For clarity’s sake, *The Apology and the Last Days* will retain its title, but *The Apology and the Last Days of Socrates* will be shortened to *The Apology* in the following text.

The Fool and the Philosopher

Erich Gruber slips into the water, hitting his head. Andrija Gavrilović rushes in to save him, a fire poker still in hand. Yet Andrija is old, slow, and crippled, and barely manages to pull him to the edge of the water where he discovers Gruber is dead. He is discovered, tried for murder, and he confesses. With this confession, he is finally free from the title which has weighed down upon him for so long. He is finally no longer a collaborator. It may have been ill luck that Gruber fell, ill luck that he was stoking the fire at that exact moment. Yet it is not ill luck that Andrija confesses, but pure ludicrous idiocy. *The* *Apology and the Last Days* builds a foundation for humor subverting the desires both in life and death of the relentlessly unlucky and utterly foolish Gavrilović, which is further accentuated by slapstick elements and the larger frame of the narrator’s Frankenstein (mis)usage of Plato’s similarly titled record.

For the majority of the text, Andrija’s defining struggle is the lack of saved people at his beach. Not a single person drowns, and so there is no one to save. For 15 years, nobody comes close to needing the skills which Andrija so desperately wants to display. Yet people are drowning. The newspaper reports drownings, and Zemba, the North Beach lifeguard, saves plenty. We later find out that his old boss even drowned in a lime pit! (77) His beach, his river, is just unlucky. His utter lack of rescues leads him to hoping “for someone to drown just a little.” (33) Andrija is a “fisherman with no luck, just like [his] father.” (48) The whole premise is rather silly, a lifeguard hoping for drowners, of which there are many, just none at his location. It gets to the point where he even dreams for drowners at his beach, yet even in his dreams he cannot save the people whom he so wishes would drown (43-44). He thinks the river has been “enchanted by some evil witch,” (35) which is of course hilarious because what evil witch would enchant a river to be so tranquil that it drowns absolutely nobody. This silliness reaches near unbelievable heights as his post is inspected by two government employees.

Andrija’s meeting with the inspectors is perhaps the peak of his foolishness and complete bumbling. After attempting to sidetrack the conversation into anything other than his shameful truth, he eventually admits that he has not saved a soul in all his years of lifeguarding. Directly following, his warning bell starts ringing, which he first ignores, but he is soon shocked into action: a drowner, at his beach. This is his moment, finally. He stumbles into action, discombobulated for the first moment of his entire career which requires his carefully honed skills. These skills, on that day, are revealed to be rather absent. In a Chaplin-esque form of ridiculous physical comedy, Andrija manages to knock himself unconscious using his own invention as he is trying to save his charge. This charge turns out to be a neighborhood boy, a good swimmer, who then has to rescue Gavrilović himself: “A drowning person saved the lifeguard…” (54) In that moment, Andrija had the opportunity to save his career and the boy all in one. Instead, his bungling leads to his own termination for his ‘“utter incompetence’” (54). It is later revealed that the whole drama was a contrived opportunity for him to finally put his skills on display, which Andrija, if he had been a little smarter in the moment, would have realized. This adds just a further element of misfortune to his life yet reminds the audience that his own foolishness gets him into this mess.

Andrija’s wife, Julienne, also provides humor for a reader. She has similar characteristics to the classic nagging wife trope but is set apart by a much harder edge than is typical. She is constantly insulting him, reminding him of his insignificance to both her and their community. When he fails to stand up for himself, she berates him, going as far as to say ‘“You were shitting your pants.’” (33) after he is confronted and mocked by Zemba. This insulting, of course, is a rather easy form of comedy, yet she also provides more nuanced humor as well. When considering if he should hit her for such a comment, one of his reasons is that he does not think she would “have gone down easy” (33). Once again this serves to mock a narrator who is both weak in mind and in body. This is not to say he should have beat his wife, only that his lack of strength to do so is rather funny. After Andrija saves Gruber, he frets over his rescue like a mother hen, all the while Julienne scolds and mocks him for it. When he says he has never seen a prettier drowned man, she is quick to remind him that he has never seen a drowned man up until this point (60). Her constant nagging grounds the reader in the reality of Andrija’s incompetence and ill-luck, though she fails to do the same to Andrija in that moment due to his sheer excitement. She pesters and pesters Andrija to leave and finally, she leaves without him, taking his son with her. All she leaves is a letter, in which she divorces him and tells him not to follow them wherever they are going (101). This is brutally funny, and Andrija’s total lack of awareness in his response “she loves me and that’s most important” (101) further exposes the strange alternate universe in which he lives.

Andrija’s humorous total lack of awareness is also seen in countless other ways. He describes his job as “hard and full of responsibilities … the lives of others were in my hands … [with not] much time for dawdling…” (33) however, as is revealed, his job for 15 years amounts to not much more than cleaning and maintaining the beach cabins and chasing away nudists who wanted to swim at his beach. His steadfast seriousness and dedication are laughable when taken in the context of what he has actually done. His self-torment over not saving anyone is even funnier, as he fails to realize how good he truly has it to simply sit at his beach and save nobody. He even realizes this as the inspectors come, thinking “Instead of being happy that I was being paid for doing nothing, I worried myself to death.” (51) His obliviousness is displayed in even fuller force as he runs through the Kraut camp, trying to receive his medal. There is gunfire, flaming papers falling from the sky, cannons and tanks, yet all he cares about is getting his medal (99-100), a symbolic representation of the very thing which caused all his fellow villagers to turn against him and label him as a collaborator.

Andrija is constantly making mistakes, yet it also must be remarked that he has the most terrible of luck. Such terrible luck, in fact, that it becomes funny to even hear. His most obvious bad luck comes with the lack of people needing rescuing at his river. However, this just heightens the pure misfortune that befalls him when his one and only rescue turns out to be a member of the Kraut occupation. He has a moment of lucidity following his recue, making the rather funny comment: ‘“They are slaughtering us like pigs, and we are saving their lives’” (65). Yet his luck sours even further with Gruber. He is then taken into the Kraut occupation, and after enduring a brutal interrogation which he could have entirely avoided had he just listened to his translator, (70-71) Andrija is welcomed by the occupiers and thrown a feast in celebration. It looks as if his luck has finally turned. However, while Andrija is too drunk to notice and too powerless to prevent, the Krauts begin to make speeches about the character of Andrija’s daring rescue. To them, it was not the simple task of a man saving another, but a man saving a country, the glorious country of the Reich. The newspaper dutifully records all this, and in doing so, practically labels Andrija as a collaborator both in text and in picture (73-74). This is one of the times he is simply a victim of his own terrible luck. Perhaps this could have been avoided by not rescuing Gruber in the first place, but his relentless beatdown by fortune is rather funny in its own right.

Why are these varied misfortunes and stupid mistakes funny? Part of what develops the humor is the establishment of Andrija as an idiot. Without this, it is all too easy to empathize with a character who has really been quite hard done-by in life. Sure, an audience may empathize with him even now, but it is not the same empathy one gives to a courageous hero, or an endlessly persevering protagonist. We can still identify a part of ourselves with Andrija, but it is typically a part one does not wish to bring to light. Andrija reminds the audience of their own stupidities, their own failures, and in doing so allows the audience to laugh at themselves as much as they laugh at our protagonist.

Further, this novel is written in a Balkan setting. The Balkan cast, like Comrade Ozren or the fellow villagers, are sharp characterizations (and sometimes caricature-izations) of typical Serbian lives both post and pre-World War 2. This local confinement adds another element of humor as Pekić can poke fun at his own nationality and the local idiosyncrasies that come with it. He draws the readers’ attention to one of these little things when Andrija meets the two city inspectors. They poke fun at his name, and in doing so at the general region. His name, Andrija Andrija Gavrilović, is in itself a rather funny little tidbit. The inspectors contextualize it in a larger Serbian sense when one quips ‘“You’re pretty stingy with the names around here, aren’t you?’’’ (50) This is even funnier when taken under the context of his son, also named Andrija, and his father, also named Andrija. Ozren also serves to develop a lovingly mocking view of Yugoslavia post-war. His plan to paint Gruber as some sort of supervillain is quite ridiculous on the surface, as if it were straight from a propaganda film. He details a horrific story of Gruber ordering a baby to be thrown upon a fire in front of his mother’s eyes (20), which causes Andrija to finally crack and beat this man to death with the fire poker. The logistics of simply concocting such a story, never mind proving it, are far beyond the resources Ozren has in hand. Here Pekić pokes fun at the endless lengths Yugoslavia pursued in receiving post-war reparations. This little local humor, combined with the Andrija’s drunken racist remarks about throwing Shabban the Turk into the water (76) add regional humor to what is before a general, fool comedy.

Andrija’s story displays elements of humor not only in the story itself but in his surrounding plea and arguments, many of which are borrowed from Socrates. His discovery of the text hearkens back to his earlier silliness (as well as highlighting is lack of education), as he believes Plato to be his village priest from Novi Slankamen. (15) In a further show of such silliness, he describes *The Apology* as ‘“… folksy without any claptrap”’ (15), a ridiculous statement considering the content of such a work. He then proceeds to use and downright plagiarize the arguments of Socrates with impunity. The opening paragraph of his plea is roughly paraphrased from the opening paragraph of *The Apology* (4),yet at once Gavrilović reveals himself to be far out of his depth, misunderstanding the uncited, copied text. He describes himself, through Socrates, as a “skilled speaker” (4), yet all of those who have interacted with him so far in his legal journey have described him as nothing more than a fool, or perhaps a wicked fool. His self-promotion through the use of such a text is ridiculous to any reader who has seen the way Andrija is treated by all who come to see him, as well as the rhetoric Andrija himself displays while he is not copying Socrates. This misuse of the text begins a litany of further usages, without citation and typically without actually fitting their context. One of the few times he actually does plagiarize within context is when describing the way in which he will answer his accusers: older first, and newer last. (27) While this is almost a direct copy of paragraph two of *The Apology*, his correct and contextualized usage perhaps gives him a free pass out of pity (a rather silly permission in and of itself).

Gavrilović’s usage of *The Apology* does not stop there, but the correctness practically does. In the following paragraph, in a passage taken from paragraph 6 of the Plato, he describes his name as “well known” and that he “had done different things from all [his] countrymen” (27). While this makes sense for the famous Greek philosopher, our foolish narrator is anything but well known, coming from a nowhere town, and leading an altogether unremarkable life besides his two run-ins with German authorities. This is further demonstrated when he is only visited either by the publicly appointed, or by those with their own agenda. His implicit equivocation of himself with Socrates is a laughable self-promotion. The following paragraph Andrija again plagiarizes the following paragraph of *The Apology* when describing the first time he had heard the term “collaborator” (27). While he indeed was unaware of this term before it became his label, this does not equivocate the crimes for which Socrates was executed, being impiety and corrupting youth. Socrates’ punishment was contrived, a removal of a political obstacle, and indeed the crime did not truly exist before he was tried for it. Andrija, on the other hand, just reveals his general ignorance with the world in his lack of knowledge for his judgement. He first believes, quite laughably, that “collaborator” is an infectious disease such as rabies (86), when his neighbors hang his dog with a sign detailing such around its neck. Yet anyone with the barest intelligence would have both recognized both the word and its meaning right away, most especially given the brutal context. In using this passage from Plato, he reveals his witlessness more than anything else.

Gavrilović uses Socrates later to highlight the reasons for staying at his post and saving the Kraut (80), but given the quasi-correctness of his usage, we’ll skip to the end, in which he describes Socrates’ death and final words. “He said that by waiting he would gain nothing but shame… Then he drank the poison … said something more about some rooster … and died.” (119) Andrija’s rather humorous summary of Socrates’ death still cannot obscure the general drama of the text, and of such an end. Yet, despite his feelings of kinship with the philosopher, Andrija’s own end, dying in prison or dying by rat poison (an option he decides against), feels not dramatic but melodramatic, not only for the fact that he could still avoid such an end had he just used the resources offered to him. His death, as his life, makes a mockery of the stark difference between him and his muse. His incompetence reaches even beyond the grave to further parade itself. Andrija, when asked if he is philosopher or fool, believes himself to be ‘“Both.’” (12) Yet his attempts at philosophy range from general musings about the nature of his river to complete plagiarism of Socrates’ own argument. This coats the story in a final veneer of humor, as the narrator is deceived by his own fool head one last time into believing that he too is a philosopher while also adding an authenticity to the narrative – one would never believe that Andrija could truly find profundity in his addled head. Thus, in the end, Andrija is not philosopher and fool, but merely fool.

The use of narrative staging, classical slapstick, and an idiot narrator establishes *The Apology and The Last Days* as a comedic novel. The various misfortunes that befall Andrija are endless, yet none would go so far as to blame only fate for his end. The fact remains that Andrija was a fool. He was born of a fisherman, drowned in his tranquil river – a fool. He lived like a fool, causing problem after problem for himself, almost never realizing that he himself was the root cause. Finally, in ignoring and denying the help of all those that offered and of course, confessing to a murder he did not commit, Andrija died a fool. What could be funnier than that?