

The Ambivalence of Joy and Sorrow at Life's Crossroads and their Reflection in Folk Song Lyrics from the Moravian Wallachia and Horňácko Regions

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Juraj Hamar in his paper quotes from Henri Bergson and Umberto Eco to define humour as a harmless digression from a norm, non threatening to human life. This concept is valid both for intended and conscious humour, which often works through hyperbole. An important part of a joke or piece of humour often originates unwittingly or unintentionally, for example as an immediate reaction to relieve a critical situation where the element of surprise plays a crucial role. The driving force of the effect of humour is often found in paradox, it does not always rely on wit or a joke. Logically, in the 1960s, Czech artists Karel Nepraš and Jan Steklík rooted their 'school of humour without wit' on Bergson's thesis of the protection of 'elan vital', against artificial mechanization and emptiness.

Laughter followed by tears is not always a result of happiness, neither does it spring from helplessness or resignation; even here a paradox can be master of the situation. The key moments in human life which are most open to exaggeration (frequently seen in folk songs) include birth, weddings, the birth of a baby, recruitment to the army, retirement, disease, or death. Similarly other extreme emotions can be exaggerated, such as those connected to social events and celebrations or to certain rituals such as weddings or Christmas.

Let us look at examples of folk songs from two Moravian ethnographic regions, Horňácko (the Highlands) and Wallachia.

Birth offers many opportunities to celebrate, a new life, a family member, the arrival of a new personality. It seems that here there is no

reason for tears, only for laughter, happiness and joy. But what if a baby is born to poverty? What are his/her life chances? Is another member of an extended family really a reason to be happy or rather the cause of tears or fears? Fortunately, there was no reason for tears either in Hornácko or in Wallachia as in both regions a baby has always been a blessing, a gift from God. Moreover a baby born to poverty has been an impetus to an ironic lilt based on the truth that "in birth everyone is equal":

When I was born, I was as rich as a king,
Having the same
As the king has got:
A little hole in my ass.

When the little Wallachian boy is born
His mother throws him out of the window
She kicks him out legs first
Go, my little son, to earn your living in the forest.

When the little Wallachian girl is born
Her mother dresses her in a grass-harvest canvass
Here you are, my little daughter,
To have something to bring with you.

Christmas songs and carols, celebrating the birth of the Lord and Messiah's arrival, represent a separate category of songs full of happiness and laughter. "Be merry and happy" this is what comes from most Christmas songs and there is, of course, no reason for tears. However, even here the ambivalence of the terms happiness/sadness appears, such as for example in a beautiful, but very sad Wallachian carol:

Oh, My God up far in heaven
I, poor wretched lame Wallachian, stay here alone.
Kuba, Jura went away, Vávra and Ondra followed them,
I have nobody nearby.

If only Bethlehem could stay nearer to my chalet
I, a poor lame duck Wallachian, would not stay at home
Someone would invite me, I could welcome my Lord sincerely,
He would laugh with me.

Dancing I would sing for him an old-time song,
Not making troubles if the song is nice enough,
But I am afraid, I am lame and I must stay home
And kick the bucket.

But I will be waiting, till my old bachelor Wallachians come home
I will ask them immediately hoping they'll make me happy
I will squeak, I will whoop, me, an old man, I will be noisy,
I will feel a little better.

Please, my Lord, don't let me limp
When the Reaper takes me to dance, don't let me be afraid,
Let me throw away my crutches, let me be healthy again
So I could jump happy with my girl up to heaven.

It will be good luck enough, I can't ask more,
But when I am at the point of dying, I will ask at least:
Please, do, my Lord, when this dance torments me to death,
Let my soul come up to you.

Perhaps the most evident ambivalence of happiness and sadness can be traced in love songs. The joys and sorrows of a love life are one of the most frequent topics of folk songs; no wonder then that happiness and sadness often meet within one text. The themes of unrequited love or even love ending with suicide or murder are frequent. We can find numerous examples, but those mentioned below are outstanding examples of 'sorrows in happiness'.

Frequently courtship is a topic for songs, especially duelling for girls.

Take for example this Wallachian song from Velké Karlovice; a wonderful metaphor describing virility is worth noting in the last stanza:

A green linden tree is standing on the bank of our lake,
A nice green linden tree,
And little birds are sitting beneath the tree.

Oh, they are not little birds, they are young fellows
So, they are arranging for a girl
Which of them will get her.

One of them says – She'll be mine, another says – When our good
Lord allows
I am the third one, I say – My true love,
Why are you so sad?

How shall I not be sad, if they want me to marry an old man?
My heart started to weep inside me,
I can't make it stay quiet.

There is a nice painted bed standing in our chamber,
Oh, a nice bed perfectly made,
Who will sleep in this bed?

If it is an old bachelor, don't let him live to see the morning
If it is a young man with nice equipment,
Let him have a good sleep!

The song was known all around Moravia but with text and melody variations. Sometimes it has a happy ending, sometimes a sad one. The added gloomy topic of an old bachelor is not unique in this song.

Courtship often turns in the song to a situation illustrated by the folk saying 'She/he had been choosing so long that there was nothing left'. Here a comparison to sweet and sour fruits that bring tears to the eyes is used.

I was getting on so well
But now I get down from a high post to the ground.

I was picking and choosing out of raspberries,
I had a lot of ripe ones, but I took a green one.

Green, unripe, very sour
Oh, mother, you will see me jolly no more

(from Hornácko)

I was choosing out of five or six fellows,
But I had no luck.

I was picking and choosing out of raspberries,
I plucked the green one, the red one I left.

The green one, green and so sour
You will not see me jolly for a long year.

(from Wallachia)

An almost cruel song composed in the form of a ballad with a similar theme comes from Javorník nad Veličkou. Anna Kománková, who learnt this song from her mother-in-law, sings it on the CD *Přes Javorník malovaná dlážka*:

I know about a nice little bird at a lovely creek,
So nice singing, slowly walking, sitting at the window.
If only I get it, I would not sleep for a week
I would rear it in a cage near my bed.

There is, girl, a very short time for your choice,
If you get a nice guy, pleasant to you.
You will get old very quickly.
Your nice, lovely face will be wrinkled as old boots.

You will be as pale as nine-year-old bacon,
Your head will be as bald-headed as a marrow,
Your teeth will go away, your nice years won't come back
Your chin will fork out as an old gate.

You will often remember the days of your youth,
Praying to God for your old bones,
The same as a horse is hornless and a donkey is antlerless,
They do not know what to do with them, as the proverb says.

Not even wedding celebrations take unconditional happiness for granted. In many courting and wedding songs there is besides a happy smile (either direct or indirect) also some crying. Tears are shed for lost freedom, for the lost certainties of mother's home, lost friends, if a bride moved far away from home. There are numerous ballads about a distant daughter, who was not allowed to visit her parents (mainly her mother) after the wedding. In the ballads, she comes to her mother's house as a bird. However, even as such she is not welcomed. Jan Rokyta adapted a Wallachian version of this well known ballad for the singer Jarmila Šuláková:

Mother gave away her daughter far from her native place
And after marriage mother prohibited her coming back to visit.

I became a little birdie, a small swallow, flying to my mother,
Sitting in the garden, on the last line, by the white lillies.

Wondering during the day, wondering during the night, having a big
headache,
No wonder, my great Lord, my head is falling in two halves.

In Horňácko, a variety of the song where mother strictly admonishes her daughter is more popular:

Mother gave away her daughter far away over the field,
She ordered her, prohibited her – don't come back to me.

I became a little crane bird, flying over the field,
And I would sit there at a little garden, on this blue lily flower.
Hush, little birdie, hush away from the blue lily,
You will disturb it, and don't break it, who will water it?

I didn't come here, my beloved mother, to break your lily flower
I came because of , my beloved mother, making a charge.

Lilting songs, called ticklish in Horňácko and tickling in Wallachia,
are a humorous part of quite sad courting songs (in many of them a girl
says goodbye to her family and friends crying, in another the engaged
couple, in tears, thank their parents for bringing them up). These songs
are performed immediately before the wedding ceremony, or more often
during the wedding party late at night or in the early morning hours.

I asked her to give me lying on the balk
On the balk lying grass to mow.
She didn't allow me , she always was angry with me,
Didn't allow, lying grass to mow.

I asked her to give me on the garret,
To allow me on the garret, take some dry aftergrass.
She didn't allow me, she was always angry with me,
Didn't allow take same dry aftergrass.

My darling has a great – what?
Has a great love with me.
She stuck up the naked – but what?
The naked bottle of wine through the window.

The cock is screaming cock-a-doddle-doo,
The fowl didn't want to give him.
Give him, you beast of a hen,
To stop him screaming.

What did you eat, my dear ,
That you grew pale, my dear soul.
I ate that spider looking out of breeches, my dear soul.
(from Horňácko)

I cannot lay on the narrow bench
Because of the beetle living in the narrow trouser-leg.
I'm fed up with ploughing, I'm fed up with digging,
The only thing I am not fed up with is playing with my darling.
(from Wallachia)

In Wallachia, as in other regions, there were wedding songs which used to function as symbolic clues for bride and groom about how to behave during their wedding night. Indirectly, these songs described coitus, which was quite often compared to a typical farm and craft activity:

My field is a good field nearby a nice creek,
Anybody who wants to plough my field, must do it gently.

My field is a good field on a nice lowlands,
Anybody who wants to plough my field, must do it in the bed of roses.

I ploughed and harrowed, my darling is weeping now,
But she has no reason to cry except the plougher.

Being in Frenštát town, not a long time ago,
I learned there, how to weave a canvas.
You must stretch one leg, then bend the other,
The warp has to distend, the shuttle has to put into there.

Nobody can feel as good as the lucky weaver,
Just in time he prepares the warp, the shuttle starts dancing.
The canvas is not manufactured now, we are short of threads,
The warp went shabby and the shuttle went to ass.

A good time during the wedding night can be suddenly changed into pain and tears. Ballads describing the murder of a newly wedded wife by her jealous groom are known in many Moravian regions. In Wallachia, for example, this topic appears in the song "Stála svatba, stála" (in František Sušil's third collection recorded as "Nevěsta bezděčná").

The joys and sorrows of motherhood can be also considered a cause of laughter and tears in folk songs. Motherhood, either wanted or unplanned, meant the end of all the joy of a single girl. This is reflected in songs from Hornácko and Wallachia:

The bell of the church is ringing, the maidens are nicely dressing
And me – poor girl - I am rocking my baby in the cradle.

You, my youngest sister, I love you so much,
Please rock him for the moment I pass through the street

I don't want to cradle, I prefer to go to church,
Rock him by yourself, you are his own mother.

(from Hornácko)

You feel well, you feel well, but I feel bad,
Your cheeks are turning red, but not mine.
The rosemary smells nice on your hat,
And my heart hurts with something I don't understand.

You feel well, you feel well, but I feel bad,
Your cheeks are turning red, but not mine.
The rose flower is blooming on your hat,
A little girl is growing up beneath my blouse.

(from Wallachia)

There are ballads whose choice of words equate to broad-side ballads or worse. These usually raise more laughter than tears of sympathy. As an example we can take a ballad about an unfaithful miller's wife, whose husband killed his rival in revenge; the song is known all around Moravia with many variations. In the following version from the community of Velká (Miškeřík, 1994, 281) the husband's revenge is described somewhat drastically:

When the miller heard about it, he woke up from the snow-white bed
Took a sabre from the wall, decapitated his rival.
After the decapitation, he took the head and threw it to the river,
To show people who followed his wife.

The miller's wife went to fetch water, cold water,
She saw his little head stained with blood.
You, little head, little head, where does your body lie?
My body lies in the grinding room, behind an oak stool.

Since we would not wish to finish with verses describing beheaded bodies, let's close this paper logically – with death, which brings together the ambivalence of sadness and happiness, laughter and tears.

The ideas of reminding us of a human's end and a farewell to the deceased member of society were considered by our forebears as meaningful and necessary, as important in fact as celebrating birth, marriage and baptism. A burial feast used to be (and in some places this still remains) a dignified moment, but not over serious. On the contrary, sometimes the deceased used to be remembered with joy and laughter, with the relating of funny stories.

In conclusion, the final example from Hrubá Vrbka (Miškeřík, 1994, 139) is a variation of a song about the sorrows of a man who has just become a widower. It fits the idea of the present paper with its rather black humour. It illustrates a tradition which requires that people should not leave a widower alone for a long time but find him a suitable partner in a short time. Contemporary sociologists and other social researchers could analyze this from the point of view of gender studies in the traditional region of Hornácko:

Martin walks in the garden crying
His Catherine, Catty died.

Don't you cry, Martin, Martínek,
We will give you our Maddy.

I won't take care of your Maddy,
If I thrash her, she will run away to mother.

My deceased wife was much better,
She twittered like a little swallow.

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