

Comic Relief or the Horrors of a Twisted Psyche?

Donna Teresa Pious

*Student, Department of English Literature and Languages
School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita University, Kochi, Kerala, India.*

Sonia B.Chellarian

*Assistant Professor
Department of English Literature and Languages
School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita University, Kochi, Kerala, India.*

Abstract

Clowns have been a welcome interlude that provides comic relief to minds besotted with the vagaries of life. But in modern times the role of a clown has gradually moved towards a negative image. This project tries to unveil the ugliness lurking behind the colourful facade of clowns, making them a potential threat in disguise.

The image of the evil clown is a development in popular culture, exploiting the natural dislike of clowns. The antagonistic threat perceived in clowns and the irrational fear of clowns, known as Coulrophobia, becomes a desirable trait that writers and movie makers wish to exploit in a villainous character through the usage of dark humour and horror elements.

This study also examines previous clowns and clown imagery characterized by humour to entertain people as opposed to the present day image of the demented or deviant clowns, the contemporary horror.

INTRODUCTION

“There is a word – albeit one not recognised by the Oxford English Dictionary or any psychology manual – for the excessive fear of clowns : Coulrophobia.”

Clowns have a multifarious appearance and play a wide assortment of guises in most cultures. A lot of people suffer from a devitalizing fear of clowns, and a lot more

people don't particularly like them but only a handful of studies have been done of the same. For example, Joseph Durwin published an essay titled "Coulrophobia and the Trickster", in which he weighs the fear of clowns and the profiteering use of this phenomenon in 'killer clown' films. He has also included a confabulation of the innuendo of clowns in paedophilia and the agitation of the masses encompassing child sex abuse, and converge on the themes of psychopathy, crime, tribal rituals and demonology. All of these nefarious motifs stand in complete opposition to the image of the clown as comic performers. Durwin's analysis further reveals that the word 'clown' not only evokes a traditional image of clown antics, colourful balloons, bright costumes and the preposterous painted faces in the circus ring or at carnivals: it also inspires misgivings, discomposure and repugnance. The vogue and scope of the fear of clowns can be seen on Yahoo! Answers where the public's answers relating to the terrifying nature of clowns range from a dislike of clowns to a fully fledged phobia. The term "coulrophobia" is "a recent coining in response to a surprisingly large amount of interest in the condition, particularly on websites, specifically devoted to the issue. If you hit search for "I hate clowns" in Google, you will find ihateclowns.com: a forum for people who hate clowns by Rodney Blackwell. The Facebook page "I hate clowns" has around 480,000 likes. There are circuses that conduct workshops so as to help visitors get over their fear of clowns. They let them watch the performers switch over to their clown persona. In 2006, in Sarasota, Florida, the general public's dislike for clowns took on a criminal turn. Dozens of fibreglass clown statues which were a part of the public art exhibition called "clowning around town" and also a recognition of the city's history as a winter sanctum for travelling circuses were broken, disfigured, heads slashed off, spray painted etc. Two statues went missing and their sad fates in the hands of those who loathe clowns can only be guessed.

Even children, who are supposed to like clowns, apparently don't. In 2008, a widely reported survey of 250 children (between the ages of 4 and 16) found that the children feared these "smiley circus entertainers" and most of them disliked even the images of clowns. Based on BBC's report on the study of the same, a child psychologist declared, "Very few children like clowns. They are unfamiliar and come from a different era. They don't look funny, they just look odd."

Unfortunately, most clowns are not trying to be odd. "Fun Personified" is what they are trying to be; silly and sweet. Therefore the question arises, "when did the clown, supposedly a jolly figure of innocuous, kid-friendly entertainment, become so weighed down by fear and sadness – a horror staple?"

"When did CLOWNS become so DARK?"

THROUGH THE AGES

Clowns in their most ancient forms were found in Egypt in the 5th dynasty around 2600 BC. But unlike the jesters and the rustic fools, these clowns played a more socio-religious and psychological role and it was the same person who played the role of the priest and clown.

Peter Berger writes, “It seems plausible that folly and fools, like religion and magic, meet some deeply rooted needs in human society.”

The “clown” developed from the zanni “rustic fool” of the early modern commedia dell’arte, which was originally based on the “rustic fool” characters of ancient Greek and Roman theatre. The English word for clown was first recorded in the year 1560 as ‘clowne’ or ‘cloyne’ with the generic meaning of “rustic, boor, and peasant”. The origin of the word is unclear, though it could be of Scandinavian origin. Soon after the 1600s, the sense of clowns as referring to a professional or habitual fool or jester developed based on the Elizabethan characters such as that of Shakespeare’s “Othello” and “The Winter’s Tale”. Inspired by the Commedia dell’arte, the Harlequinade came into being in the 17th C England. It was now that the stock character received its name – Clown. Though a foil for Harlequin’s sly and dextrous nature, the clown was a buffoon who was more of a comical idiot than a jester. He was dressed as a lower class character in tattered servant’s garb. Clowns have a varied tradition: with lots of variations in their costumes and performances. The most popular modern clown character is the “Auguste” or the “red clown” with outlandish costumes and exaggerated footwear generally designed to entertain large audiences from a distance.

During the 19th C to the mid 20th C, the tradition of the circus clowns developed out of the earlier comedic roles in theatre or variete shows. Many circus clowns became hugely popular and vital to the whole circus act. Joseph Grimaldi portrayed the first mainstream clown and created the white face make up. In the early 1800s, the role of the clown in the harlequinade that formed part of British pantomimes were expanded by Joseph, notably at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Sadler’s Wells and Convent Garden theatres. He became so influential on the London comic stage that the harlequinade clowns came to be known as “Joey”, and Grimaldi’s white face make up and nickname were and are still used by clowns all over the world.

Clowns usually perform the role of a fool whose everyday actions and gigs become ridiculous to normal audiences. In many countries and cultures across the world this kind of comedy has a long history. Many writers argue that due to its huge popularity and widespread use, such comedy has now become a part of human life.

Although clowns are originally performers of comedy, characterized to entertain people, the image of the evil clown is a development in recent popular culture in which the playful image of the clown is rendered as disturbing or irksome through the

use of horror elements and dark humor.

The origin of this modern archetype of the evil clown is unknown. The stock character has appeared infrequently during the 19th C in works such as Edgar Allan Poe's shortstory, "Hopfrog" where a court jester takes his revenge on the king and his cabinet members, for abusing him and his friends.

Evil clowns occupied a small part even in drama – the 1874 work "La Femme de Tabarin" by Catulle Mendes and in Ruggero Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci", murderous clowns have been featured as central characters.

The concept of the evil clowns has been related to the irrational fear of clowns, known as "Coulrophobia". According to Mark Derry, a cultural critic, the evil clown is an icon of our times. Clowns are often depicted as murderous psychopaths. The modern stock character of the evil clown has been further popularized and by Stephen King's horror novel "It" which was published in the year 1986. It became the first to introduce the fear of clowns to a modern audience and the fear was officially recognised after "It" 's release. The story follows the exploits of seven children as they are haunted by a shape-shifting, child-killing evil, that exploits the fear and phobias of its victims in order to disguise itself as it hunts its prey. The monster goes by the name Pennywise the Dancing Clown and it entices children to come near it. It has been around for millions of years and has an extraterrestrial origin. Its most common disguise is that of a clown (because clowns are inherently terrifying) with "funny tufts of hair on either side of his bald head", "a big clown – smile painted over his mouth", and a bouquet of balloons that float against the wind to attract children, its most preferred prey. The novel's first scene is the infamous sewer scene, in which he uses little Georgie Denbrough's toy sail boat to lure him into a rainy sewer. Pennywise offers Georgie the balloon along with his boat, and when the kid reaches in to get it, Pennywise rips his arm out of the socket and gobbles it with horrible and ragged teeth like that of a lion. Georgie bleeds to death in the gutter. All 'It' wants is to eat people and people taste better when they are frightened. 'It' delights in causing psychological, emotional and physical agony in people. The role of Pennywise played by Tim Curry in "It"'s film adaptation had a deep-seated effect in the minds of the children who belonged to the 1980's and 1990's as one of the most "iconic killer clowns" till date and this stock character played a major in the inflation and coadunation of coulrophobia in the popular culture. King leaves no doubt in the minds of the readers that the fusion of Bozo and Bogeyman is a homicidal pedophile clown, also known as John Wayne Gacy. Ofcourse Pennywise is much more than a Gacy replica.

In any discussion of the shadow the evil clown casts over the mass unconscious, the subject of Gacy is unavoidable. An American sadistic killer and rapist, arrested in 1978, Gacy was convicted of the torture – murder of 33 young men and boys. In 1994

he was executed by lethal injection. He will live on in pop nightmares as the “killer clown” an alias inspired by his Pogo the clown persona, which he adopted while performing for hospitalized children and other community events. The story of John Wayne Gacy is of utmost importance, as it was the “water shed moment in popular culture” when people began to question clowns, for what lay beneath their greasepaints and oversized costumes.

The evil clown archetype is related to the sense of dislike caused by the inherent elements of coulrophobia. However, in popular culture the concept of the evil clowns have an independant position. It can be argued that “The concept of evil clowns and the widespread hostility it includes is a cultural phenomenon which transcends just the phobia alone.” The presence of coulrophobia among today’s public is partly because of reading about evil clowns like Gacy, Bozo the clown, as well as some of the other similar fictional and non – fictional evils.

Though clowns are still popular for children’s parties and the image of Ronald McDonald is still evergreen, most children are afraid of clowns, as clowns represent an unfamiliar figure to them: “a relic of an era bygone where things could be taken at face value.”

The University of Sheffield conducted a study and concluded “That clowns are universally disliked by children. Some even found them quite frightening and unknowable.” This must be because the clowns make up hides their faces and makes them potential threats in disguise.

According to Tim Cahill, the biographer of Gacy, one of the main reasons why Gacy liked clowning was because “you can get away with a lot of things when you are a clown, because people see you as something funny. They don’t know what’s beneath the greasepaint.” As he famously observed, “A clown can get away with murder.” Anyone wearing a mask cannot be trusted.

A faux human, like a clown is very unsettling. For something not entirely human to start behaving like one can be very scary. We would never want the man at the circus to be laughing for all the wrong reasons. Clowns are a lot like children! They are sweet, mischievous and comedic, but its evident that something far more sinister and dark , lurks underneath.

Clowns were originally meant to create in the human mind the feeling that violence and danger can be humorous and ultimately ephemeral and harmless without any serious consequences. So evil clown violates and unsettles something very primal in us that can be dated back to our diaper days. The physical appearances of clowns lend themselves very well to horror. The specific ways in which they are expected to behave- serene, idiotic etc; can with very little effort be distorted into an appearance that finds delight in torturing its victims.

Phil Snyder, a magazine publisher and a long time obsessive of clowns in his essay “Exorcism Shameful Visions” goes right to the centre of clown repulsion. As he recalls his first encounter with clowns at a Shriner circus, he writes, “Somehow, I knew that something was wrong. Why the pasty makeup? Why the funny clothes? They tried so hard to make us laugh that they made me nervous. I was uncomfortable in their presence because I knew that they were really just people in disguise. When you realize that this grotesque creature is another person in makeup, the clown act loses its humour and becomes intimidating. You begin to wonder what they are really upto.” Knipfel agrees with Snyder’s sentiments, saying “There was something very insidious about (clowns). You never knew what was going on behind the greasepaints and those hidden eyes, those mouths carved into artificial smiles.”

Our repulsion towards clowns is because of our suspicion that the happy face of the clowns is Jekyll to a far darker Hyde: a sadistic sexual predator or a remorseless killer or a frustrated alcoholic. The deepest or maybe the darkest secret concealed behind the masks of the clowns is that of human mortality. The clown “mouths carved into artificial smiles” are horrifying because they entomb a spontaneous expression of happiness. They only other time our smile fixes in place is for display in an open casket. The white face of the clowns are a death mask with a pinch of humour.

Author William Willeford in his work “The Fool and his Sceptre”, points out that in the medieval mystery play, the characters of the fool and death were often interchangeable. The fixed expressions of the clowns and the neurotic antics confuse the humans with the wind up doll, the marionette or the robot. And the living dead: with his gaunt pastiness and blood red lips, the clown can be compared to a vampire, a companion bought into light in the Batman comic: Bloodstorm, where a host of undead gather around the Joker, in a pitched battle against the caped crusaders.

Clowns have always instituted fear in the minds of the people. Their behaviours are largely based on drunkardness, poverty and homelessness. Of course, such people are made fun of because they are scary. Homeless people usually wear worn out clothes and in the wrong size. Similarly, clowns in their oversized shoes and mismatched clothes, looks weird and most often funny. But later on we realize that making fun of the homeless is not exactly fun. The pratfalls of the clown are based on the tripping and falling of the drunkard. The red nose and the flushed cheeks of the clowns can be directly linked to that of the drunks, who also slur their words.

Clowns are popularly considered as non-human, an alien mass living and moving among us, as in the Hollywood movie “Killer Klowns from Outer Space”. It is

the story of how a sadistic army of extraterrestrial beings (who look a lot like clowns) land in the American town of Crescent Cove. The army of clowns uses a variety of innocent methods to capture its victims. Since the methods used by the clowns appear to be harmless, the townspeople are unaware of the danger they are in, until it's too late.

Using clowns to instil fear in the minds of people, is in a way exploiting a more sub-conscious aspect of nostalgia, since most people will have a memory of a time, when clowns were a group of innocent tricksters performing petty acts for the amusement of the audience, and a time when these clowns weren't quite such a happy thing. The fact that clowns were once good and are capable of evil is something everyone learns someday and that is how fear is created.

Clowns became to be regarded as scary within a short span of a generation or two. Though it may seem that in the recent years, the popular media has made the figure of clowns a very malignant one, the truth is that their very origin has a dark side which has only come into light in the recent years. Throughout the millennium, clowns have been presented in various forms; as court jesters, fools, harlequins, and as mythological creatures. What is to be understood is that they were present as figures of negation, especially in Europe, during the middle ages from where we have a large analysis on them.

Clowns or fools were the only figures allowed to mock the authority, bring the absurd tyrannies into light and speak the truths that the others were not allowed to speak or were afraid to openly utter. They were also the ones who delivered bad news that no one else dared to while the basic function of clowns were that of performers who had a variety of skills such as acrobatics, juggling, story-telling and magic, they also had a political significance which went beyond the preposterous antics.

We see bad clowns throughout history : Mr.Punch and Harlequin, the king's fool etc. Researcher Ben Radford argues that "Bad clowns have the ability to change with the times." You may have considered these red nosed jokers as creepy, certainly not as dangerous- a grave mistake. Clowns never give away their identities. The norms and notions followed by the civilized society don't apply to them. Who else can offer candy to children and get away with it?

Psychologists claim that the positive images of clowns are today being replaced by the negative images. "You don't really see clowns in those kinds of safe, fun contexts anymore. You see them in movies and they're scary," says Dr.Martin Antony, a professor of psychology at Ryerson University, Toronto.

CONCLUSION

Have the sad, bad and evil clowns done irreparable damage? There are two very different visions on the future of clowns:

1. Clowning down Dark Paths: Twisted Psyche -

Andrew McConnell Stott, Dean of Undergraduate Education and an English professor at the University of Buffalo, SUNY commented saying that, “I think we’ll find that the kind of dark carnival, scary clown will be the dominant mode, that the figure will continue to persist in many different ways,” with reference to characters like Krusty the Klown on *The Simpsons*, who is a funny but weary clown, or Heath Ledger’s version of *The Joker* in the *Batman* series, who is a “terrifying force of unpredictable anarchy”. When we look at it more closely, the evil archetype of clowns are not an inversion of the old day rustic fools, but an amplification of all the traits that we have been seeing over the years. Some writers say that the concept of the scary clown is as dependable as the monster under the bed is “nostalgically fearful”, which has been already overused to the maximum making it a clichéd cliché.

2. Clowning as a Comic Relief: funny and positive image of clowns-

According to David Kiser, Director of talent for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus the positive image of clowns and the love for them will not diminish in the slightest. But there is always a shortage for good clowns and it is these good clowns that keep the art of clowning alive. “ If the clown is truly a warm and sympathetic and funny heart, inside of a person who is working hard to let that clown out...I think those battles (with clown fears) are so winnable.” says Kiser. “It’s not about attacking, it’s about loving. It’s about approaching from a place of loving and joy and that when you really look at it, you see, that it’s really genuine, it’s not fake.”

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