

STUDENT ACTIVITY 1: Uses and Effects of Humour

Apart from amusing, entertaining readers and drawing their attention, humour also helps to forge deeper connections to a story's characters, and to even push readers to reflect or even shift how they think about others and the world.

In this story, the self-aware narrator reconstructs his own account of Ostrich 12B's escape through Kampong Glam by a combination of investigative journalism and his own imagination of the ostrich's perspective. Often, this is done in a very light-hearted and humorous manner. But rarely do we discuss how humour is created and the effects it has on us as readers of Literature.

Thus, we explore five uses of humour in this story and its effects:

1. Satire

When a writer, narrator or character uses a serious tone to raise a ridiculous or absurd subject, there is a form of satire at work. Often, satire also consists of the use of exaggeration, irony, or ridicule to criticise and expose flaws in human nature and behaviour.

Question 1: Read the passage below from the start of the story that shows the official reports of the first ostrich's death.

- a. **How does the writer use satire with the narrator in this passage?**
- b. **What does the satire imply about the circumstances surrounding the death of the first ostrich?**

The first male ostrich:

"It was a replacement for a male ostrich that had died in his sleep at the Singapore Zoo. No one knew why it had passed away. There was talk that the bird despised his keepers, Singaporeans, foreigners, and its caged existence. It died of a self-induced heart attack. That was what the report said, so I am inclined to believe there is some truth to it."

2. Bathos (anticlimax)

Bathos occurs in a situation where a serious, emotional and/or heartfelt story full of feeling, emotion (and even insight) is first set up, but suddenly subverts it to something trivial, insignificant or everyday. It can turn a dramatic moment into something humorous in the anticlimactic surprise, and may even hint at a commentary on the larger narrative at play.

Question 2: The author often punctuates his recount of Ostrich 12B's escape with bathetic / anticlimactic comments that refer to the subjective nature of his recount. In the following examples of bathos below, can you explain how these moments can be considered bathetic or anticlimactic?

“There was even the odd Glam tree, which once bestowed the area its name, a symbol of a once-prominent fishing village at the mouth of the Rochor river. **But of course, the ostrich didn't know that.**”

“His nest soon took shape as an oval portal. He was meticulous; he enjoyed every detail; it was a masterpiece. **I am assuming all of these things, of course, I cannot delve into the mind of an ostrich. If one were able to do just that, I am sure this account would be very different.**”

3. Incongruity

The juxtaposition of two unrelated ideas, objects, persons or entities. It can also refer to something that is out of harmony, and inconsistent with expectations or surroundings. The humour is usually generated from the surprising or unexpected juxtaposition.

Question 3: On the final two pages of the original, the story ends with the juxtaposition of the “ostrichless story of [Khairul’s] recovery” and the following image “Fig. 3: How I remember him” of Ostrich 12b. What is incongruous about closing the story these two ideas?



4. Self-deprecating humour

When the speaker or character makes fun of himself or herself, the character is made vulnerable to the readers because their flaws or errors of judgement may be exposed to them. Nonetheless, it can also connect readers to characters if the point of the self-deprecating remark is relatable.

Question 4: Read the passage below.

- a. Identify the lines that reflect the presence of self-deprecating humour.
- b. What do these lines of self-deprecation suggest about the narrator's reflection about Ostrich 12B's behaviour?

"I have often thought about this moment during sleepless nights and stuttering MRT rides. Why did he regard them with distaste? Perhaps it was because pigeons were free, yet they chose to remain tied down and urbanised. I am sure an even more salient question emerged in his mind: why were they not wild and untethered? But then again I am no Professor Chatterjee. Perhaps this is simply my imagination running away with me."

5. Hyperbole and Understatement

Hyperbole – also known as *exaggeration*, or *overstatement*. In short, to present something or someone as greater than it is for emphasis and effect, and often not to be taken literally.

Understatement – An expression that uses an obviously lesser emphasis than is expected, usually to downplay a situation or reaction, and often used in an ironic manner. The key is that the reader can understand the full extent of the actual situation and is aware of the ridiculous understatement at play.

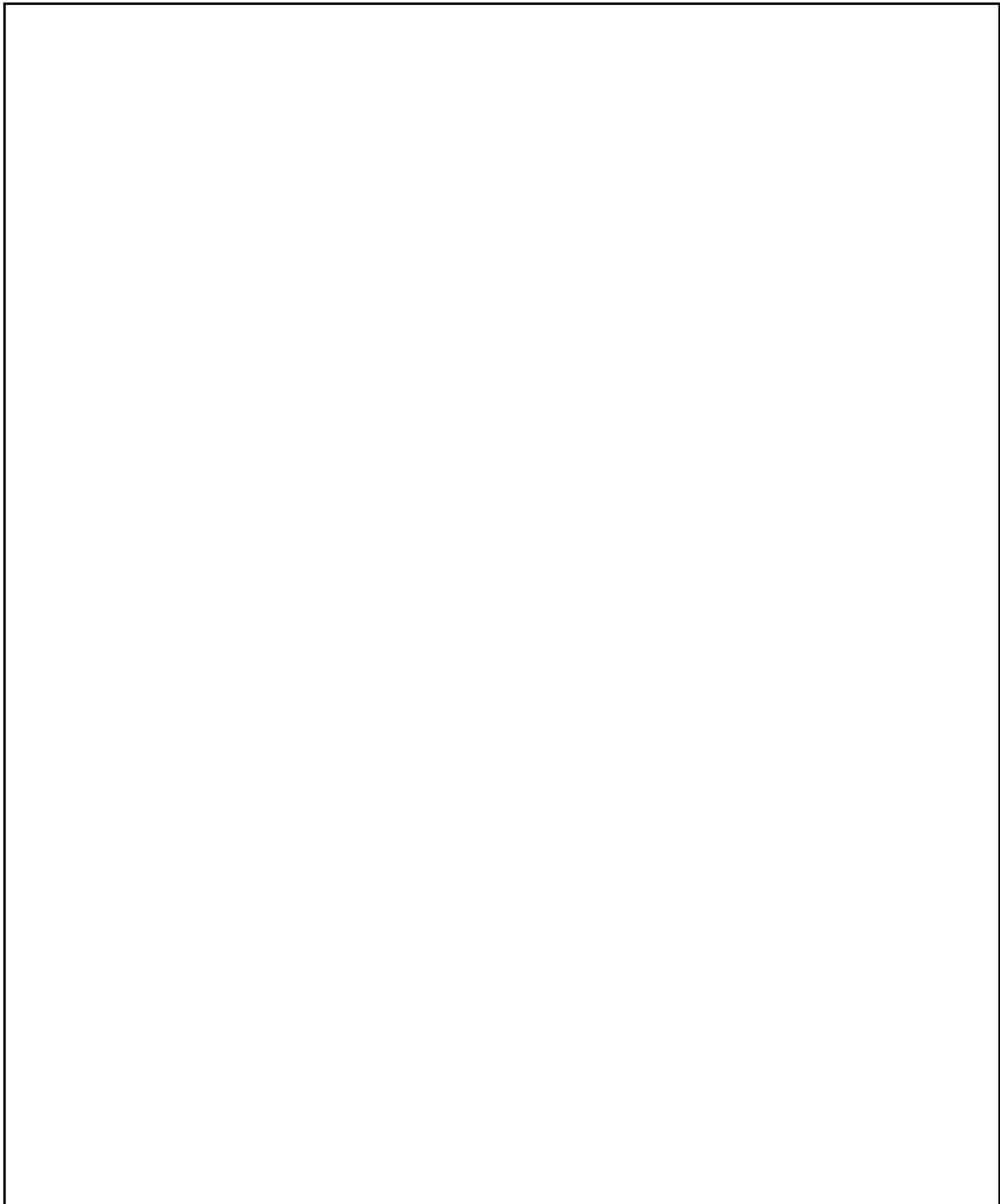
Question 5. Read the following passage below.

- a. Identify lines and/or phrases that can be considered hyperbole. Explain why.
- b. Identify lines and/or phrases that can be considered understatements. Explain why.
- c. What could the author be highlighting with this contrasting use of hyperbole and understatement?

Ostrich 12B:

“Twelve days later, a medical report came back. The slew of tranquilisers had caused a surge of etorphine and cyclohexylamine to course through 12B’s bloodstream. It was a deadly concoction, a veterinary calamity. We had fired too quickly, too much, without thought. 12B’s heart had collapsed in twenty-two seconds.

The official reports were sent a month later after timelines had been affirmed. It was delivered to a select panel of government officials. It was dubbed “a series of anomalous accidents”. 2001 came and went.”



[OPTIONAL] EXTENSION ACTIVITY: Parody in the Web Developer’s Design

You may have noticed that the web developers have chosen to create an “crime investigation” theme in the design of this microsite experience. This can be seen as a parody of the serious genre of crime investigations.

Question 6: How is the “crime investigation” theme in the microsite’s design a form of parody?