

Melamu's Use of Absurd Humour as a Narrative Technique in "The Unweeded Garden"

*Daniel Koketso**

The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh.

— Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Abstract

The article examines narrative techniques in Moteane Melamu's 'The Unweeded Garden'. It uses the incongruity theory of humour to argue that the short story uses laughter not only to titillate the reader but to comment on gender relations. Melamu was a scholar of Shakespeare, and in writing the short story he would have been influenced by some of the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The influence is seen particularly in his choice of the title and the idea of procrastination which are some of the common features in the play and the short story.

Keywords: humour, incongruity theory, unweeded garden, play, procrastination.

Introduction

Humanity and humour come a long way. Humour is one of the many ways of presenting human reality and it does so through comic elements. Morreall posits that while there is only speculation about how humor developed in early humans, we know that by the late 6th century BCE the Greeks had institutionalized it in the ritual known as comedy, and that it was performed with a contrasting dramatic form known as tragedy (2020:6). In literary works such as Jodi Picoult's *A Spark of Light* (2018); Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963); Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* (1594) to mention but a few, the derivative of humour, laughter, is used as a corrective measure. In other words, writers, comedians and comediennes often use laughter to comment on the achievements and or failures of their societies.

However, veiled behind the laughter, there is always a profound teaching that a comical presentation of reality instructs. This is why Aristotle "had spoken of laughter as something good and an instrument of truth" (Eco 1986:68). Thomas Hobbes wrote on the derivative of humour, laughter, in *Leviathan* (1651). The philosopher is often misread to suggest that laughter is a sign of egotistical attitude by the one who laughs which is why some critics believe that he is the originator of the superiority theory of laughter. However, on the contrary, Hobbes says that laughter is a passion with varying meanings. To explain his view, he compares laughter to blushing. He argues that one can blush out of feelings of love, anger, embarrassment etc. therefore, it would be wrong to overgeneralize these shows of emotions as love. In his considered view, laughter is a passion and it is one of the several responses that one may exhibit towards the calamity of another (Ewin 2001:13).

Theories of Humour

There are three theories of humour namely superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory to which attention turns to.

* Daniel Koketso, Department of English, University of Botswana. E-mail: koketsod@ub.ac.bw

Superiority theory

The theory argues that laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves. This view can be traced back to both Plato writings and the Bible and it dominated Western thinking about laughter for two millennia. Plato not only viewed laughter as malicious towards the object of laughter, but that humour was an emotion that works against self control. Therefore, the guardians of the state should avoid laughter, ‘for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction.’ *Republic* (388e). This view made him one of the influential philosophers who was vocal against humour. In the 20th century this view of laughter came to be known as the superiority theory. The theory argues that we laugh because we compare and deem ourselves superior to others (Morreall 2020:7). That would explain why perhaps there are instances when people suppress the urge to laugh for fear that they may be deemed to undermine others and why people do not take kindly to being laughed at. The theory also states that we also express superiority over a previous condition or situation of ourselves.

For example, people often laugh when they reflect on their childhood experiences especially if such experiences have not greatly altered their fortunes for the worst. A contemporary proponent of this theory is Roger Scruton, who analyses amusement as an “attentive demolition” of a person or something connected with a person. “If people dislike being laughed at,” Scruton says, “it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject’s eyes” (Morreall 1983:168). However, the weakness in this theory is that it cannot account for situations where one laughs when they realise that a person shows surprising skills that he or she lacks. However, according to De Pablos (2021), today the general trend is to see humour as a positive phenomenon, hence we find it both in simple informal conversations and in elaborate literary, film, cultural, media and political discourses, to mention but a few.

Relief theory

Through the relief theory it is argued that humour helps people to deal with stressful situations. The theory found support in Lord Shaftesbury, Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud in that order. In his 1709 essay “An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor,” Lord Shaftesbury (1911) writes that laughter releases animal spirits that have built up pressure inside the nerves. Spencer for his part explains in his essay “On the Physiology of Laughter” that emotions take the physical form of nervous energy. Nervous energy, he says, “always tends to beget muscular motion, and when it rises to certain intensity, always does beget it” (Shaftesbury 1911:299). His views about laughter are similar to that of Shaftesbury.

Sigmund Freud in his work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) analyzes three laughter situations: *der Witz* (often translated “jokes” or “joking”), “the comic,” and “humor.” In all three, laughter releases nervous energy that was summoned for a psychological task, but then became superfluous as that task was abandoned. In *der Witz*, that superfluous energy is energy used to repress feelings; in the comic it is energy used to think, and in humor it is the energy of feeling emotions (Morreall 2020:10). Psychoanalysis enables us to appreciate how complex and multi-layered humour is. It is much more than a spontaneous reaction at some stimuli. Humour says something about our personality, our relationship with our surroundings and it speaks to how we interpret fear and uncertainty (Lopang 2020). It should be noted that in this article, we are not using humor in Freud’s narrow sense, but in the general sense that includes joking, wit, the comic, etc.

Incongruity theory

This theory of humor arose in the eighteenth century to challenge the superiority theory. While the superiority theory says that the cause of laughter is feelings of superiority, and the relief theory says that it is the release of nervous energy, the incongruity theory says that it is the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations. This approach was taken by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and many later philosophers and psychologists. It is now the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology (Morreall 2020:15).

Although Aristotle did not use the term *incongruity*, he hints that it is the basis for at least some humor. In *Rhetoric* (3, 2), a handbook for speakers, he says that one way for a speaker to get a laugh is to create an expectation in the audience and then violate it (Morreall 2020:15). For example, if I came late to work on Monday and then on Tuesday I also arrived late to work then I told you, I decided to buy an alarm clock. Then on Wednesday I tell you that the clock and I were both late to work, it would make someone with a good sense of humour to laugh, maybe not my supervisor! In this anecdote, I would have created in the listener the expectation that I would not be late because I have an alarm clock, but when I declare that I was again late together with the clock the expectation is violated causing laughter. Immanuel Kant, a contemporary of Beattie's, did not use the term "incongruous" but had an explanation of laughter at jokes and wit that involves incongruity. In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh 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.

Synopsis of the Short Story

The short story is about two male friends, Luke and Simon and their spouses Mma-Lerole and Mma-Setilo respectively. Simon, who is on leave from Central Transport Organisation where he works as a driver is given instructions by his wife who has gone shopping to weed the garden in their yard. Instead of weeding the garden, the two men spend the day drinking *chibuku*, a traditional home-brew made from fermented sorghum, and talking about how insufferable women in general are. They take turns bashing their wives. Simon accuses his wife who has gone shopping at Game City Mall of waking him up as early as 9am and giving him instructions to weed the garden.

Luke, on the other hand, says his wife who is visiting their youngest daughter at Kgae View, woke him up at an ungodly 1030 am. Simon promises his friend that he is not going to weed "any woman's silly garden" much to the promise of unwavering support from Luke who concurs that life is about enjoying the moment. Luke, however, asks Simon what he would say to Mma-Setilo about the garden when she returns. Simon responds that he would probably be too drunk by the time she returns that she would not bother asking. When the two women return the two men who are by now in a drunken stupor try to hurriedly weed the garden but fail. The women mock them and Mma-Setilo gives fresh orders that the garden be weeded the next day without excuses.

Analysis of the Short Story

This part of the chapter subjects "The Unweeded Garden" to the incongruity theory to show how Melamu uses humour as one of the main narrative techniques in it. The choice of this theory over two other theories is informed by its suitability in explaining some of the key comic episodes in the short story. For example, the theory best explains why readers find anecdotes such as the Salamina bra story; the aeroplane story, the jam can story, and in particular, the ending of the story hilarious.

We will begin by focusing on the title of the story and show why readers may find it humorous.

The title of the short story, “The Unweeded Garden” derives from one of the soliloquys by the eponymous character, Hamlet. It is one of the twelve short stories in a collection by Melamu entitled “The unweeded Garden and Other Stories”. Interestingly, the collection uses three lines drawn from the said soliloquy as its epigraph. At face value, the title of the short story, with the epigraph to the collection in mind, would suggest to Shakespeare readers that the story has a macabre plot; however, that is not the case. On the contrary, the story, like several of Melamu’s, is light-hearted. It is my considered opinion that the selection of this famous phrase by Melamu is itself an interesting stroke of burlesque. The author took advantage of a literary trope called bathos to make his story memorable at least to those who have read *Hamlet*. The title exploits the anticlimax created by the literal use of the phrase “unweeded garden” to make-up for the otherwise mundane plot that revolves around two male characters who do nothing but “sit and drink to our heart’s content” (Melamu 2006:99) as one of the characters in the short story puts it. Melamu also employs humour which is a great antithesis of what one finds in *Hamlet*. “The unweeded garden” in *Hamlet* is the cause of untold despair and inversely, it is the source of laughter in the short story. The sharp contrast in the mood of the play and that of the short story caused by, on the one hand, the literal and on the other the metaphorical use of the phrase, contributes to the (Melamu 2006:99) humour in the short story. In the play, the phrase “the unweeded garden” is a metaphor used to refer to Denmark who is (un)tended by King Claudius’ incestuous marriage to the eponymous character’s mother. In the short story, the phrase refers to Mma-Setilo’s untended garden that Simon, her husband abdicates on. It is this movement from the sublime metaphorical representation of King Claudius’ kingdom in *Hamlet* to the ridiculous backyard of Mma-Setilo that makes slapstick humor one of Melamu’s great literary techniques in “The Unweeded Garden”.

The title of the short story, therefore, violates the expectations of those who read *Hamlet* hence it contributes to the overall comic effect. Readers begin to learn about the literal meaning of ‘the unweeded garden’ when Luke with an air of indignation quips: This spade was literally thrust in my face this morning with the stern injunction: You weed the garden today” (p. 99). However, it is too early into the plot of the story to conclude that Melamu’s use of the phrase is only literal. The readers’ crisis in expectation is realized at the end of the story when Mma-Setilo re-orders Luke: Hey, you two ... I want this place cleaned up now ... And my garden is going to be weeded first thing tomorrow morning. I don’t care whether people are on leave” (Melamu 2006:109).

For those who read *Hamlet*, the title of Melamu’s short story is what in stand-up comedy is referred to as a set-up and Mma-Setilo’s final words in the story are the punchline. The title (set-up) created in readers an expectation that the story would make reference to some sexual immorality or that it would have some darker theme and the men’s failure to carry out Mma-Setilo’s instructions and her stern words at them disappoint thereby rendering the ending of the story comical.

Another comical subtle parallel between the play the short story in found in the protagonists’ procrastination. In the play, Hamlet delays acting on his father’s instruction to kill King Claudius. An analogous situation obtains in the short story. Simon also delays tending his wife’s garden because he is on leave and imbibing on *chibuku* with his erstwhile friend Luke. Hamlet procrastinates because he moralizes deeply on the ramifications of killing a human being who is no less king and kin to him. In the play Hamlet debates with himself:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end the (Act III, scene i).

In the passage above it is clear that Hamlet is not sure whether to proceed and kill Claudius or to resort to inaction. Although he deeply feels wronged by the incestuous relationship between his mother and uncle and the murder of his father, his moral rectitude makes it difficult to obey his father's instruction. His indecision or hesitation which is a result of a desire to act judiciously becomes his tragic flaw. He only acts when he realizes during a fatal duel with Laertes that he has been poisoned. It is a widely held view that Hamlet's tragic flaw is, therefore, his procrastination.

Simon, for his part, delays acting on his wife's instruction as a deliberate act of manifest defiance of her because he wants to assert his manhood. In relating his latest tribulations at the hands of his wife Simon indignantly says to his friend:

This spade was literally thrust in my face this morning with the stern injunction: 'You weed the garden today'. How do you like that? Me, weeding this stupid garden of hers when I am on leave, as if I am the one who told her to start it. What fine cheek?" (Melamu 2006:99).

Simon's delay in weeding the garden and the reason thereof make the act frivolous and a manifestation of sheer laziness and a derelict of duty. Melamu uses the act to poke fun at men, especially the improvident lot, who take joy in drinking instead of fulfilling their obligation towards their families. His potshot against such men is made particularly humorous by Luke's complaint that he was woken up at 1030 a.m. First, what makes Luke's utterance humorous is that Simon had earlier on complained about being woken up at 9 a.m. therefore, when Luke points out his own torture, as it were, readers expect him to say he was woken up earlier than the "ungodly hour of 9am but that is not the case. One would argue that the incongruity theory posits that Luke created in readers an expectation of the worst 'ungodly hour' than the one meted out to his friend only to present them with an even tolerable hour. Half-past-ten in the morning is very late in the day in Botswana by any measure and for Luke to complain that he was woken up at hour is a clear testament that he is an irresponsible and near-improvident father and husband. He and his friend Simon only try to weed the garden upon the arrival of their spouses. This is the point of denouement in the short story because readers have been wondering how Mma-Setilo would react to her husband's dereliction of duty especially that we have been made to believe that she is a strict woman by none other than Simon. This is yet another moment in the story where Melamu humorously lampoons Simon and Luke who have hitherto portrayed themselves as no nonsense patriarchs.

Because they are thoroughly "soused" with chibuku, Simon's attempt to weed the garden is in vain as he falls all over himself. The reaction of the men to the arrival of Mma-Setilo undercuts the self-proclaimed power that they had all along feigned. To emphasise the men's powerlessness, Mma-Setilo quips: "Susanna, my sister, did you hear the wonders these two over-grown children have been up to? God protect us from the idiocy of these creatures" (Melamu 2006:109). Simon and Luke scurry around the garden place because they would not want to upset Mma-Setilo. This cathartic turn of events is comical because readers did not expect Simon and Luke to react the way they do to their spouses' arrival. Simon's unequivocal statement that "I am not touching this spade or any silly woman's garden (Melamu 2006:99) is a promise of act of defiance of his wife. The statement is, according to the incongruity theory of humour, discordant to their reaction to the wives' arrival.

In other words, readers had reasonable expectation that the men would not do anything that would be seen to go against their earlier stance but that expectation is violated by their attempt to weed the garden in a drunken stupor. This, therefore, is yet another hilarious scene in the story.

While procrastination in *Hamlet* results in loss of lives, in the short story it leads to humorous ending. The incongruity theory of humour best explains the comic effect of the scene. Melamu creates expectation through the character of Simon who is portrayed as an unapologetic hardliner patriarch who would not take orders from his wife, and then violates the expectation at the end of the story by cutting down Luke to an overgrown delinquent child through the character of Mma-Setilo. Our mental pattern and expectation as readers is that Luke would defy his wife's orders as he had sworn to and our disappointment in Luke's failure to stay true to his words makes us laugh.

The third and perhaps the most interesting parallel is the portrayal of family relationships in the two texts. The relationship between men and women in the short story leads the men to constantly criticize women. Even though in the short story the relationships are positive the remarks by the two adult males that women are insufferable make the story humorous. For example, Simon's reference to the garden as "stupid" could be understood as meaning that his wife is silly to expect him to weed her garden when he is on leave. The word reminds readers that earlier on in the story he made a remark to the effect that women do not think straight. He quips "Man, I tell you, these women! You can never understand how these heads of theirs work, *strues* God" (Melamu 2006:98). Therefore, the word "stupid" connects to "heads". Although the words are said in banter, they reveal these men's attitude towards women.

Melamu also uses quirky humour in "The unweeded garden". The characters in the story are unpredictable in their character and behaviour. In the absence of their spouses, the two men sound like hardliners who would not compromise especially on their merry time, however, upon the arrival of the women they quickly morph into pliable men if not delinquent yet obedient children. Melamu foregrounds the motif of mischief that abounds in several versions of the cat and mice story. He writes "The two know too well that when their wives are out, they are not likely to be back home until well after 4.30pm It is therefore "freedom" day for the two mice while the cats are away" (Melamu 2006:97). It is not surprising that the women arrive back unannounced and the two men are caught off guard. The metaphor of rats and overgrown children accord the two men some level of delinquency and mischief and further heighten the humor in the story.

Simon's failure to stand-up to his wife as he had vowed has a similar moral to the story entitled "Who will bell the Cat?" The story goes that there lived some mice in a certain house. There was no cat in the house. So the mice moved about quite freely and ate whatever they got in the kitchen. The master of the house felt very much disturbed. So one day he brought a cat to kill them. The cat was a good hunter. So the mice were now in great fear. They could not come out of their holes. At last they held a meeting to decide how they might get rid of the cat. But none could suggest a suitable plan. At last a young mouse said, "Friends, let us tie a bell to the neck of the cat. When the cat moves, the bell will ring. Then we shall run away." "It is really a very good plan," said all the mice in great joy. But there was an old mouse. He was all along silent. Now he said, "It is no doubt a good plan. But who will bell the cat?" There was no reply. The joy of the mice disappeared in a moment. They left the place.

The moral of the cat and mice story above is that it is easier said than done. The same could be said about the "two mice" in "The Unweeded Garden". It was easy for Simon to declare that he will defy his wife's instruction and so was Luke in promising his friend unwavering support. However, when the moment arrived for the two to do as they have promised, they could not. The allusion to

the cat and mice stories, therefore, adds to the comic technique that leaves readers reeling in laughter throughout the story.

There is also the use of awkward humour in the short story, this is an unintentional humour where the subject does not realise he is being laughed at. In the story Luke tells his friend that his daughter once asked him for a fifty Pula and when he asked her what she was going to buy with the money she said a bra. Before giving her the money Luke says to his daughter:

You must count yourself very lucky to have an understanding father like me who can dish out money so easily. When I was your age, my father never gave me any money for a bra. I just had to do without. And you know what? The girl runs out of the room laughing hysterically, as if I had said something stupid (Melamu 2006:103).

Simon, who is couture savvy also laughs at his friend's ignorance, but what is particularly comic about the bra subject is that when the two friends later have a go at each other about their 'wayward' daughters, Salamina and Pauline, Simon brusquely jokes "Oh, shut up, you bra man!" obviously rubbing on the Salamina bra anecdote. It could be said that the comic effect of the 'bra scene' lies precisely in its inadvertent subversion of masculinity myths, particularly that which derives from the patriarchal feminine identity that rests on clothes. The epithet "bra man" undercuts the no-nonsense patriarch image that Luke has earlier proclaimed in the absence of Mma-Setilo. Buoyed by his friend's solidarity on the garden issue, Simon courageously says: "What would I do without you? But I tell you, my brother, this woman will know today who wears the trousers in this house" (Melamu 2006:101).

Incongruity theory better accounts for laughter and humour in Melamu's 'The Unweeded Garden' than the scientific relief theory. It also seems more inclusive than the superiority theory since it can account for kinds of humour that do not seem to be based on superiority, such as puns and other wordplay. For example, the phrase "Bra man" puns with the word "Brahman" which is a breed of cattle that is known to be unusually thrifty, hardy and adaptable to a wide range of feed and climate. A brahman can be very docile too. Simon's unexpected reaction to his wife's arrival clearly shows that he is a tame man, a total opposite of what he proclaims to be. The pun, therefore, also undercuts all the claims he made about his unrelenting masculinity.

Immanuel Kant (1790) did not use the term "incongruous" but had an explanation of laughter at jokes and wit that involves incongruity. He argues that everything that excites a convulsive laugh 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. Kant illustrates with this story:

An Indian at the table of an Englishman in Surat, when he saw a bottle of ale opened and all the beer turned into froth and overflowing, testified his great astonishment with many exclamations. When the Englishman asked him, "What is there in this to astonish you so much?" he answered, "I am not at all astonished that it should flow out, but I do wonder how you ever got it in" (Kant 1790: 333).

We laugh at this story, Kant says, "not because we deem ourselves cleverer than this ignorant man, or because of anything in it that we note as satisfactory to the understanding, but because our expectation was strained (for a time) and then was suddenly dissipated into nothing" (Kant 1790: 333). An eerily

similar incident to that which Kante uses to explain humour is found in Melamu's "The unweeded garden". In the story Luke quips that "Si, you have said a mouthful. But I tell the day the white man really beat me, my friend, was when he managed to take jam and lock it up in a can" (Melamu 2006:106).

The incongruity theory or rather Kant would explain the humour in what Luke says by telling us that it is not his simple-mindedness that triggers laughter or our knowledge of the process of canning which the superiority theory would point to, but that our expectation was heightened (for a time) and then it suddenly dissolved into nothing. In the story there are several anecdotes and other digressions in the form of musings by the two male characters from the plot. For example, the Salamina bra story, the wine story, the aeroplane and jam can reflections by the two men. These digressions serve very little purpose than to identify the characters' confusion about the world. When the two men discuss the aeroplane and jam subject, Simon tells his friend "No Luke, let's forget about the white man's wizardry. These things we're talking about were not made for our heads" (Melamu 2006:106). The comic anecdotes that Simon and Luke dish out as they savour their traditional brew offers them comic relief from their unendurable spouses. At least, with the help of the brew, they can afford to laugh about their experience at the hands of their wives. Their exchanges, the subject of which is mainly the women folks, are largely rendered in a comic manner; therefore, one can argue that laughter is used by the two male characters as a coping and bonding mechanism. It could be argued also that the humorous presentation of the male characters' source of despair excuses them from being viewed as objects of derision by the readers. When Simon responds that he would probably be too drunk by the time Mma-Setilo returns therefore, she would not bother asking why the garden is unweeded, the narrator tells us that he (Simon) chuckles mischievously.

The ending of the story takes the narrative into a three hundred and sixty degree revolution. This is cyclical pattern as the story seems to end in precisely the same condition it began, with no real change having occurred. Mma-Setilo reinstructs Simon to weed the garden the next day and he, unlike Hamlet, suffers no consequence for his inaction. One could, therefore, argue that the ending of Melamu's story is without moral or value. Readers still wonder how the drama surrounding the weeding would end. In other words, although there is denouement in the story there is no affirmed ending. There is lack of understating of the ways of not only women in the short story but also the white man and there is no attempt to understand the two which makes the ending of the story valueless but funny nonetheless.

Conclusion

The paper used the incongruity theory of humour to show that Melamu employs laughter as a corrective measure against unfair representation of male sentiments in the society. The technique allows the author to cautiously criticize men folks for their over-emphasis and over-reliance on skewed patriarchal attitudes. Comments that would have otherwise been sexist and condescending from both sexes are rendered acceptable by the humour with which they are expressed.

As a scholar of Shakespeare, whose teaching career spanned more than four decades, it is safe to conclude that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* must have been not far from his mind when writing "The Unweeded Garden". The play's influence is seen particularly in his choice of the title and the idea of procrastination which are some of the common features in it and the short story. This view should not, however, be construed to suggest that the author was unimaginative. On the contrary, the story curates Melamu's great observation, intelligence and creativity that make his story literary intelligible. Melamu's story, like several others of his, target negligible everyday activities

which he “dramatizes” to comment on the society’s fears and aspirations.

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