

# **‘Fading into the Foreground’: Comedy in Terry Pratchett’s *Carpe Jugulum***

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## **Synopsis**

This paper examines the effects of the comedy in Terry Pratchett’s vampire thriller, *Carpe Jugulum* (1998). Pratchett is often described as a ‘satirist’, but this in turn raises the interesting questions of what it actually means to be a satirist in the Fantasy genre, and of whether ‘satire’ is actually an appropriate term for the approach Pratchett takes. Using, in broad terms, the theories of humour offered by Sigmund Freud (1905, 1928) and Ted Cohen (1990), we consider the comic *techniques*, the *modes* of the comedy, and the *pragmatic* effects of the comedy in the text as a whole. The paper argues that *reversal* is the key technique employed by Pratchett, and that this technique that is employed in each of the three modes of comedy found in the text, *satire*, *mockage* and the *absurd*. Although we argue that Pratchett’s use of humour is *tendentious*, that is, it is humour with a purpose, we argue that, contrary to the popular perception, it is actually the absurd that seems more central to Pratchett’s comedy rather than the satiric, and this is because it best serves the subversive desire in Pratchett to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people’s mental habits to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to re-examine rules and institutions. Pratchett, in fact, uses the absurd to hide the true economy of our symbolic universe in full view (he ‘fades it into the foreground’). But, further to this, we ultimately argue that the pragmatic effect of the comedy is to (absurdly) target comedy itself, especially the way in which *comedy legitimises*. *Carpe Jugulum* works so that the horrific actions of the vampires, the killings and the assaults that we constantly witness also *fade into the foreground*: Whatever the vampires explicitly do, however openly horrific, the humorous mood constantly suspends our full condemnation. *Carpe Jugulum* is a kind of meta-comedy, a comedy about the conditions of (im)possibility of comedy itself, a self-reflexive impulse which means that the text (absurdly) subverts itself.

## 1. Introduction

In a previous paper<sup>1</sup>, I asked what it means to approach political/ideological issues within the medium of the Fantasy genre through the example of Terry Pratchett's vampire thriller, *Carpe Jugulum* (1998). It was mentioned in the introduction to that article that *Carpe Jugulum* is one of Pratchett's most political works, but it should be mentioned alongside this that the novel is also one of Pratchett's *funniest*, and it is to the effects of the humour in *Carpe Jugulum* that we turn here. Pratchett is often described as a 'satirist', but this in turn raises the interesting questions of what it actually means to be a satirist in the Fantasy genre, and of whether 'satire' is actually an appropriate term for the approach Pratchett takes.

This paper, then, will look at the comedy in *Carpe Jugulum* using, in broad terms, the theories of humour offered firstly by Sigmund Freud (1905, 1928) and secondly by the, more recent, Ted Cohen (1990). We will first consider the comic *techniques* employed in *Carpe Jugulum*, before moving on to the *modes* of the comedy and their particular effects (along with a parallel consideration of the appropriateness of labelling Pratchett a satirist), and then, finally, the *pragmatic* effects of the humour in the text as a whole.

There is, of course, a wealth of potential material in *Carpe Jugulum*, but this paper will confine itself to a narrow examination of the comedy in relation to the vampire characters.

## 2. Vampires or Seripmav? Pratchett's Reversals or Discworld in a Spin

The Magpyrs, the vampire family to which we are introduced in the wittily titled *Carpe Jugulum*, are certainly among Pratchett's finest humorous creations, and most of "the yield[ing] of humorous pleasure" (Freud, "Humour" 427) in their regard relies on *reversal*.

Most obviously, Pratchett co-opts a creature that is seen as the symbol of "the 'bestiality' of human origins", the *regressive* and rank *oral* vampire (Parkin-Gounelas 200), as an *anal-retentive* champion of *progressive* values, of all things. On the political level, there is great fun to be had by making Count Magpyr, this representation of a "totemic animal" (Ibid. 208), sound like a social democrat:

"[The village of Escrow is] a model for the future. Vampires and humans in harmony at last. There is no *need* for this animosity, just as I have always said."

(*Carpe Jugulum* [hereafter, *CJ*] 181)

Moreover, the Count's embrace of the 'progressive' on a personal level also opens the door for a number of extremely funny, reversals. These vampires not only do not fear the sunlight, but actively want to go sunbathing (*CJ* 135). They can not only tolerate garlic, but seemingly eat it with great pleasure (*CJ* 89), and, far from being blood-seeking monomaniacs, they are also partial to a drop of fine wine ("Think of it as grape blood" (*CJ* 136)).

And yet these reversals are not only humorous because they reverse our *expectations* of vampire behaviour, but also because they reverse our *values*. Look what happens when the Count's attempts to

'progress' away from usual vampire behaviour are resisted by his daughter, Lacrimosa, as he offers her wine:

"Yuck," said Lacrimosa. "I'm not touching that, it's squeezed from *vegetables!*"

"Fruit, I think you'll find," said the Count calmly. He took the bottle from his son and removed the cork. "A fine claret, I understand. You'll try some, my dear?"

His wife smiled nervously, supporting her husband but slightly against her better judgement.

"Do we, er, are we, eh, supposed to warm it up?" she said.

"Room temperature is suggested."

"That's *sickening*," said Lacrimosa. "I don't know how you can bear it!"

"Try it for your father, dear," said the Countess. "Quickly, before it congeals."

"No, my dear. Wine stays runny."

(*CJ* 135-6)

This superbly comic resistance reverses, of course, our usual evaluation of 'normal' and 'eccentric'. Seen from the perspective of a blood drinker, behaviour that we would value as 'normal' (drinking wine) comes to seem utterly eccentric if not perverse – *It is sickening; how you can bear it?! And this reversal of 'normal' continues when her challenge to her father is thrown back at her by her mother (the Countess) and brother (Vlad):*

"I thought you'd like this sort of thing, dear," said the Countess. "It's the sort of thing your crowd does, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" said the girl.

"Oh, staying up until gone noon and wearing brightly coloured clothes, and giving yourselves funny names," said the Countess.

"Like *Gertrude*," sneered Vlad. "And *Pam*. They think it's *cool*."

Lacrimosa turned on him furiously, nails out...

"That's none of your business!"

"Lady Strigoiful said her daughter has taken to calling herself Wendy," said the Countess. "I can't imagine why she'd want to, when Hieroglyphica is such a *nice* name for a girl. And if I was her mother I'd see to it that she at least wore a bit of eyeliner-

"Yes, but *no one* drinks *wine*," said Lacrimosa. "Only real weirdos who file their teeth blunt drink wine-

"Maldora Krvoijac does," said Vlad. "Or 'Freda,' I should say-

"No she doesn't!"

"What? She wears a silver corkscrew on a chain round her neck and sometimes there's even a cork on it!"

"That's just a fashion item! Oh, I know she *says* she's partial to a drop of port, but

really it's just blood in the glass. Henry actually brought a bottle to a party and she fainted at the smell!"

"Henry?" said the Countess.

Lacrimosa looked down sulkily. "Graven Gierachi," she said.

"The one who grows his hair short and pretends he's an accountant," said Vlad.

(CJ 136-7)

From the point of view of young vampires desperate to define themselves against their 'traditional' parents, the (to us) mundane wearing of brightly coloured clothes, drinking port and being called Wendy, Pam or Henry seems incredibly exotic, rebellious and desirable. Yet, this double reversal (of our expectations and of how we evaluate 'normal') is not the only one that Pratchett offers. Indeed, the scrutiny of the vampires offered by their servant, Igor, doubly turns the entire relation between the world and *representation of the world* around.

Igor, who seemingly has been with the Magpyr family for generations, offers a commentary on the 'new' vampires that is unremittingly negative. His complaint is that the new Magpyrs do not follow the 'traditions' of vampiring, 'traditions' being, for example, having a castle with squeaky doors and guttering candles, wearing evening dress all the time, owning a coach with black plumes and employing a servant called Igor who speaks with a lisp and walks with a limp! The new Count Magpyr is not interested in these 'traditions' that Igor thinks essential for vampires and is constantly scolding him for trying to uphold them:

"Igor! On to Lancre!"

The coachman turned.

"Yeth<sup>2</sup>, marthter."

"Oh, for the last time, man... is that any way to talk?"

"It'th the only way I know, marthter," said Igor.

"And I told you to take the plumes off the coach, you idiot."

The coachman shifted uneasily.

"Gotta have black plumeth, marthter. It'th *tradithional*."

"Remove them at once!"

(CJ 15)

From Igor's point of view, not upholding the traditions ("Being a vampire'th about continuity, ithn't it?") (CJ 86) is akin not being a 'proper' vampire, a 'proper' vampire like the old Count Magpyr whom Igor reveres:

"Huh! Now the *old* Count, he *wath* a gentleman of the old thchool. *He* knew how it all workth. Proper evening dreth *at all timeth*, that'th the rule!"

(CJ 85)

The comedy here relies on what is apparently another double reversal. First, there is the reversal of what we usually think is the relationship between the arts and the world. For the reader, the collapse in our expectation of the vampires' behaviour derives from our meta-textual knowledge of vampires in literature and film. For us, we simply do not expect vampires to eat garlic or enjoy fine wine or call themselves Henry – Bram Stoker's *Dracula* certainly did none of these things! But, for Igor, this meta-content has collapsed into his diegetic world. He demands, in the name of 'tradition', that the version of vampires in his diegetic real conforms to the version of vampires that exists in the meta-content beyond the text. He demands, in other words, that, rather than literature/film being a reflection of reality, *reality become a reflection of literature/film* (with all the clichés being read as 'traditions'). Second, there is a reversal of what we usually think is the relationship between the world and images of the world. Igor's demand is based on the notion that reality is determined by conformity to expectations of what the world looks like. Look at his extensive complaints in the following extract regarding the Magpyrs' failure to 'get the details right':

"D'you know what thith lot have done?"

"Do tell..."

"They've oiled the hingeth!" Igor took a hefty pull of Nanny's special brandy. "Thome of thothe thqueakth took bloody *yearth* to get right. But, oh no, now it'th, 'Igor, clean thothe thspiderth out of the dungeon' and 'Igor, order up thome proper oil lamph, all thethe flickering torcheth are tho fifteen minuteth ago'! Tho the plathe lookth old? Being a vampire'th about continuity, ithn't it? You get lotht in the mountainth and thee a light burnin' in thome carthle, you got a right to expect proper thqueakin' doorth and thome old-world courtethy, don't you?"

"Ah, right. An' a bed in the room with a balcony outside," said Nanny.

"My point egthactly!"

"Proper billowing curtains, too?"

"Damn right!"

"Real gutterin' candles?"

"I thpend *ageth* getting' them properly dribbly. Not that anyone careth."

(CJ 85-6)

'Vampire' is a term that can be applied, according to Igor, only to those who look like and perform like vampires!: Traditional gentlemen who offer old-world hospitality in a castle that has squeaky doors, billowing curtains and guttering candles. Rather than treating the trappings of vampiredom as an *effect* of their being vampires, *Igor treats 'vampires' as being an effect of the trappings of vampiredom*. They do not, according to his lights, have squeaky doors, billowing curtains and guttering candles *because* they are vampires but rather their having them *makes* them vampires. And, clearly, by these criteria, the Count and his family are not 'proper' vampires. The apparent relation between the world and images of the world is reversed – this is a place in which *appearance generates reality*.

To sum up this section, then, Pratchett's comic technique with regard to the vampires in *Carpe Jugulum* is reversal; indeed, his series of double reversals is enough to send the reader into a highly amused spin. There is the double reversal of our expectations of vampires and concomitant reversal of our evaluation of 'normality'. Then there is the double reversal, instigated through Igor, of the relation between the world and representation of the world (through both literature/film and images) in the sense of literature and in the sense of signifiers). Just from the short discussion above, we can see that Pratchett's technique is highly amusing and playful, but also provocative, challenging us as it does to compare the start and end points of the reversals. Yet, it is, of course, a mistake to assume that Pratchett's comedy is structured as pure, 'innocent' entertainment. It is entertaining, of course, but, in Freudian terms this is *tendentious* humour, humour with a purpose. It is to the modes of humour in *Carpe Jugulum* and the question of whether Pratchett is properly a satirist that we turn next.

### 3. The Modes of Comedy in *Carpe Jugulum*

As mentioned in the introduction, it is plain that the common view of Pratchett is as a satirist. Let us first look at some example quotations to get a flavour of how he is regarded:

One of the most popular **satirists** in the history of British literature is the recently knighted Sir Terry Pratchett, whose internationally best-selling Discworld series has sold more than 55,000,000 copies. ("Satire" my emphasis)

[Pratchett] is Tolkien with a sharper, more **satiric** edge. ("The Praise!" my emphasis)

[Pratchett] is a bomb-throwing **satirist**. (Neil Gaiman quoted in "Through" my emphasis)

Terry Pratchett is the greatest living **satirist**...if one had to boil Terry down to one thing in particular it would be this [...] He has this incredible opportunity to be a **satirist** of our own world. (Vadim Jean quoted in "Through" my emphasis)

It is certainly worth pausing for a moment, however, to consider whether it is true without complication that Pratchett is a simple satirist. Three questions present themselves: 1. If Pratchett *is* a satirist, just who/what is being satirised? 2. Is satire the whole story? Is satire so central to Pratchett that it is useful/accurate to label him this way? 3. What exactly is 'satire' in the context of the Fantasy genre?

We proceed here with caution because, of course, our subject here is only one book of the thirty five in the Discworld sequence, and we confine ourselves to only one group (the vampires) within this single novel, but we must, as it were, begin somewhere. And our very first point must be a working definition of 'satire', which we take from the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

A mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn. (Baldick 299)

The first obstacle that we run into with this definition in mind is that *Carpe Jugulum* is a *Fantasy* text, and vampires are *not real*. Clearly, there is not much purpose in satirising in-existent vampires, but it is important here to remind ourselves that the fact that Fantasy is *structured* as real (what I call, the Fantasy *Pragmatikos*) allows the mirroring of our own social reality, so the question of the satire ultimately becomes one of recognition: What is the extent that we can recognize ourselves in the text? And are there enough *overt* references in the text to enable a transposition of what is before us (in the mirror) onto an equivalent in the real world of our experience?

The answer to this must, I think, be a qualified 'yes'. Turning back for a moment to some of the reversals mentioned above as a means of generating comedy through the Magpyrs, it seems evident that, beyond the comedy itself, Pratchett does attempt to expose "the failings of" real-world "individuals, institutions, or societies". Firstly, I think we can say that he targets those who use the political rhetoric of 'progress' when they are obviously not progressive. It is clear that, although the vampires speak like social democrats, their political motivation is most certainly not social- democratic but actually Fascist- authoritarian. Consider the following extract where the expressed values of 'progress' are explicitly juxtaposed with a Fascistic interpretation of the survival of the fittest:

The Countess walked over to the window and gingerly pulled aside the curtain...grey light filtered in. [...] The Countess shuddered and turned her face away.

"You see? Still harmless. Every day, in every way, we get better and better," said Count Magpyr cheerfully. "Self help. Positive thinking. Training. Familiarity. Garlic? A pleasant seasoning. Lemons? Merely an acquired taste. [...] There's a new world coming, and there won't be any room in it for those ghastly little gnomes or witches or centaurs. [...] Away with them! Let us progress! They are unfitted for survival!"

(CJ 181-2)

*They are unfitted for survival!* This is a speech that chimes sinisterly with Vlad's earlier, Fascistic aside:

"The place is just full of... well, remnants. I mean... centaurs? Really! They've got no business surviving. They're out of place. And frankly all the lower races are just as bad. The trolls are stupid, the dwarves are devious, the pixies are evil and the gnomes stick in your teeth. Time they were gone. Driven out."

(CJ 113)

*Away with the lower races! Drive them out! Let us progress!* This is most certainly not a progressive political programme as most of us would understand it.

Pratchett's second real-world target would seem to be those who are obsessed with self-improvement, and I think we can say that he particularly targets those for whom self-improvement is always a matter of conditioning oneself to something that is *disgusting*. The vampires can surely be read as a Fantasy

equivalent to new age asceticism, with their attempt to condition themselves to 'improving' wine equivalent to those who drink, for example, (the notoriously loathsome) wheatgrass smoothies in the belief that this will somehow improve them as people...

Finally, Pratchett also seems to take aim at a real-world target in the form of the British youth who followed the so-called 'gothic' fashions in the 1980s and 1990s. The vampires exactly invert the 'cool', real-world fashion of dressing in black, wearing esoteric symbols and copious make-up, assuming outlandish names and ascribing themselves mystical roles by wearing *colourful* clothes, wearing symbols of the *everyday* (such as corkscrews), *refusing* to wear eye make-up, assuming *common* names (Wendy, Henry, Pam) and ascribing themselves the most *ordinary* roles possible (Graven Gierachi, who grows his hair short and pretends he's an accountant...).

To return to the original point, then, we can perhaps accept that what Pratchett does on this level *is* satirical, and we might also add that it is extremely *effective* satire, at least partly, because the Fantasy genre, unconstrained as it is by the need to reproduce our reality, allows for *exaggeration*, one of the basic requirements/weapons of the satiric mode. Reversal can be seen as a mode of exaggeration, so what better way of making the slogans of 'progressiveness' sound empty than by putting them in the mouths of monsters? What better way of confronting the reader with the pride and pretension of asceticism than placing it in a vampire struggling to throw off "cultural conditioning" by 'indulging' in *wine*? What better way of ridiculing a 'subversive' fashion than by making it the height of conservative taste? This is simply too arresting and funny to ignore.

Yet, the question of whether this satire really lies at the heart of Pratchett has still to be addressed. Is this mode so typical of him that the consensus can be uncritically accepted? Two points occur. The first is that the targets of the satire hardly seem in all cases to be what Freud calls "worthy opponents of the joke" (Freud, *Jokes* 105). The overt satiric targets (new age asceticism and adolescent followers of 'gothic' fashions) are surely not two groups who unreservedly deserve to be held up to "ridicule and scorn" (it is hardly *heinous* to try to condition oneself to wheatgrass smoothies or to rebelliously dress in black after all), and, indeed, Count Magpyr's attempts to overcome the limits of his 'natural' physiognomy might even be seen as somehow *heroic*. Is he not, after all, trying to *expand his capabilities*, a notion that is connected in political philosophy to *freedom*, in other words "the freedom to achieve valuable functionings" (Cornell 65)? Choosing to drink wine rather than blood gives the Count *agency* and "giv[es] value to the [...] functioning [he] seek[s]" (Ibid. 71), in other words, freedom (progress) from what he sees as the stupid traditions of the past. Moreover, even if we allow that the satiric revelation of the other target (the gap between the rhetoric of 'progress' and its actual manifestation) is 'serious' and 'worthy', the target here is so general that some of the power of the satire is necessarily lost. There is nothing *overt* in the text to guide us towards any particular real-world person or event, and, without explicit indication, the 'Magpyr must be Michael Howard' type game played by fans of the Discworld series must remain that: Simply a game.

The second point concerns the fact that, even if we do accept that some of the comedy in *Carpe Jugulum* is in the satiric mode (unworthy 'opponents' notwithstanding), there are certainly other modes of comedy employed in regard of the vampires that one would hesitate to call satire. The first of these

is comedy that is essentially a *mockery* of vampire clichés in text and film. Through overt and constant references to the expectations of the 'nature' of vampires (which, of course, can only ever be literary/film conventions) juxtaposed against the *particular* ('peculiar') vampires in the text, Pratchett's wonderful meta-fictionalism draws attention to and subverts the hackneyed portrayals of vampires in book and film.

In the following example, Pratchett pokes fun at the 'everyone knows' type of 'knowledge' that clichés engender. 'Everyone knows' that vampires wear evening dress, live in old castles and spell their names backwards, so why do the *vampires* not know these things?

Why are vampires always so stupid? As if wearing evening dress all day wasn't an undead giveaway, why do they choose to live in old castles which offer so much in the way of ways to defeat a vampire, like easily torn curtains and wall decorations that can be readily twisted into a religious symbol? Do they *really* think that spelling their name backwards fools anyone?

(CJ 12-3)

While, in the conversation that follows, Pratchett mocks the disjunct between the clichés that exert power in that they must be followed and the powerlessness of the 'monsters' that they thereby create (the logic of the clichés being that vampires are just ordinary people!):

"What's good for [killing] vampires?"

Oats thought for a moment. "Er, [...] cutting off the head and staking them in the heart is generally efficacious."

"But that works on everyone," said Nanny.

"Er... in Splintz they die if you put a coin in their mouth and cut their head off..."

"Not like ordinary people, then," said Nanny, taking out a notebook.

"Er... in Klotz they die if you stick a lemon in their mouth..."

"Sounds more like it."

"-after you cut their head off."

(CJ 159-60)

And (finally) it can be seen that Pratchett ridicules the predictability of the vampire genre by actually granting one of the characters (Count Magpyr) access to the meta-discourse of the vampire genre:

The castle gates swung open and Count Magpyr stepped out. [...]

This was not according to the proper narrative tradition. Although the people of Lancre were technically new to all this, down at genetic level they knew that when the mob is at the gate the mobee should be screaming defiance in a burning laboratory or engaged in a cliffhanger struggle with some hero on the battlements.

He shouldn't be lighting a cigar.

They fell silent, scythes and pitchforks hovering in mid-shake. The only sound was the

crackling of the torches.

The Count blew a smoke ring.

“Good evening,” he said, as it drifted away. “You must be the mob.” [...]

“The pitchforks are good,” he said. “I like the pitchforks. As pitchforks they certainly pass muster. And the torches, well, that goes without saying. But the scythes... no, no, I’m afraid not. They simply will not do. *Not* a good mob weapon, I have to tell you. Take it from me. A simple sickle is much better. Start waving scythes around and someone could lose an ear.”

(CJ 234-5)

*The scythes... no, no. Not a good mob weapon* – not only does Magpyr have access to the meta-discourse of vampire fiction, but he is also able to comment upon where the other characters have not followed it correctly! There is, of course, a target in all of the extracts above, but it is difficult to construe this precisely as *satire*, as “writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn” since it is aimed purely (and self-referentially) at *genre*. Indeed, there is a strong sense in which this mockery of the conventional vampire is also a *homage* to it and lacking in anything that can be thought of as the criticism that is essential to satire. *Carpe Jugulum*’s very subversion of the genre can, I think, rather be read as a sort of *enactment of its indebtedness to the genre it subverts*, and it is certainly true that the instances where the conventions of the vampire genre are mocked seem to be instances of Pratchett at his most playful<sup>3</sup>, as if “the author’s enjoyment of the comic effects achieved in his picture of [the] character has [...] pushed the [‘serious’]<sup>4</sup> purpose little by little into the background” (Freud, *Jokes* 212-3). And does not the fact of this playfulness lead us to question whether there is a hole in our critical terminology? ‘Mockery’ is somehow not quite an accurate term for what Pratchett does in this case. Could we, then, say in fact that this is a kind of mock-homage, a kind of (let us risk a neologism) *mockage*?

\* \* \*

Moving on from Pratchett’s *mockage*, another non-satiric mode of comedy that is employed with the vampires in *Carpe Jugulum* is the *absurd*, laughter that comes from the disturbance/explosion of ostensibly ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ positions. Pratchett, in fact, uses the absurd as a weapon to uncover what is usually hidden by familiarity.

The reversal of wine/blood, to take an example referred to previously, is absurd in the sense that it estranges us from the notion that it is *natural* to enjoy such a drink. *Lacrimosa*’s de-familiarising disgust (“‘*That’s sickening!*’”) recalls the situation where one drinks something unusual on one’s travels (a westerner drinking Okinawan *habu*, for instance) that reminds one that taste is merely force of (cultural) habit. Notwithstanding this gentle critique of the ‘natural’, however, Igor’s apparently absurd treatment of the vampires gives rise to something perhaps more profound, as it becomes apparent that Pratchett’s treatment is a great deal more subtle than it initially appears.

Initially, as we have seen, it is the way in which Igor interprets the relationship between the world and representations of the world that appears absurd. Igor not only treats ‘vampire’ as a pure *symbolic mandate*

(‘vampire’ for him is only about the *role* that they perform), but he also treats the role as being governed by the ideal-image vampires created in *fiction*. We experience this precisely as absurd because it reverses what we might call our commonplace understanding of vampires, fiction and identity. We ‘naturally’ think of vampirism as something connected with *biology* (an undead creature that sucks blood); we ‘naturally’ think of fiction as something that reflects the world (a mirror of the ‘human condition’) rather than the world being a reflection of fiction; and we ‘naturally’ think of identity as something that exists in the phenomenological real (which makes us baulk at the idea of it being governed by the imaginary – kings are kings because they are *kingly*. Merely wearing a crown does not make one a king; there is something outside and prior to the performance/the symbolic mandate). Yet, these seemingly absurd reversals of our commonplace understanding of vampires, fiction and identity precisely reveal what is hidden by their seeming ‘naturalness’. Pratchett’s ultimate reversal is that he makes us understand that Igor is *right*.

What *is* absurd with regard to Igor is that he is capable of ‘reaching outside’ the text and gaining access to the meta-discourse of the vampire genre. Every time that he does this, he draws attention not only to the meta-discourse itself, but to the fact that this is the meta-discourse to which the reader, too, refers (the meta-discourse of how vampires are constructed in literature and film discourse). In other words, Igor is merely doing what *we* are doing: Locating the identity of ‘vampire’ in the places where it is constructed in discourse and the imaginary, and he is right because ‘vampires’ *are* created in the discourse of film and literature (the world is ‘made’ in fiction); ‘vampires’ *are* precisely vampires because of the attendant imaginary, the way in which they *perform* the role of ‘vampire’ in these discourses. *Carpe Jugulum* stages through Igor, then, not only *an allegory of reading* (checking text against text, not against the real world), but also *an allegory of the fictionality of identity*. The fact that we can come to an opinion about whether the Magpyrs are ‘proper’ vampires demonstrates that identity has no relation to anything in the phenomenological real. ‘Vampire’ is an empty space filled by discourse that is reified into what appears to be a reference outside the discourse.

Igor’s construction of the vampires of *Carpe Jugulum* is, I think we can say, another manifestation of Pratchett’s obsession with questions of identity. He superbly suggests in the text that identity and subjectivity are partly formed *discursively*, and partly *performatively*; that identity and subjectivity are certainly not formed by reference to any properties of the subject that exist outside, or prior to discourse; and that identity is (partially) structured by the ideal images one finds in literature (possible objects of identification). But the other point about identity that is foregrounded is that it is ultimately a question of *acceptance*. One *decides* (by reference to discourse, of course!) whether one accepts any given performance: A king is *not* a king merely because he wears a crown and calls himself a king, but this has no connection with any *a priori* kingliness: *One’s identity as king depends on whether one is treated as a king*. Igor is right again. The Magpyrs being ‘proper’ vampires depends on us treating them as vampires, something that we are unable to do because a ‘vampire’ does, for example, wear evening dress all the time, and a ‘vampire’ *does*, for another example, have an aversion to garlic; and this is precisely because the ‘vampire’ role of our expectations *is* discursively formed in this way.

To return to the thesis, I think we can say that, in the context of *Carpe Jugulum*, this absurd mode seems more central to Pratchett’s humour than the satiric. This is partly a question of emphasis because

Pratchett does employ a number of modes of humour (satire among them) in the text, but what can be pointed to is that *the absurd seems to coincide with Pratchett's very procedure*, that of (playful) challenge and provocation. Pratchett employs the absurd to engage with ideas more common in anti-essentialist high theory, and, in regard to Pratchett's engagement with theoretical positions, can we not say that there is something of the Foucault about Pratchett's fundamental procedure? Something of the desire to "question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits... to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to re-examine rules and institutions" (Foucault quoted in Kritzman xvi)? If we can see Pratchett in this way, then there is little doubt that there is a subversiveness to his work, a subversiveness to which the absurd is central. Pratchett uses the absurd to hide the true economy of our symbolic universe in full view (that is, he 'fades it into the foreground'<sup>5</sup>). That 'vampire' is, for example, nothing but an empty space will remain 'hidden' unless the reader risks adopting the subversive reading, risks reading the text as 'true'. Pratchett, in other words, *dares us to read the Fantasy 'absurd' as real and the 'obvious reality' as truly absurd*.

It must again be emphasised (in conclusion to this section) that this paper engages only with the modes of humour relating to the vampires in *Carpe Jugulum*, but what we have looked at suggests that to read Pratchett as a mere satirist would not only be lazy, but would also amount to an overlooking of the most subversive side of the text. Do we not think of satirists as conservative, didactic and possessed of a self-assured assumption that there is a safe place from outside one's target from which to judge? Pratchett is the exact opposite of this: He is radical, playful and dismissive of all that is based on assumptions of 'natural', and even willing to suggest that satire may be complicit in the construction of its own targets since the discourse of satire is inseparable from the discursive formations it creates to attack.

#### **4. The Pleasure of the Text: Humour and Interrupted Seduction**

If, in the previous section, we considered the individual effects of the different modes of comedy employed by Pratchett in *Carpe Jugulum* (satire, mockage, absurd), in this final section, we will consider the pragmatic effects of the humour in the text as a whole. This may seem rather a strange focus as it seems self-evident that the overall effect of the comedy is *pleasure*. Yet as we shall see, the way that the comedy is withdrawn in the final stages of *Carpe Jugulum*, is an important aspect of what we might regard as another aspect of Pratchett's provocative (subversive-absurd) style.

Although, then, its sheer obviousness makes it easy to overlook, it is important to keep in sight in any study of the comic that the primary yield of comedy (in fact, its *raison d'être*) is pleasure. People, as Freud says, are "tireless pleasure-seeker[s]" (*Jokes* 126), and comedy is, of course, one way to sate this need. In *Carpe Jugulum*, there is pleasure to be derived from the exaggeration of the satire of social types, from the *conditionality* of the mockery-homage of genre (that is to say, the fact that the reader must have knowledge of the vampire genre for the comedy to be effective)<sup>6</sup> and from the juxtapositional shock of the ridiculous. Pleasure stacked on pleasure upon pleasure: *Carpe Jugulum* is an extremely enjoyable read. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that Pratchett also puts the comedy to use to enact, what might be called, a *seduction* of the reader.

Our starting point here is that reader-reaction towards the vampires is extremely ambivalent from the outset. First, there is the role of precedent, the fact that Pratchett, in many of his other texts, subverts the idea of 'monster' through allowing, for example, werewolves, trolls and zombies to assume 'heroic' status<sup>7</sup>. This amounts to a conditioning of his readers to be cautious of over-hasty labelling. It is also apparent that Pratchett builds up reader affinity with the vampires. Firstly, the Count and Vlad are fully *subjectivised*: Pratchett takes us inside their minds, so that, as in the case of Frankenstein's monster, we can see what it is like to be, as the Count sees it, labelled, defined and treated by society as a monster ("“Once people find out you're a vampire they act as if you're some kind of monster”" (CJ 309)). The second way of building up reader affinity is, however, even more powerful, namely: *The very beguiling nature of the comic mode of presentation itself*. Ted Cohen writes at some length about how, what he calls, the "joke transaction" (28) creates *intimacy* between the joke-teller and the recipient of the joke, but the case of the Magpyrs in *Carpe Jugulum* seems to indicate that the same kind of intimacy can be created by a comic character in a book. It is, moreover, this loss of gravity that is key to the seduction because it effectively means that our judgement regarding the vampires is suspended.

Despite the fact that the vampires kill, enact a coup, express some quite explicit proto-fascist ideas, talk of eating babies and attack characters who are clearly 'heroes', the mood of the text is unwaveringly *humorous*. Take this example of what is, in fact, a brutal murder:

[Casanunda watched] the coach came to a halt. [He] couldn't hear what transpired, but the highwayman rode around to one of the doors and leaned down to speak to the occupants...

...and a hand reached out and plucked him off his horse and into the coach.

It rocked on its springs for a while, and then the door burst open and the highwayman tumbled out and lay still on the road.

The coach moved on...

Casanunda waited a little while and then rode down to the body. [...]

He could tell the highwayman was stone dead. Living people are expected to have some blood in them.

(CJ 25)

Or this description of what is ultimately a ferocious assault:

[Mightily Oats] thrust something in front of the vampire's face. Agnes saw him glance down hurriedly at a small book in his other hand.

"Er... 'Get thee hence, thou worm of Rheum, and vex not-'"

"Excuse me?" said the Count.

"-trouble not more the-"

"Could I just make a point?"

"-thou spirit that troubles thee, thou' ... What?"

The Count took the notebook out of Oats's suddenly unresisting hand.

"This is from Ossory's *Malleus Maleficarum*," he said. "Why do you look so surprised? I helped write it!" [...]

He tossed the notebook aside and took the pendant. "And this is the holy turtle of Om, which I believe should make me cringe back in fear." [...]

Oats found a reserve of strength. He managed to say, "And how would you know, foul fiend?"

"No, no, that's for demons," sighed the Count. [...]

He hit the priest so hard that he slid under the long table.

(CJ 238-9)

*Carpe Jugulum* works, in fact, so that the horrific actions of the vampires, the killings and the assaults (and we use this term again) '*fade into the foreground*': Whatever the vampires explicitly do, however openly horrific, the humorous mood (the deadpan observations about living people requiring blood, the ironic way a character within the text can mock other characters' confusion of genres) constantly suspends our full condemnation.

It is not until late in the text, in fact, that the mood darkens to the extent that the vampires become sinister. The following passage, where Vlad takes Agnes to see what 'progress' actually means in Escrow, is worth quoting at length given its importance as the tipping point:

Now, across the square, the people were beginning to form lines. A couple of small children pulled away from their parents' hands and chased one another up and down the lines of people, laughing.

And the suspicion bloomed slowly in Agnes like a great black, red-edged rose.

Vlad must have felt her body stiffen, because his grip tightened on her arm.

"I know what you're thinking-" he began.

"You *don't* know what I'm thinking but I'll *tell* you what I'm thinking," she said, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. "You're -"

"Listen, it could be so much worse, it *used* to be so much worse-"

The Count bustled. "Good news," he said, "Three children have just turned twelve." He smiled at Agnes. "We have a little... ceremony before the main lottery. A rite of passage, as it were. I think they look forward to it, to tell you the truth." [...]

But Agnes felt the terror rising around her. And it was *wrong*, the wrong *kind* of terror, a numbing cold sick feeling that froze her where she stood. She had to do something, do anything, break its horrible grip-

It was Vlad who spoke.

"It's nothing dramatic," he said quickly. "A little drop of blood... Father went to the school and explained all about citizenship..."

"How nice," she croaked. "Do they get a badge?" [...]

"Hah, no. But what a *good* idea," said the Count, giving her another quick smile. "Yes..."

perhaps a badge, or a small plaque. Something to be treasured in later life. I shall make a mental note of this. And so... let us begin. Ah, the mayor has assembled the dear children..."

(CJ 337-9)

Crucial to the change of mood is that, firstly, the focalisation subtly shifts. The full horror of what the vampires are doing (farming the villagers for blood) is at this point focalised through one of the watching characters (Agnes) in such a way that *we* cannot but help but feel *her* horror and terror as she understands what will happen to the children who are now laughing and playing in their innocence. And the second catalyst is that the Count makes a comment so crass that it simply stops the narrative party dead in its tracks<sup>8</sup>. *Perhaps a badge, or a small plaque. Something to be treasured in later life. What a good idea. A badge to remember the first day that one was assaulted, violated, coerced – suddenly, we realise that he is not joking.*

It is from this point in the text onwards, then, that Pratchett seems to withdraw the previous affinity towards the vampires that has previously been built up. The narrative point of view is taken from them so that they are *de-subjectivised*, and, crucially, from the Count's crass party-stopper onwards, Pratchett desists from using the vampires as a source of humour as they descend into dysfunctional family squabbling. But what, we might ask, is the exact *effect* of this abrupt withdrawal of humour, what we might term this *humorous-interruptus*?

The point that should be made is that the sudden rupture of humour is so powerful not because the text suddenly and overwhelmingly confronts the reader with the abyssal horror of the vampires but rather because it *makes the reader aware that he she has in some way been the victim of a seduction* in which the comedy has served as a veil for a horrific real<sup>9</sup>. The readers are, in short, brought face to face with the fact of their seduction by what Ted Cohen calls "the insinuating quality of jokes, [the] way in which they *force* their audience to join in with the joke" (4 my emphasis). And from this revelation comes, I think, a feeling of shame and guilt – shame and guilt that their laughter has somehow implied complicity in the vampires' actions, and a sense of deep unease at the realisation that the comedy has caused a suspension of their judgement. It is, in short, an understanding of humour as the "wrapping [that] bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them [which inclines us not] to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of the pleasure" (Freud, *Jokes* 132).

## 5. Conclusion

Two comments seem pertinent to close this section and this paper. The first is that Pratchett has created a wonderful conformity of content and form: The seductive powers of the vampires in the text, their attempts to seduce the citizens of Lancre and Escrow into an embrace of their 'Progressive Vampirism' in general, and Vlad's attempt to seduce Agnes in particular, is beautifully mirrored in their *attempted seduction of the reader*. The second is that the text seems to work by targeting comedy itself, especially the way in which *comedy legitimises*. Can we not thus take the risk of reading *Carpe Jugulum* as a kind of meta-comedy? A comedy about the conditions of (im)possibility of comedy itself, a self-reflexive impulse

which means that *the text subverts itself*?

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## Notes

- 1 "A Bloodless Coup, Metaphorically: Representations of 'Progress' in Terry Pratchett's *Carpe Jugulum*". *eSharp, Special Issue: Communicating Change: Representing Self and Community in a Technological World* (2010): 122-135.
- 2 Igor always speaks with a lisp, so his 's' is always rendered as 'th'.
- 3 Indeed, as Pratchett himself says, his original motivation for writing the Discworld series was to have "fun with the clichés of the Fantasy novel (see "Through")."
- 4 Freud, in fact, uses the word 'satiric' here.
- 5 A wonderful turn of phrase used by Nanny Ogg to describe the 'pictsies' (Scottish pixies) camouflage technique (*CJ* 211).
- 6 As Ted Cohen says, "A conditional joke is one that can work only with certain audiences. The audience must supply something in order to either get the joke or to be amused by it. That something is the *condition* on which the success of the joke depends. It is a vital feature of much joking that only a suitably qualified audience – one that can meet the condition – can receive the joke, and the audience often derives an additional satisfaction from knowing this about itself" (12).
- 7 One thinks immediately of Angua, Detritus and Reg Shoe.
- 8 And, from the perspective of a British reader, he commits the 'crime' of not understanding sarcasm.
- 9 Which is exactly the reverse of the process that Žižek points to in Hitchcock's *A Stranger Calls* where the 'stranger' starts as a "horrifying point the real" before being subjectivised through a switch of narrative perspective. Žižek describes the switch in perspective as having "subversive effect", but, if anything, the switch enacted by Pratchett seems more subversive because the impact of a *withdrawal* of sympathy seems much more traumatic (127-128).