

# THE GROTESQUENESS IN VIETNAMESE FOLK JOKES

Dang Quoc Minh Duong<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Social Communication, Van Hien University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

\*Corresponding author: Email: duongdqm@vhu.edu.vn

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## Abstract

*Grotesqueness exploits laughter, exaggeration, and unusual contrasts between the imaginary and the real, beauty and ugliness, tragedy and comedy. Grotesqueness is prevalent in folk jokes, especially in tales about gluttony, henpecked husbands, and sexual desire. It manifests itself through character type, language, tone, and time frame. Using analytical and synthetic methods and an interdisciplinary approach, the author examines Vietnamese folk jokes to elucidate this viewpoint.*

**Keywords:** Character; Grotesqueness; Jokes; Language; Time; Tone; Vietnamese.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “the culture of folk humor” [*văn hóa trào tiếu dân gian*] was proposed and used by the Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). Studying and exploring the culture of folk humor reveals many intriguing aspects, such as types of folk festivals, jokes and humorous stories, and forms of the language of the marketplace [*ngôn ngữ chợ búa - quảng trường*], which is characterized by its informality and vivid expressions, and often includes slang, humor, and local dialects. The word “grotesque” can be translated into Vietnamese as *ngịch dị* (the word “grotesque” is an English adjective borrowed from French that can also be translated as “vulgar” or “absurd”). It represents a form of artistic imagery that “relies on illusion, laughter, exaggeration, and the strange combination and contrast of the illusory with the real, beauty with ugliness, tragedy with comedy, and the seemingly real with caricature” (Lê et al., 2004, p. 203). This type of imagery has existed since ancient times in the classical art of Greece and Rome. By the time classicism (a movement in literature and art during the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe that favored rationality, restraint, and strict forms) arose, Bakhtin (1984, pp. 101–102) said that “the tradition of the grotesque is not entirely extinct; it continues to live and to struggle for its existence in the lower canonical genres (comedy, satire, fable) and especially in noncanonical genres (in the novel, in a special form of popular dialogue, in burlesque).” “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 19–20). In this paper, the author focuses on exploring the grotesque in Vietnamese folk jokes as expressed through character types, language, tone, and time frame to clarify this argument.

## 2. GROTESQUE CHARACTER

The culture of folk humor contributes to the formation of grotesque characters. One of the most famous works in world literature is *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais. In this series of five novels, grotesqueness is expressed through the material and bodily imagery of the characters Gargantua and Pantagruel. Gargantua has quintessential traits of grotesqueness, from being carried in the womb for eleven months to being born from his mother’s left ear after she suffered from overeating due to consuming too many cow innards. Instead of crying upon birth, he loudly exclaimed, “Drink, drink, drink!” He then consumed the milk of 17,913 cows. Notably, the hyperbole is evident, such as the vast amount of fabric needed to make his clothes. The name “Pantagruel” means “all thirst.” Pantagruel’s eating and drinking habits are truly extraordinary; at each meal, he drank the milk of 4600 cows.

Similar to the grotesque depiction of Gargantua, characters in Vietnamese folk jokes also exhibit grotesque traits in their preferences and personalities. For instance, in the Vietnamese joke *Người vợ giỏi tính* [A wife who is good at counting down], the wife

ate all 12 *bánh tét*<sup>1</sup> in a humorous fashion, creating a playful rhyme each time she ate one to count down to the total number left. In another folk joke, *An khỏe* [Hearty appetite], Mr. Dinh is renowned for his hearty appetite: “In his entire life, he only had two meals that could be considered filling.” As Mr. Dinh reached “the fifteenth *bánh tét*,” his wife begged him to stop since there were only four left for the family (Vũ, 1995, p. 79). Some characters constantly look for excuses to mooch off others, as seen in the tale *Nhậu kiếm nhậu* [A drunk is getting more drunk], which tells of a young man who, although not invited, “goes looking for a feast, and whenever he sees a party, he finds a way to join in” (Trần, 2010, p. 346).

The grotesqueness in personality is most evident in the themes of sexual desire and the tales of henpecked husbands. Regarding sexual desire, there is a monk in the tale *Một tháng ba kỳ* [Three times per month], who, when asked, “You’ve been a monk for a long time; does your ‘rooster’ still crow?” reveals, “It crows three times per month,” adding, “Each time, about ten days!” (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 353). Buddhism advocates for the suppression of desire, especially sexual desire, to achieve a pure mind and heart. Yet, here is a monk who has supposedly been practicing for years, but his “rooster crows every day” for a whole month. The exaggeration of “each time about ten days” mocks this monk’s commitment to his vows.

Another example is the story *Khóc chồng* [Grieving for husband], which depicts a couple’s odd habits in their marital life. The tale recounts how, after each intimate encounter, they would place a grain of rice in a jar as a keepsake. When the husband dies unexpectedly, the young widow grieves deeply. After the funeral, she pours out the rice and finds three full cups with a little extra. She cries out, “Three cups and this little bit. Why didn’t you live to fill four cups?” (Vũ, 1995, p. 250). The tale does not reveal the couple’s ages but describes her as “a young wife,” indicating they had recently married. Yet, in such a short period, they had managed to fill nearly “four cups of rice” (one cup of rice contains anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 grains). Such a staggering number would leave even historical figures such as Wu Zetian, Queen Dowager Zhao, and Empress Lü<sup>2</sup> in awe of this young wife’s accomplishments.

Another tale, *Úm ba la, ba ta cùng khỏi* [Abracadabra! Three of us are freed], includes a trio of characters trapped in a vulgar situation: A wife, while cutting a yam, is captivated by one, so she puts it “inside her” and goes mad trying to remove it. Meanwhile, her husband returns just then for intimacy and discovers his wife’s situation. Disheartened, he goes outside to “distract himself” with a female dog. In an absurd turn, he ends up “bedding the female dog.” A shaman is called to help, but he indulges in thoughts of lust when encountering the couple’s situation, which leads him to stuff “his part” into a bottle and get it stuck. The tale ends, “The woman laughed so hard at the shaman’s situation that the yam was pushed out, and the female dog, seeing the yam, thought it was a piece of meat and ran to grab it. The shaman thought the dog was coming

<sup>1</sup> *Bánh tét*: A Vietnamese savory but sometimes sweetened cake made primarily from glutinous rice, which is rolled in a banana leaf into a thick, log-like cylindrical shape with a mung bean and pork filling, then boiled.

<sup>2</sup> Figures in Chinese history considered immoral or debauched.

to bite him, and out of fear, ‘his part’ shrank, causing the bottle to fall to the ground.” This creates a grotesque scene (Nguyễn, 2009, pp. 113–114). This trio exemplifies grotesque traits by their vulgar and outlandish ways of satisfying sexual needs.

Some characters are terrified of wives to the point of being paralyzed, even to the extent of not daring to marry. The tale *Sợ chết cứng* [Paralyzed with fear] features ten men who are so afraid of their wives that they gather to discuss how to deal with them, ultimately heading to a local shrine to unite against their wives. When the wives hear of this, they storm into the shrine, causing the husbands to scatter in fear. Once the danger passes, they discover one man still sitting calmly on a mat; it turns out he has been “paralyzed with fear” all along (Trương & Phong, 1993, pp. 203–204). This fear is not limited to commoners; even officials, who might thunder at the townspeople, become submissive and terrified when dealing with their wives. In the stories *Giàn hoa lý sắp đổ* [My cowslip creeper trellis is about to collapse] and *Điều kế* [Clever stratagem], we see this dynamic play out. In *Giàn hoa lý sắp đổ*, a schoolteacher has been clawed by his wife, leaving him with scratches all over his face. When the local magistrate enquires about the scratches, the teacher claims they were caused by “the collapsing cowslip creeper trellis.” The magistrate, not believing him, asserts that it was his wife who did it and declares, “Just tell the truth, and I’ll have some guards drag her in here. Women like that need to be dealt with firmly; otherwise, they’ll walk all over you.” However, when the magistrate’s wife overhears this, he suddenly falters and tells the teacher, “Forget it ... you ... just back off. ... My cowslip creeper trellis is about to collapse too” (Nguyễn, 2014c, pp. 38–39). The fact that the other nine men flee or that the teacher is beaten by his wife is already bizarre. But men who are so scared they might die is truly grotesque. Similarly, a high-ranking official who jumps at the sound of his wife’s voice is also quite absurd. Here, folklore cleverly highlights the contradiction between the tragic and the comic, between outward appearances (the loud posturing of the husbands and the bravado of the official) and the reality (that everyone is afraid of their wives).

Grotesque characters appear not only in the guise of common folk but also in the roles of powerful and noble figures, including scholars, officials, and royalty. For instance, there is the case of Lord *Trịnh*, who, while gravely ill, demands that his officials bring beautiful women to the palace, undressing them in front of him so he can claw and bite them. Recognizing that his illness stems from indulgence in toxic substances and lust, *Trạng Quỳnh* employs a clever remedy by staging a ritual [*lễ tế sao*] to encourage the lord to abstain from all excesses to restore his health (Hoàn, 2012, p. 46). With grotesque imagery and laughter as the primary method, folk humor creates characters that embody eccentric, bizarre, and absurd traits. This leads to a series of unusual situations that reveal the absurdities of life. Examples include the character of the teacher who furtively ate *chè* [Vietnamese sweet soup] in the folk joke *Thầy đồ ăn vụng chè* [The teacher who furtively ate the sweet soup] and the teacher in another folk joke *Chó cắn tay* [The dog who bit my hand] who devises a way to eat a student’s *bánh đa* [a type of Vietnamese rice paper wrapper], instructing the child who is crying about his rice paper wrapper being eaten to say, “If anyone asks, just say you cry because one of your hands was bitten by a dog” (Vũ, 1995, p. 187). This is considered a grotesque character as it shows a foolish and

greedy teacher degrade himself to the level of a dog. In the folk joke *Đậu phụ làng cần đậu phụ chùa* [The tofu from the village and the tofu of the pagoda are fighting], the master, who is consuming dog meat, answers a novice when asked what he is eating, “I’m eating tofu.” Just then, there is the sound of dogs fighting outside the gate, and he asks the novice what is going on, so the novice innocently answers, “The tofu from the village and the tofu of the pagoda are fighting.” There are other characters representing traits of grotesqueness, such as monks drinking alcohol and accepting bribes in folk jokes. Examples include *Thầy chùa* [The monk], *Lai niên bất đáo* [Not coming next year], *Lá húng lá húng* [Basil leaf, basil leaf], *Đậu phụ làng cần đậu phụ chùa*, and so on. While some monks may fail to uphold the teachings of Buddhism—especially regarding the suppression of desire, which pollutes the sacred—they often hide behind the solemnity of their robes. The most pronounced and biting portrayals of grotesque characters are found in the figures of the officials. In everyday life, order and hierarchy are taken seriously, contributing to the reinforcement of the existing regime, which claims stability and permanence in the world. “Debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images. We spoke of the grotesque swing, which brings together heaven and earth. But the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent” (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 370–371). Thus, the culture of folk humor helps dismantle “the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9). It “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10).

### 3. GROTESQUE LANGUAGE

Language is an important tool that writers use to express life and character personalities. Connected to and compatible with grotesque characters is certainly grotesque language. In Vietnamese folk jokes, grotesque language is manifested through the use of slang, vulgar terms, swear words, and street language. Everyday language rushes into the literary work with all its rawness, vibrancy, and chaos.

First and foremost, the very titles of these stories reveal their vulgarity. Titles such as *Cặc mày là cặc mày, cặc tao là cặc tao* [Your c\*\*k is yours; my c\*\*k is mine], *Cái ấy của làng* [The p\*\*\*y of the village], *Đái mau đưa vô* [Take a pi\*s quickly and bring it in], *Rồng ỉa vào đầu* [Where does the dragon sh\*t], *Quan nhà chú dốt như bò đực ấy* [Your official is a dumb-a\*\* bull], *Ăn to no bãi* [Eat till sh\*t], *Xơi chim* [Eat c\*\*k], and *Tài ăn cứt chó* [Whose talent is eating dog sh\*t] clearly indicate a part of each story’s theme. These titles showcase their distinctive qualities and grotesque nature, setting them apart from other stories and genres. These titles contribute to establishing a “reputation” for the culture of folk humor.

Unlike genteel literature, particularly in the period of classicism, which adhered to a normative, formal, and pure language associated with the educated elite, folk literature—especially humor—featured a distinct type of language known as “the language of the marketplace” (a term used by Bakhtin). For the first time, terms referring to male

and female genitalia, such as “c\*\*k” and “p\*\*\*y,” are used openly in Vietnamese literature. For instance, in the story *Ông râu rậm* [An old man with a bushy beard], the man whose beard is so bushy that it covers his mouth and causes a child to exclaim, “Look, there’s a man without a mouth!” The old man, annoyed, parts his beard and retorts, “No mouth? This is your mother’s p\*\*\*y right here!” (Vũ, 2014, p. 210). In another tale, *Cặc mày là cặc mày, cặc tao là cặc tao*, a rude official berates a ferry operator for being slow, saying, “You’re like my c\*\*k!” Upon hearing this, the wife responds, “If he’s your c\*\*k, then does that mean he’s sleeping with me?” The official tries to correct himself, saying, “I’m like your c\*\*k” but realizes it implies he’s saying he slept with his wife. Ultimately, the official concludes, “Your c\*\*k is yours; my c\*\*k is mine” (Nguyễn, 2014a, pp. 361–362). These examples illustrate how folk humor embraces raw, unfiltered language, creating a stark contrast with the elevated diction of traditional literature.

Grotesque language is most prominently manifested in terms related to human excretion, such as “sh\*t” and “pi\*s.” Here are specific examples from various stories. In the tale *Thầy đồ ăn vụng chè*, an old teacher furtively eats the sweet soup and then suffers from a stomachache all night. “He wants to relieve himself but is afraid of the fierce dogs. In desperation, he opens his bag and uses it as a toilet.” The next morning, as he carries his bag, the host worries that the teacher might feel ashamed of eating the sweet soup, leading to the scene where the host, in trying to pull him back into the house, causes the bag to fall and feces to spill everywhere! (Trần, 2010, p. 423). Another tale, *Xoi ... đại tiện* [Eating sh\*t], revolves around a soldier mistakenly reporting that the district chief is “resting and eating sh\*t in the house” (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 135). In *Tài ăn cứt chó*, a man challenges others, saying, “Whoever can eat three piles of dog sh\*t, I will marry my daughter to.” A man cleverly cooks three bowls of sweet rice cake, places them on leaves in the yard, and eats them happily. The story concludes with another man bringing a real pile of dog feces to the table. When the first man smells it, he feels nauseous, and when he closes his eyes to taste it, he cannot tolerate it and vomits (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 8).

The story *Đái mau đưa vô* tells of a village council punishing a woman for being pregnant out of wedlock. An errand boy,<sup>3</sup> serving the feast, sends his wife to buy liquor for the officials. She returns late but still stops to urinate. Waiting too long, the husband urges her, “Take a p\*\*s quickly! Bring it in for the villagers to drink!” (Vũ, 1995, p. 11). These examples illustrate that bodily excretion features prominently in humorous stories, showcasing a deliberate artistic intention in folk literature. According to Bakhtin, “feces and urine are the intermediary substances between the human body and the earth, between the living body and the dead, that is, bodies that have become fertilizer for the ground. Both feces and dead bodies enrich the soil, making it fertile and abundant. In grotesque realism, feces and urine represent a ‘joyful’ substance, both crude and gentle, combining death with the regeneration of new life most familiarly and humorously” (Bakhtin, 2011). As previously noted, humor in literature often features characters of elevated status, such as village officials, deities, and spirits. Folk literature employs elements related to

<sup>3</sup> In *Đồ Văn Ninh’s Từ điển chức quan Việt Nam* [Vietnamese Officials’ Dictionary] (Thanh Niên Publishing, 2022), this role is not mentioned. This character might resemble a “*thằng mỗ*,” who was an errand boy for local councils in the past.

excretion to critique and subvert these authoritative figures and traditional values. This technique serves as both a form of satire and a significant artistic device within the realm of folk storytelling.

Grotesque language plays a role in desacralizing characters deemed powerful and noble, paving the way for freedom and equality. “This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10).

#### 4. GROTESQUE TONE

The grotesque tone is most clearly expressed in parody—specifically, the imitation of divine voices. In the genre of folk humor, this tone is captivating and engaging. For instance, in the story *Gà nhỏ nỏ có mề* [This small chicken doesn’t have a gizzard], the character shows reverence to the village deity by “preparing a boiled chicken for the offering,” but due to his gluttony and the mistaken belief that a chicken has many gizzards, he ends up eating “the” gizzard. When he prays, he justifies his action by saying: “This small chicken doesn’t have a gizzard / Do you still want the chicken? Or else I will take it home.” The story concludes with a humorous detail responding to his prayer: “A gizzard is like a p\*\*\*s / And of course you ate it” (Nguyễn, 2014b p. 388). In the tale *Thầy trừ chồn* [The shaman against the weasel], a man pretends to be a shaman to help with a family whose chickens and ducks are eaten by weasels. The offerings he makes are weasel-shaped cakes made from rice flour and green beans, which are the food of the family. While the shaman is chanting: “Black weasel, wicked weasel / Deceitful eater of chicken / I won’t spare you / I’ll trap you and put you in my bag,” he is putting the weasel-shaped cakes one by one into his bag, intending to eat them all later (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 54). “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7).

Grotesque tone is also expressed through the tone of disbelief. With an intention not to praise but to question, folklore boldly portrays characters who are skeptical of their own beliefs and the existing world. This skepticism extends to the authority and divine power of village deities, as seen in the tales *Hai ông thổ công* [Two earth deities] and *Gà nhỏ nỏ có mề*, as well as to the fake shaman in *Thầy trừ chồn* and geomancers. It also encompasses doubts about the virtue and competence of monks and teachers. The story *Khịt khịt thềm thịt với xôi* [The snorting deity] tells of a shrine keeper who often brings home the offerings from the village shrine. One time, he notices the offerings have been “depleted” and sees a large red-covered bundle on the altar, accompanied by snorting sounds. The shrine keeper assumes a deity has manifested. However, upon further questioning, he discovers that the one consuming the offerings is not a god but the village

headman, who is hiding in the shrine due to an affair having been discovered by his wife. This tale is like killing two birds with one stone: It expresses disbelief in the deities and also conveys an attitude toward local dignitaries, who represent the existing world. In the story *Vị cà* [The flavor of eggplants], a man eats too many salted eggplants, becoming so thirsty at night that he shouts, waking everyone up. Mistaking him for a divine spirit, the villagers bow down to him. When asked “*ngài vị gì để dân chúng còn bái lạy*” [What title are you so that the people can worship?], he replies, “*Vị cà!*” [The flavor of eggplants!]-indicating that he is thirsty from eating too many salted eggplants. (The Vietnamese word *vị* has two meanings: “title” and “flavor.”) It turns out that the deities the villagers have traditionally worshipped and trusted are just ordinary people with many earthly desires and vices. The characters considered to be gods are stripped of their divine facade, leading to a tone that lacks solemnity or reverence. Instead, we see their disheveled and coarse appearance. Thus, through these stories, folklore clearly expresses its attitude through a tone of disbelief.

The grotesque tone is also portrayed through the mockery of prominent figures. Typically, the people regard officials as parental figures, often respectfully referring to local authorities as parents. When visiting an official’s house, one must remove their shoes and bring offerings, which should at least include several bags of tea or a bunch of areca nuts, along with a bowing gesture known as *lạy trình* [respectfully presenting oneself] (Phan, 2022, p. 232). However, in folk humor, these esteemed individuals become the primary subjects of satire and ridicule. In the tale *Bám chó cả* [Indeed, it’s all dog!], a Confucian scholar observes the corruption among officials and harbors deep disdain. One day, when officials, including some old acquaintances, visit his home, he instructs his household to prepare a meal. As the officials begin to eat, savoring the dishes, they inquire about the names of the food. Seizing the opportunity, the host replies, “This is a dog; that’s also a dog. Indeed, it’s all dog!” (Truong & Phong, 1993, p. 54). This introduction to the meal serves as a heavy insult aimed at the corrupt officials who are accustomed to taking money from commoners. The critique is, indeed, sharp. Folk wisdom suggests that most individuals who enter the rank of authority become morally corrupt. The story *Giã ơn con lợn* [Thanks to you, pig] exemplifies this. It tells of two men who have shared scholarly pursuits. When one of them achieves success and becomes an official, he turns his back on his friend. Despite repeated visits from his friend, he always sends word that he is too busy to meet. After several such encounters, the friend becomes quite upset. When he finally brings a roasted pig as a gift, he is warmly invited in. Upon arrival, the friend takes a betel leaf, puts it in the pig’s mouth, and bows several times to the roasted pig, saying, “I thank you! Thanks to you, I can see my old friend again!” (Truong & Phong, 1993, p. 58). Through this mocking and derisive tone, folk humor criticizes those who are ungrateful, achieving a bit of fame and wealth and soon forgetting the bonds of friendship from their humble beginnings.

Thus, through the grotesque tone, we can discern the attitudes and sentiments of the common folk toward the characters and issues addressed in the stories. This includes the mockery of supernatural figures and a sense of disbelief regarding both faith and the



existing world. It is this distinctive tone that helps to dismiss those characters deemed noble or elite in an outdated society.

## 5. GROTESQUE TIME

In terms of grotesque time, folk humor often depicts activities and events during the nighttime, or more precisely, at the transition between dusk and dawn. Bakhtin (1984, p. 24) once noted that “time is given as two parallel (actually simultaneous) phases of development, the initial and the terminal, winter and spring, death and birth.” Regarding the significance of darkness, Chevalier and Gheerbrant (2002, p. 298) argue that “night symbolizes the time of gestation, sprouting, and secret plots that will reveal themselves in broad daylight as manifestations of life. The night is filled with all the latent possibilities of existence. However, entering the night means returning to the undefined, fraught with nightmares and monsters, dark thoughts. The night embodies duality: the dark side where all transformations ferment, and the preparatory aspect for daytime, where the light of life will eventually shine through.”

Indeed, surveys show that many stories depict characters stealing food in the darkness, during power outages, and so on. For example, the story *Tôi với ông thông gia phải lắm* [I and my in-law are quite compatible] tells of two in-laws dining together. “Fearing that the other person might take advantage of the dark and grab more food” because the lights are out, they agree to “clap in unison to know whose turn it is to grab food” (Vũ, 1995, p. 31). Ironically, both of them end up “slapping their left hands on their thighs when their right hands inadvertently make contact.” Upon realizing each other’s “sneaky” actions, they quickly conclude, “Then I and you, my in-law, are quite compatible” (Vũ, 1995, p. 31). Clearly, these two in-laws share a deep understanding when it comes to, well, eating!

The story *Anh vô tôi* [The two in-laws have a drink] also recounts the tale of two in-laws having a drink and wanting to show off their drinking ability “from noon until twilight,” and when they part ways, “neither can see anything, stumbling as they walk.” They both claim that they are not drunk, but “both are unsteady on their feet, and as night falls, they can’t see where they’re going, so they each cling to a straw pile as they move” (Vũ, 1995, p. 219). The story *Thịt le le ăn ngóta* [The meat of lesser whistling duck is so itchy] features a lazy, gluttonous son-in-law who attempts to steal the lesser whistling duck meat in the dark, only to be discovered and forced to make a hasty retreat (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 62). This story closely aligns with the story *Tía đừng vác gậy rượt tôi nữa* [Don’t chase me with the stick anymore, father-in-law], where a wife mistakenly instructs her husband on how to sneak food: “The husband fumbles at the bedpost to tie a rope, awkwardly tying it to ... father-in-law’s bedpost” (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 80). As a result, after sneaking food, the husband mistakenly enters his father-in-law’s bed and gets beaten. Besides reflecting and condemning those who indulge in gluttony, these stories highlight the daily habits of our ancestors. They illustrate the custom of conserving oil and ensuring safety from fire hazards, which is why they often turn off the oil lamp when sleeping. With the lights off, many mishaps occur. The story *Thầy chùa - thầy pháp - bà bóng* [The monk - the shaman - the female medium] recounts various monks, shamans, and mediums

chanting sutras to cure a family's ill child. As "the chanting goes on late into the night and the family only has one mattress, they have to let all the guests sleep on it." Late at night, when the host's child becomes seriously ill, the monk mistakenly grabs two pairs of trousers from the shaman and the female medium to wrap around his neck as he gets up and chants (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 41). This absurd mix-up reflects the folk perspective, showcasing a satirical and desacralizing view of characters representing religion and faith. Nighttime also features in other stories such as *Vị cà*, *Tại vì tối* [It was too dark to see], *Thầy đồ ăn bánh rán* [The teacher eats fried cakes], and *Thầy đồ trừ chồn*.

Many stories related to sexual desire also primarily occur during this time of grotesqueness. For example, in the story *Ai biểu chị sui ngoắc tui* [Who told you to invite me over?], a widow invites her brother-in-law over to attend her husband's death ceremony, requiring him to stay overnight so he can leave early the next morning. At night, when she reaches to turn off the oil lamp on the table, the brother-in-law mistakenly thinks she is beckoning him, prompting him to jump over and embrace her (Vũ, 1995, p. 209). The story *Tại vì tối* tells of a student who asks to stay overnight at a widow's house, where only she and her daughter reside. The next morning, the mother asks, "Why did you dare to grope my daughter last night when the lights went out?" He replies, "Madam, I wouldn't dare; it was too dark to see where I was going, so I had to 'grobe'!" (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 16). The darkness serves as a complicit character in the less-than-innocent intentions of the characters. Nighttime is indeed a grotesque time frame, as through this choice of time, folk narratives have articulated their artistic intentions: condemning those who indulge in lust and gluttony.

Thus, dusk, the transition between darkness and light, serves as the "golden hour"<sup>4</sup> for characters deemed unscrupulous, such as those who indulge in gluttony and sexual desire. These acts of excess are deserving of condemnation; in other words, they are immoral actions. Consequently, characters often act when the household is empty or during the dark of night. In this context, darkness acts as a "accomplice," complicit in the characters' sneaky behaviors.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Thus, the grotesqueness prominently featured in folk jokes, especially those centered around themes of gluttony, henpecked husbands, and sexuality, highlights the richness of this comedic culture. Through humorous storytelling, the folk tradition has created unique characters, using everyday language filled with slang, curses, vulgar expressions, and terms for human waste and genitalia. By employing parody and skepticism toward divine figures and representations of authority, and by choosing the emblematic setting of the night—a complicit character of the gluttonous and the furtive—folklore effectively undermines the sacred and the elite. This serves to fulfill its entertainment function while partially expressing a dream of social equality and democracy, albeit through the lens of art. The article also indicates that grotesqueness

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<sup>4</sup> Golden hour, referred to as "G," signifies a crucial time for important actions or events, like the moment to start filming or the beginning of a significant occasion.

opens new avenues for exploration, inviting further research into topics such as the significance of nighttime, comparisons of the absurd in Vietnamese folk jokes with those from other cultures, or an in-depth examination of specific elements of grotesqueness, such as character, tone, language, and so on.

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