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The Death-Humor Paradox

(Based on contrastive study of Georgian and American humorous epitaphs and obituaries)

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Abstract:

Paradoxical juxtapositions of death and humor in today's world are on the rise. My intent in this paper is to refute wide spread opinion that Georgians do not laugh at death and conduct the contrastive study of American and Georgian humorous epitaphs and obituaries, in which they are culture - specific and have their own peculiarities and specific sub-types.

Keywords: death-based humor, paradoxical juxtapositions, humorous epitaph, hilarious obituary, contrastive studies.

Death is something we all must face one day and most people would not equate humor with this occasion - yet some apparently do. In some cultures there are tombstone epitaphs and obituaries that are unintentionally, and sometimes, intentionally amusing. It is true that humor is a foreign element in dealing with death and dying but it can help everyone who is involved in death bear the unbearable. The world's only "jollytologist" A. Klein states: "Death-based humor can a) provide relief for our anxieties about death; b) help us to cope with the death of others and c) ease the stress that often surrounds grief." G. Mikes points out: "Laughing at death gives us triple pleasure: 1) the pleasure of the joke itself; 2) the malicious joy of laughing at death's expense and 3) the pleasure of taming Death and fraternizing with him" (A.Klein, 1986:43). According to these quotations humor decreases stress and tension. It provides empowerment to those who feel helpless. Or as an American humorist E. Bombeck once put it "Laughter rises out of tragedy when you need it the most and rewards you for your courage."

The United States is commonly characterized as a "death-denying" society. Americans frequently attach fearful meanings to thanatological concerns and have taboo against frank discussions about death and dying (Leming and Dickinson, 2002). Although the United States is a "death-denying" society, Americans may be said to have an obsessive fascination with death and death-related phenomena (Durkin, 2003:48). As Bryant and Shoemaker observe, "Thanatological entertainment has been and remains a traditional pervasive cultural pattern in the United States."(Bryant, Shoemaker, 1977:2) Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in American popular culture. Television programming, movies, songs, the print media, games, jokes. Thanatological themes in U.S. popular culture function as a mechanism that helps Americans to deal with death (Durkin, 2003: 47).

Georgians, like other cultures, attach fearful meanings to death, dying, and the dead. In Georgia there is still a social taboo on concepts "death," "coffin," "graveyard," "the dead." When Georgians do refer to the topic of death, it is normative for them to use euphemisms. Alongside with this, one can come across "black humor jokes" and humorous epitaphs in Georgian culture but no one can see hilarious obituaries in Georgian newspapers. The softening of a strict taboo against death can be explained by intercultural relationships with different countries which slightly changed Georgian mentality. Georgians started to believe that death, dying, and the dead are traumatic topics, and can be better confronted if they are socially neutralized.

My analysis of American humorous epitaphs showed that there can be singled out two special groups of humorous epitaphs: 1) epitaphs describing the lifestyle of the deceased in a humorous way; 2) semi-didactic epitaphs stressing the vanity of life.

The first group can be subdivided into several subgroups:

1) Humorous epitaphs focusing on the manner of death: He got a fish-bone in his throat/and then sang an angel note (Schenectady, New York); Here lies the body of our Anna/Done to death by a banana; /It wasn't the fruit that made her go/But the skin of the thing that made her go (Enosburg Falls, Vermont).

2) Humorous epitaphs focusing on the relationships between the deceased and his/her members of the family, relatives, friends or even the society in which he/she lived.

Cold is my bed, but oh, I love it,
For colder are my friends above it
(Calvary Cemetery, Chicago, Illinois)

3) Humorous epitaphs in which the deceased's negative characteristic features are mocked at.

Here lies as silent clay
Miss Anabella Young
Who on the 21st of May
Began to hold her tongue
(Massachussetes, Hetfield cemetery)

Here lies the body of poor Aunt Charlotte
Born a virgin, died a harlot
(Death Valley, California)

4) Humorous epitaphs having advertisement style. It is a special type of a text where family members advertise themselves or their business. It bears characteristics of both: epitaph as well as advertisement and has twofold function: to memorialize the deceased, on the one hand, and to advertise the deceased's family members or their business, on the other hand.

Sacred to the memory of
My husband John Barnes
Who died January 8, 1803
His comely young widow aged 23,
And earns to be comforted
(Vermont cemetery)

5) Humorous epitaphs built on dialogue principle. American epitaphs having dialogical character consist of two parts: the main part (which is didactic-philosophical in most cases) and a humorous inscription inscribed by a passerby or the member of the deceased family. Such types of epitaphs are not encountered in Georgian culture as it is sinful and therefore banned to inscribe something on tombstones. As Georgian professor A. Arabuli says: "It is humiliation of the deceased" (Arabuli, 2007: 37). The aim of dialogical epitaphs in American culture is not to humiliate the deceased but show love of life.

Come blooming youths, as you pass by,
And on these lines do cast an eye.
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, so must you be;
Prepare for death and follow.

To follow you, I am not content

How do I know, which way you went.
(Waynesville, North Carolina)

6) Humorous epitaphs based on pun. For example: Here Lies Lester Moore/For Slugs/From A 44 /No Less /No more (Boot Hill Cemetery, Arizona).

As for semi-didactic epitaphs they teach people to consider the problem of life and death less seriously and to face death in a humorous way.

That's all folks (Hollywood Memorial Park, California).

In Georgian humorous epitaphs I have singled out two main groups:

1) Semi-didactic epitaphs: Mets vikavi shenistana, Shents gakhdebi chemistana (Once I was as you are now; As I am now, so must you be – my own translation), (Ruisi, Georgia).

Kho movkhutsdi, mere ra
Kho vitskhovre samkopi,
Atsi kide mivdivar,
Sadats ar var namkophi
(Tsalenjikha, Georgia)

(I have nothing to complain about. I was old when I died, now I am going to the place where I have never been – my own translation).

2) Epitaphs focusing on the manner of death and relationship with the living: They are very few in number but they do exist. Most of them are found in Kartli, Samegrelo and Guria (regions of Georgia). Some examples of this type are: Arka ikavi tu Kama ikavi me ke momkali ratskha ikavi (It does not matter what kind of mushroom you were, you poisoned and killed me - my own translation); Vchiodi glakhat var, glakhat var metki (identical to an American famous epitaph “I told you I was sick”), Mometsiet ukan (Follow me! – my own translation), (Guria); Saphlavshi vtsevar lamazad mortuli, chemi sidzisgan tokhit mokluli (I am lying in a grave, killed with a hoe by my son-in-law), (Ruisi, Kartli);

Differences between Georgian and American humorous epitaphs are the following:

1) Georgians never mock at the deceased's negative characteristic features. In Georgian culture it is impolite to speak badly of the deceased.

2) In American culture women feel enormous pressure to “lose virginity” or to become sexually active. A lack of sexual experience is a burden, a curse, or a liability – for both men and women. American epitaphs showed us that Americans can even laugh at virginity.

Here lie the bones of Sophie Jones
For her death held no terrors.
She was born a maid and died a maid
No hits, no runs, and no heirs
(Pennsylvania)

Returned – unopened (North Carolina Cemetery).

In Georgian culture virginity is greatly valued. There is something moral, mythical or superstitious value in virginity. It is associated with wholesomeness, purity and “goodness.” Georgians rush to embrace Western ways, but a cultural taboo on sex before marriage for women is one tradition that is still holding strong. The belief is rooted both in Georgia's conservative culture and the Georgian Orthodox faith. Georgian epitaphs show that in Georgia virginity is still praised: Tsavel umankod (I died virgin - my own translation), (Metekhi, Kaspi Region); Am tsutisoplidan ara mkhvda tsili, arts kmari mkavda, arts tu kmartsvili, zetsad indomet chemi

kortsili (I left the world having neither a husband nor a boyfriend, let me marry in heaven - my own translation), (Ninotsminda, Sagarejo region).

3) Georgians are often proud of having many children: Dautove 5 dzeni da 4 asuli (I left 5 sons and 4 daughters - my own translation), (Tsinamdgvriantkari, Mtskheta Region). But in American culture having many children is ridiculous: Here lies the father of 29/He would have had more / But he didn't have time (Moultrie, Georgia).

4) When Georgian women are widowed, they mourn for years and most of them even do not remarry. It does not matter if they were happily married or not, they often hide their feelings about their deceased "second halves." As for American women they do not hide their negative feelings towards the deceased and it seems that some of them do not feel sorry about their husbands' death.

Here lies my husbands 1-2-3
As still as men could ever be
As for the fourth: Praise be to God
He still abides above the sod;
Abel, Seth and Ceidy were the first 3 names
And to make things tidy I'll add his – James
(Shutesbury)

Analysis showed that differences between Georgian and American humorous epitaphs are of various types. In American culture humorous epitaph as a linguistic phenomenon is well-developed and has a long history. In Georgian culture it starts to develop. Differences are found in types of humorous epitaphs. Some special types of humorous epitaphs such as: humorous epitaphs having advertisement style, humorous epitaphs built on dialogue principle or based on puns are not encountered in Georgian culture. Georgian humorous epitaphs are semi-didactic and therefore less humorous than their American counterparts. Humorous epitaphs in both cultures do not arouse sorrow, repentance, or fear towards death in readers and are perceived less painfully.

Richard E. Meyer once said: "Dead people can be really funny sometimes" (Narvaez, 2003:140). What did the researcher want to say by these words? Perhaps he wanted to say that Death is no laughing matter but people often are. In a section of the newspaper that usually inspires tears – the obituary page – there are a few unique souls who would rather give the readers chuckle. They are the people who are remembered after the death as funny as they were in life. Some people write their final words and give their loved ones one last joke.

No one is perfect. Knowing it, Americans try to be honest in writing obituaries. They seldom lie in order to please the deceased's family members to make them happy. As for Georgians they like "to give compliments" to the dead. Sometimes the writers of the obituaries create unreal stories about the deceased and purposely exaggerate their merits. In Georgian obituaries every person is an angel. Wonderful parents, perfect partners, careful grandparents, high-quality professionals – this is how Georgians describe the dead in obituaries. If you read Georgian obituaries, you may think that every Georgian is perfect. This is an old tradition of Georgians – "Never speak ill of the dead."

Americans' sense of humor in dealing with the emotionally complex issue of death is well shown in the obituary of William "Freddie" McCulloch, written by Freddie's eldest son. It starts in this way: "The man. The myth. The legend. Men wanted to be him and women wanted to be with him. William Freddie McCulloch died on September 11, 2013. Freddie loved deep fried Southern food smothered in Cane Syrup, fishing at Santee Cooper Lake, Little Debbie Cakes,

Two and a Half Men, beautiful women, Reeses Cups and Jim Beam. Not necessarily in that order. He hated vegetables and hypocrites. Not necessarily in that order.” According to the obituary, he was a lover of women “Freddie adored the ladies. And they adored him. There isn’t enough space here to list all of the women from Freddie’s past. There isn’t enough space in the Bloomingdale phone book. A few of the more colorful ones were Momma Margie, Crazy Pam, Big Tittie Wanda, Spacy Stacy and Sweet Melissa.” The obituary describes William Freddie McCullough as one of the most interesting men in the world. But what does the obituary tell the readers about the person who created it? The son of the deceased told the Savannah Morning News that he read dozens of obituaries and found them too bland and formulaic for his father. He said: “I wanted to do things differently to honor him with an obit that fit him.”

Another example of hilarious obituary is much more interesting as it is written by the man who lost his battle with cancer. He wrote his own obituary a week before his death and called himself an amazing “Spider-man.” The obituary starts in this way: “Purmort, Aaron Joseph age 35, died peacefully at home on November 25 after complications from a radioactive spider bite that led to years of crime-fighting and years of long battle with a nefarious criminal named Cancer, who has plagued our society for far too long. Civilians will recognize him best as Spider-Man, and thank him for his many years of service protecting our city. His family knew him only as a kind and mild-mannered Art Director, a designer of websites and t-shirts, and concert posters who always had the right cardigan and the right thing to say.” The obituary is touching as well as funny. Purmort was aware that his fight with cancer was coming to a sad end and that is why he decided to write his own obituary. But rather than writing a solemn farewell to his family and friends, the 35-year-old decided to take this time to posthumously reveal that he was in fact Spider-Man.

American Val Patterson, who died of throat cancer in 2012, wrote his own first-person obituary. The obituary is funny and touching - with a hint of rebellion, and even some sarcasm. Patterson’s obituary is just a confessional: “Now that I have gone to my reward, I have confessions and things I should now say. As it turns out, I AM the guy, who stole the safe from the Motor View Drive Inn back in June, 1971. I could have left that unsaid, but I wanted to get it off my chest. Also, I really am NOT the U of U, the girl working there put my receipt into the wrong stack, and two weeks late, a PhD diploma came in the mail. I didn’t graduate. I only had about 3 years of college credit. In fact, I never did even learn what the letters “PhD” even stood for. For all the Electronic Engineers I have worked with, I’m sorry, but you have to admit my designs always worked very well, and were well engineered, and I always made you laugh at work.” Val’s obituary is written much like his life was spent. It reflects the qualities of what his life was: an experience. At the same time Val explains to his family and friends that he never actually received a Ph. D. from the University of Utah. It was a mistake, and the university sent him the wrong degree. He admits that he never knew what the letters P-H-D stand for. In his self-panned obituary Val speaks about his motto “anything for a laugh,” and he was true to his word to the end. Val’s wife explained the readers why her husband decided on a hilarious obituary. She said: “He thought most obituaries read like boring resumes and believed leaving the job to survivors just added to their stress. He wanted to set a new standard on how obituaries should be written.”

The analysis of American obituaries revealed that those ones who write self-obituaries before their death have two main purposes: either to show how brave they were in the battle with diseases and death or to show how great their sense of humor was. If someone writes a humorous obituary about the deceased after their death, their aim is to mark the readers’ attention towards the deceased’s personal weaknesses. Humor gives the writers possibility to mock at the deceased’s personal characteristics as well as his/her strange hobbies. But one thing is clear – with humorous epitaphs and obituaries people are better remembered.

Comparative analysis of American and Georgian obituaries also revealed that Georgian obituaries are formal, serious, laudatory, old-fashioned and dull. As for American obituaries they are funny and touching at the same time. Funny obituaries bring new life to a dying art. It is the genre that changes and transforms into something of a cult: obituaries as entertainment. Americans shift parameters of American cultural attitudes towards death and commemoration. Georgians' attitude towards death is also in the process of changing but death-based humor in Georgia is less developed.

As "Laughter is the best medicine" and humor is "a little anesthesia of the heart," (B. Mankoff's quotation) it should be wonderful if the people of all cultures used it to deal with death.

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