dying and death of oneself as well as others lay.

Michelangelo condensed this fantasy of the nurturing mother in a fascinating way. If one illuminates the Pietá in the way that he did, as a left-handed, while he was working on her, one can quite clearly recognize that the

left breast resembles an infant with pursed lips, whereas the right breast brings to mind a skull. The mother thus not only gives life to her child, but also death.

In order to pick up on S. Freud's earlier mentioned idea of a "swelled", comforting super-ego, one can imagine it not only being an almighty, loving mother, that picks up her whining, sickly child and smilingly tells it that everything is going to be alright, but also as an angel of death, that take it back into her arms. S. Freud (1919h, S 259) talks about going back to "*every human beings' old homeland in which everybody once and first dwelled*" and further expands on this by saying that we, when we dream about familiar landscapes and either crave or fear them, could easily be dreaming about the mother's womb. That is what humour trivializes with a comforting smile under tears over the inevitability of death. This is the smile that connects the fear of dying with the desire to die. Therefore, humour is an important resource in accompanying a dying person, but also when dealing with one's own death.

### **Unconscious homicidal wishes**

In funeral speeches and epitaphs one praises just the most advantageous sides of the deceased.

With S. Freud (1915b, S 342) one can deduce that



behind this exaggerated commendation there could stand an unacknowledged animosity towards the departed. A little bit of ambivalence can be found in the most tender relationships with our close relatives. Even under the greatest love there lays a dark layer of hate. In the most devoted relationships there are urges to get rid of the other.

If now a close relative actually dies, these impulses have become gruesomely real. Then the bereaved may feel guilty for having sent the deceased to their grave through their aggressive wishes. Out of this feeling of guilt comes the fear the dead may come back and seek revenge. This is probably the reason why everyone throws a scoopful of dirt on the coffin and a heavy stone is put on top of the grave. Not to mention the dismembering, battering or eating of the corpse by those left behind in some cultures. It seems natural that some jokes play with the release of such frowned upon, homicidal wishes, for example when a lady says to her friend: "My husband is an angel" and the friend replies: "How lucky, mine is still alive".

Or alternatively when a doctor advises his elderly patient to be cautious with sex, because supposedly there have been cases of death and the patient replies, after stopping to think for a moment, "Alright, if she dies, so be it".

The joke of the clown in the retirement home also fits in this category: When asked: “Are all of you here?” the elderly reply “Yes!”, to which the clown quietly adds “But not for long...”.

Apart from the countless, trivial jokes, that play with the homicidal wish towards the deceased, there is the therapeutic dealing with these kinds of unconscious aggressions when guiding those left behind, who frequently get stuck with their grief work and transition into depression, which is often meaningful.

A heavily depressed woman, whose husband died more than a year after a stroke, a time in which she lovingly cared for him at home, could only start to solve her depression when she acknowledged to having thought at times: *“It would actually be a relieve if he wouldn’t live anymore”*.

## **Gallows’ humour as a comforter**

In the following there are some more examples for coping with death and dying in a humorous manner. The Spreuer Bridge in Lucerne is decorated with some astonishing baroque depictions of the Danse Macabre. One of them addresses the death of an infant. One can see death appearing in the form of a skeleton man in order to collect the child from its cradle. He is

supported by a second skeleton man dressed up with a red mask as a character from the Commedia dell Arte, in order to avoid frightening the young child.

A moving example of a friendly, familiar view on death is a verse from the so called “Hobellied” (The Carpenter’s Song), which the character Valentin sings in Ferdinand Raimunds’ play “The Spendthrift”:

*And when Death shows up one fine day  
and beckons, brother - come!*

*I’ll act a little deaf at first, and simply  
look away*

*But when he says: dear Valentine, don’t  
give me trouble, go!*

*I’ll lay my plane down on my bench and  
bid the world farewell!*

Tragically, this thoroughly positive outlook on death didn’t keep the author from committing suicide just two years after writing this play.

Captain Lawrence Oates, a member of the failed English south pole expedition, is also remembered for his last words. He left the tent in order to die, because he feared holding up the rest of the party with his foot injury. While going outside he is said to have spoken

with typical English understatement: *“I am just going outside and may be some time.”*

## **Manic defence against the horrors of death**

Often, the depression caused by object loss in the event of death is warded off through mania.

This psychical mechanism is especially obvious in the Mexican tradition of All Soul’s Day, the Dia De Los Muertos, during which people drink and dance at graveyards, eating skulls made from marzipan.

The author experienced a similarly cheerful funeral party with the Toraja people on Sulawesi, during which many buffalos were slaughtered and chugged down with lots of rice wine.

## **Sexualised defence against menacing death-experiences**

From the manic coping with death it is just a small step to connecting dying with genital sexuality.

Dancing is a naturally sensual and playful affair and there is no doubt that the subject of the Danse Macabre, which was especially popular during the Medieval Age, belongs here.

An account would certainly go beyond the scope of this

paper. Merely the monumental depiction by S. Kozaky (1944) is noted. The depictions of death and girls by Sebald Beham or Niklaus Manuel are quite drastic, in like manner to later ones e.g. those by Edvard Munch. Contrarily, in J.W. Goethe's poem about the Danse Macabre, illustrated by Ernst Barlach, the funny side comes to the fore.

The effort by the French litterateur and cultural scientist G. Bataille may be noted. In his "The Tears of Eros" he examines the connection between death and sexual desire, from the stone age until the present.

## **Splitting of the ego**

The splitting of the ego is a defence mechanism introduced fairly late (1940) by S. Freud which plays an essential part in coping with the threat of dying.

The notion that the days of our beloved ego are numbered is one of the biggest narcissistic wounds.

The splitting of the ego is one of the most popular defence mechanisms for coping with this threat. If my beloved ego has to die and get eaten by worms in the grave, at least a part of me should live on.

A narcissistic duplicate, a soul bird, that flies up to the sky, maybe just a shadow or a mirror image...

Without further going into the globally widespread soul

idea in a paper predominantly dealing with the joke and humour, an amusing example for the splitting of the ego in regard to death is given.

The poet Ernst Jandl (1980) describes the emergence of the soul idea in a child:

*„mit der einen hand (with one hand)  
der Knabe zeigt (the boy points)  
nach oben (upwards)  
mit der anderen auf den frischen (with the other to the  
fresh)  
grabhügel (burial mound)  
und lacht (and laughs)  
wenn der großvater (if the grandfather)  
da unten ist (is under there)  
wie soll er dann (how is he supposed)  
da oben sein (to be up there)*

*ach ja die seele“ (oh right, the soul)*

On that point another tragicomic example. Diogenes Laertius tells us (1955, S 90) about a Greek philosopher named Anaxarchos. He says that the tyrant of Cyprus commanded him to be pounded to death in a mortar, and that he endured this torture with fortitude, calling out:

*“Pound, and pound again even harder*

*it's only a sack*

*Pound away: Anaxarchos has long been with Zeus."*

There are numerous Acts of the Saints which could be used as examples for the splitting of the ego as a defence mechanism. However, due to considerations regarding space and piety, this paper restrains from doing so. Another form of defence against the narcissistic wound of death through splitting and projecting worth mentioning is the identification of loved ones, especially children, with split off parts of oneself.

This has already been described by S. Freud (1905c, S 121):

*"One has to intertwine one's life so closely to the others, identify with them so dearly, that the abbreviation of one's own lifespan becomes surmountable."*

## **Regressive return to the mother**

Over the course of our psychical development we gradually develop a somewhat homogenous and from the outer world delimited image of our self. We never experience ourselves in the same lucidity and compactness. For example, while sleeping, orgasming or during states of trance the structure of our self loosens up. When we fantasize about death, it stands

to reason that we project images of the creation of ourselves, of our psychical birth, onto our yet to come dying.

In a sense, death is imagined as a reversed birth, as a homecoming into the arms, if not into the body of the mother. On the lap and in the arms of the mother is where the first perception and thinking emerges, connected with the fear of being eaten and dismembered. Into the lap of the mother, e.g. the earth mother, is where we return when our consciousness goes out in death.

*“Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist...*

*And yet psycho-analysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness—the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence.” (S. Freud, 1919h, S 257)*

Many customs confirm the widespread prevalence of such fantasies regarding death.

Even the Greek word sarcophagus, “meat eater”, suggests that dying is imagined as being swallowed by an archaic mother and in fact, one can find many cultures which use coffins resembling large animals



from Bali to West Africa. There however, in modern times, the fish-shaped coffin is often replaced by a Mercedes made from wood, which might also be an image of the protective body of the archaic mother. Images of death as a passing through narrow tubes, observed, for example on a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, are not uncommon and might as well resemble the symbolic depiction of death as reversed birth.

## **Denial of Death**

*“Death is nothing to us. When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not.”*

This quote by Epikur (1973, S 41) shows in a remarkable way the effort made by many philosophers, especially the stoics, to disperse death through means of logical manipulation.

Currently, one is under the impression that death is not only rationally disowned, but completely eliminated by the doing of many specialists. Mechanisms of death denial seem to dominate in recent culture. Experts in the field of intensive-care medicine, agents of insurance companies, safety engineers and transplant surgeons all feed into the illusion that it is only a matter of time until we finally outwit death itself. It may be possible to look at activities like fitness, a healthy diet

and cosmetic operations under the aspect of denying mortality and death.

But as usual with the defence against deep fears and threats, the suppressed re-emerges eerily in the defence symptoms. All these stagings that intent to ultimately rid our lives of death give our society something cemetery-like and one can smell a hint of decay.

### **Abstract**

Weeping, singing, dancing, cannibalistic as well as sexual orgies – many strategies are tested to deal with the menace of death. Certainly jest and humour too. S. Freud showed how the joke erupts from unconscious sources and also how humour detaches emotions from the associated mental image. Now the common mental coping with dread over the annihilation of one's own self or that of a closely related person already corresponds with known defence mechanisms: A fraction of oneself is split off as an immortal soul, memories of the earliest emergence of the self in one's mother's arms get projected into the prospective dying or the reality of death is generally disowned. All these mechanisms can be supported through the use of jest and humour. This is true for the threat to oneself, when, for example, the count who was sentenced to

death gets pulled a bit too harshly by his beard, says to the executioner :

“You are supposed to behead me, not shave me!”.

It is even more true for the death of others, where it is especially common to perceive the sinister surfacing of the subconscious desire to murder one’s dear fellows, as funny.

With the help of various ethnological, historical and clinical examples and images, the presentation attempts to psychodynamically break down humorous strategies of coping with the horror of death.

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