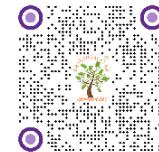


Original Article

AN ANALYSIS OF ONE HAPPY DAY BY SHRILAL SHUKLA THROUGH THE LENS OF LAUGHTER BY HENRI BERGSON

Thiago Gomes da Gama Bragantin ¹

¹ UFPR – Universidade Federal do Paraná – Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil



ABSTRACT

This article proposes a literary and philosophical analysis of the short story One Happy Day from the book Selected Satire by Indian author Shrilal Shukla, using Henri Bergson's work Laughter (1900) as a theoretical framework. The short story narrates an atypical day in the life of a protagonist who finds himself surrounded by unusual order and tranquility, where the small mechanical obstacles of daily life disappear. Through the application of Bergsonian concepts of "the mechanical embedded in the living", "rigidity" and "automatism" we explore how Shukla's humor emerges not from the presence of explicit comedy, but from the absence of the social and physical rigidities that normally make life absurd. The analysis demonstrates that the narrator's "happiness" is, in fact, a satire on the mechanical nature of society and human interactions, revealing that normality, in Bergson's view, is a set of automatisms that laughter seeks to correct.

Keywords: Shirilal Shukla, Henri Bergson, Laughter, Satire, Everyday Life

INTRODUCTION

The short story One Happy Day by Shirilal Shukla presents a seemingly simple, yet profoundly ironic narrative about a man who experiences a day in which absolutely everything works. However, what makes the story humorous and satirical is not the extraordinary events, but the systematic absence of small misfortunes, rude behaviors, and bureaucratic failures that make up the fabric of urban daily life. To understand the depth of this irony, the work of Henri Bergson, particularly his essay Laughter, offers a privileged theoretical lens.

Bergson posits that laughter has a social function and arises when we perceive something "mechanical" in what should be fluid, like human life. In One Happy Day, Shirilal Shukla inverts this premise: the humor arises from the mechanic's temporary suspension of disbelief. The narrator is surprised when his servant uses the correct shoe brush or when the bus conductor gives him the exact change. This "normality" is so rare that it becomes comical by contrast.

Shukla's narrative engages with Bergson's theses on rigidity and automatism. We will see how the protagonist defines his happiness by negating the "ready-made forms" of society—the sycophantic student, the arrogant waiter, or the noisy neighbor at the cinema. By analyzing the story from this perspective, we intend to demonstrate that Shukla uses the "perfection" of an ordinary day to denounce the mechanization of the human soul and social structures, transforming silence and order into tools of sharp social critique.

*Corresponding Author:

Email address: Thiago Gomes da Gama Bragantin (thiagobragantin@gmail.com)

Received: 06 November 2025; Accepted: 23 December 2025; Published 05 January 2026

DOI: [10.29121/Shodhgyan.v4.i1.2026.81](https://doi.org/10.29121/Shodhgyan.v4.i1.2026.81)

Page Number: 24-26

Journal Title: ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies

Journal Abbreviation: ShodhGyan.NU J. Lit. Cul. Stu.

Online ISSN: 2584-1300

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

BERGSONIAN LAUGHTER

For Henri Bergson, laughter is not merely a physiological reaction, but a social gesture with punitive and corrective purposes. In his fundamental work, the French philosopher establishes that "Comic quality is that aspect of a person by which they seem like a thing, that aspect of human events that imitates, through its rigidity of a very particular kind, pure and simple mechanism" (Bergson, 75). The essence of the comic, therefore, resides in what he calls "a mechanism superimposed on life" (Bergson, 56).

Bergson identifies three main conditions for the manifestation of laughter. The first is insensitivity: laughter requires a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Bergson, 56) since the comic is directed at pure intelligence. The second is its social character: laughter needs an echo; it is a group that communicates through contempt for the rigid. The third, and most crucial for this analysis, is automatism. An individual becomes comical when they follow their path mechanically, without adapting to the changes in life or the environment. Bergson's classic example is the man who trips and falls in the street; he is funny because his body continued the walking motion when the situation demanded adaptation to the obstacle. It is the "rigidity" against the "agility" of life.

Beyond the individual, Bergson extends this analysis to institutions and social habits. Society expects the individual to be attentive, flexible, and lively. When human behavior becomes repetitive, predictable, and lacking in awareness—like an employee who follows absurd rules or a speaker who uses empty clichés—it becomes the target of ridicule. Laughter is the tool that society uses to break this rigidity and force the individual to regain their vital plasticity.

In the context of Shukla, Bergsonian theory can be applied in an inverse or specular way. If laughter normally punishes the rigidity that manifests itself, in One Happy Day, laughter arises from the expectation of a rigidity that doesn't materialize. The narrator is so accustomed to the flawed automatism of others (the servant who misses the brush, the bus that's late at the intersection) that the fluidity of life seems to him a happy anomaly. The "happiness" described is, ultimately, the relief of not having to deal with the mechanization of others twenty-four hours a day.

THE SHORT STORY ONE HAPPY DAY FROM A BERGSONIAN PERSPECTIVE.

As we begin reading One Happy Day we are immediately immersed in the world of small, everyday rigidities that Bergson would describe as habitual automatisms. The narrator begins his day with a series of small victories over matter and human error. He notices that, on his clean trousers, "to my surprise, saw that there were not missing buttons" (Shukla, 66). The absence of the missing button—a classic Bergsonian example of a minor mechanical flaw in clothing that attracts a comical gaze—is the first sign that this day will be different.

The relationship with the servant is a central point for understanding social automatism. The narrator mentions: "Our servant had an old habit of using the red brush to polish my shoes, but this time he had actually used the correct brush". The servant's "old habit" is the personification of Bergsonian rigidity; the individual acts by repetition, ignoring the logical purpose of his act. When the servant breaks this automatism and uses the correct brush, the narrator prophesies: "Right then, I said to myself that it was going to be a happy day". Here, happiness is defined as the suspension of irrational, mechanical behavior.

The bus ride to college expands this analysis to the sphere of social transactions and bureaucracy. Bergson argues that the comic arises when forms and formulas replace lived reality. In the story, the bus conductor generally operates under a rigidity of scarcity or ill will, often writing "I owe You" is written on the back of the tickets. On this day, however, the narrator receives the correct change without any bureaucracy. The absence of this debt "formula" makes the interaction fluid and, by extension, surprising for the protagonist.

The scene on the bus also reveals the narrator's own rigidity. He admits to a "weakness for reading" about the romantic entanglements of the stars of the "Film world" when he sits next to women. When he sits away from them, he feels "freed from my Weakness" For Bergson, vice or weakness of character is a form of mental automatism—a fixed idea that governs the individual. The narrator finds happiness in being spared his own behavioral rigidity.

Shukla's critique extends to intellectualism and the academic environment, where mechanical forms of teaching and interaction abound. The narrator, a professor, describes his day at the university as "happy" because he didn't have to deal with a student's "sentimental story" seeking grades or the flattery of a "sycophantic" student. For Bergson, flattery is a form of mechanical language, devoid of genuine sincerity. Furthermore, the reference to colleagues who would call him "Amma yaar" in public highlights how social laughter (or derision) is avoided. Academic peace is crowned by the fact that he doesn't have to repeat "love stories" or "witty Satire" — activities that, ironically, became mechanical in his routine as a teacher.

The visit to the restaurant offers rich material for the analysis of "professional rigidity". Bergson frequently cites the waiter or professional who rigidly merges with their function. In the story, the narrator avoids the waiter type who is "old, stuffed, overbearing sort", finding in its place a "timid Neophyte" The inexperience of the novice is preferable to the arrogant mechanization of the veteran. The environment is also devoid of "wisecracking" youth and fashionable "Young ladies" figures that often represent Bergsonian social types—characters who act according to invisible manuals of social behavior.

Even cinema, the great simulacrum of life, is filtered through the lens of order. The narrator obtains tickets through the “correct price”, avoiding the mechanical corruption of the black market. The Indian film, which he identifies as a “Hindi film”, generally follows a rigid and predictable structure, but this finished before the end of its eighteenth Reel Breaking the tiresome structure of the film is a liberation from artistic automatism. Furthermore, the audience’s behavior in the cinema is a succession of rigidities that are avoided: “No one behind me put his feet up on the back of my seat” and “No one elbowed me in the dark”.

The return home maintains this pattern. Shukla’s domestic peace is the absence of repetitive conflicts. The narrator doesn’t need to hear about “financial problems” a litany that Bergson would classify as a form of mechanical melancholy that invades daily life. His wife listens to his discourses on literature with “great”, “Interest” and doesn’t realize her “pettiness” Here, the wife’s blindness functions as the “anesthesia of the heart” necessary to maintain the illusion of happiness.

The conclusion of the day reveals that the pinnacle of happiness is not only what has happened, but what is yet to come: a Sunday without the “over-enthusiastic friends” who go on a picnic far from the city. The excessive “enthusiasm” of these friends is seen as a form of social automatism—an obligation to have fun that the narrator despises. Shukla’s true happiness, therefore, lies in silence and the absence of the social “machine”.

CONCLUSION

The short story One Happy Day by Shrilal Shukla, when read through the lens of Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter, reveals itself as a sophisticated satire on the human condition in urban modernity. Shukla does not construct humor through jokes or scatological situations, but through the careful listing of all the mechanical gears of life that, by some statistical miracle, ceased to creak on that specific day.

The narrator’s happiness is, in essence, the relief of being treated as a living being and not as a cog in a flawed social machine. As Bergson points out, life demands flexibility and awareness; however, what Shukla shows us is that daily life is a succession of “rigidities”—the careless servant, the dishonest debt collector, the self-serving students, and the noisy friends. When these rigidities disappear, the result is so unusual that it becomes almost surreal.

The story functions like a mirror: in describing a “happy” and “perfect” day, Shukla is, in fact, painting a devastating portrait of normality. “Happiness” is a byproduct of the absence of everything that makes Bergsonian social life comically absurd. However, the narrator himself does not escape analysis; his obsession with noticing every small correction and his satisfaction in “lambasting” Writers reveal that he also possesses his own rigidities and automatic behaviors.

Ultimately, One Happy Day suggests that Bergsonian laughter is the only possible response to an existence where order is the exception and mechanization is the rule. Through irony, Shukla invites the reader to laugh not at the happy day, but at all the other “normal” days that we accept without question. Bergson’s work helps us see that the true “counterpoint” to the mechanical is not just the luck of a trouble-free day, but the awakened awareness of the subtleties of life that rigidity tries, incessantly, to crush.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Bergson, H. (2018). *O Riso: Ensaio Sobre o Significado Do Cômico*. Edipro.
 Shukla, S., and Reeck, M. (2021). *Selected Satire: Fifty Years of Ignorance*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.