

□ **'Unto Dust'** (Abrahams, Lionel, ed., (1965) *Bosman At His Best*, Cape Town & Pretoria: Human and Rousseau, 133-137)

In order to understand Herman Charles Bosman's humour you need to understand the meaning of irony as irony forms the basis of his humour.

Irony is:

“**a.** The use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning. **b.** An expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning. **c.** A literary style employing such contrasts for humorous or rhetorical effect.”

(Internet)

Ironic humour is based on contradictions, and things not being what they appear to be.

In his story "Unto Dust" he is looking at the levelling effect of death, that is, that death reveals that we are all equal. Bosman is a master of comic irony. And irony is often very subtle. Bosman will often slip in a phrase or remark that undercuts the meaning that he seems to present.

Bosman begins with attitudes to death and points to people's reverence for the dead and death which hides the reality of the fear of death.

In the first paragraph of the story, he is discussing our attitude to the death of a young person.

A girl of twenty who has died,
"a flower that withered before it bloomed," (133)
and people sigh about the sad loss of a young

life.

Then he throws in at the end of the paragraph
"that a couple of men in plain clothes from the landdrost's office are asking about cattle dip"
(133)

which implies that there was something sordid about the death.

"Cattle dip" brings us down to earth; it is contrary to the notion of a beautiful flower withering. It also points to the false sentiments of the people at the funeral.

In the second paragraph, Bosman deals with the death of an old person. We accept death as a natural end for old people. Old people know that they are near the end. Andries Wessels,

an old man, seems to be prepared for death, “he kept on murmuring to us how happy he was, with heavenly hosts and invisible choirs of angels all around him.”

(133)

But his dreams as he neared death were about “medium-sized angels, he said, and they had cloven hoofs and carried forks.”

So he was dreaming about devils (cloven hoofs and forks).

The humour lies in the fact that he continues to refer to them as angels. He was dreaming of devils, an indication that he feared death and though he would not admit it, he felt he was going not to heaven but to the other place.

His life had not been “the blameless path he had trodden from his earliest years.”

(133) He was really afraid and only pretending to be ready to die.

Ironic humour treats serious subjects with humour but the humour is a transparent veil over reality, in this case the fear of death.

As part of our reverence for the dead and death, we hallow the burial place of the dead and we choose special places for graves; “we Boers had properly marked-out places on our farms for white people to be laid to rest in, in a civilized Christian way instead of having to be buried just anyhow, along with a dead wild-cat, maybe, or a Bushman with a claypot, and things.” (134)

From this we gather that Boers are superior to Bushmen (who are equated with animals) and have proper respect for the dead. Then Bosman tells the story of Hans Welman which completely contradicts the notion of superiority and shows death truly as a leveller.

1. Hans Welman's bones cannot be distinguished from those of the "tall kaffir" (135). Only the dog knows the difference.

Despite the belief in their superiority, a dog's instinct is shown to be superior.

2. They give the Black man "a civilized Christian" burial and leave the bones of the white man "to be buried just anyhow, along with a dead wild-cat, maybe, or a Bushman with a claypot, and things."

Bosman, in showing death as the leveller, is making fun of racist notions of superiority. Death does not distinguish between human beings on the grounds of race.

If human beings are treated as equal in death, why not in life?
That is the serious question being asked under the ironic humour

of confusing the Black man's bones with Hans Welman's bones.

Confusion, a theme of the story, is also a source of humour: it is apparent in the first paragraph in the young woman's death. She is being treated as an angel but the reference to the 'cattle dip' and the 'men from the landdrost's office' indicate the opposite.

In the second paragraph we have Andries Wessels' confusion of angels with devils. In the Hans Welman's story there is the confusion of Welman's bones with the Black man's bones

The theme of hypocrisy is also a source of amusement. People at the funeral of the young woman refuse to face the facts that led to her death and instead focus on her youth.

Andries Wessels hides his fear of death under the pretence that he is happy to die.

In the Hans Welman story, the Boers pretend that they were able to sort out Welman's bones from the Black man's bones.

But they couldn't really tell the difference. The irony lies in the fact that they did sort out the bones, but they mistook the Black man's bones for the white man's bones and gave the Black man the "civilized Christian" burial.

Thus

they contradict the notion of racial superiority.

The narrators' attitudes also accentuate the humour in the story, there are two narrators; the main narrator, who has the fever that focuses him on thoughts of death and dying, tells the whole story and a second one, his friend, Stoffel Oosthuizen, who tells part of the story. They are both the voices of their community; they accept the norms and values of their group and resent and disapprove of criticisms and challenges to their standards. Their self-righteousness will not acknowledge contradictions even when they are obvious. As the reader sees the contradictions, the reader is made aware of the comic predicament of the Boers whose self-righteousness is shown to be naive.

