

## **AICED-24: Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts**

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Conference

Date:

June 9, 2023 to June 11, 2023

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Romania

Subject Fields:

American History / Studies, British History / Studies, Film and Film History, Literature, Popular Culture Studies

# **AICED-24**

**THE 24<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE ENGLISH  
DEPARTMENT,**

**UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST**

**LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES SECTION**

**9-11 JUNE 2023**

**CALL FOR PAPERS**

The English Department of the University of Bucharest invites proposals for the Literature and Cultural Studies section of its 24<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference:

## **Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts**

**- In memoriam Mihaela Irimia, Irina Pană and Octavian Roske -**

To be held in hybrid format at

**The University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures**

7-13 Pitar Moş St., Bucharest, Romania

and online

**Confirmed Keynote Speakers:**

**Professor Annie Gagiano (Stellenbosch University)**

**Professor Flavio Gregori (Università Ca' Foscari, Venice)**

**Professor Valentina Sandu-Dediu (National University of Music, Bucharest)**

**Professor Bogdan Ştefănescu (University of Bucharest)**

**Professor Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3)**

Humour and pathos have been essential elements of literature and the arts - and of life - from ancient times to the twenty-first century and they pose many fascinating questions for literary and cultural criticism, theory and practice and for a range of related fields of intellectual inquiry such as aesthetics, anthropology, musicology, philosophy, psychology and sociology. They present an especially intriguing challenge to intellectual analysis because they are bound up with fundamental human emotions and the physical expression of these through laughter and tears and their impact on readers and audiences is greatest when they are immediately and intuitively understood - when we "get the joke" laugh or grasp at once at the pity of a particular situation and feel moved to tears. This intrinsic connection with physiological manifestations is reflected by the etymology of the two terms. Humour comes from the Latin *humor* (moisture) and the original meaning was bodily fluid, which led to its being used for the cardinal humours and subsequently for mood and whim. On the other hand, pathos was the Greek word for suffering and the word passion, derived from its Latin counterpart, came to be associated with Christ's crucifixion and His bleeding wounds. But as pain and pleasure are sometimes so close to each other, passion came to denote a form of excessive love.

The emotional, immediate and intuitive aspects of humour and pathos, however, mean that the attempt to analyse them can seem to diminish, dissipate and even destroy their impact and essence - explaining a joke or a scene of pathos may reduce or remove its capacity to produce amusement or pity. What language and concepts can we find or formulate that will enable us to write and speak of humour and pathos in the arts in ways that adequately encompass both their experiential quality and their intellectual significance?

Through the ages, many writers and thinkers have addressed these and related questions: key examples include Aristotle in *Rhetoric* [ῥητορική], which sees pathos [πάθος] as a means of persuasion that uses language to arouse emotion (and, in Plato's view, is therefore suspect); the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709); Ben Jonson in his comedies *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) and *Every Man out of His Humour* (1600), which play on the sense of "humour" as an inclination to behave in a certain way that produces "humour" in the sense of amusement; Alexander Pope's prose piece "Peri Bathos or The Art of Sinking in Poetry" (1728), which introduces the term "bathos" (meaning a failed attempt at pathos) into the English language; Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872); Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* [*Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*] (1900); Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* [*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*] (1905); and Trevor Griffith's play *Comedians* (first performed 1975), which, set in an evening class for would-be comedians, dramatises issues around the nature, ethics and politics of humour. There is also a vast swathe of literary criticism that examines humour and pathos in specific writers and texts, perhaps most extensively in relation to Charles Dickens, who makes copious use of both elements in his novels and short stories in ways that have attracted a host of readers but troubled some literary critics who feel that they detract from the stature of serious literature.

The challenging questions raised by the theme of humour and pathos in the arts include: What makes us laugh and cry? What is going on (cognitively, emotionally, physically, semiotically) when we do either or both? What is the relationship between humour and the genre of comedy, and pathos and the genre of tragedy? What is the relationship between humour and satire (a satire aims to be humorous, but not all humour is satire)? How does humour work in comic subgenres such as "low comedy" (a term coined by the seventeenth-century English poet and playwright John Dryden), black comedy (which jokes about serious matters and is akin to the "sick joke" and dark comedy (a term developed by Shakespeare critics for plays such as *Measure for Measure*, which come dangerously close to full-blown tragedy). How does humour work in popular modes like burlesque, farce, musical comedy and vaudeville? How does pathos work in popular genres such as melodrama and romantic comedy? What distinctions might there be between humour and wit? How culturally and temporally specific are humour and pathos (a joke or scene that may make one kind of audience laugh and cry may fall flat with another, or indeed with the same audience at different times). How far can humour or pathos be conveyed through translation (one of the texts mentioned above, Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* presents particular difficulties in translating the jokes it uses as examples, especially those that depend on wordplay)? What happens when attempts at humour and pathos inadvertently go wrong (a joke falls flat or results in a blunder, a scene of pathos seems funny, resulting in what Alexander Pope dubbed "bathos")? What is the dividing line between pathos and bathos? What are the boundaries to humour and pathos at any given time (for example, some jokes that might once have been acceptable and amusing would now seem racist or sexist, such as the line in Noel Coward's romantic comedy *Private Lives*: "Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs", which might once have been thought witty but would now seem to make light of patriarchal violence; scenes that provoked tears in one generation may provoke laughter in another generation, as in the observation on Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* attributed to Oscar Wilde: "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing"). Why have the adjectives "pathetic" and "sentimental", which originally had positive connotations connected with pathos and

sympathy, acquired such derogatory meanings?

We invite papers that explore examples of humour and pathos in literature and the arts from the present or past and from across the world, whether in verbal, aural, visual or hybrid forms – for example, poetry, fiction, drama, music, opera, song, painting, sculpture, photography, film, dance, comics, graphic novels and multimedia work. Papers may focus upon individual works or bodies of work by one or more writers or artists and may also consider broader and more abstract issues around conceptualising, defining and theorising humour and pathos, drawing where appropriate on other disciplines that seem relevant and illuminating.

Possible topics may include (but are not confined to) the following:

- Humour and pathos as means of artistic expression in literature and the arts
- Humour and comedy
- Pathos and tragedy
- Humour as relief in tragedy
- Pathos and parody and caricature
- Humour and satire
- Humour, pathos and catharsis
- Humour and pathos seen from a historical perspective
- “Pathetic” as a positive and pejorative adjective
- “Sentimental” as a positive and pejorative adjective
- The boundaries of humour
- Humour, pathos and ethics
- Humour, pathos and aesthetics
- Humour and wit
- Humour as strategy of survival
- Humour and comedy as vehicles of social criticism and catalysits of social change
- Women’s humour versus feminist humour

- Humour and gender
- Humour in relation to culture, society and historical period
- The double-edged sword of humour as healer and/or destroyer

Conference presentations should be in English and will be allocated 20 minutes each, plus 10 minutes for discussion. Prospective participants are invited to submit abstracts of up to 200 words. Proposals should be in .doc or .docx format and should also include (within the same document) name and institutional affiliation, a short bio (no more than 100 words) and e-mail address. Proposals for panel discussions (to be organised by the participant) will also be considered.

A selection of papers from the conference will be published in *University of Bucharest Review* (ISSN 2069-8658) – listed on ERIH PLUS, Scopus, EBSCO (Literary Reference Centre Plus), CEEOL and Ulrichsweb. See the guidelines for contributors at <https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>.

Deadline for proposals: **10 April 2023**

Please send proposals through this form: <https://bit.ly/3IZfOQJ>

Enquiries may be sent to our email address: [conf.eng.litcult@lls.unibuc.ro](mailto:conf.eng.litcult@lls.unibuc.ro)

Conference fee: **50 euro** (or **250 lei** if paid in Romanian currency) to be paid by bank transfer into the account of the *Alumni* association (**IBAN TBA**) **by 15 May 2023**

For further details and updates, see: <https://engleza.lls.unibuc.ro/conferinte/>

(Enquiries regarding the Theoretical and Applied Linguistics section of the conference, which will be running at the same time, should be sent to [aiced.2023@gmail.com](mailto:aiced.2023@gmail.com))

We look forward to receiving proposals.

### **Organising and Selection Committee:**

Dr Alina Bottez

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Dr Andrei Nae

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