

David Porter

TRANSLATING SARCASM

"Sarcasm I now see to be, in general, the language of the Devil; for which reason I have long since as good as renounced it." So wrote the Nineteenth Century essayist, Thomas Carlyle. The dictionary defines sarcasm as *"a sharp, bitter, or cutting expression or remark"* and further explains a sarcastic speaker as *"a sarcastic speaker or writer"*. My motive in presenting this essay is to express my concern about sarcasm as we so often experience it and I hope that my comments will prove thought-provoking to fellow readers of **"Self and Society"**.

To the best of my knowledge, the topic of sarcasm has never properly been discussed in any journal, although most people are aware of its existence. How many of us, perhaps when watching a film or television programme, have winced while listening to the characters making use of sarcasm in their conversations? How many, while reading a sarcastic article in a newspaper or magazines, have wondered what sort of person wrote it and what his motive was in doing so?

The problems posed by sarcasm are nothing new and nine centuries ago the Arab philologist and literary genius Abu Ali Hariri included this request in one of his prayers:

*"Guard us from error in narration,
And keep us from folly even in pleasantry,
So that we may be safe from the censure of sarcastic tongues".*

During the present century the late Kathleen Lonsdale, a scientist who was also a Quaker, included these comments in a lecture she gave in 1953:

"We must control our tongues and our pens. Violence in words can cause more unhappiness than a blow. To wound a man's spirit is worse than to wound his body and may, indeed, cause

a physical reaction. Caustic words can generate widening circles of bad temper and cause suffering where none was intended. We ourselves must forgive 'to seventy times seven!'"

An Analysis of Sarcasm

To begin, I have found it valuable to compare sarcasm with genuine humour, with these results:

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|--|---------------------------------|
| Sarcasm - is "not really funny" | Humour - is funny |
| - makes you feel bad | - makes you feel good |
| - is sneering | - is loving |
| - is insulting | - is complimenting |
| - is divisive | - brings people closer together |
| - doesn't work | - works! |

Secondly, I have attempted to classify types of sarcasm in this way:

- (a) Yiddishisms
- (b) Gay Sarcasm
- (c) Psychiatry and Sarcasm
- (d) Sarcasm in Entertainment
- (e) Sarcasm in Everyday Life

(a) **Yiddishisms**

Yiddishisms or Jewish Negativisms are here presented first since it was a short article about these, published in an American psychology periodical called the **Transactional Analysis Journal** (1971), that had suggested to me that they could be "*translated*" into English just like any other language. The author explains that "*negativisms began as a protective device to save Jews from pain*". She adds that "*it hurt less to predict the negative and to have the future come out that way than to speak optimistically and then be disappointed*". Consequently such negativisms, of which there are many, may be considered to be simply double-level messages, the sarcastic version masking a warmer, more nurturing version that could not so easily be expressed.

A Jewish mother, speaking of her son, might refer to him as a "*monster*" or bastard, though she is actually saying "*a darling*"

child whom I love dearly". If the son is particularly clever she might add that "he is too smart for his own good" which, "translated", means "he's such a brainy one and I'm very proud of him". If the son speaks enthusiastically of his future plans she might respond with "I should live so long". Again, "translated", this means "I should like to live to see that day and share that future joy with you".

Such negativisms are by no means confined to Jews, and the above examples are given simply as a starting point for our discussion.

(b) **Gay Sarcasm**

Sarcasm among homosexuals appears to be a defence, although a somewhat satisfactory one, against the fear of being hurt by one another or by the larger society. Like the Jews and certain other minorities, gays have been subjected to varying degrees of persecution. Consequently, gay conversations and writings often include negativisms of one kind or another. Hopefully, all these will disappear if and when gay life improves in quality.

An obvious example of gay sarcasm is the "**Bosie**" column in "**Gay News**", an anonymously-written column which has been in existence for some years now, in spite of reactions of anger or at least bewilderment from some of its readership coupled with inadequate and mystifying explanations from the editorship. For a period the column was produced by the salaried general secretary at that time of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. With complete insensitivity to anyone he was able to use his position in order to make barbed comments about prominent gay activists and eventually to go around giving talks on his exploits to local groups, being presented to them as a speaker of talent and wit. Lamentably, sneering criticism of this kind can easily turn well-intentioned reformers into figures of fun and ridicule. An ultimately self-destructive process, it is clearly best avoided in any campaigning organisation.

Gay sarcasm has also turned up in a number of plays and films and some examples of these are given in (d) below.

(c) **Psychiatry and Sarcasm**

A second article in the **Transactional Analysis Journal** (1973) provides an interesting anecdote of how a therapist successfully stopped a client from continuing to make use of sarcasm in her social life:

"Betty was incapable of handling a compliment. She would rather have you do almost anything to her than pay her a genuine compliment. She had a repertoire of dealing with these 'difficult' situations which included every imaginable possibility other than accepting the compliment. Sometimes, for example, she would take the statement of sarcasm. If someone said 'you sure are a good dancer, Betty!' she would answer 'yes, I know I am a poor dancer but do you have to make an issue of it?'

I gave Betty the following prescription: 'whenever anyone says something nice about you, you say, 'and furthermore' and then say three additional good things about yourself.' Many a time after that Betty's delightful and imaginative carrying out of the prescription provided much entertainment for the group. Now if someone said, 'you sure are a good dancer' she would reply 'and furthermore I am also smart, pretty, and a good cook!'

(d) **Sarcasm in Entertainment**

The world of entertainment seems always to have included a few sarcasts, some of whom have achieved public recognition through being labelled as "personalities". Much of the fun is derived from their audiences trying to guess how rude or aggressive they are going to be. Such a pastime was, I recall, associated with the late Gilbert Harding and a dictionary of quotations gives this conversation as an example:

Wynford Vaughan Thomas: "Try and seem full of the milk of human kindness".

Gilbert Harding: "I am full of the stuff, damn it. My trouble is that it gets clotted so easily".

Many plays and films have employed sarcasm. The 1930's play "**The Man Who Came To Dinner**" is about a selfish eccentric whose razor-sharp "wit" enables him to dominate a whole family. A musical film of the same period, "**Swing Time**", incorporates several examples of songs which are either sarcastic or sung in an ironic situation, a feature noted by at least two biographers of Jerome Kern, its composer, although not identifiable in any other of Kern's scores. One of the songs, "*A Fine Romance*", is sub-titled "*A Sarcastic Love Song*".

Some of the plays and films produced by or for gay people seem almost compelled to include at least one sarcastic character. Examples which spring readily to mind are "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" and "*The Killing of Sister George*". "*The Boys in the Band*", considered by the **Filmgoer's Companion** to be "*the first sympathetic homosexual comedy*", had a field day with its thespian sarcasts, and from the point of view of our discussion the play could be considered neither sympathetic nor comic.

(e) **Sarcasm in Everyday Life**

Sarcasm may well be a highly distorted expression of humour and even of affection though it appears also to embody a challenge, almost a cry for help. When we encounter sarcasm in everyday life I think it appropriate if we can confront the sarcasm in a determined yet loving way. Sarcasm can breed more sarcasm and if we respond to it with laughter, we only make matters worse.

We must also seek to free ourselves from sarcasm which means that we must not give double-level messages, nor gossip, nor ridicule others, nor allow our love to become "clotted", nor dominate others with what has been described as "*the lowest form of wit*".

Sarcasm can be challenged in other ways. For example, recently I was able to prevent copies of "**Punch**" from being bought for and displayed within the library where I work as colleagues and I had agreed that the magazine was no longer funny, many of its "*jokes*" being about alcoholism, mental illness, homosexuality, and race prejudice.

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Comments on this essay will be welcomed.

Alix Pirani

TWO DIVERSIONS

THE REBIRTHING after Harold Pinter

(A rather bare room in a squat. The Rebirther is curled up in a foetal position, head against a wall, to R. The Meditator sits in a meditation position on a cushion, to L.)

Rebirther: *(Grunts and strains intermittently for a few minutes)*

Meditator: *(Silence)*

Rebirther: I'm never going to get out . . .

Meditator: *(Silent)*

Rebirther: I'm stuck! Help! I can't get out . . . *(Grunts etc)*

Meditator: *(Silent)*

Rebirther: It hurts. It's terrible. When will it ever end?
I'll never get out.

Meditator: *(Turns to look at him)* You don't look very comfortable to me.

Rebirther: I'm being born and I can't get out . . .