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## In Which Black Humor Gets A Vivisection

Tom Bisky

*St. John Fisher University*

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## In Which Black Humor Gets A Vivisection

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The black humorist wears many hats, but the one that appears to fit him best is that of the caricaturist. Using words as his medium, the black humorist paints society larger than life to make a topical comment. The tragedy of us moderns is that the black humorist must really labor to paint surrealistically, to outstrip real-life phenomena in distortion: today, the grotesques of Bosch pale beside Polaroid snapshots of That Day in Dallas."

### Cover Page Footnote

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The black humorist wears many hats, but the one that appears to fit him best is that of the caricaturist. Using words as his medium, the black humorist paints society larger than life to make a topical comment. The tragedy of us moderns is that the black humorist must really labor to paint surrealistically, to outstrip real-life phenomena in distortion: today, the grotesques of Bosch pale beside Polaroid snapshots of That Day in Dallas.

Now the political caricaturist distorts according to the rules of a rather benign game: his work smacks of a harmless form of malice, harmless because we know that his creature is a biological impossibility, that it is not real. Were the conventional caricaturist's work to be brought before a court of inquisition determined to root out and destroy pornography, it would be found blissfully innocent. In contrast, the black humorist's work would be condemned by the same court as "malicious" and "pornographic," largely for the very reason of the work's unreality: no inquisitor could bear to be told that the world around him has itself become so obscene, so inured to horror, that art, to be noticed, must dredge pits of offal and parade the findings; but this is exactly the black humorist's rationale.

While one of society's tragic flaws is an exceedingly blase attitude toward violence and disaster, the black humorist himself is not unpossessed of a tragic flaw, or so it seems upon a cursory reading of his work. For if his first main trick as caricaturist is distortion for "force value," his second main trick, it appears, is oversimplification. He leaves out features not relevant to his purpose. Sex and violence, popular as subject matter with black humorists, are often portrayed so starkly that the entire composition is set out of key, the more "wholesome" aspects painted out with harsh "Red Light" tones (Cf. John Rechy's "Miss Destiny: The Fabulous Wedding"), tones dappled blood-red (Cf. Thomas Pynchon's "In Which Esther Gets a Nose Job"); tones which, though red, still, under the imposed optics of conventional morality, fade into the humorist's wonted black.

All of which points up the question of intent. Surely, the black humorist does not color the world absurd, unattainable, and cruelly phantasmagoric, without some purpose, nor without a secret disbelief that man is really so bereft of hope; for what individual could, without hope, turn to writing and wax hortatory in a world gone mad? But speculations withstanding, pigeonholing the black humorist's specific purpose is not an easy task. Broadly viewed, though, his distorting, his stark treating of "taboo'd" material, his erasing the line between fact and fantasy, and his oversimplifying, tend toward "celebrates." To his caricaturist's hat can be

affixed the promotive insigniae marked "satirist."

Now satirists hope to stir "righteous indignation" in their readers; the black humorist, however, aware of society's complacency, often must settle for less. Any identifiable reaction is at the nether end of the response meter attuned to black humor; comprehension, leading to a remedy for a particular brand of sociopathy, is at the other end. In between lie for the writer: at worst, ostracism, because of "unseemly" material; at best, "big money" flung his way by a reading public that smiles at charmingly "naughty" intellectuals, that wants to believe that the very literary are very different from you and me. Living on the stipends paid by this public for its "kicks" is, for the shrewd writer, as easy as giving Candy to babies.

Violence and venery, then, are the principle ingredients of a marvelously vile brew (to switch metaphors again) called black humor. The brew comes bottled behind many labels, but it is essentially an emetic: steeped in exaggeration to high potency, it is administered in hopes of eliciting cascades of deeply-rooted prejudices, fetishes, and "hang-ups," for the cure of the societal body.

Tom Bisky

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Extant

To be  
a dancer-beam that over water skipped  
for just a night  
awakening a morning-ray adrift  
on gossamer shaft,  
or dream of floating once  
with unweighted arms delight  
to embrace a crystal tone  
(the final tone)  
of a silver bell,  
to be.

—Lenore Ventura