

Dark Humor in the Trenches of Gelibolu¹

Dilek KANTAR*

Abstract

This paper investigates the use of dark humor in the Anzac soldiers' diaries and letters recounting their experiences in the Gelibolu battlefield. It aims to illuminate the psychological mechanisms and functions of war time humor through a philosophical perspective. The ideas of selected classical and contemporary philosophers and critics on the concept of the comic help us understand why many of the most painful and violent scenes described in the soldiers' narratives involve dark humor. The texts we study reveal that not only the Anzacs but also the Turkish soldiers had recourse to humor sometimes to communicate with the enemy when the trenches between the two sides could be measured by only a few meters, and at other times to poke fun at the combative competence of the Anzac soldiers. However, we do not have any personal accounts of war written by the private Turkish soldier. The Anzacs were better educated than the Turks and they were encouraged by their superiors to keep diaries throughout the war. This study aims to illuminate a relatively less known section of the Anzac and Turkish history which is buried in the unpublished private accounts of the common soldier.

Keywords: *Gelibolu battlefield, Anzac soldiers' diaries, dark humor, theory of humor*

Gelibolu Hendeklerinde Kara Mizah

Özet

Bu çalışma Anzak askerlerinin Çanakkale Savaşları sırasında yazdıkları günlükler ve mektuplar aracılığıyla kara mizahın psikolojik mekanizmalarını ve işlevlerini felsefi açılardan araştıracaktır. Klasik ve çağdaş felsefelerin gülünç olana dair öne sürdükleri kimi teoriler, mizahın nasıl olup da asker mektuplarında betimlenen en acı ve şiddet yüklü sahnelerde bile yer alabildiğini aydınlatmamıza olanak tanımaktadır. Anzak askerlerinin anlatılarından anladığımıza göre, savaş sırasında Türk askerleri de kendilerinden yalnızca birkaç metre ötedeki hendeklerde bekleyen düşman askerleriyle iletişim kurmak için ya da onların askeri yeterliklerini dalgaya almak için mizaha başvurmuşlardır. Maalesef Gelibolu cephesini rütbesiz Türk askerinin gözünden anlatan yazılı eserler elimizde bulunmamaktadır. Türk askerine oranla Anzak askerleri hem daha eğitimliydi hem de savaş sırasında günlük tutmaları konusunda komutanları tarafından teşvik ediliyorlardı. Bu çalışma daha önce hiçbir yerde yayımlanmayan asker anlatılarına dayandığı için hem Anzak hem de Türk tarihinin fazla bilinmeyen bir bölümüne ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gelibolu cephesi, Anzak asker mektupları, kara mizah, mizah teorisi.*

* Assoc. Prof., Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Sciences and Letters, Department of English Language and Literature. Email:dkantar@comu.edu.tr

1 This study is a part of a larger Project sponsored by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey): "From Hostility to Lasting Friendship: Cultural Reflections from Turkish and Anzac Soldier Diaries and Narratives" 113K105, 2013-2015.

The military attack launched by the allied European forces in Gelibolu lasted from April 25 1915 until 9 January 1916. The aim of the allied forces was to occupy the Gelibolu peninsula and then move on to Constantinople, today's Istanbul. Robin Prior sees Gelibolu as the “*great lost opportunity of the First World War*”², because he believes that victory could have been possible for the allied forces, and the World War could have ended sooner if the Anzac placement of the troops on the peninsula had involved better logistical planning. Whether “Someone had blundered”³ or not, the Anzacs lost over thirty thousand lives throughout the campaign. The diaries and letters of the Anzac soldiers which form the database for this study involve heart rending accounts of the immense suffering and loss experienced by the soldiers over a relatively short period of time. They are taken from the archives of the Australian War Memorial and Wellington National Library.

Corporal Paul Haworth fights in the Battle of Gelibolu until he is wounded in August 1915. When he gets back home from the war, he says that he has decided to write a long letter to his family to tell his experience of the war properly. In the preface of the letter, which turns out to be “*almost a book*,” he claims that during the war “*the censors were so strict that all we could put in a letter was that we were still alive*”⁴. After having witnessed the appalling atrocities of the war Haworth reacts: “*Oh God! If there is a God in heaven, why does he allow this? If this is war, how do people keep from losing their minds when in it? How long would it last? Would I ever see home again?*”⁵ These words reflect the ordinary soldier's common experience of war trauma which is generally ignored during the combat, and overlooked when he comes back home to be hailed as a hero. Unprofessional soldiers like Haworth were generally left to their own devices to make sense of the extent of death and destruction to which they were exposed on a daily basis in the war. Humor, it turns out, becomes the best weapon for survival under those circumstances as Haworth himself admits:

“A hearty laugh is almost priceless in the firing line. A man who can keep his comrades in a light frame of mind is always a very valuable man. The man who, when the enemy is shelling your particular piece of trench, can make some remark that will cause the others to forget the danger for a mere second, or can make them laugh just as they are leaving the trench for an attack, or when a man or two happens to be buried by a shell explosion can make them forget their surroundings and think of something light, that is the man needed in the fire trench more than any other man”⁶

In the soldiers' diaries and letters, we see that many of them have recourse to humor in the most unexpected contexts to cope with the worst experience of their young lives.

2 Robin Prior, Gallipoli: *The End of the Myth*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2009, p. xiii.
3 Alfred Tennyson, “Charge of the Light Brigade,” *Tennyson a Selected Edition*, Christopher Ricks (Ed.), Routledge, New York 2007, p.315.
4 Paul Haworth, PR0156, *Papers of Corporal Paul Haworth*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, p.1.
5 Haworth, PR0156, p.29.
6 Haworth, PR0156, p.63.

Humor can be both a defensive and offensive tool of self-preservation for all the parties involved in the war. In some letters, the war for the Anzac soldier is described as “fun” or “picnic” and killing the Turkish soldiers can be a “rare sport”. Although the young soldiers’ optimistic ideas about the war change drastically throughout the course of the long battles, some of them still manage to keep their sense of humor during the most violent of times. As Kemalöglü⁷ indicates, the Anzac soldiers’ negative perception of the Turk also changes throughout the course of the war, and they narrate humorous stories about them. The personal narratives of the ordinary soldiers reveal several aspects of humane interactions and reactions in the face of extreme violence which are not included in the standard official historical accounts of war, as Kemalöglü explores further in her insightful and poignant study of Çanakkale Wars⁸.

Some of the Anzac soldiers admit that they come to respect the Turks because of their “fair” fighting. Long lasting episodes of close encounters in the trenches of Gelibolu force both sides to get to know the enemy better, sometimes to discover one another’s weak points, at other times to share a common bond of desperation which would make them come to terms with their current predicament. As we shall see in the examples below, humor in these narratives serves five main functions: to challenge death, to insult the opponent, to overcome unwanted feelings of pity and fear, to communicate with the enemy, and to react against the unquestionable power of military authority.

To understand the perplexing mechanisms of war time humor better, let us consult some of the philosophical roots of the concept of “the comic” first. In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 2008, Umberto Eco remarks that a successful book on the theory of comedy has not yet been written because of the complexity of the phenomenon. Eco relates the idea of comic to a sense of “*uncanny sentimentality*” which can be terrifying. We do not, at least consciously, associate the idea of the comic with a sense of fear; however, what is comic in this sense is not the object of actual physical laughter, but a complicated psychological reaction involving levity against a perceived powerful threat. As Eco states, “*comedy is the quintessential human reaction to the fear of death*”⁹. In the war front, humor can become a source of strength for the soldier to challenge and face death when it turns out to be a commonplace definition of his mundane existence. Humor, then, helps him overcome the fear of death by replacing all too common feelings of sadness and doom with a daring hope of survival and victory. As Brown and Penttinen put forward, “*There is more to the human experience of war than suffering and trauma*”¹⁰. The use of humor is by no means restricted to the soldiers fighting at the war front. Üngör

7 Azer Banu Kemalöglü, “From Hostility to Lasting Friendship: A Study of the Anzac and Turkish Soldier’s Personal Narratives”. *English Studies: New Perspectives* (eds. Mehmet Ali Çelikel and Baysar Taniyan). Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2015, p. 28.

8 Azer Banu Kemalöglü, “Düşmanlıktan Kalıcı Dostluğa: Türk ve Anzak Askerlerinin Günlüklerinden Kültürel Yansımalar,” *Çanakkale Araştırmaları Türk Yılığ*, V. 15, Çanakkale Güz 2013, p. 145.

9 Umberto Eco, “The Art of Fiction No 197”, *The Paris Review* (Interview by Lila Azam Zanganeh), No. 185 Summer 2008, p. 124.

10 Katherine E. Brown and Elina Penttinen, “A ‘Sucking Chest Wound’ is Nature’s Way of Telling You to Slow Down: Humor and Laughter in War Time”. *Critical Studies on Security*, no. 1.1 (June 2013), p. 124.

explains three different cases of mass victimization which produced humor: “the Nazi mass murder of Jews during World War II, the Serbian genocide against Bosnian muslims (Bosniaks) during the Yugoslavian civil wars and the Assad regime’s massively deadly violence against the opposition from March 2011 on”.¹¹ In any case, humor empowers the individual against the fear of victimization by a deadly force. Laughter or levity can be life affirming acts of courage which prove to be stronger than the debilitating emotion of fear. Nevertheless, humor can intermix both positive and negative feelings at one and the same time.

According to Socrates, in the Platonic dialogue of *Philebus*, the feelings of distress and pleasure can be mixed when longing for something lacking at one’s present surroundings: “we shall find with the mind and the body combinations of distress and pleasure sometimes lumped together under a single heading as pleasure, sometimes as distress”.¹² Without the distress caused by a lack of water, drinking would not be pleasurable for example. Purely mental forms of distress like fear, envy and malice involve a sense of “enjoyment” according to Socrates. By extension, he contends, the audience enjoy their tears in a tragedy, and in a similar fashion “the state of mind (psyche) is one of combined distress and pleasure”¹³ in comedies. For the soldiers at the war front, the distress caused by the fear of death is somewhat merged with the joy of being still alive.

Plato argues that there is always something tragi-comic in humor because laughter is induced at the expense of somebody. Laughter includes a certain degree of malice, which also gives one pleasure. Comedy involves an odd mixture of the contradictory feelings of pleasure and malice. We always ridicule a failure. People who ignore the Oracle’s decree “know thyself” fail in this respect and arouse laughter because they assume to have more than they actually possess in terms of money, power, intelligence etc. When the people are not capable of self-reflection, they have no way of knowing that their sense of self-worth is always relative. Aristotle illuminates how such a sense of pride in oneself can be a source of humor and sarcasm.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines comedy as a human tendency to see oneself superior to others: “Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type...it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are”¹⁴. He further explains that “Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life”.¹⁵ Aristotle uses the word ‘worse’ in a special way here. Comedy represents its object not in the full sense of the word “bad”, which means “painful” or “destructive” like the proverbial villain in a fairy tale. Because the object of representation is to be ridiculed, not to be feared, it will be portrayed as

11 Uğur Ümit Üngör, “Funny as Hell: The Functions of Humor During and after Genocide”. *European Journal of Humor Research*, no 3.2.3, p. 82.

12 Plato, *Philebus*. (Trans. J.C.B. Gosling), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, p. 45.

13 Plato, *Philebus*, p. 47.

14 Aristotle. *Poetics*. (Trans. S.H. Butcher), Hill and Wang, New York 1961, p 52.

15 Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 52.

feeble and deformed, rather than strong and formidable. The humorous descriptions of the Turkish enemy in the Anzac soldiers' narratives almost always imply a Westerner's superiority over the ignorant, laughable Easterner. When an Anzac soldier describes the Turk under the worst possible light in a humorous way, he subverts his historical image as a frightening, powerful and ruthless agent of war. By representing the Turk as "worse than in actual life", the Anzac soldier naturally positions himself in a higher status than his opponent, physically, intellectually, and even ideologically. Thomas Hobbes calls this feeling "*sudden glory*"¹⁶: "*the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves*"¹⁷. "Sudden glory" implies a feeling of pride and self-satisfaction, because every form of ridicule implies some sort of a war of opposites, through which one reinforces one's own strength against the perceived or posited weakness of the other.

As Henri Bergson puts forward, an "*absence of feeling*"¹⁸ accompanies humor, because "*comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled*".¹⁹ This absence of feeling, or a pretense of absence of feeling towards the suffering of the enemy is a must to give oneself the license to kill others, and to make light of the matter afterwards. However, humor can also bring fighting soldiers closer together, and make the enemy appear in a more humane light when it emphasizes their common weakness against senseless and random violence. The ones who dare to turn against war and violence even for a brief period of time can see the painful irony and absurdity of taking part in mass killings and mass destruction.

When self-sacrificial heroism is spoiled by irony, we have a prolific source material for humor. It arises out of a discrepancy between what is expected before the war and what actually happens in the battlefield. When the soldiers realize and accept the fact that the truth of their current condition is less than heroic, humor seems to be the last resort to alleviate the pain of helplessness they feel against their fate. Humor can carry a purgative function for the soldier then; it helps him deal with the unwanted feelings of fear and pity for himself, for his comrades, and even for the enemy soldier as a fellow human being. Through such jokes as "*If the enemy is in range, so are you*"²⁰ which were used to circulate amongst the groups in US military, uncertainty and unpredictability of war were "*made knowable by humorous statements that deny responsibility and highlight how soldiers are in a war of not their own making*"²¹. Both the Turkish and the Anzac soldiers use similar self-directing humor which becomes a defence mechanism against criticism

16 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or, the Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civil* Barnes and Noble, New York 2004, p. 37.

17 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p.37.

18 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton, Macmillan, New York 1911, p.2.

19 Bergson, *Laughter*, p 2.

20 Brown and Penttinen, "Chest Wound", p. 124.

21 Brown and Penttinen, "Chest Wound", p. 124.

and failure. As Frye explains, in Aristotle's *Ethics*, *iron* is a self-deprecating man who "makes himself invulnerable"²² and—though Aristotle disapproves of him—there is no question that "he is a predestined artist"²³. Pity and fear are eliminated in this sort of irony because the vision of the artist "takes life exactly as it finds it"²⁴.

Unspeakable acts of violence are repeatedly depicted as amusing and ridiculous incidents in the soldiers' narratives. Northrop Frye explains the ways through which different forms of violence find expression comedy. In his view, literature has an upper limit and a lower limit; in the upper, the visionary description of eternal truth becomes a substitute for the actual experience of it (as in Dante's *Paradiso*). The lower limit, on the other hand, reveals itself in ironic comedy: "*This is the condition of savagery, the world in which comedy consists of inflicting pain on a helpless victim, and tragedy in enduring it*"²⁵. This is the lowest possible extent a human being can go to force pain onto another. Archetypally, we see the execution of this spirit in a witch hunt or lynching: "*The element of play is the barrier that separates art from savagery, and playing at human sacrifice seems to be an important theme of ironic comedy*"²⁶. When we observe that killing is treated like a hunting game, or a sport for the Anzac soldiers, we cannot help asking the age-old question: "Does life imitate art or does art imitate life?" Whatever the answer is, one fact remains clear that the war arouses the most primitive, savage instincts in a man which lets him enjoy death and destruction.

Anzac soldiers often use animal imagery in their narratives to dehumanize the enemy and to justify the ruthless, pleasurable killings. In a letter that he wrote to his mother in May 1915, Lieutenant H.R. McLarty compares Turkish soldiers to lice: "*We have now made very comfortable 'dugouts' with corrugated iron for roofs and but for the flies and lice (they are far worse than the Turks) living would be very comfortable*"²⁷. The dugouts are supposed to be "comfortable" places except for the flies and lice. McLarty undermines the power and authority of the Turkish military by depicting them worse than ordinary pests. He sends home the message that the Anzac soldiers are living under tolerable conditions in Gelibolu, and the Turkish soldiers are no possible match for them. In another letter written three months later, he uses the metaphor of flies to describe the dead bodies of the Turkish soldiers: "*For four days they have been dragging Turkish dead out of the captured trenches. As each body is dragged past my dug-out I am having a most enjoyable time. They are 4 to 5 days old and they do buzz*"²⁸. McLarty uses black humor to depict one of the most horrendous sights imaginable for any person to see. He suggests that the buzzing sound that he hears comes not from the flies infesting the corpses of the long dead soldiers, but from the dead bodies themselves. By comparing the dead bodies

22 Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 40.

23 Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 40.

24 Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 40.

25 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Princeton and Oxford 1971, p. 45.

26 Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 46.

27 L.T. H.R. McLarty, 3DRL3339. Australian War Memorial Research Archive, Canberra 1915.

28 McLarty, August 11 1915.

of the Turkish soldiers to buzzing bothersome flies, McLarty prevents any possibility of empathy for them as human beings. Moreover, he claims to be having ‘a most enjoyable time’ while watching their removal from their surroundings. This sort of humor involves “*pleasurable malice*” or “*sudden glory*” to use Plato’s and Hobbes’ concepts respectively.

In many texts, we see that the soldiers do not refrain from admitting the fact that they actually enjoy the act of killing Turks or watching others kill them. In his diary entry of April 25, 1915, Leslie Lott relates the death of an old friend of his, “*one of the bravest*”²⁹ soldiers, due to a shot he gets in his head. As if to counterbalance his own feelings of grief within the same entry, he narrates an incident about an Indian soldier which, he says, he finds “amusing”. When the Indian soldier’s mule is shot by a Turkish sniper, the Indian gets so angry that he takes his big knife and goes over the hill in front of them, towards the Turkish side. Soon after, “*the Indian returned with a smile all over his face carrying a Turkish Rifle and a head held by the hair; he had avenged his mule*”³⁰. In this entry, Lott intimates that a Turkish soldier’s life is worth no more than that of a mule. His death is justified because they kill brave Anzac soldiers. Not only Lott, but also other soldiers seem to find this sort of unfeeling act of killing amusing. In an entry he writes the next day, Lott quotes one of the officers saying: “*You are a cold blooded lot any [one] would think that you were shooting rabbits instead of human beings*”.³¹ The Anzac soldier is the unfeeling hunter whereas the Turkish soldiers are described as helpless and powerless rabbits. The war becomes a hunting game in which the soldiers shoot human beings for enjoyment.

It could be claimed that in a war all the parties involved are supposed to kill one another, therefore none of them are “helpless victims” per se. However, we see that it was possible for an Anzac soldier to mock totally helpless captive Turks. In his account of the Lone Pine Charge, Leslie Lott comments on the conduct of the Turkish soldiers who give themselves up: “*some funny things happened*”; “*From out of a tunnel...crawled about 20 Turks crying ‘Meester Merci’, and kissing our hands and feet, giving anything to us not to kill them*”³². After his description of the “comical” procession of the Turkish soldiers, Lott tells us a totally unrelated incident about a shell falling in their midst and killing a number of them. In the last sentence of the same day’s entry, he reveals that they had lost nearly all of their officers. In the midst of such senseless carnage in which both parties keep losing lives, Lott’s entry shows us the power of humor in keeping up a sense of self-righteousness, and perhaps sanity.

Humor becomes a means of insulting not only the people themselves but also their religious devotion, which is reminiscent of the American colonization of indigenous peoples. Corporal Haworth narrates an incident in which Anzacs mock Turkish soldiers

29 Leslie Lott. MSS1122, Australian War Memorial Research Archive, Canberra 1915.

30 Lott, 1122, p. 12.

31 Lott, April 26 1915.

32 Lott, August 6 1915.

cries of “Allah, Allah, Allah!” while attacking the enemy: “As soon as we heard them we began to laugh. It really was a joke. I never will believe that the troops making all that noise were the best in the Turkish army, as they were supposed to be. We repulsed them as easily as on the previous night”³³. Turkish cries for divine help appears to be a sign of his powerlessness, a mere “noise” or a “joke” for the Anzac soldier. The snubbing of local cultures and belief systems provides the European powers with a just cause for colonization and conquest. “I don’t want any Turkish woman blaming me for killing her husband or harem master, whichever the case may be. I have seen their cousins in Egypt and don’t like them”³⁴ writes Haworth. Since many Australian soldiers refer to themselves as the “Colonials” in their diaries, their motivation for fighting in a country totally unknown to them historically, geographically and culturally becomes evident.

The Anzac and Turkish soldiers also exchange a sense of humor devoid of overt maliciousness and builds a common bond of humanity between them even for a brief period of time. Colonel Haworth narrates an incident which makes him admit that “There is no doubt about it. The Turk is a humorist regardless of what people say”³⁵. On one occasion, the Australian soldiers spend a lot of time laying out barbed wire in front of their trenches. The next morning, they wake up to find that all the wire has been taken away by the Turkish soldiers who leave a note behind: “Kindly cut the wire longer next time as it is slightly too short for our use. Thanks, all the same”³⁶. Immediately after narrating this incident, Haworth recounts how the Turks, several of whom spoke English, fooled the Australian soldiers into thinking that they were sending a friendly note which turned out to be a bomb that killed one and wounded three. Haworth makes his reader remember that such humorous and friendly exchange between the enemy soldiers means only a temporary break with violence and carnage that is about to follow.

A New Zealander, Lieutenant Charles Wallace Saunders, uses an ironic sense of humor to emphasize the ridiculous in the apparently serious business of putting out barbed wire in front of the trenches. In a diary entry he wrote on 20 May 1915, he claims that they cannot stop the Turks, who are positioned about only 30 yards away, with the irregularly laid out barbed wire. However, he says, “as we will have to go ahead sooner or later, it will probably be in our own road”³⁷. The use of self-deprecating humor in this instance makes the Anzac’s helplessness against the Turks appear less fearful and alarming. Right after describing the futile act of planting barbed wires on their own way, Saunders reports the content of a cutting from a Constantinople paper that he has seen: “the Turks had driven the British colonial troops into the sea but, owing to their aquatic propensities they had swum back to land again. It was the first time Turkey has been invaded by savages, black people such as the colonials”³⁸. This amusing piece of

33 Haworth, PR0156, pp. 39-40.

34 Haworth Pro156, p. 69.

35 Haworth, PR0156, p.80.

36 Haworth, PR0156, pp.80-81.

37 Charles W. Saunders. MS7336-1 Wellington National Library, New Zealand, p 71.

38 Saunders, 7336, p. 71.

news created by the Turks overturns the commonplace image of the “black savages” to represent the Colonials themselves rather than the colonized Africans. Ironically, Turks see themselves as the superior white race, as opposed to the ‘black Colonials’ who are pictured as amphibian creatures. Saunders’ commentary on this joke involves some sort of a cathartic relief by admitting his own feelings of powerlessness like the *iron*: “*Guess if I had been driven into the sea, any aquatic propensity I possessed would have carried me to a ship, or over to the Island of Imbross, certainly not back to Anzac*”³⁹. Here Saunders exchanges his expected role of a brave soldier fighting for his country and for his nation with that of an ordinary human being who wants to run away from the battlefield as soon as possible. The double nature of humor in this case gives the soldier the license to express his innermost feelings freely. If he had voiced those feelings seriously, he would easily have been labelled as a deserter, or a traitor, but the irony of humor can put a safe distance between the reality of war and the truth of human psyche striving for survival.

Sometimes the *iron*-like self-deprecation builds an imaginary shield of psychological invulnerability around all the soldiers involved in the combat. In his letter dated August 25, 1915, Private H.T.C. Alcock asks his mother whether a friend called Roy Brown has been killed in action. In the very next paragraph, he tells her a story involving trench humor as if to alleviate the sadness and heaviness of the air created by his question. In this account, Anzac and Turkish soldiers exchange notes in the Lone Pine trenches where the Turks are stationed only fifteen yards away: “*once the Turks threw a note over saying, ‘You are too weak to advance and too strong to retire and we are the same, so what the ---- are we going to do about it?’ Another one said, ‘If you don’t surrender in twenty-four hours we will!’*”⁴⁰. Here humor arises out of an acceptance of one’s own weakness as a human being when one has to play the part of the brave soldier, always ready to face death without flinching. While the soldiers wait for death to take them away from their physical surroundings and their loved ones, jokes help them build one last attempt of human communication. As Eco puts forward: “*Laughter is a way to tame death, a way not to take our death too seriously, by not taking too seriously our life*”⁴¹.

When life and death become inextricably intertwined, the soldiers witness the loss of common sense and meaning that presides over regular life. Death becomes a rule rather than an exception, and the soldiers can find solace in absurd humor (We know that absurd drama arose as a reaction to the atrocities of World War II). When a soldier feels like a complete failure, he will hang on to absurd humor to stay level-headed. For Sergeant Major Henry Kitson, it is his toothbrush that becomes a symbol of the thin line between sanity and madness in the midst of utter hopelessness. Kitson writes the following lines on May 15, 1915: “*Heavy rifle and artillery fire about dawn...large shells began to burst round & fragments fly in all directions. It ended by Turks putting one in our midst, knocking out 8 men. The explosion was terrific. I was fortunate in securing a toothbrush,*

39 Saunders, 7336, p. 71.

40 Private H.T.C. Alcock, File No. 12/11/235. Australian War Memorial Research Archive, Canberra.

41 Adam Chandler, ‘Remembering Umberto Eco’, *The Atlantic*, (Feb 19 2016).

*new needless to say*⁴². Kitson composes this passage while sitting in a dirty ditch which could be hit by a shell any time. Instead of mourning for the eight comrades he has just lost, he pretends to rejoice over saving his “new” toothbrush, perhaps the last connection he has left with a normal, regular life. As he himself emphasizes, when you lose more than half of the four thousand comrades in one day, you do not even turn around and look to see where a shell has landed. The absurd sense of humor that Kitson uses here is an attempt to deflect his feelings of unspeakable sadness and loss. It underlines the dismal truth that the life of a man as a thinking, feeling being can mean nothing in a war.

Charles Wallace Saunders also portrays an absurd scene of mass hysteria, which many of us would find incongruous with the seriousness of a war. While Saunders is busy with the maintenance work to keep the trenches safer, he witnesses an event, which, he thinks is unbelievable: “*I am sure some of my readers will say I am stretching a little*”⁴³. Jack Johnson, a big black bomb shell named after an African American world heavy weight boxing champion, lands in a bivouac of Australian Light Horse. It makes an awful noise and completely devastates the bivouac. What Saunders hears at this moment is “*echoing across the gully, peal after peal of the most ribald and hilarious laughter one ever heard...another Jack Johnson and again peals of laughter-how those Australians laughed at death and curiously enough no one was hurt*”⁴⁴. Saunders finds the “*colonials*” “*laughing in the midst of death and treating it all as a joke*”⁴⁵ admirable. This story is another instance of laughter taming death. The human spirit is designed for survival under any condition, and laughter is one great tool to rise above the immediacy of any challenge that threatens the integrity of the individual self.

Our final examples will illustrate the use of humor in challenging the power of military authority. As we have already seen in Corporal Haworth’s letter, some of the Anzac soldiers complain about the military censorship on personal communications. Perfect heroes, as you can imagine, are not allowed to display any kind of human frailty or criticize their superiors. When some soldiers go back home after they finish military duty, they find the time and opportunity to reflect upon the past only to realize that they were less than perfect as soldiers. Charles Saunders finds a lot to criticize about a certain episode of his military duty:

“When we were being trained in Egypt Colonel Pridham, caps Ferguson & Mc Neil, when lecturing to us, always used to remark on the wonderful talent amongst us and how very useful we would be, etc. etc. –and we, just the sort of men wanted-how always we used to wonder ‘Was it sarcasm or not?’ They did so so often that we got absolutely tired of it. And now we know it was all sarcasm or apparently it was”.⁴⁶

42 Henry Kitson, MS4540. Wellington, New Zealand.

43 Saunders, 7336, 23 April 1915.

44 Saunders, 7336, 23 April 1915.

45 Saunders, 7336, 23 April 1915.

46 Saunders, 7336, May 31 1915.

Saunders cannot be sure whether their superiors were mocking them or not. Nevertheless, he is brave enough to poke fun at their own awkward situation there: “we, just the sort of men wanted”. He knows very well that the brief training period in Egypt would not make them professional soldiers. His disillusionment with the training period extends to some of the Royal Engineers or R.E’s: “All my life, I have always thought that if a man held, say, the rank of Capt. In R.E.’s then he must be a smart and capable engineer- now I know that, although the smartest engineers in the nation are in the R.E’s they have also many fools”⁴⁷. Saunders’ commentary on the professional competency of Royal Engineers could be a reaction to the ridicule he had suffered at the hands of his superiors. If the best of the military men have fools amongst themselves, it must be alright for ordinary folk to be less than perfect soldiers.

While Saunders can challenge authority only through his writing, Major Arthur William Dodd risks his military career when he rejects humiliation by his superiors when he responds to sarcasm with flippancy. He gives an account of how he felt compelled to shoot at a Turkish soldier who was aiming at an English officer: “I drew my revolver and shot this Turk dead. As soon as I had done so, I felt very sick, but such is war”⁴⁸. After the incident he is called by an infuriated English group commander who wanted to know “in a most sarcastic voice, what I thought I was doing wasting all the ammunition I was firing”⁴⁹. What follows almost gets Dodd under arrest: “after some fiery words on both sides, I told him I would not obey the order and that he could go and jump in the Dardanelles”⁵⁰. After a good dressing down by his superiors—in addition to the fear of bringing shame not only upon himself but also on his Battery—Dodd is brought to his senses. Looking back on the events, he admits that it was a foolish act, and he had just reached the age of twenty-one years, which was too young to understand the full consequences of his actions.

Like all the other soldiers whose stories of war form a basis for our analysis, we do not know whether Major Dodd is giving us the whole picture. He naturally narrates the events from his own standpoint and gives us his take on the relationships among the hierarchical levels of the Anzac military. Even for a short while humor helps Major Dodd confront sarcasm from his superior with the empowerment of mimicry. He subverts the chain of command by telling the group commander to go and jump in the Dardanelles. Mikhail Bakhtin sees the reactionary possibilities in humor as a means to overcome the official and authoritarian aspects of class culture, which “combined with violence, prohibitions and limitations...always contain an element of fear and of intimidation”⁵¹. It would be impossible to convince tens of thousands of people to keep killing one another unless fear and intimidation were not used as a control mechanism on various levels. Sometimes only humor can have the licence and courage to tell the world that “complete liberty is

47 Saunders, 7336, May 31 1915.

48 Arthur William Dodd, MSS:0818. File No: 419/27/12, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, p. 4.

49 Dodd, MSS:0818, p. 4.

50 Dodd, MSS:0818, pp. 4-5.

51 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1968, p. 90.

*possible only in a completely fearless world*⁵². The personal accounts of the common soldiers reveal that humor could be an essential part of the existence in the battlefield. As Corporal Haworth puts forward: “*Strange thing, this war business, one never knows what it is like till he is in it himself*”⁵³.

This study has analyzed only five of the several Anzac soldiers personal accounts of Gelibolu battlefields. As we have seen in these accounts, humor can be both a defensive and an offensive tool for survival in war. We find humor in the least expected contexts which involve mass killings and destruction. Moreover, humor can become both a friendly communicative tool and a hostile weapon for intercultural exchange in the battlefield. However, the studies on war time humor in general are very limited. The philosophical and literary theories on what is comic illuminate why pleasure and pain appear to be the basic driving forces behind the dualistic nature of humor to a certain extent. A more extensive study on different war diaries and letters will help us understand different functions of humor and the individual reactions of the common soldier towards war which are always left out of the larger framework of the official narratives of war.

52 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 47

53 Haworth, PR0156, p. 39.

Works Cited:

- Alcock, Private H.T.C., File No. 12/11/235. Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1915.
- Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. S.H. Butcher, Hill and Wang, New York 1961.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1968.
- Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton. New York: 1911, Macmillan.
- Brown, Katherine and Elina Penttinen, "A 'Sucking Chest Wound' is Nature's Way of Telling You to Slow Down: Humor and Laughter in War Time", *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 1.1, June 2013, pp. 124-126.
- Chandler, Adam, "Remembering Umberto Eco", *The Atlantic*, Feb 19 2016.
- Dodd, Arthur William. MSS:0818. File No: 419/27/12. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Eco, Umberto, "The Art of Fiction No 197", Interview by Lila Azam Zanganeh, *The Paris Review*, no. 185, Summer 2008, p. 124.
- Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Princeton and Oxford 1971.
- Haworth, Paul, PR0156, *Papers of Corporal Paul Haworth*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan or, the Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, Barnes and Noble, New York 2004.
- Üngör, Uğur Ümit, "Funny as Hell: The Functions of Humor During and after Genocide". *European Journal of Humor Research*, no 3.2.3, pp. 80-101.
- Kemaloğlu, Azer Banu, "Düşmanlıktan Kalıcı Dostluğa: Türk ve Anzak Askerlerinin Günlüklerinden Kültürel Yansımalar." *Çanakkale Araştırmaları Türk Yıllığı*, V. 15, Çanakkale Güz 2013, pp. 145-47.
- "From Hostility to Lasting Friendship: A Study of the Anzac and Turkish Soldier's Personal Narratives", In Çelikel, M. A. & Taniyan, B. (ed.) *English Studies: New Perspectives*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2015, pp. 23-35.
- Kitson, Henry, MS4540. Wellington National Library, New Zealand 1915.

Lott, Leslie, MSS1122, Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1915.

McLarty, L.T. H.R., 3DRL3339. Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1915.

Plato, *Philebus*, (Trans. J.C.B. Gosling), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975.

Prior, Robin, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2009.

Saunders, Charles W., MS7336-1 Wellington National Library, New Zealand 1915.

Tennyson, Alfred. "Charge of the Light Brigade," *Tennyson a Selected Edition*, Christopher Ricks (Ed.), Routledge, New York 2007.