

RIDICULE

When one looks at the history of social traditions, it is clear that the use of ridicule is a fairly modern custom.

Thanks to their internal transformations, countries, like individuals, usually change their temperament more than once during their life.

These modifications in social attitudes have taken many different forms when they are manifested.

For us, it has resulted in the obsession of using ridicule as a means of punishment or retribution.

But before we continue speaking of ridicule, it would seem natural to try to find a clear definition of what it actually is.

Tired of trying again and again to find a meaningful definition, many of those who have wanted to describe what grace is have finally come to an agreement that it is one of those things which is impossible to define. Because of that, no one has ever come up with a real definition of grace.

And since that is the case, I am going to follow the same practice. Ridicule, like grace, is something you cannot define.

And if that is true, who knows what it consists of, what form it takes, when it begins, and when it ends?

It has sometimes been said that grace lights up one's face.

But that is not a definition; it is a phrase. Still, it is a pretty phrase and has become quite common, which proves that, like cakes for the lack of bread, phrases are good for the lack of definitions.

So, by following this path, my task is greatly simplified.

Ridicule is a cruel joke that makes people laugh. It is something that kills and rejoices. It is a Harlequin who exchanges his wooden sword for another one of steel and, as a joke, pretends to kill someone and then only gives his victim a piece of buffoonery as a funeral oration.

It is Mephistopheles who, with evil intention and no justification, mocks all that is sacred. It is Falstaff, less philosophical and more dogmatic, who belittles all that is great.

These are also phrases.

It would be the same as saying that in order to find the water of the Universe you must look for it in a pitcher from my kitchen.

Ridicule is seen one step beyond all that is sublime, because it is considered one step beyond everything else. Unfortunately, it is also one step closer.

It is a monster that has stretched out an immense hidden net to trap us.

A clever enemy that hides behind our simplest actions, our most innocent words, and our most insignificant movements.

We are all trembling with the fear that we will be caught in its trap.

We all live with the anxiety of Damocles and the Licenciado Vidriera¹, fearing that the thread by which ridicule is hanging over us will break, or we will shatter like a jar that falls from a shelf.

¹The character in a short story by Cervantes, who thinks he is made of glass.

This exaggerated fear is not surprising.

Ridicule, as I have suggested, is a public death. It is a painful death, which is comical at the same time.

However, there is a remedy for this poison. But in this case, it could be said that the remedy is worse than the illness.

Ridicule is cured by blood.

It is necessary to attack, if you don't want to be laughed at.

When society is threatened by these reefs, the rest of us, like good sailors, ought to have a good hydrographic map to help us navigate these waters safely.

I know, more or less, what is good, and what is bad.

I know what is punished, and what is rewarded.

Religion has its catechism.

Society, its civil laws, and its criminals.

However, nobody knows the statute of ridicule. So even if they were to try, no one could abide by a written law.

So how are we to distinguish it?

And how can we avoid it, if there is nothing that is more elastic than the circle of its influence?

The poor fellow who wears an old-fashioned frock coat is ridiculous, as is the husband whose honor is destroyed.

Remove the outcome of *El médico de su honra*², and the protagonist seems ridiculous.

Give a tragic conclusion to *El lindo don Diego*³, and the character becomes an admirable person.

When you consider it in this way, the theory of ridicule cannot help but be somewhat dangerous.

So what does ridicule consist of?

Within its domain are the tears of people whose feelings were hurt, and the handiwork of certain people wearing a clerical collar.

The embarrassment of a lover, and the way some people walk.

The simple frankness of an honorable man, and this or that length of a topcoat.

What I have observed is that scoundrels and crooks are the only ones who are never treated with ridicule.

It is said that ridicule is worse than dying.

But whether or not we are ridiculed is outside our control, because it could be done by anyone who happens to feel like doing it.

When you stop to think about these absurd aspects of life, you come to the conclusion that logic has been created for the entertainment of schoolboys.

The decimal system will eventually include all the different types of currency, coins, and methods of measurement.

Sooner or later, there will be a universal language that makes it possible for all people to understand each other.

“Give me a place to stand on,” Archimedes said, “and I will move the earth.”

²A play by Calderon de la Barca where a husband kills his wife to preserve his honor.

³A comedy by Agustín Moreto where the self-centered Don Diego only thinks about restoring his good image, after he is tricked by a woman who doesn't want to marry him.

And I say, give me a basic truth and, starting from there, I will find all the others; then, like Moses, I will create tablets of law and make the world a paradise.

But perhaps this is something we are condemned to search for forever, and never be able to find.