

Humour and Familiarisation in Terry Pratchett's *Cohen the
Barbarian* -sequence

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1. Introduction

It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that Terry Pratchett is among the most successful and well-known of modern-day authors. Certainly his name does not seem out of place if mentioned among other writers such as Stephen King, J.K. Rowling or Douglas Adams, who are all recognized even by people who may not have read any of their books. And although skill, style and originality are by no means prerequisites for popularity, as can easily be verified by reading a random collection of best-sellers, Pratchett is in the opinion of many a master of his craft, his craft being the writing of humorous novels.

Even though he is still a living and active writer – although clearly at the end of his career – there is already a growing body of works studying and commenting on the impressive amount of novels that he has written since 1983, when the first Discworld-book was published. There is even a book published – twice, now – containing essays discussing various aspects of Pratchett's work. However, it seems a pity that even in such a volume, so many pages are spent analyzing the symbolism of Discworld, or the nature of the witch-characters from the point of view of feminism, or the religious aspects of *Small Gods*, when there is but one text that deals with the actual comedy present in the novels through the viewpoint of established theories of humour – although the text in question is a good one.

This thesis will be a technical analysis of some of the Discworld novels and the humor found in them, as well as of the literary role the books in question play, although it is by no means intended to be an exhausting or a definitive one. It is usually advisable to select a topic of research that is as narrow as possible, which in literary circles tends to mean just one or two novels, but in this case I have chosen to draw material from several. The reasoning behind such a choice is that Pratchett uses and reuses his characters in several novels, sometimes in supporting roles, sometimes as main

characters, so that the story of a particular fictional person or persons may span several novels. The texts that will be the primary focus are *The Light Fantastic*, *Interesting Times*, and *The Last Hero* (which is an illustrated novel). These are the books which taken together tell the story, or at least parts of the story, of Cohen the Barbarian and his Silver Horde. The focus of the thesis is, however, not on the characters themselves, but on the techniques that Pratchett employs to achieve the humorous effects for which he is renowned, and the nature of his writing, the story-arc of Cohen being merely a particularly good source for illustrating the argument. Individual examples may also be drawn from sections of other novels as is useful or necessary.

It is, in short, my contention that much of the humour in Pratchett's writings can be described or seen as a specific type of script opposition that encompasses two of the traditional concepts or theories of humour – superiority and incongruity – and that such a combination, which I shall refer to as familiarisation, has a specifically parodic application. Furthermore, I shall discuss the wider literary role of said parody, i.e. the relationship the Discworld-novels – or at least the three in question – have with the genre that they are spawns of. Some space has also been given to analysis of humour that is not strictly speaking parody.

Concerning the definition of parody – although as a word it is an old one and has its origins in ancient Greece, with the first known mention being found unsurprisingly in the works of Aristotle (Dentith 2000: 10), it does not carry an exactly established meaning in the circles of literary criticism and research, and often is confused or overlaps with other related terms.

Cultural artefacts may alternatively be seen as “satirical irony,” “ironic parody,” “parodic satire,” and so forth, and it is not certain that “ironic parody” in one research means the same as it does in another [...]. The more a term or a description wants to cover functionally all (parodic,

ironic, or satirical) phenomena on all levels, the more it has to refuse any definitional criterion and to blur boundaries. Normative approaches, on the other hand, whatever their criteria, can be criticized for under- or overdetermining concepts vis-à-vis their many actual uses. (Vandaele 2002: 233.)

Hutcheon echoes this appraisal in *A Theory of Parody* (1985: 32):

[...] there are no transhistorical definitions of parody. The vast literature on parody in different ages and places makes clear that its meaning changes.

The downside of this is that any writer in this particular field must carefully define the ways in which he uses the previously mentioned terms before he can proceed. Happily, this on-going lack of consensus also means that a writer is more or less free to pick and choose his own variations of said definitions as he sees fit.

Irony, though it is often intermingled with – some say an inherent part of – parody and satire, need not be explored here, at least not in detail. Though there are many sub-classifications of irony (verbal, dramatic, etc.) and many people hold strong and conflicting opinions on what can and cannot be called ironic,¹ virtually all definitions seem to carry a “root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case; not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects” (Abrams 1993: 97). Having that on record, we shall leave irony mostly in peace.

¹ Alanis Morissette’s well-known song seems to have created quite a lot of confusion on the matter in the minds of the public and has resulted in a fair amount – frankly well-deserved – criticism.

Satire, on the other hand, is much closer conceptually to parody, and it is necessary here to make a clear delineation between the two. As a point of focus we can take Dryden's statement from *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693) that satire should criticise one particular vice and recommend in its stead one particular virtue. Griffin (1994: 18-24) has argued that Dryden was being more prescriptive than descriptive in an attempt to guide the genre down a path that he felt was appropriate for his own purposes, and that accepting that precise definition would require the exclusion of large amounts of material that is widely considered to be satirical, even famously so. It is in fact easy to point to satires that deal with several different vices without necessarily offering any corresponding virtues in their place (ibid.). What most researchers would probably agree with, however, is that satire is about criticism of vices and human folly first and foremost and that it does often have a corrective aim and is in fact a type of literary weapon. This separates it from parody, which, as we shall see, has a wider range of possible applications while at the same time being more closely tied with other works of literature.²

One central feature of parody, which should be noted here, is that it is referential by its very nature. This puts it firmly on one side of a categorical division that runs throughout the history of humour research – the verbal/referential distinction, which has been mentioned as early as the first century BC by the Italian philosopher Cicero (Attardo 1994: 28). Although both of these forms of humour are (or can be) verbal in the sense that they are spoken or written and therefore include words, 'verbal' in this narrow sense means humour that is dependent on a specific formulation of words and relies on the idiosyncrasies of a specific language, and therefore cannot be translated to another, unrelated one (excepting some rare and happy accidents), whereas in referential humour the 'funny' lives in a concept that can be expressed through any number of word-combinations. In some senses this is a distinction of foundational importance, but due to the nature of the analysed material, this thesis shall set 'verbal' humour aside and concern itself with referential humour only. This is not to say that Pratchett employs

² Although one could actually make the claim, looking at humour strictly from the point of view of the superiority/hostility theories explored in the section 2.1. that all humour is satire.

referential humour to the exclusion of all other forms, but merely that strictly verbal jokes are not his focus and will therefore not be ours either.

Finally, a few explanations on the style and structure of this text are in order. When it comes to theses dealing with literary topics such as this one, there generally seems to be an unwritten rule that discussions of source material and literary theory as well as the actual analysis are each to have their own separate sections. This is sometimes a good idea, but can oftentimes appear artificial. I have therefore decided to forego that particular custom. The analysis of examples will not be separate, but will run alongside the theory, although most of it will still inevitably be found in the later sections. Background information of the source material will likewise be supplied not as an independent block, but whenever and in as large portions as is appropriate.

On the subject of language used in this thesis: Some authors in the field of humour research use words such as *humorous* and *comic* to mean separate concepts while others do not. There is no consensus on the matter, no generally agreed vocabulary of categories. In this thesis I have indiscriminately employed the previously mentioned words alongside others such as *amusing* or *funny* to describe the same phenomenon simply to bring some variety into the text and to make it more pleasant to read. Likewise in places I have used *comedy* in the larger sense of a humorous text or performance (i.e. something that is comic) as well as to refer to a specific type of stage-play.

2. Here Be Humour

This section contains explanations of what have been – and are – the main schools of thought when it comes to humour, starting with the ancient opinions but focusing more on the past hundred years. It should be noted that this is a discussion of concepts, not history. Therefore not every important name in the field will merit a mention, although the most famous ones are present due to their central roles.

Theories of humour can be divided into three major groups based on their focus. Of those, only two get their own subsections here because the third, so-called release theories, are focused more on the psychology of jokes than their technique. They will therefore be mentioned only in passing during the discussions of the more important concepts that are superiority and incongruity. Furthermore, there is a third subsection that is devoted to some specific but vital aspects of comedy that the two main theories leave mostly untouched.

2.1. Don't Be a Clown – Superiority

Like with so many other aspects of western culture, the study of humour begins with the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Plato, though he was and is recognised as the first person to create a theory of humour, did not hold laughter in high regard (Attardo 1994: 18-19). He classified humour as something that is ridiculous, which to him belonged in the category of things that are twisted and evil. No human being should aspire to be ridiculous (in direct contradiction of the advice famously put forth by Cole Porter), but must strive to have as little about himself that is worthy of laughter as possible. Being ridiculous is lacking understanding of oneself, which is a weakness. Laughter is logically therefore a result of pointing out a weakness or an attempt to make someone or something appear weak. It is not a desirable thing, but a sign that something is wrong. Many people have criticised Plato's utopian constructions for various reasons,

and his apparent desire to seriously restrict or even eliminate laughter is one more nail into a coffin that is already fairly well hammered shut.

Plato's seriously negative view on humour and comedy in general may seem odd to the modern European. It points to the fact that humour is or can be highly culture-dependent in both its role as well as content. This should not, however, be wholly surprising to us, since it can be shown that even today some cultures, particularly those originating in the Middle East, view jokes as primarily a weapon to be used to lower someone's status (Glazov 2010), which for certain people is as serious an attack as they come. In some countries a well-known jokester is good company, in others he is a man to be avoided and, if possible, punished.

Plato was not alone in his opinion, and his idea on the nature of humour lived on in the works of his equally famous pupil. Aristotle wrote:

As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind of the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly (Poetics, quoted in Attardo & Raskin 1994: 19).

This division of the dramatic arts – comedy is a play about the lower classes, tragedy is a play about the higher ones – has been an enduring one, though its having been violated with increasing frequency in the past couple of centuries, for instance by Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and P.G. Wodehouse in his stories of Jeeves and Wooster, shows that it is either incomplete or wholly unnecessary. Either that, or it is simply outdated, as according to Attardo & Raskin “most of Greek humor consists in what today would be rather crude slapstick, obscenity and profanity, insults, and puns” (1994: 21). Nevertheless the concept that humour resides in the ugly, weak or deformed

aspects of reality seems to contain a lot of truth. Certainly nobody laughs at God very much, and those who do do so more out of attempted defiance than out of any kind of sense of amusement.

In more modern times the French philosopher Henri Bergson noted that laughter is a strictly human phenomenon (hyenas notwithstanding) that furthermore is primarily a form of social interaction as opposed to something a person does by himself – “the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience” (Bergson 1980: 64). Bergson sees laughing as a corrective exercise, something that people employ to point out the flaws of others – although he acknowledges that even virtues may sometimes appear comical – and, if possible, through ridicule encourage them to improve themselves by changing whatever attributes they possess that others find ridiculous. A type of peer pressure, if you will. In this he is of course echoing Plato’s observations about humour almost verbatim – “a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself” (Bergson 1980: 71) – even though he does not credit the Greek spoilsport with this idea. Neither does he seem to share Plato’s radical disapproval of laughter in general. It seems that Plato, as a seeker of perfection, regarded a reduction of laughter as sign that the goal is nearer, whereas Bergson saw it more as a permanent part of the cycle of life – a little correction here and there is always necessary.

The very first Discworld-novel, *The Colour of Magic*, uses this principle of humour as practically its primary vehicle. The most powerful and generally awesome figure of any fantastic story is usually a wizard of some kind. Good examples are Gandalf (the ultimate wizard, really) from *The Lord of the Rings*, or Raistlin from the *Dragonlance*-books, a man who tries to become a god and nearly succeeds. These are characters in the affairs of whom one does not meddle, as has been so memorably pointed out. In *The Colour of Magic*, the protagonist is Rincewind, a wizard barely worthy of the name. He knows no useful spells and is as cowardly as something very cowardly indeed. He is also unambitious to a fault (although this feature is elaborated on more in the later

books that he is a part of), and the only true talent that he possesses – foreign languages – is merely a plot device that allows the author to place such a figure in the middle of the action where he otherwise definitely would not be. Rincewind is a reluctant hero without the hero-part. It is easy and safe to laugh at someone like that. The other important character in *The Colour of Magic* is Twoflower, the Disc's very first tourist, who is endlessly fascinated by almost everything about the places he visits, but does not really understand the things he so adores. His almost complete lack of awareness and common sense are, again, useful plot devices in creating suitable settings and interesting conflicts, but they are also ways of lowering the character's stature, a classic technique of coaxing an amused response from the reader. But the fascination of such obvious subversions eventually wears thin, and were it not for Pratchett's ability to craft witty turns of phrase, and his use of allusions, *The Colour of Magic* would actually be a rather boring book.

These notions from Plato onward stating that we find funny those things and people that we consider in some way lesser than ourselves are often called theories of superiority or theories of aggression, depending somewhat on the viewpoint one approaches the topic from. 'Aggression' as a word is as good a choice as any if one is contemplating the purpose of humour and the motivations of a humourist, but since this thesis is more concerned with the how than the why, 'superiority' is the moniker that shall be employed here, even though it may not be exactly the perfect choice either. Consider, for example, a man laughing at himself for, say, having placed his car-keys in the refrigerator. He is laughing at stupidity, but since the stupidity is his own, he can hardly be said to consider himself his own superior or inferior. 'Imperfection' might be closest to a suitable referent, but the idea is really more important than the name – it is easier to find humour in characters that are low than in ones that have mainly noble and virtuous qualities. On the other hand, this, too, has its limits. Again, Bergson:

It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and

unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. (Bergson 1980: 63.)

By this he means that it is difficult to laugh at someone who inspires in us too much feeling, whether the feeling is pity, horror, or something else. Selecting an extreme example, almost nobody would laugh at the little match girl in H.C. Andersen's eponymous story precisely because she is too sad a figure, her death too pitiful. The respected literary critic M.H. Abrams sees as a central pillar of comedy the assumption that "the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur" (1993: 28-29). A small girl dying miserably is not a fit subject for levity. However, if the girl were to survive her ordeal and the focus were to be turned to something or someone else, then the story could be used in a humorous context, as indeed it is in *Hogfather*, where Death (Pratchett's most famous and effective character), acting temporarily in the role of Discworld's Santa Claus-figure, saves the girl from freezing, and the angels that turn up only to find no soul to take to heaven end up serving as the butt of the joke (Pratchett 1996: 167-169). The problem of strong emotions counteracting or negating humorous effects was also noted much earlier by Cicero, who advised would-be orators to carefully consider the context of their speeches before injecting humorous remarks into them (Attardo 1994: 27).

This idea of superiority/aggression is also given some space in the writings of a man who is known for creating highly impressive and fanciful theories that have not a whit of scientific rigour behind them, and who also is perhaps the best-known humour theorist of them all – Sigmund Freud. As a part of his work in creating what is now the dubiously regarded field of psychoanalysis, Freud analysed the human proclivity of making ourselves and our fellow men laugh and wrote his conclusions down in the often quoted book that is *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960). And although many of his other ideas – dream interpretation, the Oedipus-complex and so on

– have gone out of style, Freud is still a figure that is frequently mentioned when it comes to humour research, and rightly so.

After spending dozens of pages analysing and explicating the techniques of jokes, Freud explains his understanding for the reason human beings spend so much time making them. Throughout the text of the aforementioned book, he maintains that human lives involve layer after layer of culture and civilisation and that the behavioural precepts people adopt to maintain a society force them to repress a multitude of instincts, reactions and desires. Freud claims (1960: 101) that jokes function as an antidote to such limitations. Now, one can spend a lot of time arguing to what extent this repression occurs and exactly how harmful or beneficial it is to the individual doing it, but those discussions are not necessary to accept – at least in part – the concept that the purpose of jokes is to get around the societal and psychological obstacles that people might have (technically, this would mean that his ideas fit better under the subheading of release-theories, which are not discussed in this thesis, but that is neither here nor there). Freud lists several aspects of satisfying human experience that jokes give the civilised man access to that would otherwise be closed off to him due to the rules of correct behaviour – in polite company that is. One of them – this being Sigmund Freud we are discussing – is the sexual, another is hostility, and the rest are not really worth mentioning in this context (Freud 1960: 101). Sexuality is obviously only taboo in public, not in private. Therefore, if the highly civilised man wishes to engage the carnal part of his psyche while in the presence of ladies, he cannot in the manner of peasants (Freud's term for the lower class of people) crudely comment on the secondary sexual characteristics of a female he finds desirable, but must invent a witty double entendre to satisfy his base need, and entertain others in the process.³

³ Pleasurable experiences in life, of course, often do not involve laughter as a signal when the conditions are such that they need not be circumvented via humour. On the contrary, although sex is perhaps the most obvious topic for jokes, the act itself does not invite laughter and may be disrupted by it. In the sitcom *Two Guys, a Girl & a Pizza Place*, Pete, one of the main characters, attempts to break up with his girlfriend because she, although otherwise virtually perfect, has a disturbing tendency to laugh maniacally during intercourse. This is highly amusing to the audience, but not to Pete.

It is the hostility part, however, that is more relevant to the concept of superiority theories of humour. Unlike Plato, Aristotle and Bergson, Freud does not see humour as necessarily something that is directed at those lower than oneself, rather it is a way to bring others low or, if they were already there, even lower. Social conventions often dictate that unconcealed insults or pointing and laughing are unacceptable – if they were not, a notable majority of humour would be like the character of Nelson in *The Simpsons*, simply braying “Ha-ha!” again and again at the misfortunes of others. However, if one can dress the negative remark in the cloak of wit, one can maintain the appearance of being a charming and intelligent person, and even enhance it, while still verbally attacking others. The target of the offensive need not be a person – ideas, cultural attitudes and the like can serve as the butt of the joke just as well.

Overall, regardless of the methods used to express the sentiment or the motives behind said expression – be they malevolent or corrective in nature, or neither – it has been noted throughout Western literary history that laughter and amusement often spring forth from the observation and pointing out of weakness, flaws, stupidity and bad luck. At least when they occur in the lives of others, for as Mel Brooks has said: “Comedy is when you accidentally fall off a cliff and die. Tragedy is when I have a hangnail” (Brown 2005: 81).

2.2. Do Androids Laugh at Electric Sheep? – From Inelasticity to Incongruity

Another, perhaps even more fertile area for useful literary techniques can be found in what constitutes another major focus of humour theories - incongruity. This concept is of much later origin than the idea of superiority/hostility in comedy – Attardo (1994: 47-48) places the origins of the notion in its modern form in the nineteenth century, in the writings of Kant and Schopenhauer. Nevertheless, to get a proper understanding of it one needs once again to look at the works of those two giants of the field, Freud and Bergson.

Bergson in his treatise on humour devotes a lot of time to the discussion of what he refers to as “mechanical inelasticity” (Bergson 1980: 67). This is a continuation of the thought process described in the previous chapter on superiority. If laughter is to Bergson a form of social correction, then what exactly are those forms of behaviour that require correction? Lack of self-awareness is one broad category that has been mentioned, but it goes further. Human beings are in need of correction when they are not behaving as human beings. And human beings – indeed all things living but humans most of all – are adaptable. They react to their surroundings, and when the surroundings change, so does the reaction.

Now, take the case of a person who attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision. The objects around him, however, have all been tampered with by a mischievous wag, the result being that when he dips his pen into the inkstand he draws it out all covered with mud, when he fancies he is sitting down on a solid chair he finds himself sprawling on the floor, in a word his actions are all topsy-turvy or mere beating the air, while in every case the effect is invariably one of momentum. Habit has given the impulse: what was wanted was to check the movement or deflect it. (Bergson 1980: 66.)

The man in the example is no longer behaving as a human being, but rigidly continues to carry out the movements he has taught himself to do, completely ignoring the change in the circumstances. He has turned himself into an automaton, a human machine. This is what comedy is at its heart, according to Bergson – human beings behaving like machines. Now, this may happen for differing reasons. Some people adopt vices that direct them to act in a predictable cycle of repetition; some become absentminded as they withdraw to live in their minds to the exclusion of the external reality. Here, by the way, is found Bergson's understanding of the difference between drama and comedy. Drama is about characters, comedy is about characteristics (1980: 70-71).

There are several conclusions that follow this idea, some of which will be discussed later on, but the basic concept of the juxtaposition of human/machine is enough for now. A few points escaped Bergson's notice, however. Although mechanical inelasticity is a fertile field for comedy, and although *Laughter* (1980) – Bergson's definitive work on the subject – is a treasure-trove of material for any aspiring writer of comedy, there is more to humour than rigidity of behaviour. One of these points is something that the French philosopher noted, but failed to develop and in fact partially discarded: "It has often been said that it is the *trifling* faults of our fellow-men that make us laugh" (Bergson 1980: 149). This goes back to Abrams' (1993) definition of comedy that whatever unfortunate events may befall the central characters, they should nevertheless ultimately not suffer unduly. A character led down to his destruction by his own ambitions or vanity is the stuff of tragedy, not comedy. There is little that is amusing about Macbeth, for instance, and much that is horrible.

Connected to the above is the criticism put forth by Andrew Butler, among others, that the model of human-as-machine is not necessarily enough to create comedy:

The efforts of Chaplin to keep up with the production line in *Modern Times* (1936) and the instinctive dancing in the dole queue in *The Full*

Monty (1997) are both funny, but the struggle of work in *Metropolis* (1926) is horrific (Butler et. al 2004: 75).

There is always that certain something, a specific skilful twist that can create both horror and comedy using the same recipe. There are useful and oft-repeated techniques for provoking laughter, but the more cautious theorists in the field of humour take the sensible approach that we need to be “slow to invoke the idea that humor has any ‘‘necessary ingredients.’’”(Veale 2004: 424). This is not to say, however, that Bergson’s ideas are entirely incorrect. They are not. What there is, is a need to hedge our bets a little bit and to widen the perspective.

Returning to Freud and his book on the subject for the moment, in his discussion of the technique of jokes, after a detailed analysis of a great number of jokes he lists three categories of humorous mechanisms, which in turn have a total of eleven sub-categories. Yet, all those various specific techniques can, according to Freud, be distilled into merely two underlying principles – condensation and displacement. Condensation being such use of language as allows large amounts of information (of any kind, not necessarily useful) to be conveyed with a niggardly use of words. Displacement is the practice of taking something out of a situation, interaction etc., and replacing it with something else that is the opposite of, or at least unrelated to, the original part. An example of this would be saying ‘no’, but saying it in such a way that it appears to be ‘yes’, or vice versa.

The reason why these things amuse us, says the Austrian psychoanalyst, is that they spare us mental energy. Or, rather, that is one of the reasons. What is written here is by no means a comprehensive explanation of all Freud’s – or anyone else’s – ideas on humour, but merely the exploration of those aspects of them that are relevant to the topic at hand. With that in mind:

[...] we derive unmistakable enjoyment in jokes from being transported by the use of the same or similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one [...], this enjoyment is no doubt correctly to be attributed to economy in psychical expenditure. The pleasure in a joke arising from a 'short-circuit' like this seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word – the further apart they are, and thus the greater the economy which the joke's technical method provides in the train of thought. (Freud 1960: 120.)

A lack of mental effort may be why some jokes are funny, or maybe it is not. Nevertheless, in keeping with the focus of how over why, even if the reason behind the effect is something completely different, what is important to note here is that the technique does work. Bergson thought that the combination of man and machine is humorous, but he failed to expand the idea. It is not merely that particular combination that works in a humorous fashion (or, rather, can do so), it is any combination of similar properties. The word for it is *incongruity*. The more unsuitable or peculiar the two concepts thus combined are and the more unusual the result, the greater the effect.

The most notable proponents of the incongruity theory of humour in recent decades have been Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo. They are, at any rate, the ones who have created the most straight-forward model of it. The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), developed by Raskin (and covering only verbal humour, not slapstick etc.), claims that:

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both of the conditions in (108) [i.e. what follows] are satisfied:

- i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
- ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [...].

The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in this text. (Raskin 1985: 99.)

A script, in this context, means any organised contextual chunk of information, i.e. the frame through which a reader interprets the text (Attardo 1994: 200). Examples of scripts could be the theatre, a sinking ship, a man shoeing a horse, fantasy etc. Information that is included in a script may be things like who, where, why, under what conditions, and so on. Scripts can also be simpler and more abstract – some script oppositions are pairs like slow/fast, here/there, or, as has been mentioned, human/machine.

Although *incongruity theories* is the name that is used to describe models such as the SSTH, it should not be overlooked that the *opposition* of frames is vital as well. After all, “it is easy to show that neither incongruity or its resolution can be considered logically sufficient ingredients of humor since incongruity resolution is an ingredient in such unfunny phenomena as poetic metaphors, magic tricks, and the denouements of whodunit thrillers” (Veale 2004: 424). It is this emphasis on opposition of scripts that is the real gift of Raskin’s formulation, incongruity having been around in one form or another for years before he was even born. The idea is not without its weaknesses – the opposition of any two scripts can be argued from different angles and is sometimes little more than a matter of personal point of view, but at the very least it can be said that the clearer a particular opposition is, the more (potential) humour there is in it.

The SSTH is a model for describing individual jokes, although it is also useful in analysing longer texts. Raskin did not stop there, but with the help of Attardo revised the theory into something that has a wider scope by taking into account factors such as narrative strategy and logical mechanisms among others (Attardo 1994: 222-226). The larger model goes by the name of General Theory of Verbal Humor, and is mentioned here merely in passing. The theory appears to be more than a description of the essence

of humour, it is more akin to an attempt to reverse engineer jokes and to categorise based on the most minute of details every existing and possible joke. As such its exploration is well beyond the scope of this particular thesis. All that is needed here is the concept of incongruity with opposition, of one text containing two at least partially overlapping scripts or frames that are on some level opposites of each other.

It should be noted that according to the SSTH there is no need for a resolution. It has been implied, by Freud among others (see quote on page 17), that jokes require a jump from one frame to another. In other words, that a joke is incomplete until it abandons one frame and takes on another, so that the ambiguity is resolved satisfactorily and that the audience is left with one view of the events that have been described. This is a mechanism often employed in comedy, but it is not an absolutely necessary component of verbal humour, as we shall see, and as such Raskin quite rightly left it out of his model. Much of Freud's work in this field was an analysis of *jokes*, not humour in its entirety, and his emphasis is therefore understandable. Jokes usually involve a punch-line, which is an utterance that at the very least creates the possibility of a change of script, and often forces it outright. However, in different forms of humour, such as the novels that are the topic of this thesis, two scripts can remain parallel to each other without ever having to be resolved one way or another, and still achieve the humorous effect. It could be noted that one form of comedy where the optional nature of the punch-line becomes clear is farce. In a farce the correct script is revealed early on and the humour is a result of the characters unwittingly following a script that the audience knows to be false.

This leads into the concept of narrative humour. Obviously, script opposition can be used on a variety of scales. It can exist as a single joke embedded in a narrative, or it can be a foundational part of the entire narrative structure of a novel, or something in between. An entire novel (or a short story, or a play) can be structured in the form of a joke, where the events that take place can be interpreted through two different scripts and the reader is lead to adopt one of these scripts until at the end something happens –

a punch-line – that makes him realize that the other script is either the more accurate or the only possible one. Attardo has a good analysis that demonstrates via an analysis of one of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories how this can be done (1994: 255-262). However, as mentioned, a text like this need not contain a resolution, but can incorporate two opposing scripts from start to finish without ever needing to choose one over the other, and we will return to this idea in a later section.

2.3. The Care and Feeding of Hippopotami – Cueing and Repetition

A few other general aspects of humour need to be mentioned before we embark on a course of exploration through some other literary notions. Note that this subsection contains several concepts of humour, and that they have been placed together not because they absolutely must be – although they are somewhat interconnected and segue into each other rather nicely – but because they are what one might call left-overs, bits and pieces that do not strictly speaking belong under either one of the larger sets of theories that have been discussed in the previous subsections. They are nevertheless worth discussing inasmuch as they are notable parts of Pratchett’s technique and have significance in terms of a wider understanding of humour.

The first of these concepts is called *cueing*. In the section on superiority it was briefly noted that roughly two thousand years ago Cicero recommended that humour be used carefully in public speaking, as it may in some cases be ineffective, and in others downright counterproductive, particularly when matters of morality and the extreme breaking of civilised behaviour are in question (Attardo 1994). In other words, do not make jokes when defending a murderer in court.

It therefore behoves a humourist to ensure that his audience is receptive to his jokes before telling them. Jeroen Vandaele in an enlightening article on narrative humour writes:

Deprived of a more general comic tone, humor is usually a very local phenomenon; a nice quip or a funny mistake do not automatically produce mirth beyond the immediate laughter or spontaneous smiling. A serious tone can usually block the further spread of mirth. In successful comedy, however, comic tone and instances of humor together create laughter in a

circular process: if a tone is successfully established, the humor will come more easily, and if the humor is good, an overall comic tone can be created and maintained. Tone is the intentional or dispositional background, humor is the event, and they reinforce each other: a comic tone signalled by convention is empty without specific cases of successful humor, and humor without an overall comic tone is bound to be an isolated phenomenon. [...] a person who has just laughed will tend to laugh more. (Vandeale 2010: 778-779.)

Humour is communication, a social phenomenon as Bergson said, and it has a purpose. If the recipient is unsure of the entertaining purpose of a particular act of communication, be it an off-hand joke or an entire comic novel, his response will be guarded or blocked altogether. Once the purpose has been established, each act will – hopefully – feed on the previous one(s) and produce greater enjoyment in the reader or hearer. There are limits, of course. A well-known stand up-comedian (and juggler) Chris Bliss has suggested that a joke on a specific topic only has three laughs in it – the first punch-line will provoke laughter, the second one will build on the first one and will almost always seem funnier to the audience (even when it objectively is not), and the third one, if well-crafted, will still be amusing enough to be justifiable, but after that a comedian needs to move on. Context is obviously the king here. A stand-up comedian may be working under stricter limits than a writer. As far as plays and movies go, John Cleese has said that a scene in a comedy has to be the right scene in addition to being funny. No matter how well-written, if it is not the scene the audience wants at a specific stage in the story, it will not go over well (Cleese himself had to dramatically shorten the getting-vital-information-out-of-a-stutterer sequence that he was so fond of in *A Fish Called Wanda* because test-audiences reacted poorly to the resulting delay in action (Cleese 2003)).

Vandaele wisely remarks that, owing to “the cumulative effect of mirth” (2011: 779), the early pages of a text intended as humorous are crucial to get right, tone-wise. After

that the pump has been primed, so to speak, and one may reduce the frequency and intensity of the jokes while still maintaining the humorous quality of the text. If there are few jokes or quips – or none at all – in the first chapter or two of a book (Pratchett himself rarely divides his novels into chapters, but the point still stands), delivering them later on is more likely to confuse than amuse. Moving between genres and styles within a single text is a trick that most authors would be wise to avoid due to the skill required – and even the ones who do not do so seldom include the comic section in the very late chapters or acts of a story for a good reason.

It should be noted that people rarely pick up and start reading a book without knowing fairly well what the genre and topic of it is. The person opening a Discworld-novel is looking to be amused, and is in a somewhat receptive mood from the very first word.⁴ This may buy an author some breathing-room, not necessitating an absolutely hilarious turn of phrase in the opening sequence, or it may raise expectations to the point that subtlety in the writing will convince the reader to close the book and find something else to do.

As for the tools of humour in the opening of a novel, perhaps the primary one – unless an author is willing to begin with “How many Polacks does it take to change a light-bulb?” or some equivalent – is specificity of diction. How something is said matters a great deal. Triezenberg (2004: 413) notes in an article on what she refers to as “humour enhancers” that although a specific wording may be irrelevant from a semantic point of view as Attardo implies in some of his analyses using the General Theory of Verbal Humour, it very much matters in terms of achieving a desired response. The example she employs is a specific case of alliterative language that quite simply sounds funnier than its more commonplace counterpart would (“long-limbed” as opposed to “tall”). Some expressions are more phonetically pleasing than others. If they were not, there would be no poetry. A similar point can be found in Freud, who refers to “pleasure in

⁴ A personal note: I did in fact pick up my first Discworld-book (Reaper Man) at the library more or less at random and had no expectations of any kind. The first couple of pages were somewhat baffling; after about a twenty or so I realised that I had stumbled upon something absolutely brilliant.

nonsense”, a child-like tendency in people to find enjoyment in creating or hearing combinations of words that have a rhythm or rhyme to them without devoting much thought to what they mean or if they mean anything at all (1960: 125). Freud states that children grow out of – or rather are forced out of – this mode of thought and behaviour with age in a civilised society. Even an adult, however, will still find greater pleasure in a well-worded expression than in a more mundane or clumsy one even if no new meaning is added by the clever wording.

Another version of pleasure in nonsense is a non-phonetic one – the attention to detail. If the devil is in the detail, comedy is to be found in details that are quite unnecessary and pointless. Pointlessness is funny. Laurence Sterne exploited this fact to great effect in *Tristram Shandy* – a novel in which little happens and even that little is constantly being interrupted by digressions to ever more irrelevant lines of thought and story. A text can be enhanced by adding curious little notes that little meaning, little relevancy bear.

Several authors [...] have noticed that humour delights in concrete terms, technical details, definite facts. If our analysis is correct, this is not an accidental trait of humour, it is its very essence. (Bergson 1980: 143.)

If a character in a novel, for example, is described as a mechanic, that is merely background information and perhaps something that will become an important plot-point later on. If, on the other hand, the author reveals how the character became a mechanic due to his fascination with Philips-head screwdrivers and that he has a tendency to give Christian names to ball-bearings, then the effect will be a comic one. Colourful and unusual descriptions of any kind and any thing are, in fact, marvellous tools for establishing from the start the comic tone that is so necessary if a humorous novel is to capture its audience and not flop like a worn-out mattress thrown into a ditch from a speeding Volkswagen.

Pointless information can be seen as a specific case of violation of rules. Attardo (1994: 205) makes the suggestion that many jokes function through the mechanism of breaking certain assumed rules of human interaction, namely what are known as Grice's Maxims. These maxims are the extension of what Paul Grice referred to as the Cooperative Principle, i.e. the assumption that conversations in general are team efforts in which "each participant recognizes [...] to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction" (Grice 1991: 26). It follows that each new contribution should be and usually is subject to the four maxims that Grice named Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner (Grice 1991: 28). The violation of any one of these maxims can produce humour that is specific to itself (although it does not follow that mere violation of any kind under any circumstances is humorous). Under these basic assumptions, pointless information would qualify as the violation of both Quantity and Quality. A 'joke' of this kind involves using more words than is necessary to relate knowledge that has no value or purpose (other than to entertain – there may be a paradox of some kind here).⁵

In most of his Discworld-novels, Pratchett uses the first few – or dozen – pages to establish the setting and tone, and to give background information. That information is usually of such nature that it is highly important for the reader's enjoyment of the book, but considerably less valuable from the point of view of understanding the story that follows. One could in fact skip the first two to five pages of the average Discworld-book completely and not miss a thing as far as the actual events of the story are concerned. It is cueing, pure and simple. Pratchett is getting to the point (humour) by not getting to the point (story).

Much of the time the opening sequence is a description of the Discworld itself, which sends a clear message that whatever the subject matter of the novel will be, reality is not

⁵ The greatest form of pointless humour I have personally encountered was a joke about a family of elephants told to me by my older brother. The joke took a quarter of an hour to tell and had no punch-line.

going to be a major part of its overall thematic framework. This is because the fictional world is a huge geological disc supported on the backs of four enormous elephants, which in turn stand on the back of a gigantic space-turtle – named A'Tuin – as it slowly swims across the nothingness of cosmos. The mental image thus created is majestically impressive and magical. It stirs up the enthusiastic child-like parts of the reader's imagination and prepares him for a wondrous experience. It also flies in the face of everything we know (or think we know) about the laws of physics, astronomy and biology. Of the three novels that are the primary focus of this thesis, two – *The Light Fantastic* and *The Last Hero* – open with such a description. The third – *Interesting Times* – does not get to the bit about the turtle until the fifth page. However, it is still there, even though that particular novel, unlike the other two, does not include A'Tuin or the elephants in the plot at all.

Let us look at specific examples from the opening sequences of each of the three books – out of chronological order for reasons of convenience. The very first sentence in *The Light Fantastic* is as follows:

The sun rose slowly, as if it wasn't sure it was worth all the effort
(Pratchett 1986: 7).

That is in its simplicity as close to a perfect opening line as there is. The first part is a standard description of scenery one often gets in novels, a literary version of a wide angle shot that establishes the background before moving on to the specifics. However, the second part changes the tone completely. There are two things going on here. Firstly, everyone knows how the sun rises, so there is no real need for a qualifying explanation. In a realistic text it would be quite unnecessary, but here the presence of a detailed description of the manner of the sun's rising is a signal that the book one is reading is intended as humorous. The second important point is that the author is describing the sun – a lifeless object – as if it had human characteristics. It is as though

the flaming orb were a postman or suchlike, performing a human function, getting up in the morning with a weary sigh to do his duty. This creates an incongruity, a script opposition of living/lifeless, or human/ball of gas. Barring the most thick-witted or humourless reader, everything that follows such a sentence will be at least initially interpreted as comedy.

The Last Hero's (Pratchett 2002) first few pages, it being a graphic novel, has not only a narration of the fantastic setting, but pictures of the turtle and the elephants carrying the disc, with the relatively small sun and moon present for the scale. The first three paragraphs, fittingly, talk about the size of the space-animals in an amusing manner. But that would give us nothing new to analyse, so our focus here will be on the fourth paragraph.

The *reason* for the story was a mix of many things. There was humanity's desire to do forbidden deeds merely because they were forbidden. There was its desire to find new horizons and kill the people who live beyond them. There were the mysterious scrolls. There was the cucumber. But mostly there was the knowledge that one day, quite soon, it would be all over. (Pratchett 2002: 5.)

There are many things of note here. The general quality of the text is serious. Expressions like "forbidden deeds", "desire to find new horizons" and "mysterious scrolls" lend a mythical air to the narration, and the opaque reference to the shortness of human life lends certain pathos to the text. But these phrases are mixed with others that subvert them. The sentence that advocates the adventure of exploration also contains a message about massacring new acquaintances for no apparent reason.⁶ The ambiguous mention of strange writings is followed by a specific and inexplicable reference to a

⁶ This novel is not, of course, the earliest place where such a sentiment can be found. Compare to the old joke about military recruiting clichés: "Join the army: travel the world, meet interesting people – and kill them".

vegetable. The tone of the passage combines incongruous elements by flipping the script back and forth, creating a comic effect.

In *Interesting Times*, as previously mentioned, the first pages are not used to portray the gigantic space-turtle, but rather talk about the games gods play with the fates of men, and a specifically discworldian version of chaos theory with the accompanying butterfly. Early on, there is an individual passage that reads:

According to the philosopher Ly Tin Wheedle, chaos is found in greatest abundance wherever order is being sought. It always defeats order, because it is better organized. (Pratchett 1995: 12.)

Here we have absolute nonsense disguised as ancient wisdom. Chaos is chaos precisely because it is unorganised, so this makes absolutely no sense if traditional definitions for those words apply. This is not in itself particularly funny – at most it can inspire a muffled grunt of amusement – but it does function as an indication that the reader is not supposed to take the novel he is holding too seriously.

But even prior to this nonsensical statement there are other cues. On page nine, which is practically the first page of the novel, there is a footnote discussing the possibility of unfortunate miracles, that is, the concept that “because it’s not nice doesn’t mean it’s not miraculous” (Pratchett 1995), as in a highly unlikely accident that nevertheless takes place. This is in reference to the nature of Fate – a god on Discworld and a character in the novel – who is introduced in the main text. Pratchett’s fondness for footnotes is so well-known that they are virtually his calling-card. He fills his books with delightful little notes that usually have no bearing on the story being told, but explicate little historical facts (that in some cases may actually even be true), technical details, lists, linguistic factoids that he invents etc. These footnotes occur with great frequency in the

first few pages of most of Pratchett's books, and are an excellent cueing tool – in *Interesting Times* (1995), there are twenty-one footnotes in the first third of the novel (counting the ones referring to other footnotes) and five in the latter two thirds.

Another example of this type of footnote can be found a few pages later. By this time the narration has reached the point of explaining the turtle et al., and the note is in reference to the revolving of the disc:

People wonder how this works, since terrestrial elephant would be unlikely to bear a revolving load for any length of time without some serious friction burns. But you may as well ask why the axle of a planet doesn't squeak, or where love goes, or what sound yellow makes. (Pratchett 1995: 14.)

In a normal – for a given definition of the word – fantasy or science fiction novel details such as this would only be pointed out if the author had invented some plausibly logical mechanism that also serves (or at the very least does not conflict with) the rest of the story. Otherwise, the reader's willing suspension of disbelief would be left with the job of helping him ignore what cannot be explained. But in *Interesting Times*, Pratchett takes the time (in accordance with the rules of humour, such as they are, but in opposition to Grice's Maxims) to pause the story to discuss a problem inherent in the narration, and then outright refuses to resolve it. The question of friction in elephants is not even relevant in any way, but its specificity along with the nonsense comparisons make it funny. The author is in essence saying: "Look, look, what I have just told you is impossible. Cannot happen, makes no sense. Relax, this is all a just a joke."

Another obvious cue – and one that will lead into the next theoretical point – is again on page nine. The gods are playing games with human lives, as they are wont to do, and the character of Fate has been introduced.

He blinked them [his eyes], smiled at his fellow players in the smug way winners do just before they become winners, and said:

‘I accuse the High Priest of the Green Robe in the library with the double-handed axe.’ (Pratchett 1995: 9.)

Various gods and other supernatural beings interfering with the lives of people is a concept that goes back as far as any moderately organised religion. Greek mythology is perhaps the most obvious example, being replete with stories of Zeus impregnating young maidens and other lovely occurrences. And then there is of course Homer’s telling of the Trojan War starting as the result of the jealousy of a goddess. “Games” as a word, however, is usually used to signal the idea that the gods, immortal as they are, engage in such activities for amusement and approach them with certain carelessness while people suffer. The non-specific nature of such mythological games creates mystery and awe. Making it sound like an afternoon of Monopoly ruins the whole thing, mystery-wise.

There are in fact three ways this short passage can be classified as belonging in the category marked “funny”. Firstly, it is highly and unnecessarily specific – the gods are not just playing games in general, they are playing a particular board-game. Secondly, there is the script opposition of matters of life and death vs. family entertainment (this will be discussed in greater length later on). And thirdly, there is the factor of allusion in and of itself.

Specific allusions will get more attention in section 3.3., being as they are a necessary part of parody. For now let us simply focus on the larger technique or mechanism of humour that allusions are a sub-category of – *repetition*. Whereas cueing is the front-loading of jokes into the early parts of a text to set the frame, repetition almost by definition is something that cannot be achieved in the beginning; it needs to be set up early to be funny later on. And in the spirit of repetition, let us quote Freud:

In a second group of technical methods used in jokes – unification, similarity of sound, multiple use, modification of familiar phrases, allusions to quotations – we can single out as their common characteristic the fact that in each of them something familiar is rediscovered, where we might instead have expected something new (Freud 1960: 120).

He goes on to lay the reason behind the pleasure of recognising something familiar on the lack of mental effort. There is no need to accept that explanation in order to profit from the observation itself. Familiarity breeds not only contempt but humour as well (and perhaps for that very reason, given the superiority theories). Bergson assigns the explanation for this function of humour on the fact that “a really living thing should never repeat itself” (1980: 82). In other words, it is a part of his human-as-a-machine formulation, the truth of which is also rather doubtful especially considering how repetition achieves its effect even with a larger application – a phrase repeated by different characters, a situation repeated with new participants etc. – but that is a discussion for another time.

What can be said with certainty is that repetition works. Vandaele notes:

When a stimulus is frequently associated with laughter, then the mere recall of that stimulus sometimes predisposes us to laugh again. [...]

Comic tone or disposition can thus come to be attached to catchphrases, repeated jokes, and specific intentional agents, and it can even be create actual laughter. A narrative participant can be so systematically associated with a certain type of incongruity that his or her mere appearance produces humor. (Vandaele 2010: 779.)

This is the lifeblood of sketch-comedies, among other things. But Vandaele does not go far enough in his argument. It is not necessary to attach a comic meaning to a phrase or a situation before its repetition becomes amusing. Repetition – of almost anything – can be humorous in itself, perhaps as a result of people finding comfort in the familiar. A simple allusion to something familiar is often enough, provided, of course, that the general tone of the context is humorous, as has been said. This more than anything is the reason behind all those Special Guest Stars in TV-shows – a simple, although not necessarily a cheap way to turn mediocre jokes into gut-shaking comedy.

The fact that recognition of anything we have encountered before – as long as it is not by its very nature unpleasant – can be a source of pleasure actually goes against Freud's theory of mental economy, considering how repetition often works even better when it is served as a type of puzzle that the reader then delights in solving. Going back to our previous example of gods playing games, the narration does not say that Fate is participating in a game of Cluedo, which he is, but strongly hints at it by alluding to the nature of that very game, where the participants have to solve a crime by deducing the identity of a murderer, the location of the homicide and the nature of the implement used to carry out the heinous act. Simply naming the game outright would have been markedly less comic.

The flip-side of easy laughs through allusions and references is the short shelf-life humour based on such things may end up having. The more that specific jokes in a book or play are tied to certain cultural factors – recent events, other works of literature,

references to existing people, fashionable expressions – the more likely it is that once those generations who have an easy familiarity with said factors pass away the text itself will be forgotten as it will then have lost much of its meaning. Perhaps this is why modern audiences do not find Shakespeare's comedies, for example, to be all that funny. On the other hand, if one wishes to research the cultures of bygone eras, it may be useful to pay special attention to its comedy due to this tendency it has to gather large amounts of information and distil it into texts of readable length.

The Great A'Tuin itself, in a fashion, becomes a joke through repetition. Originally, it was simply stolen from Hindu mythology, which has obscure references to the world existing on the back of a turtle (there are also references to elephants serving such a function, but it is unclear whether the specific Discworldian combination is a new one). However, as far as references go it is not among the most obvious ones, at least not to a western reader. The comic potential is therefore limited. The first time around, that is, but since most Discworld-novels include this description, experienced readers will anticipate it and take pleasure from the recurrence, curious as to what variation of expressions Pratchett will invent this time.

A most wonderful and self-contained example of humour through repetition can be found in *Interesting Times*. Before going further with it, however, a quick explanation of the novel's plot is in order.

Most of Discworld consists of one large continent. Probably. Pratchett has refused to give detailed geographical descriptions of his imaginary world on the grounds that it stifles imagination. In contradiction to a convention of fantasy that dates back to the first half of the twentieth century, *Sourcery* actually opens with a short announcement:

This book does not contain a map. Please feel free to draw your own.
(Pratchett 2012: 9.)

Most of the events in the books take place on the large primary continent, on which is Cori Celesti, the home of the gods and the hub of the Disc. Other important locations on that vast land-mass include Ankh-Morpork, the most famous and decadent city on the turtle, and the Ramtops, a mountain range that contains numerous small kingdoms including that of Lancre. In *Interesting Times*, however, the action is focused on the Counterweight Continent, a separate part of the Disc and the home to a vast empire that is reminiscent of the historical China (or Japan, Pratchett seems to mix allusions to the Far East with good-natured abandon).

The empire is in the midst of a power struggle, as the old emperor is dying and the heads of five different families are vying for a spot at the top. A very inefficient ground-level revolutionary faction is attempting to overthrow the old order. Rincewind the inept wizard, who has been mentioned before, has been sent to visit the empire against his own wishes, for reasons neither he nor those who sent him understand. And Cohen the Barbarian, the Disc's most famous and oldest barbarian hero has gathered together a group of five old heroes like himself (referred to as the Silver Horde) and one former school-teacher in order to covertly replace the current ruler and seize control of the whole empire.

As the main characters are adventuring in a country that is almost entirely foreign to them, the author has an opportunity to play with possible misunderstandings between people who speak different languages. Rincewind, as has been said, has a degree of familiarity with a variety of languages, and Cohen and his Horde have apparently picked up enough foreign words during their adventures to get by, but none of them speak Agatean (the name of the empire) perfectly. Hence the most repetitive joke in the book. Early on there is a footnote concerning linguistics (quoted here only in part):

Inexperienced travellers might think that ‘Aargh!’ is universal, but in Betrobi it means ‘highly enjoyable’, and in Howondaland it means, variously, ‘I would like to eat your foot’, ‘Your wife is a big hippo’ and ‘Hello, Thinks Mr Purple Cat’ (Pratchett 1995: 56).

It is the hippo part, mostly, that gets recycled throughout the novel. The concept itself, a primitive interjection signalling pain or frustration being a clumsy insult in another language, is mildly amusing and not the most original of ideas, but it gets better when it appears again and again in various contexts. When Rincewind meets Cohen for the first time (in this novel), the old man has been taken prisoner and is being transported in chains. He kills the people transporting him, and mentions to Rincewind his desire to find the people who originally captured him and have a talk with them.

The tone of his voice suggested very clearly that all they were likely to say would be ‘Highly enjoyable! Your wife is a big hippo’ (ibid.: 72).

Which implies that Cohen would make them scream. The reader has to remember the earlier explanation from sixteen pages back and ‘translate’ what is being said. Without the mental puzzle, this passage would not be humorous. What this is, actually, is a form of incongruity. The reader gets two scripts, one that makes sense and one that does not. In the first one, the exclamations are either completely nonsensical or refer to a context that the reader has not been supplied any knowledge of. In the other, the mystifying expressions are mistranslations of men screaming in pain. This is one example where incongruity does need resolution for the joke to work, even though it does not follow that that is always the case. The details of a joke matter very much, suggesting that an absolutely applicable model of verbal humour is either impossible or highly complex.

Another time this same confusing mistranslation makes an appearance is when the Silver Horde – one of whom, it should be pointed out, is hard of hearing – are attempting to enter the Agatean capitol and have an encounter with some guards.

A sword came up through the cloth and stabbed the guard in the thigh.

‘Whut? Whut? Whutzeesay?’

‘He said, “Aargh!”, Hamish,’ said Cohen, a knife appearing in his hand. With one movement his skinny arms had the captain in a lock, the knife at his throat.

‘Whut?’

‘He said “Aargh!”’

‘Whut? I ain’t even married!’ (ibid.: 132.)

Again, the reader must remember the earlier reference(s) and supply the explanation to the otherwise out-of-context response. The difference is that this time what there is on the page is a scream and one must remember what that means or could mean in Howondaland to make sense of the exchange.

There are several other places where a similar allusion occurs, but these two examples suffice to make the point. Humour can be built up through repetition, so that what was only moderately funny, or not at all, becomes noticeably so with frequent recurrence.

3. From Russia with Love to a Turtle with Elephants

Now we must take a detour from humour into more general literary theory in order to gather momentum and swing back to the more specific category of parody later on. To this end, it is worthwhile to explore a central concept of the movement known as Russian Formalism, since that concept – known as defamiliarisation – is highly useful in combination with incongruity and superiority in creating a better understanding of what parody actually is. Finally, section 3.3., in discussing the overall disposition of parody in general and Pratchett’s parody in particular, will introduce one more literary notion, that of intertextuality.

3.1. Defamiliarisation

Russian Formalism was an influential school of literary thought in the early twentieth century, developed, as the name implies, in Slavic countries. Its central idea was that unlike what critics until that time had thought, “literature was an autonomous reality governed by its own regularity and more or less independent of contiguous spheres of culture” (Steiner 1984: 245). Or, to put it in other words, it argues that literary critics should concern themselves with the work of literature itself and not, for example, biographical, philosophical or historical matters peripheral to it (although some Formalists deviated from this idea somewhat as they attempted to include commentary on the then on-going Marxist movement in their work on literature (Shklovsky 1965: 3)). In this way Formalism has much in common with New Criticism, a trend of criticism developed roughly at the same time in the English-speaking countries. Beyond that, however, Formalists seem to differ in attitudes with the New Critics as well as in many cases with each other (Steiner 1984, Thompson 1971: 7).

The name Formalism comes from this literary school's focus on the form of a literary work. While other critics may spend a lot of effort and energy looking at the historical significance of a novel, or what a poem says about social conditions, Formalists were and are primarily interested in the techniques employed to achieve a desired effect – the *how*, not the *what* or *why*. They separated language into two spheres, the normal everyday language, and literature, and spent their time exploring the specific qualities of the latter. (Abrams 1993: 273-274)

The only Russian Formalist whose work is of interest here is Viktor Shklovsky, whose central and most enduring idea concerning literature was what he referred to as *defamiliarization*. In *Art as Technique*, his seminal work on the subject, Shklovsky begins with Alexander Potebnya's maxim 'Art is thinking in images'. Shklovsky summarises the core of this (rather Freudian) concept thusly:

Poetry is a special way of thinking; it is, precisely, a way of thinking in images, a way which permits what is generally called "economy of mental effort," a way which makes for "a sensation of the relative ease of the process." Aesthetic feeling is the reaction to this economy. (Shklovsky 1965: 5-6.)

Shklovsky disagrees from the bottom of his heart. To his way of thinking, poetry (as he refers to all forms of literary art) does not exist to minimise the effort reader or listener must expend to gain something from it, but exactly the contrary. Potebnya's mistake is confusing two aspects of imagery – the practical and the poetic. The former exists to place objects within categories in order to facilitate thought, but the latter has the purpose of reinforcing an impression. The clarity one prays for when reading a technical document is not always desirable in a purely literary text, and may well work against its intended purpose. If one doubts whether comedy is art, under Shklovsky's definition the

answer would be a clear yes, considering how unnecessary digressions and overly specific details often play such a prominent part in humour.

In life, an object seen for the first time draws the eye, assuming that it is different enough from any other thing one may have encountered previously. Such a discovery has a tendency to occupy the mind, sometimes for long stretches of time. In the early twentieth century, a man seeing a parked automobile for the first time in his life would have noticed immediately the way it differs from a horse-drawn cart, his nearest experience to such a vehicle. The steering wheel, the pedals, the engine, the extensive use of metal instead of wood in the main structures, all this would have made him wonder how exactly the thing was supposed to function. Such a man would have seen the car very clearly, and would have remembered the experience probably for the rest of his life. Contrast that to a man living today. Walking across a parking lot, he sees a car – similar to thousands of other cars he has seen in his life – and his brain registers it only as an object to walk around. Ten seconds after having passed it, he would likely have difficulty in recalling the colour of the thing. This is simply what allows human beings to survive – recognising patterns, analysing them and creating mental frameworks, both conscious and unconscious. If a person is surprised every morning by the sunrise and pauses to observe it in detail, he has less time and mental capacity for other matters. And if we did not learn early in our lives the connection between the feeling of thirst and dehydration, no-one would live past infancy. Having learned it, we often go from feeling slightly thirsty to walking into the kitchen and drinking a glass of water without a conscious thought having passed through our brains. It is a question of necessary efficiency.

In majority of the situations where such frameworks are applied, they are useful and appropriate. However, this is not always the case. For one thing, a learned generalisation may lead one to make mistaken assumptions in situations where some small but significant detail does not conform to expectations. Many people are bothered by stereotypes of specific human sub-populations, claiming them to be nothing but

unhelpful and bigoted, but this is not the entire truth. Half a century ago a prospective employer would have taken a tattooed applicant to be a former prisoner (or, perhaps, a sailor) and been – quite rightly – wary of hiring such a person in a position of great responsibility. Today, such an attitude has less basis (depending somewhat on the location and the details of said body-art) and would be misleading more often than not. This may also work the other way round – instead of seeing something that does not in fact exist, pre-formed expectations can lead to overlooking something that is. If all poodles one has encountered thus far have been well-behaved and harmless, one may fail to notice the tell-tale foam at the corners of a cute but rabies-infected puppy.

Besides distorting perception, this tendency to organise the world into patterns has another unfortunate side-effect. It makes the human experience less vivid. A man will, if he is lucky, remember and cherish his first kiss until the day he dies. The smell of the girl's hair, the taste of her lips, the awkward feeling of nervousness melting into previously unimagined bliss, if only for a moment, will remain, burned into his brain too deeply for mere aging or senility to remove. The hundredth kiss, with a third woman, will be comfortable and pleasant. The kiss number ten thousand, with the woman number fifty-five, will be mechanical and fairly devoid of pleasure, and forgotten minutes later. There is such a thing as too much experience. Or, in Shklovsky's words: "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (1965: 12). Here can be seen Shklovsky's political motivations for his work – the failure of art to maintain people's sensitivity to life gets at least partial blame for World War I, during which the essay was written (Tihanov 2005: 670-672).

Pratchett understands this phenomenon as well, judging by his fiction. In his novel *Reaper Man* there is a short and un-dramatic passage that notes:

Over the fireplace was an ornamental candlestick, fixed to a bracket on the wall. It was such a familiar piece of furniture that Windle hadn't really seen it for fifty years. (Pratchett 1992: 51.)

Art exists to reintroduce experiences, to make us really look at things and to see them in a new way. Its purpose is not to make perception easier and faster, but longer and more difficult so that we may "recover the sensation of life" (Shklovsky 1965: 12).

Bergson said practically the same thing, noting that usually "we perceive nothing but the outward display of our mental state" (Bergson 1980: 160), but that the man who can at least momentarily divorce himself from "the prejudices of form and colour that come between ourselves and reality" can realise "the loftiest ambition of art, which here consists in revealing to us nature" (ibid.: 161). That such a statement can be found in a treatise on the aesthetics of humour suggests that defamiliarisation and comedy have a profound connection, which we shall turn to next.

3.2. Familiarisation, the Parodic Script Opposition

What exactly can defamiliarisation and humour have in common when one is concerned with the weird and the other with the familiar? The answer is to be found in another question: If defamiliarisation is all about taking some aspect of life or literature and displaying it in a new light – thus making it strange (Shklovsky used as an example Tolstoy's literary techniques, one of which is having a horse as the narrator in the story *Kholstomer* (Shklovsky 1965: 13-14) – in order to make the reader re-examine his views on that something and see it properly once more, what new light can be shined on something that is strange already? In the words of Aida O. Azouqa:

[...] poetic defamiliarization is the outcome of coalescing, that is, of combining incongruous elements, to produce literary texts that have their own method and their own logic of reflecting reality (Azouqa 2001: 175).

The key word, obviously, is *incongruous*. This is where defamiliarisation meets comedy. Those things and images that are mythical, legendary or fantastic cannot be renewed by making them strange, because to an extent they are so by definition. The only option left is to bring them down, to place them on the level of the mundane. In fact, what such *familiarisation* is is a combination of both the concepts of superiority and incongruity. Fantasy is not comical because it is high, because it is about great adventure, good versus evil, mighty heroes against awesome and terrible monsters. It needs to become low for the average man to find it funny. And one way it can be brought low – or at least a little lower – is through a specific script opposition. The reader almost certainly has no experience of fighting armies of goblins or raiding a dragon's lair (apart, perhaps, from a very select group of biologists), so the natural opposing script for such incredible and fantastic scenarios is the everyday, mundane existence of normal human beings with its un-dramatic features such as aging, nine-to-five jobs and predictably boring afternoons. Combine the fantastic with the realistic, or

the mythical and legendary with the everyday and commonplace and the result is a starting point for excellent humour.

All this, however, is nothing new. Writers throughout the ages have combined the noble viewpoints of fiction and life with the less appealing and more practical aspects of human existence. This is in fact the major mechanism of a subgenre of humour, noted by, among others, Bergson (1980: 140), who said: “Transpose the solemn into the familiar and the result is parody.” It seems as though the French philosopher mentioned virtually every observation that can be found in any other humour theorist’s work. It seems something of a shame that he did not connect them all in a more general and abstract fashion.

The next subsection will give a more detailed account of parody and provide examples of Pratchett’s barbarian saga that are clearly, specifically parodic. Before all that, however, we can open up the familiarised texture of Pratchett’s novels a little bit.

Fantasy is by its nature and tradition very escapist. The point of fantasy is that the protagonists have incredible adventures where they encounter various almost insurmountable obstacles, but are ultimately triumphant. The heroes of fantasy are so named sometimes because they are morally good, but always because they accomplish feats that require great courage, determination and skill, and because they do not give in to despair regardless of circumstances. This part of the make-up of fantasy Pratchett leaves mostly untouched, at least as far as his barbarian heroes are concerned. Cohen the Barbarian, a.k.a. Ghenghiz Cohen, is the greatest fighter the Disc has ever known and does not know the meaning of fear, and his Horde are not far behind in mettle and talent. However, they are human, and what happens to them is the same thing that happens to everyone else – they get old. Here is Rincewind’s very first encounter with the famous adventurer:

By the light of the torches he saw that it was a very old man, the skinny variety that generally gets called ‘spry’, with a totally bald head, a beard almost down to his knees, and a pair of matchstick legs on which varicose veins had traced the street map of quite a large city. Despite the snow he wore nothing more than a studded leather holdall and a pair of boots that could have easily accommodated a second pair of feet. (Pratchett 1986: 99.)

And once the toothless old man has performed an act of great heroism – raiding a temple and saving a virgin from being executed in a druidic ritual – that is only slightly impeded by a bout of lumbago:

‘Cohen ish my name, boy.’ Bethan’s hands stopped moving.

‘Cohen?’ she said. ‘Cohen the Barbarian?’

‘The very shame.’

‘Hang on, hang on,’ said Rincewind. ‘Cohen’s a great big chap, neck like a bull, got chest muscles like a sack of footballs. I mean, he’s the Disc’s greatest warrior, a legend in his own lifetime. I remember my grandad telling me he saw him... my grandad telling me he... my grandad...’

He faltered under the gimlet gaze.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Oh. Of course. Sorry.’

‘Yesh,’ said Cohen, and sighed. ‘Thatsh right, boy. I’m a lifetime in my own legend.’ (Pratchett 1986: 104.)

So the specific familiarised script opposition here is great hero/old man. Cohen is very clearly both. Also, he remains both throughout the series, so that one script at no point

completely ceases to be – there is no release or narrative punch-line to be found. Cohen robs temples, kills his enemies, conquers nations and even challenges gods as his story progresses. He just does all that while suffering from joint-problems, having dental issues and looking very much like the senior citizen he is. His Horde is the same, survivors of numerous great battles – Boy Willie has orthopaedic problems, Truckle the Uncivil uses walking sticks, Old Vincent’s memory is going, Mad Hamish (as mentioned earlier) has poor hearing and is in a wheelchair, and Caleb the Ripper is just generally old and frail (Pratchett 1995: 86-89). The joke remains the same, but the increased number of geriatric adventurers allows for a little bit of variety as far as the nature of the ailments go. Even with all their age-related issues, however, when the time comes to perform, they meet all expectations placed on more traditional fantasy-heroes:

The fighting was a fast and furious affair but, somehow, only on one side. The Horde fought like you’d expect old men to fight – slowly, and with care. All the activity was on the part of the ninjas, but no matter how well flung the throwing star or speedy the kick, the target was always, without any obvious effort, not there. (Pratchett 1995: 200.)

Although their advanced age is the primary method the author employs to familiarise the troupe, it is not the only one. Discworld, taking into account the entire length of the series, experiences a form of accelerated technological progress and cultural change. This is because doing so has allowed Pratchett to use the same make-belief world to send up not only fantasy, but also things like opera, banking and newspapers. In order to incorporate aspects of the modern – real – world, the Discworld itself has had to become more modern as new novels appear. Another form of incongruity is thus found for the barbarian horde, since Cohen remains unchanged in his attitudes and behaviour, and the world around him adopts features from our reality.

‘No future in it, back around the Ramtops,’ said Cohen, as they trudged through the snow. ‘Fences and farms, fences and farms *everywhere*. You kill a dragon these days, people complain. You know what? You know what happened?’

‘No. What happened?’

‘Man came up to me, said my teeth were offensive to trolls. What about that, eh?’ (ibid.: 70.)

As can be expected, in a world with scarce resources and increasing population – i.e. the real world – the type of roving lifestyle that many fantasy novels depict becomes very difficult, and a man determined to continue barbarian heroing will find himself in conflict with enraged farmers and homeowners more often than with monsters and tyrants. Also, once the assumption that the preservation of biodiversity is a paramount duty of all mankind takes hold, killing a member of a rare species becomes an act of transgression against all that is right and proper and will earn one a chorus of condemnation rather than a celebratory feast, even if the beast in question is a fire-breathing, gold-hoarding monster. As for the teeth, Cohen’s own have long since withered away, leaving him to subsist mostly on a diet of soup, until he in the course of the events of *The Light Fantastic* recovers some diamonds from the mouth of a great big troll and finds a craftsman to manufacture him a set of false teeth out of them. (Trolls on Discworld are made of stone and have teeth of diamond.) In a politically correct environment such highly ornamental dentures could – and probably would – be construed as an insensitive provocation of another species.

There is also a self-contained short story of Cohen called *Troll Bridge* that is constructed entirely on this premise of traditional fantasy clashing with modernity. In it, Cohen plans to rob a troll living under a bridge, assuming that the troll himself, having robbed many a wealthy traveller, has quite a hoard. Instead, it turns out that due to the economy, traditional troll-like behaviour is not very profitable and instead of a treasure

the troll has several children in need of feeding and a wife who constantly nags him to go into business with her brothers, who have embraced new ways of life and become merchants and businessmen.

A third version of a familiarising script opposition is dependent on the character of Ronald Saveloy, a.k.a. Teach, the former school-teacher and geologist Cohen has recruited as a guide and translator for his horde in *Interesting Times*. Mr Saveloy tries constantly to instruct the Horde in the ways of civilisation, and the Horde – who have spent a combined amount of nearly five hundred years behaving as rudely and violently as they like – keep struggling with concepts like talking to women as opposed to just ravishing them, paying for things, taking the occasional bath and not brutally killing every guard that happens to cross their path.

Mr Saveloy sighed.

‘I’m trying to teach them chess,’ he said. ‘It’s vital to the understanding of the Auriental mind. But I am afraid they have no concept of taking turns at moving, and their idea of an opening gambit is for the King and all the pawns to rush up the board together and set fire to the opposing rooks.’
(ibid.: 91.)

The invasion that Cohen and the Silver Horde undertake thus becomes akin to a field-trip for unruly schoolchildren, with Teach chastising the elderly barbarians for bad behaviour, and the blood-thirsty killers attempting to conform to the rules that most other people live by and failing, as in this example of Cohen attempting to buy an apple from a vendor:

‘Now, everyone: Who can tell me what Ghenghiz did wrong?’

‘Didn’t say please?’

‘Whut?’

‘No.’

‘Didn’t say thank you?’

‘Whut?’

‘No.’

‘Hit the man over the head with a melon and thumped him into the strawberries and kicked him in the nuts and set fire to his stall and stole all the money?’

‘Correct!’ Mr Saveloy sighed. ‘Ghenghiz, you were doing *so* well up to then.’ (ibid.: 145.)

As was said in the section on incongruity, the extent of the opposition of two scripts is often somewhat ambiguous and can be argued from both sides. In this case, the two frames in question are not exactly polar opposites – it is hypothetically possible to be an arrogant and violent old coot and still find yourself in the role of a student facing a condescending teacher – but they are far enough apart that the humour of the situation is clear. It is more important here that the legendary heroes face situations that the audience can find recognisably familiar on some level than it is to have two completely irreconcilable scripts, because the comedy in a parodic text depends heavily on bringing the characters closer to the readers’ field of experience.

If it can be said that humour – or verbal humour in the wide sense – depends and is built on incongruity (which may or may not be absolutely true), then familiarisation such as has been displayed here must be seen as one possible subcategory of humour. It is a specific type of incongruity, a narrowed down script opposition that relies on contrasting and combining awesome elements with mundane ones, allowing a reader to experience some level of superiority in relation to the characters in a text and relate more closely to the situations they find themselves in. Also, the possible applications of such a ‘restricted’ subspecies of humour are not overly limited – in Cohen’s specific

case the familiarised script opposition is hero/geriatric, but in other contexts it could as well be astronaut/plumber, or any other of thousands of possibilities.

3.3. The Nature of Parody

Finally, we arrive at parody in the narrow sense. The previous sections have shown that humour is broadly speaking a result of either the feelings of superiority it produces in the audience, or two parallel ideas that do not quite match, or both, and that a script opposition which includes an aspect of superiority – high/low, great/normal, a.k.a. familiarisation – is a particularly potent mechanism for comedy. Now it is time to answer a few larger questions about the Discworld-novels that are under analysis here: In exactly what sense are they parodic? And what is the function of that parody in a wider literary context – i.e. what does Pratchett’s parody do to fantasy?

Although it may be chronologically backwards, it helps to begin the exploration of our definition of parody with the relatively recent concept of *intertextuality*. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in the mid-twentieth century to conceptualise the idea that all texts are a limitless whole, like an iceberg of indeterminate size with specific texts forming the tiny above-surface parts. Central to intertextuality is that all texts have a double meaning or purpose; writing a new text is at the same time the reading of all texts that have preceded it (Stewen 1991: 129-130). A written text thus only gains its complete meaning from the relationships it has with other texts and cannot be fully understood without them. Like with so many other literary terms, the use of intertextuality varies – sometimes it is used to refer to the idea of interconnectedness of all writing, sometimes it is just another word for references and allusions.

The one intertextualist whose work is of interest in the current context is Gérard Genette. Genette’s contribution to the field is his attempt to categorise minutely the different relationships that two or more separate texts can have (confusingly, he refers to the entire concept of the connections between texts as transtextuality, of which intertextuality is only a sub-classification). Under Genette’s classifications, a direct relationship between two specific text is called *hypertextuality*, where a *hypertext* is – in

its entirety – a new construction of a previous *hypotext* (Lyytikäinen 1991: 155-159). Parody, in this system, is a hypertext that is a word-for-word transcription of a hypotext into a new context, thus creating a comic effect; an – often stylistic – imitation of another text Genette refers to as a pastiche (ibid.). The problem with this approach is that it not only “suffers from the difficulty of attempting to reform or reconstitute a whole vocabulary by an act of scholarly force majeure, as though habitual usage could be single-handedly transformed in the name of greater precision” (Dentith 2000: 14), i.e. that it removes the casual use of the word parody from the sphere of its literary definition, but also that under such a definition, parody basically ceases to exist.

In this thesis, the word parody carries a meaning that does not go quite as far as Genette’s definition. However, what can be salvaged from the French intertextualist’s web of textual relations is the idea that parody can be highly specific, a narrow allusion to or reworking of one single previous text. It simply does not have to limit itself to that level – one can parody entire genres, or specific texts without using the original words, or even non-textual sources such as movies or speeches. Furthermore, a text can fluctuate between general and specific parody. It is unnecessary to create a binary model of parody and not-parody; a sliding scale from very-much-parodic to less-parodic to not-at-all-parodic is much more accurate and practical. Also, parody *is* intertextual inasmuch as it necessarily involves allusions to other works of art. While a satirical or generally humorous work can be entirely original – to the extent that originality in literature is possible – parody is always derivative.

Returning to Pratchett, the character of Cohen the Barbarian is obviously a specific parody of Conan the Barbarian, a warrior, thief and king created in the early twentieth century by Robert E. Howard, first in the short story *Phoenix on the Sword* (2006). The stories of Cohen are also generally parodic of the genre of sword & sorcery stories that Howard practically invented (his lesser known adventurers include Bran Mak Morn and Solomon Kane) and that was continued by such writers as Fritz Leiber and Michael Moorcock. The most obvious allusion to the character of Conan in the Discworld books

is not, however, borrowed from the original stories but is another ‘old man’-joke referring to the first film version of the Cimmerian’s saga, made in 1981, written by John Milius and Oliver Stone and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the movie, Conan (at that point in his life a gladiator), is asked by a Mongolian-looking chieftain what is best in life. Another member of the chieftain’s tribe has answered with “the open steppe, fleet horse, falcons at your wrist, and the wind in your hair,” which the chief finds unacceptable. Conan replies, to general approval:

Crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and hear the lamentation of their women! (1981)

In *The Light Fantastic*, we get the following scene:

The barbarian chieftain said: ‘What then are the greatest things that a man may find in life?’ This is the sort of thing you’re supposed to say to maintain steppe-cred in barbarian circles.

The man on his right thoughtfully drank his cocktail of mare’s milk and snowcat blood and spoke thus: ‘The crisp horizon of the steppe, the wind in your hair, a fresh horse under you.’

The man on his left said: ‘The cry of the white eagle in the heights, the fall of snow in the forest, a true arrow in your bow.’

The chieftain nodded, and said: ‘Surely it is the sight of your enemy slain, the humiliation of his tribe and the lamentation of his women.’ (Pratchett 1986: 47-48.)

There is a minor joke in the first paragraph that compares barbarian tribes to modern-day street gangs where it is possible to lose credibility and status by not acting ‘street’

enough, and the description of the drinking habits of the nomads is exaggerated and unusually specific, but otherwise this sequence is a fairly straightforward allusion to the movie, in places using practically the same words. The specificity is not enough to reach Genette's requirements for parody, but nothing ever is, and this gets very close. But there is thus far no humour in the barbarians' answers, unless one chooses to see the extreme romanticism in them as such. The punch-line comes from Cohen.

Then the chieftain turned respectfully to his guest, a small figure carefully warming his chilblains by the fire, and said: 'But our guest, whose name is legend, must tell us truly: what are they that a man may call the greatest things in life?'

The guest paused in the middle of another unsuccessful attempt to light up.

'What shay?' he said, toothlessly.

'I said, what are they that a man may call the greatest things in life?'

The warriors leaned closer. This should be worth hearing.

The guest thought long and hard and then said, with deliberation: 'Hot water, good dentistry and soft lavatory paper.' (ibid.: 48.)

This joke is perhaps the most memorable in the entire novel. The contrast between the romanticised escapist nature of fantasy and the pragmatic wishes of an old man who has seen and done everything and has returned to desire small comforts could hardly be greater, and further pleasure is provided by the recognition of the almost canonical statement from the famous movie (which was released only five years before the publication of *The Light Fantastic*, so most readers would have perhaps been even more likely to recognise the allusion than they are today). The incongruity of this passage is plain to see – great heroes of fantasy do not concern themselves with the petty details of normal life. The desire for quality lavatory paper is a familiar one to a

normal person and makes Cohen a more relatable character, but it seems out of place in this context, particularly as it follows such a high-sounding build-up – hence the amusement provided by such a combination.

In general discussions on parody, the question whether ridicule and malevolent mocking are essential parts of the practice tends to arise often. Or, to put it in other words, how closely are parody and satire connected? In perhaps the most famous parody of all time, *Don Quixote*, the polemical tone is fairly undisputed – the novel puts forward the case that the whole notion of chivalric romance is foolish and undesirable. This is not, however, necessarily the case in all parody. If one chooses to accept the characterisation of Discworld-novels as parody – and, Genette’s extremism notwithstanding, I fail to see how one could not – it follows that parody can have several purposes, and that destructive aims need not be among them. Hutcheon, who defines parody as “repetition with critical distance” (1985: 6), argues that a parodic work does not necessarily include ridicule (ibid.: 40).

Now, one certainly could see the previous allusion to the movie *Conan the Barbarian* as a sneering rejection of the whole genre, a comment stating that the values and goals embodied by Conan are not only delusionally unrealistic but also ultimately unsatisfying, but that would require focusing on only on that specific quotation to the exclusion to everything else in the novel(s), and even then it would be a particularly mean-spirited interpretation. Not to mention that surely, if Pratchett’s intention and desire was to guide his readers away from the fantasy-genre, he would do so with one or two novels and then move on to other things, not create an entire series based around that premise – for if the books were successful then the readers of one Discworld novel would never pick up another, and if they were unsuccessful they would not be very good books and again, a reader of one would not read another. The very existence of a popular series of fantasy-parody lends credibility to the claim that parody is not inherently a destructive genre.

If anything, Pratchett – like R.E. Howard, the creator of Conan, before him – takes the side of the barbarian ideal over the civilised one (although to be fair, what they both mock as civilisation is usually only the decadent and corrupt surface features, not the core concept itself). Take this passage in *Interesting Times* that is both specific and general parody:

Cohen's father had taken him to a mountain top, when he was no more than a lad, and explained to him the hero's creed and told him that there was no greater joy than to die in battle.

Cohen had seen the flaw in this straight away, and a lifetime's experience had reinforced his belief that in fact a greater joy was to kill the other bugger in battle and end up sitting on a heap of gold higher than your horse. It was an observation that had served him well. (Pratchett 1995: 114-115.)

The part of a father granting his wisdom to a young son while sitting on a mountain top is in fact the opening scene from *Conan the Barbarian*. The wisdom that is granted differs somewhat, though. In *Interesting Times*, Cohen's father's advice is a variation of a theme that runs through the entire history of western civilisation, that self-sacrifice in the service of something greater than yourself is the highest virtue. Cohen's take is a parodic reversal of such thinking; to him, greed and ambition in service of yourself rises above other considerations (In this short passage, that is. Later in his saga it is shown that Cohen's selfishness has clear limits). This passage is actually anti-satire, or a parody of satire in Dryden's sense, in that it recommends a vice over a virtue. Creating comedy out of such a stance requires walking a fine line. What ultimately seals it as a joke is the specific nature of the described loot. Pratchett does not say "lots of gold", he uses a measure that is both unusual (the height of an equine mammal), specific, and alliterative ("heap", "higher", "horse"), as befits the comedic guidelines that were explored in section 2.3.

There are other places where it can be seen that Pratchett is not attempting to dismantle what Howard created. In *The Tower of The Elephant*, one of the earliest short stories of Conan, there is a statement of the differences between civilisation and barbarism.

Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing (Howard 2006: 82).

Compare that with the scene in *Interesting Times* (referenced earlier concerning repetition) where Cohen and his Horde tangle with some guards.

'I would rather die than betray my Emperor!'

'Fair enough.'

It took the captain only a fraction of a second to realize that Cohen, being a man of his word, assumed that other people were too. He might, if he had time, have reflected that the purpose of civilization is to make violence the final resort, while to a barbarian it is the first, preferred, only and above all most enjoyable option. But by then it was too late. He slumped forward. (Pratchett 1995: 132-133.)

The tone is more humorous in the latter passage – although not by much, the Howard quotation is not without levity – but the core concept is the same. People who live savage lives are more honest, straightforward and polite as a result. This is not to say that such a claim is absolutely true, merely that both authors make the same point in their fictive works. If Cohen were indeed a satirical reworking of a fantasy hero, it would be likely that he would be presented in at least somewhat negative light so that the values his approach to life represents would not seem so desirable, but this is not the

case. Cohen is a charming rogue, a violent yet honest and deeply likable, even admirable man.

It is not a necessity that he be this way. In *The Colour of Magic*, the earliest Discworld-book, there is a character that has also embraced the adventuring lifestyle, called Hrun the Barbarian. Hrun, while much closer to the archetypal fantasy hero in physical features than Cohen is, is also rather simple-minded, and while he is not exactly despicable he is still far from anything resembling a positive role-model, whereas Cohen can be seen as such. This suggests that Pratchett had the option – and knew he had the option – of creating a parody of fantasy-stories with a primarily negative emphasis, but ultimately chose not to do so. Another point that bolsters this view is Pratchett's limited use of dramatic irony. In a farcical text the character(s) would know less about their own circumstances than the reader, and make mistakes due to their limited or false understanding of their situation. This is not true for Cohen, who tends to be more aware of his surroundings than the reader. In *Interesting Times* the full extent of his plan to conquer Agateia is not revealed until the last third of the novel, and in *The Last Hero* the nature and motivations of his quest come fully to light only once the Horde are well on their way to do what they plan to do, although the title of the novel is a clue in this respect.

Appropriately, since parody is a particularly familiarising (or defamiliarising) genre, Russian Formalists have made some valid observations on its role in the greater arena of literature.

[Formalists] understood the literary situation in any period to be a complex system with its elements disposed in particular ways; parody could serve the function of reordering the elements in the system, allowing previously low-status elements to take on high-status positions. This

process was memorably described by Viktor Shklovsky as ‘the canonication of the junior branch’. (Dentith 2000: 33.)

It is in this way that “parody can contribute to the evolution of a literary style” (ibid.). Defamiliarisation of any phenomenon or object renews the reader’s experience of that object. Familiarisation (which really is only a particular form of defamiliarisation) of a genre renews and recreates the reader’s experience of that particular genre. Parody therefore has the opportunity to reconstruct heroic fantasy and prolong its life, introducing it to new audiences and reminding older fans of its pleasures.

Ways of doing this include bringing to the forefront aspects of fantasy that, while clearly a part of the genre, have thus far been peripheral issues. A wonderful example of this can be found in *The Last Hero* (2002). Cohen and the Silver Horde, in the course of their final adventure, meet an old acquaintance of theirs called Evil Harry Dread, along with some of his henchmen.

‘So how come you left the Evil Dark Lord business, Harry?’ said Cohen.

‘Werl, you know how it is these days,’ said Evil Harry Dread.

The Horde nodded. They knew how it was these days.

‘People these days, when they’re attacking your Dark Evil Tower, the first thing they do is block up your escape tunnel,’ said Evil Harry.

‘Bastards!’ said Cohen. ‘You’ve *got* to let the Dark Lord escape. Everyone knows that.’

‘And it wasn’t as if I didn’t play fair,’ said Evil Harry. ‘I mean, I always left a secret back entrance to my Mountain of Dread, I employed really *stupid* people as cell guards—’

‘Dat’s me,’ said the enormous troll proudly.

‘–that was you, right, and I always made sure all my henchmen had the kind of helmets that covered the *whole* face, so an enterprising hero could disguise himself in one, and those come damn expensive, let me tell you. (Pratchett 2002: 52.)

This passage could be seen as specific parody – the allusion to impractical helmets brings to mind *Star Wars*, for instance – but more importantly it is a general parody of an entire genre. Conventions of fantasy adventures, and what can be seen as forms of *deus ex machina*, are transformed into a type of honour code that both heroes and villains abide by, as though their entire lives were nothing but an elaborate game where sportsmanship is a highly relevant factor. Villains tend to escape because it allows the writers to prolong the story or create sequels, evil fortresses have back doors through which thieves may enter because otherwise there would be no story (this happens in *Conan the Barbarian*), and heroes, if captured, are left alive and placed in cells that always have some flaw which allows them to escape and triumph (not an uncommon feature in the stories of R.E. Howard). What were merely matters of convenience or necessity for the writer in original fantasy become, in a parodic text, central points deliberately manufactured by the characters themselves. Often the flaw comes in human form.

’And this is Butcher.’

‘Good name, good name,’ said Cohen, looking up at the enormous fat man. ‘Your jailer, right?’

‘Took a lot of finding,’ said Evil Harry, while Butcher grinned happily at nothing. ‘Believes anything anyone tells him, can’t see through the most ridiculous disguise, would let a transvestite washerwoman go free even if she had a beard you could camp in, falls asleep real easily on a chair near the bars and–’

‘—carries his keys on a big hook on his belt so’s they can be easily lifted off!’ said Cohen. (ibid.: 57.)

Jailers in fantasy tend not to be particularly bright or attractive. This is probably because being hideous makes them less sympathetic as people so that the reader will not mind terribly when the hero of the story skewers them during his escape. But in the case of Evil Harry’s dark little enterprise, the guard is fat and stupid because those are highly sought out job skills in his field. There is the code of villains to think of.

Furthermore, what is continued here is the contrast between the realities of human existence and the transcendental aspects of fictional worlds, although from another point of view. In *Interesting Times* Cohen was complaining about how the economic realities of farming got in the way of barbarian heroing. Here Evil Harry defends his actions from the opposite side of the same argument.

’They said I was an evil stain covering the face of the world,’ said Harry. ‘Not a word about bringing jobs to areas of traditionally high unemployment. (ibid.: 53.)

As with the helmets earlier, one does not usually think of the fiscal aspects of being a Dark Lord. The villains of fantasy sometimes wish to be rich, but often are evil just for the sake of being evil. It is a rare story where the villain of the piece stops to consider whether his quest for money and power is a cost-effective one. Evil Harry, then, becomes someone who sees himself in the role similar to that of a CEO of a corporation, where evil is simply something he does for a living, and thinks that he should be at the very least tolerated because his evilness is offset by the stimulus he brings to the local economy, much like a manufacturing company would justify small levels of pollution by referring to the number of people it employs and the amount of

taxes it pays. Also of note is the way in which this treatment lowers the image of the Dark Lord and allows the reader a feeling of superiority in relation to Harry. Instead of a mighty figure ruling with an iron fist, Evil Harry Dread becomes more akin to a small-time businessman, wrestling with public relations problems and feeling the stress of trying to keep ones enterprise afloat in an uncertain world. He is, in a word, familiarised.

There is a small element of satire in this, but not enough to make a mockery of a whole genre. As was mentioned above, in the opinion of many, parody does not need to ridicule its source material to be parody. Indeed, 'ridicule' would perhaps be an unnecessarily strong word for what occurs in the passages quoted above, as would be 'mocking'. It cannot be denied that the scenes are humorous, and that the humour is of a familiarising nature, but the tone is more benevolent than malicious. Rather than making fun *of* heroic fantasy, Pratchett is making fun *with* it. The tone is not one of derision but of celebration. And in this celebration and drawing attention to the peculiarities of the genre is a key to more fantasy:

[Parody puts] its critical function ultimately in the service of literary creation and continuity. In rebounding upon itself, leaving room for other versions or even suggesting the forms these might take, parody ensures that the tradition it revises will continue even beyond itself. (Hannoosh 1989: 116.)

Parody can be a positive influence. It serves as a catalogue of genre-specific conventions; it brings to the forefront everything – or most things – that are valuable or noteworthy about the source material it uses, and then plays with those things. A parody of fantasy thus becomes a kind of treasure trove for any aspiring writer of fantasy, because he can, through the reading of perhaps even just one parody-novel, absorb the practices and traditions created by the authors that have gone before him.

Of course, by gathering so many conventions and distilling them into their essences, parody may ultimately destroy a genre, because the effect this has is that it raises the standards of writing within that genre. Once it has become (almost painfully) obvious what types of characters, storylines and situations fantasy generally consists of, a new writer, if he is to achieve anything, has to either invent something new that he injects into the established context or use the same old set-pieces but use them better than anyone who has gone before him. After reading *The Last Hero*, an aspiring author will be wary creating a story where the hero sneaks into a fortress through a secret passage, gets caught and is placed in a dungeon from which he escapes, perhaps by outwitting some people by using a disguise. Likewise, the villain of the piece should probably have goals and motivations that make some sort of sense.

However, even though every new novel does need to be novel in some way, that certain something new can be simply be a new combination of old materials, and Pratchett has in fact suggested a new – or old – direction. The starting point of *The Last Hero* is lifted straight out of Greek mythology. The first hero in history, according to the Greeks, was Prometheus, the titan who stole the secret of fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, for which kindness he was sentenced to unending torment.⁷ In *The Last Hero*, Cohen and the Silver Horde decide to right a wrong by returning fire to the gods in the form of a barrelful of explosives. Two things are thus revealed for the attentive reader. First, that old myths can be used as material and inspiration for future works of fantasy. What could one, for example, create using the template of the story of the Minotaur? What about Romulus and Remus? Or perhaps, lying in wait within some dusty old tome on ancient legends there is a marvellous story that has been largely forgotten so that just by changing a few names and other details a writer could publish it under his own name and become a bestselling author. Certainly the *Odyssey* has been rewritten a few times and nobody seems to mind. For all that the most famous and loved work in the history of fantasy was inspired largely by northern mythologies – and I am speaking of course of *The Lord of the Rings* – the books that have followed have focused more on the genre's swash-buckling tradition than its mythical roots. Perhaps now would be a good

⁷ Interestingly, the choice of beast to repeatedly devour Prometheus's liver is biologically appropriate, since apparently eagles are one of the few animals that do not get bored even with very limited stimulus.

time for authors to explore that direction. This is the second point – fantasy still has life left in it.

Pratchett draws from a number of sources and uses the material he parodies as a springboard for his own storylines without feeling the need to be loyal to the originals when a suitable narrative road branches out on its own. When a humorous premise leads to a worthwhile and original (-ish) story, faithfulness to the parodied work becomes secondary. Thus, while parodying fantasy, Pratchett remains faithful to the spirit of fantasy – a good and inspiring story overrides other considerations. What makes fantasy special is that it is larger in scope than almost any other form of literature. Fantasy, as it began its existence, always had a transcendental subtext; it was about life and death, right and wrong, the meaning of life, sacrifice, the nature and place of mankind in the cosmos, and other such things. In *The Last Hero*, the Silver Horde's actions are motivated by their dissatisfaction with the very nature of human existence. One of their numbers, Old Vincent, chokes on a cucumber and dies, and the rest become incensed that someone who has led a life of adventure and danger could come to such a pointless and undignified end. So they decide to execute a plan to show what they really think of the way the gods of Discworld treat people as nothing more than insignificant playthings, and the act through which the Horde plan to demonstrate their displeasure is blowing up the gods' abode, returning the fire to its original owners, as it were. And yet when they learn, as their barrel of doom is about to go off, that the destruction of the home of the gods would also destroy the entire Disc and all the people in it, they choose to abort the plan and in doing so sacrifice themselves rather than let the lives of innocent people be ended.

So it can be seen that Pratchett's parody exists primarily on the surface level and does not extend very far into the deeper strata of the narrative. The jokes are weaved into the fabric of the story – to change the metaphor – but the story itself is not a joke. Cohen the arthritic barbarian is an actual hero, not someone pretending to be one or misunderstanding the circumstances and relevancy of his quest, and the underlying

theme of his story – as comical as it is – is one of nobility and search for meaning (although to be fair, early on this is not as easy to tell as it is during the later chapters, and higher meaning is clearly not the only thing he seeks). For all that Pratchett's barbarian characters are combinations of incongruous elements, which is to say they have been familiarised so that the reader may laugh at them – or sometimes with them – their adventures are in many ways serious, perhaps even inspiring, in nature.

4. Conclusion

While I wish to end this thesis by repeating Veale's (2004) warning concerning the assumption that humour has any absolutely necessary components, I must also note that Pratchett's work follows passably well the established theories of what constitutes and creates humour. If comedy is the result of either creating a superior viewpoint in regard to something or someone, or using a mode of storytelling that includes two opposing frames simultaneously, then the saga of Cohen the Barbarian qualifies on both counts, and for the same reason. Cohen and his Horde are familiarised fantasy heroes – they are brave, capable to the point of invincibility and (occasionally) unselfish, but they are at the same time more human than the adventuring characters that populate more traditional fantasy-novels. Whereas the original Conan is more akin to a superhero, and as such above petty everyday concerns, Cohen and the others suffer the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. Their almost exaggerated human frailty is opposed to their stature as great heroes, and is what allows the reader to see them and their exploits as comic, though not necessarily any less heroic because of that.

The manner in which Pratchett handles the material he parodies is not particularly polemical, nor is it purist. He uses whatever references he employs as a spring-board for his own stories, alternating between generally parodying the underlying genre and sprinkling the narrative with specific parodies of recognisable scenes and passages from other works of literature as he sees fit. The ultimate goal behind it all – as far as one can tell – being to entertain his readers and share the literary pleasures he has experienced with a wider audience. Whatever criticism of fantasy can be found in Pratchett's novels is narrow and incidental. Though parody can be a destructive force, it does not have to be and the stories of Discworld do not have that goal or effect. On the contrary, they have probably introduced thousands of people to the wonders of fantasy. Though some of the characters on Discworld are buffoons – Rincewind the inept yet surprisingly long-living wizard is one – Ghenghiz Cohen is not among them, and Pratchett's mostly positive treatment of his version of the archetypal fantasy-character strongly suggests

that he does not wish to see the fantasy-genre disappear even though he uses it to elicit a few laughs, which attitude shines through in a telling quip from the man himself: “Jailers don’t like escapism” (Pringle 2009).

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