

Švejk vs. Címrman: A Comparison in Satire

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To dissect humor is its antithesis. Analyzing and deliberating over wit and satire is anything but humorous. Such is the unfunny task of comparing the two fictional characters Josef Švejk and Jára Címrman, creations of Czech authors Jaroslav Hašek, and Zdeněk Svěrák and Ladislav Smoljak, respectively. Most telling in both characters' works is a continuous satirical wit that evokes a nationalist tendency to passively alleviate foreign hegemony over the Czech people through humor. Tacit that both fictional characters are funny, the devices through which each achieves this humor are largely unique as are their respective satirical targets and the ultimate consequences of their humor. Comparatively studying Švejk and Címrman's similar wit addresses these differences, proposing a final dichotomy: Švejk's influence is largely literary and historic, an almost nostalgic reference towards acquiescently overcoming social inequality through ridiculousness, while Címrman's is perpetual through literature and theatre, Svěrák and Smoljak reapplying his farce to new and absurd events.

In order to compare both fictional characters, a brief understanding of their respective origins must first be established. An imbecile Czech soldier was Hašek's original idea. Returning home after a late night he scribbled a note to himself that read, "An idiot in the [army] company. He had himself examined [to testify] that he is capable of conducting himself like a proper soldier."¹ Otherwise much of Švejk's personal background is unknown because neither Hašek nor Švejk supply it. Only that he sells mongrels as disguised pedigrees and also speaks German.

Címrman was born in Vienna to an Austrian mother and Czech father sometime in the middle of the late nineteenth century. The exact date is unknown because the doctor was drunk and smudged the birth certificate. Thus, Címrman is not even a real Czech. This is a fundamental discrepancy between the two. Raised as a girl in Vienna through age fifteen, because of available hand-me-downs and to abstain from the wasted mental energy boys experience through puberty, Címrman experienced female puberty earlier, thus enabling him to save the mental resources otherwise exhausted by pubescent boys. This significantly contributed to his unparalleled genius. Applying this intellect, Címrman made pivotal contributions to philosophy, poetry, theatre, innovation, and exploration, most notably: missing the north pole by seven meters due to attacking natives, arriving too late at the patent office to register his light bulb (for which Edison later took credit), and proposing the construction of the Panama Canal to the United States, about which he later wrote a libretto of the same name.

Besides the characters' ostensible differences, (one is dismissed from the army for being an imbecile, the other *is* an imbecile for mishandling patents) existing intrinsic similarities in their humor originate from their compara-

ble inceptions. Švejk was created under Austro-Hungarian rule, in an era of social discrimination. Thus the Empire, its narrow-minded army and state bureaucracies are satirical targets for Hašek. Cimrman originated during the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR), a satellite and centralized communist government under the dictate of the Soviet Union. Therefore, because of similar foreign sovereignty, both Švejk and Cimrman *can* be making fun of similar things; bureaucracy, corruption and near-sighted government rule. However, they generally are not. Because Cimrman is only half Czech, much of his humor depends on his ambiguous nationality. As a non-Czech, Cimrman not only mocks the typically inferior position Czechs hold in comparison to their more innovative, accomplished and recognized neighbors, but he also ridicules them because this very deficiency inspired his creation. If the Czechs do not have world philosophers, physicists, or inventors, why not make one up who is even more spectacular? Therein lies Cimrman's irony: pure fiction disguised in reality by placing his fictitious farce in real contexts with real people. Švejk and his counterparts, however, are fiction, merely using a historical event as a setting.

Švejk and Cimrman mock the same subject through their subversion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hašek's memorable opening scene begins when Mrs. Muller mentions Archduke Ferdinand's assassination, to which our rheumatic protagonist replies, "Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Muller? I know two Ferdinands. One is a messenger at Pruša's the chemist's, and once by mistake he drank a bottle of hair oil there. And the other is Ferdinand Kokoška who collects dog manure. Neither of them is any loss."² Švejk's response undermines the severity and imminent consequences of "Ferdinand's" death. "Ferdinand", despite Švejk's connotations, was an archduke and heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. Humor arises when Švejk's unawareness belittles this grandiose monarch's assassination and prominence. He only recalls two Ferdinands, a clumsy messenger and a dog manure collector, rather than the Ferdinand of the Hapsburg dynasty. What anchors the joke is that neither of Švejk's Ferdinands are even remotely associated with the late archduke, monarchy, or catastrophic events, but instead vulgar, insignificant practices like accidentally consuming hair oil and collecting dog manure. Additionally, Švejk has already served in the army and should at least recognize its superior officers, so his apparent stupidity also contributes to the humor.

Similarly, Cimrman mocks the archduke's significance, and the monarchy in general, in his play, "Posel z Liptákova", during the second one-act segment, "Vizionář". Typically Cimrman's plays are composed of several introductory reports usually concerning the author and his background, followed by one or two one-act plays. "Vizionář" is the brief story of Hlavsa, who reads fortunes through his furnace, and is to tell his client, Mr. Ptáček, which of his daughters' suitors snores. Mid fortune telling, Hlavsa's son František reminds his father that Death was to take Hlavsa that day, thus explaining his periodic pains. Once Death arrives at the door, Hlavsa wants to finish with his client and bestow his belongings to his son. During all this, Death is waiting for Hlavsa, but then concedes that he was talked into waiting

too long and must now get going to “nejakej Ferdinand, Sarajevo.”³ As Švejk’s comments undermine the Austro-Hungarian archduke, so do Cimirman’s. The character Death mocks the archduke’s assassination by making it seem frivolous and inconsequential, despite its starting the First World War. Like Švejk, not recognizing the name creates humor. However Cimirman’s comedy is more farcical because of the absurdity Death’s crude characterization presents. This additional humor also detracts from the butt of the joke, making it less severe. Whereas Švejk focuses our attention on his disparaging remarks, Cimirman places less emphasis, perhaps as a result of his distance from Austro-Hungarian rule.

Though Švejk and Cimirman both subvert the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s power, thus deriving humor from the same source, they approach the humor from opposite angles. With Švejk, Mrs. Muller’s initial comment places the context on a global scale, yet Švejk mocks the empire and archduke by relating on a paltry, local level. Cimirman, on the other hand, mocks by establishing a bizarre local scene and creating ignorance of the larger outside world and imminent cataclysmic events.

Public monuments are another subject matter that both Švejk’s and Cimirman’s humor mocks but by different means. It is clear that Švejk’s target is the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but Cimirman’s is more ambivalent. Švejk shouts, “To Belgrade! To Belgrade!” to a crowd which has gathered as he is escorted past a monument of the general Radetzky who, “looked dreamily down from his monument at the good soldier Švejk, as, limping on his old crutches, he slowly disappeared into the distance with his recruit’s flowers in his buttonhole.”⁴ The comedy arises from the irony of Švejk’s patriotic cries. He is neither going to Belgrade, but instead is ignominiously escorted to the gaol, nor could he even march there under his own accord. Also, all this ridiculousness takes place before a monument to one of Austria’s most venerable generals, thus insulting the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a whole.

Cimirman parodies imperial monuments through a discussion in one of Svěrák’s opening dialogues to his play, “Vražda v salonním coupé”. The dialogue concerns the process of erecting a monument for Cimirman, which, Cimirman notes, “at je z bílého mramoru. V bílém budu nejlépe čelit holubům.”⁵ The humor is not only in the absurdity of Cimirman’s concern with the pigeons’ preference, but because the dialogue makes further ridiculous suggestions: naturally Cimirman’s statue would be equine, like those of all other great Czechs and saints, and due to trolley line interference, Cimirman would lead, not ride, the horse. The former is ridiculous because it is illogical that a figure like Cimirman’s should have a horse in his monument, and the latter because Cimirman would not be visible from some directions as a result. Despite the evident humor, the aim is ambiguous. As Cimirman is a supposed contemporary of Švejk, the Austro-Hungarian Empire is a conceivable target, but so might empire building or the monument-erecting process of any era.

As noted, both characters may be aiming their respective humor at similar targets and attain their humor through generally similar means. Švejk’s is funny by situation: an escorted soldier crying out of patriotism. Cimirman is

funny through farce: selecting statue materials based on pigeon partiality. Both are funny, however, for their historical juxtapositions and physical humor.

Regardless of the apparent likeness of comedic intent between Švejk and Címrman, the latter does not focus on Empire and bureaucratic satire. Rather, as mentioned above, Címrman largely pokes fun at the absurdity of a shrewd, inventive non-Czech Czech exploring the world, advising Europe's geniuses, and achieving greatness sans credit or care. The latter is very un-Czech, Svěrák states. According to Svěrák, Címrman's displacement of satirical targets is a consequence of his inconsistency. Unlike Švejk's, Címrman's authors are living so his humor is *not* static. Címrman is repeatedly placed to mock the changing world, and so he is a timeless character. Švejk, antithetically, is only funny during the First World War under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His character does not translate into other settings.

This is the most striking difference in each character's humor: that Címrman is a perennial parody while Švejk is static, because Švejk is only a historic literary creation his comedy retains its setting. Though he can be endlessly appreciated, he can only be funny within his own context. Contrastingly, as both a literary and theatrical fictional character, Címrman has nearly universal humor. Címrman's authors are living, which contributes to the ambiguity of his comedy's direction. Three voices, Smoljak, Svěrák and Šebánek, contribute to Címrman's character so identifying his individual voice and tone is involved. As a result, Címrman's humor is primarily derived from third person narratives, not dialogue and other primary interactions like Švejk. Švejk, on the other hand, has only Hašek with whom he shares or disguises voice and tone. Also, Švejk narrates his own stories to provide humor, or is the subject of narration to create humor. Thus Švejk is comical on three distinct levels, dialogue, narrated descriptions, and first-person story telling, while Címrman is primarily involved with only the first two.

Despite their contrasting roles in humor, both Švejk and Címrman would be considered kynics, by Sloterdijk's definition of the term, because both live, rather than speak, against idealism and both exhibit core existentialism. An important aspect at the center of their existentialism is their ability to maintain equanimity. Equanimity enables situations to highlight their apparent obliviousness and seemingly unintuitive approach, while actually progressively poking fun at their subject.

Švejk repeatedly showcases this clandestine demeanor when confronted by Lieutenant Lukáš. In response to Lieutenant Lukáš's accusation that he stole his dog, Švejk responds,

Humbly report, sir, I know of no such case recently and I would like to observe, sir, that you yourself took Max this afternoon out for a walk and so I couldn't have stolen it. I saw at once when you came back without the dog that something must have happened. That's called a situation. In Spálená Street there is a bag-maker names Kunes and he couldn't take a dog out for a walk without losing it. Usually he left it somewhere at a pub or someone stole it from him or

borrowed it and never returned it....⁶

Without hesitation, Švejk coolly presents through verbose logic his reasons why it is inconceivable that he stole the dog. Not only does he go on to impudently, and sweetly, explain that Lukáš's missing dog is a "situation", but he also damages Lukáš's image by associating the actions of a lieutenant in the Imperial Army with an irresponsible, likely drunk, local bag-maker. Utilizing his calm, Švejk, again, makes disparaging remarks about, and towards, authority in order to solicit humor. The juxtaposition of Švejk's collected response with Lukáš's boiling rage initiates the comedic response, but it is extended by Švejk's sardonic humor. Additionally, Švejk tries to preclude the discussion by initially volunteering fatal information to Lukáš about his cat. Švejk is not only responsible for the dog's premature departure, but also for the cat's demise. Collectively this epitomizes Švejk's notorious passive resistance.

Cimrman seems to share some of Švejk's inherent equanimity. However, it does not appear as forthright because it largely reveals itself through passive situations, such as Cimrman's correspondence with *Národní Politika* in 1908, thanking them because, "neocenitelnou službu mu na chladném severu poskytl náš tisk, když si jím vycpal kabát a nohavice,"⁷ during his North Pole expedition. Though Cimrman is only interacting through correspondence, and not with an authoritative figure like Švejk, his brutal honesty and placidity create humor. How would an individual have the audacity to submit such a letter otherwise? It is precisely Cimrman's nerve that makes the content of his letter so funny.

Each of the above two situations is equally humorous because both are unsolicited. As noted above, Švejk initiates the conversation by telling Lukáš that his cat ate boot polish and passed out, and that, "You won't find again such a good and beautiful Angora cat."⁸ Cimrman's unsought letter to *Národní Politika*, thanking them for their paper's heat retaining qualities, mirrors Švejk's enthusiasm. For both, overzealousness produces humor through their apparent incompetence.

In the above examples, a striking difference between Švejk's and Cimrman's humor is that Švejk's visage significantly contributes to weakening Lukáš's infuriated response to him. Cimrman, on the other hand, does not have any intrinsic ability to innocently subdue. Lukáš's weakened state is exactly what enables Švejk to behave this way and create hilarity. When Lukáš is, "confronted by the honest and kindly gaze of the good and innocent eyes of Švejk who dared to interrupt the calm before the storm..."⁹ it permits Švejk to interrupt, thus inciting ridiculousness, because of Lukáš's feebleness. Unlike Cimrman, Švejk's delicate facial features contribute to countless dire situations, regularly allowing Švejk to take advantage of his superior's vulnerability, permitting even more ridiculousness to develop.

Another observable difference in their humor is that Švejk is, more often than not, talking himself out of trouble with authority, thus his humor is a foil to, and flight from, his dire situation. Cimrman typically creates humor from the scenarios he creates, not escapes

Though these collective observations are obvious from the onset, their imperativeness is not. In order to measure the significance of these discrepancies it was important to first compare the characters' humor, and then establish method and causality.

The resulting passive humor from both characters is overwhelmingly Czech. More importantly, Címrman and Švejk's dissemination of this wit not only contributed to their overwhelming popularity but also invoked national resistance through passive humor, during years of subjugation of the Czech people. Individually, Címrman has made an arguably greater local cultural impact. Though Švejk's character is internationally recognized and popular throughout academia and literary circles, Címrman has both a museum and theatre in Prague. The Jára Címrman Divadlo maintains his legacy, continually expanding his genius and satire. Most important, however, may be Švejk's most enduring contribution: vocabulary. The unmistakable personality and actions that are Švejk become so familiar to the reader by the novel's abrupt end that the work instills "švejk" into one's lexicon, as verb, noun and adjective. Formulated to convey the typical imbecilic sardonic humor delivered by Švejk, to švejk, or behave in a švejk-esque manner, typifies the book's situational wit. The shared popularity of both characters manifested in the overwhelming number of votes each received in a recent "Greatest Czech Ever" contest. Despite their fictional existence both were picked among the overall favorites alongside other Czechs like Masaryk and Hus. Something that, most can agree, is funny.

NOTES

1. J.P. Stern, "War and the Comic Muse: The Good Soldier Schweik and Catch-22," *Comparative Literature* 20.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 193.

2. Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (London: Penguin Publishing, 1973), 3-4.

3. Ladislav Smoljak and Svěrák, Zdeněk, *To nejlepší ze Smoljaka, Svěráka a Járy Cimrmana* (Prague: Exact Service Press 1993), 290.

4. Hašek, *Good Soldier Švejk*, 61.

5. Smoljak and Svěrák, *To nejlepší*, 126.

6. Hašek, *Good Soldier Švejk*, 209.

7. Smoljak and Svěrák, *To nejlepší*, 48.

8. Hašek, *Good Soldier Švejk*, 208.

9. *Ibid.*