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Making Truth Laugh

An Investigation of Umberto Eco's
Comic Worlds.

By Diana June Scrimshaw.

Abstract

This thesis discusses Umberto Eco's use of comedy in his three postmodern novels, *The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault's Pendulum*, and *The Island of the Day Before*. It argues that while Eco draws on the tradition of learned wit to create works rich in comedy, his argument is lost because of the erudition of his literary game playing. Eco uses a variety of comic techniques, especially irony, to attack the subjects which annoy him, such as librarians, academia, Roman Catholicism, and publishers. He sincerely believes that humour will enable readers to see the faults in society and, more importantly to him, to then change the world.

Unfortunately for Eco, his irony is misread. Eventually this misreading shapes Eco's own writing, as the third book shows. This in itself is deeply ironic, as Eco has strong views on reader response criticism, which the response to his work proves to be flawed.

The first chapter is a general survey of comic techniques. It draws on Eco's writing about comedy, building a picture of his comic techniques and explains the response Eco expects to his comic writing. The tradition of learned wit and postmodern writing are also discussed, and the links between them are spelled out. Given the importance of game playing in both learned wit and postmodern fiction, game theory is explored. Eco's history of playing intellectual practical jokes is discussed as intellectual game playing is part of his comic repertoire.

The remaining chapters cover each novel separately, discussing and accessing the comic devices Eco uses in each work. Attention is paid to the literary sources of Eco's comedy. The main source is Jorge Carlos Borges, who appears as a major character in *The Name of the Rose*. James Joyce and Cervantes are also important sources.

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Introduction

Most studies of comedy originate, I am convinced, in a season of despair. A class sits mirthless and stone-faced through "the funniest story written in America since *Huckleberry Finn*." A critic ignores or even maligns humor while fitting a poem into a particular theoretical bed. Or worst of all, one laughs - and laughs alone. Then the light of wisdom shines. If they can't see what is obvious, give them what is obviously needed : a plain-spoken definition of comedy that will teach everyone when and where to laugh. So with a high heart, the scholar rides into battle; and a fearsome battle it is, for defining comedy, as Bergson has suggested, is like trying to capture the foam of the sea. As quickly as a thesis is built up, it vanishes, exploded by the intransigence of comedy itself. Above all, comedy is irregular, irreverent, and cheerfully defiant of common sense.

(Frances McNeely Leonard)

This thesis, which investigates Umberto Eco's comic worlds, is divided into two sections. The first section contains a general survey of comic techniques. It draws on Eco's non-fiction about comedy, building a picture of his comic techniques and explains the response Eco expects to his comic writing.

Eco's writing follows on in the tradition of learned wit. Learned wit is a loose conglomeration of techniques and devices, and it is this looseness which makes it useful for examining Eco's various comic worlds. The English Augustans, such as Swift and Pope, who developed the tradition of learned wit, drew on the style and content of the original Augustans - Ovid, Virgil and Horace. While it is simplistic to assume that just because Eco is Italian he will be familiar with the great Roman writers, his education and tastes show this is, in fact, the case. More generally, Umberto Eco is deeply European in his tastes.

In the second section of the thesis each novel is analysed in the light of the comic techniques discussed in the first section. Attention is also paid to Umberto Eco's world view. Eco has strong views on a number of subjects, and he uses comedy to make his points about these views. He sincerely believes

that he has an important contribution to make in exposing the follies of the modern world, and he uses comedy to reveal these follies. Eco's aim is to make truth laugh.

Eco, too, has had his comic fiction misread. Admittedly, the success of *The Name of the Rose* stunned Eco, who thought the work would appeal to a small, highly educated group, and found himself with a best-seller on his hands. Its transformation into a book read as a popular novel is best seen in the fact that it has been translated into Swahili. Any Swahili speaker with the Western education Eco expected of his readership would be able to read the novel in the English or French translation. The expense of translating the work into Swahili shows that the publishers believed there was a market for the novel, as a medieval murder mystery.

Eco's fiction has been widely misread, his comedy ignored. Consequently, *The Name of the Rose* is read as an historical murder mystery, *Foucault's Pendulum* as a bad thriller, and *The Island of the Day Before*, as an historical novel. In fact, the first two works are scathing attacks on Catholicism, library management, publishers, academia and crank religions. By the third novel, Eco seemed to have vented his spleen, and it lacks the satirical edge of the earlier novels.

Eco has written academic articles on reader response criticism. In his *Reflections on the Name of the Rose* Eco explains how he attempted to shape the way that his first novel was read. In the end though, most readers were oblivious to the elaborate postmodern game Eco played. The resonances of Jorge Luis Borges and James Joyce go unnoticed by most readers, who seize upon the Sherlock Holmes references.

The public response to his work in turn affected Eco's writing. The third novel is noticeably less savage than its predecessors. Rather than shaping his readers, Eco in turn has himself been shaped by them.