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(Sarajevo, 29-30 September 2023)

Proceedings

Fifth International Conference on English Language, Literature, Teaching and Translation Studies
(5th CELLTTS)

The Art and Craft of Humour in Anglophone Studies

Sarajevo, 2024

Fifth International Conference on English Language, Literature, Teaching and Translation Studies
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The Art and Craft of Humour in Anglophone Studies

Proceedings

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Foreword

When we discussed a possible theme for the 5th International Conference on English Language, Literature, Teaching and Translation Studies, the decision was not easy. The world has fallen into yet another turmoil, with ongoing wars and various crises, be it the post-pandemic reality, climate change, economic and political tensions… We needed a framework to encompass the gravity of the situation and yet leave enough space to reflect and celebrate our little jubilee, since the 5th conference marks an anniversary of this important endeavour of the Faculty of Philosophy's English Language and Literature Department. That is why we decided to choose *The Art and Craft of Humour in Anglophone Studies* as the main conference theme.

Humour, often described as the universal language, holds a profound ability to unite, heal and challenge. It reflects our shared humanity, it functions both as a refuge and a tool for navigating complex and often unsettling themes. It serves as a bridge across divides, allowing individuals and communities to process fear, frustration, ambiguity… It offers comfort in moments of distress and a lens through which we can criticize power structures, challenge the status quo, question accepted norms.

The conference was held on 29-30 September 2023 at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo. We were truly honoured to welcome distinguished professors Salvatore Attardo (Department of Literature and Languages Texas A&M University – Commerce), Annette J. Saddik (Department of English, New York City College of Technology City University of New York (CUNY)), and Jadranka Kolenović-Đapo (University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Philosophy) as keynote speakers. The three scholars, all masters of their craft (linguistics, literature and psychology) offered new insights and opened some interesting perspectives and trends in the study and perception of humour.

Participants at the conference, our dear guests and colleagues from around the world came to Sarajevo and gave a true international note to our symposium, presenting their research, sharing their friendship.

Their papers, contained in the proceedings, versatile in terms of approaches and findings, share a common trait: they show humour as a profound mechanism for making sense of our unpredictable world. Their contributions are an invitation to reflect on how humour shapes our collective response to an ever-changing global landscape in times of uncertainty.

We would like to extend sincere gratitude to the University of Sarajevo – Faculty of Philosophy for their ongoing support. Yet again, their encouragement and sincere assistance made the organization of the conference and the preparation of the proceedings a pleasurable experience. We extend sincere gratitude to Dean Kenan Šljivo and his team of Vice-Deans, for constant support and encouragement. Vice-Dean for International Cooperation, our dear colleague Minka Džanko opened the conference by a welcome that not only resonated friendship and collegial unity, but also reflected some of her own ideas about humour. We are especially grateful to the Society for the Study of English in BiH, for collegial support and encouragement.

Also, English Language and Literature Department students have been a standing asset of all our academic efforts. They are an inspiration, the driving force of our department's activities.

Sarajevo, October 2024
Sanja Šoštarić & Nermina Čordalija

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PART ONE: LINGUISTICS, ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND TRANSLATION STUDIES

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Humor in the Age of the Internet: The Case of Glocal Memes

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ABSTRACT

Since the advent of social media, which has been called the Web 2.0, around the start of the millennium, the Internet has become a very significant presence in our culture. This paper discusses how the impact of the Internet has changed the nature of humor, while at the same time showing how the main cognitive factors of humor remain unchanged. There have been many significant changes in humor, such as much shorter forms (e.g., TiKTok videos), the introduction of trolling and nastiness as common forms of humor, as well as the ubiquitous nature of cringe humor. Some uses of humor, such as the use of humor in neo-Nazi propaganda are truly worrisome. However, in this paper we will focus on the global nature of memes.

Keywords: humor, memes, memetic drift, glocalization, Bosnian context

1. Introduction

Since the advent of social media, which has been called the Web 2.0, around the start of the millennium, the Internet has become a very significant presence in our culture. This paper discusses how the impact of the Internet has changed the nature of humor, while at the same time showing how the main cognitive factors of humor remain unchanged.

Among the main aspect of change in humor, there is a general consensus that internet humor uses shorter, faster forms (e.g., the 6 seconds vine, or the 15 seconds TikTok videos). Subtler differences are the mainstreaming of cringe humor (a blend of embarrassment and humor) and what Attardo (2023) called the "uglification" of humor, i.e., the preference in many internet spaces for a much more aggressive, nastier type of humor where essentially showing off one's hostile or angry attitude substitutes the need for wit (e.g., trolling). Related to this latter trend is an even more worrisome aspect of internet humor and namely the Alt-right use of humor for neo-Nazi propaganda, masquerading as humor and/or irony. Despite these significant changes, however, the fundamental cognitive factors of humor, often defined as incongruity and resolution, remain unchanged.

In the second part of this paper, we explore the impact of global memes on local cultures through the lens of glocalization, i.e., the process of appropriating global, typically Western, "Hollywood" mainstream memes, by local communities, in this case Bosnian meme produsers (producers+users; Bruns, 2008) to express typical traditional concepts and concerns.

Attardo (2020) argued that the production of memes causes them to drift: "during the process of memetic drift, memes are remixed, parodied, mashed up and altered to reflect the concerns of the culture in which the users engaging in memeiosis operate." Drift was seen as movement in cultural space: the users creating or reposting memes change them to reflect their interest, concerns, political views, or commenting on recent news. While this is substantially correct, it neglects drift in physical space.

In other words, producers of memes in different geographical locations will adapt (i.e., cause to drift) the memes to local concerns and issues. Since memes are a globalizing phenomenon, the "global" framework seems best suited to describe the phenomenon. However, we must first define more specifically the process of "drift" in memes.

2. Memetic Drift

Memetic drift is simply defined as the semantic and visual differences that appear when an original meme, called the anchor meme or "founder meme" (Shifman, 2014), is reproduced. The anchor meme is the "original" meme. Drift begins in the reproduction of the original meme: while some diffusion involves reposting the meme as is, Shifman and Thelwall (2009) found that

> although Internet transmission theoretically has high copy-fidelity (i.e., accuracy), people tended to edit the jokes mildly before reposting. In some cases, users also changed the texts dramatically, creating new versions and counter-versions. (p. 2571; our emphasis, SA/SĐ)

Attardo (2020) advanced the argument that the distinction between jokes, intertextual and meta jokes (Attardo, 2001), found in the light bulb joke cycle, is also usefully applied to memes. In Attardo (2001), we have the "original" light bulb joke with a set of "canonical" variants (28 versions were reported at the Indiana University Folklore Archives). These canonical variants give rise to a number of jokes that are variations on the theme of "screwing in a lightbulb" but with a different script opposition:

> a large number of jokes emerged where the charge of stupidity, essential in the original "light bulb joke," had been dropped, and instead the way in which given groups performed the action of "light bulb screwing" was used to point out the peculiarities of

the targeted group (Attardo, 2001, p. 70)

Attardo (2001) presents the outline for second and third generation jokes, based on intertextual and metalinguistic/metasemiotic references. Tsakona (2024) calls the anchor meme and its reproductions the "first generation." Both Attardo (2020) and Tsakona (2024) agree that second and third generation match closely Attardo's (2001) intertextual jokes and meta jokes, although Tsakona objects to the "intertextual" label. Intertextual memes (2nd generation) imply an explicit reference to another meme/text, either in formal terms or semantic terms. Meta-memes (3rd generation) are memes that under the guise of delivering one meme, in fact deliver another one (for an example, see Attardo, 2020, in which a Cheryl She-Shed meme turns out to be in fact a Disaster Girl meme). Importantly, the sequence from first to second and third generation does not imply necessarily a linear process. However, obviously anchor memes pre-exist their elaborations (mashups, remixes, etc. Attardo, 2023). The point is that meta-memes do not come "after" intertextual remixes, chronologically for example, but they do show greater conceptual distance. In other words, the degree of drift is greater in meta-memes than in intertextual memes but that does not presuppose sequentiality.

The other generalization about drift is that it generally goes from more to less specific content, through a general process called "semantic bleaching" (Attardo, 2023; 2024): a meme, such as Cheryl She-Shed starts from a specific text, with specific referents, meaning, etc. In the process of drifting, these referents lose some of their specificity. For example, the Drakeposting meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drakeposting) which uses two stills from a video for the song Hotline Bling by hip-hop Canadian artist Drake, wearing an iconic orange jacket. In the stills, Drake is making a rejecting and an affirming gesture, respectively. In the anchor meme (as the Knowyourmeme entry makes it clear) the artist is identified as "Drake" but in subsequent variants he is referred to as "orange jacket guy," clearly as less specific reference. Any reference to the song is also completely elided. In some versions, Drake is replaced by

other celebrities also making accepting/rejecting gestures, or even by a crude stick figure. For more discussion of drift, see Attardo (2025).

In other aspects, the direction of drift is unclear. For example, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2022) claim that "Even distinctly political memes become voided of their initial political messages, as they skew toward nonsensical humor (Katz & Shifman, 2017, p. 925)." This is at odds with the observation (Attardo, 2020) that non-political memes drift toward political content (the non-factional Cheryl She Shed memes end up being used against Republicans and Democrats). Other memes, such as the complex Dark Brandon meme, stay in the political realm all along (Attardo, 2025).

However, Shifman et al. (2014) posit that the direction of drift is geographically defined, specifically, as Umberto Eco (1976) would have put it from the center to the periphery of the "Empire" (the US). Their evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of this thesis: "In 20 of the 21 global [successful jokes], the first date of appearance of the English versions predated the first appearance of the joke in all other languages." (p. 736). Moreover, 16 out of 21 were created in the US. Shifman et al. (2014) report that the localization of these global jokes falls under three patterns; the most frequent is "off the shelf" localization, such as changing names to local names "Bob" becomes "Roberto," "dollars" become "Euros," etc. This is the most superficial form of localization. The next most frequent form of localization is labeled "custom-made" localization and involves inserting referents that are culturally specific to the local culture. For example, a joke about husbands, translated in Arabic, includes a reference to "urfi" (a secret or unofficial marriage, reportedly common in Egypt). Finally, the least common form of localization was the omission of American cultural components (e.g., the omission of the mention of the brand Victoria's secret). Shifman et al. (2014) label it "cutaway" localization.

Shifman et al. (2014) study of the glocalization of jokes is a fundamental contribution. We expand on it, first by focusing on memes, which tend to have a multimodal component, and second but no least significantly, by introducing an even more extreme form of localization in

which the formal components of memes (images, constructional aspect of the meme) are used to express local concerns and customs. We may label this the "Trojan horse" localization strategy, as it "hollows out" the global meme and uses it to voice definitely local concerns.

2.1. The Global Side

First, we note the obvious fact that the memes we have collected use "Hollywood" global personalities: Monk, played by Tony Shalhoub, Capt. Janeway, played by Kate Mulgrew, Julia Roberts, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jack Nicholson, Gordon Ramsey, Jason Statham, Gloria Steinem, and others. Obviously, the label "Hollywood" should not be taken literally. Gloria Steinem is not a celebrity in the sense that Julia Roberts is, and Gordon Ramsey is a British chef, for one. We are using the term "Hollywood" in the same sense as the now old-fashioned term "jet set" and more recent "glitterati." We would point to the appearance of Cornel West in the Matrix movies, and of Marshal McLuhan in Annie Hall, as examples of the inter penetrability of celebrity culture(s). In fact, Steinem herself has appeared in cameos in film (First Wives Club).

The motivation for using memes that reference Hollywood celebrities is, to quote McLuhan, that the medium is the message: the association with mainstream, global media celebrities is prestigious and precisely because they are celebrities, they are recognizable and their personae evoke specific connotations.

Simplistically, but nonetheless we think correctly, we can describe "Hollywood" media, as defined above, as cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 1991). This view is articulated starkly by Trillò (2023): "Global meme templates surely favor continuity, privileging, for example, Western worldviews expressed in English and North American cultural references." (p. 4).

The claim that memes are forces of globalization is well-established, e.g. Shifman et al. (2014) "A study tracing the spread of translated jokes on the web found that they often covertly deliver global and/or American cultural cues thus functioning as 'secret agents of globalization'" (cf.

Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2022, p. 926). Even the formal aspects of memes contribute: “a recent study that focused on meme templates in different languages found several global commonalities in patterns of participation and emotional expression (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018).” (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2022, p. 926).

2.2. The Local Side

The idea of glocalization comes from 1980s Japanese business jargon (Robertson, 1995). It is fitting that the idea starts out as a marketing ploy, part and parcel of the “soft” cultural imperialism of post-modernity. We use the modifier “soft” to differentiate the cultural imperialism of post-modernity from the “hard” *manu militari* cultural imperialism described for example by Tobin (2007) in ancient and colonial times. This is consonant with Shifman et al. (2014) definition of meme glocalization as “Internet jokes as facilitating user-generated globalization – a process of cross-national diffusion of content by ordinary Internet users.” (p. 728) where most significantly it is the internet produsers (Bruns, 2008) themselves that facilitate globalization/cultural imperialism.

The idea that humor is localized is not new, of course (Robertson, 1995; Shifman, 2007; Shifman et al. 2014; Kaptan, 2016; Cotrău & Cotoc, 2019; Sarwatay, 2020; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2022; Lipson et al. 2023). To the extent that the present article’s thesis is original, it is in seeing glocalization as part of memetic drift. We will examine a few memes collected with an opportunistic sampling method, in Bosnia in the summer of 2024.[1]

1 All the memes were retrieved from Instagram profiles: captain_bosnica, svesutovjeshtice, nadrealisticki and 2fahija.

(1)

Original image: Depeche Mode

Translation: Mom, can I bring my new buddies from the Comparative Literature Department to hang out?

Context: The Faculty of Philosophy's Comparative Literature Department is known to always host a group of students different from the local average. Usually they are "artsy" kids, with lifestyle choices the common Bosnian surroundings are not used to (them being mostly Instagram-perfection oriented, living a life of a rather uneducated, in many cases even illiterate community). They would most probably either mock or disapprove of such contacts.

The anchor meme is the picture of Depeche Mode from a 1987 photo shoot. Needless to say, the band members no longer look/dress like this. Memetic drift is quite advanced, as there is no need to identify the band, per se. All that is significant is the normal/abnormal script opposition relative to the clothing, hairdos, etc. The localization is comprehensive:

there is mention of the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Philosophy, and of the Comparative Literature Department.

(2)
Original image: Lord of the Rings
Translation: The worst thing you can do is worry.

Context: Advice usually shared by friends and family in Bosnia. The image is highly contrasted by the word "sekirati", which is a borrowing from the Ottoman Turkish period in the region, highly present today. This is also seen as a form of a sisterhood, an encouragement for women.

Memetic drive is fairly advanced. Recognition of characters (Galadriel, right and Arwen, left seated) from the Lord of the Rings is not necessary. The image is apparently a deleted scene from the movie. No reference to the Lord of the Rings is even necessary. The only content from the anchor meme is the hand on the shoulder comforting gesture.

(3)

The anchor meme is a still from the Monk TV series. Pictured: inspector Adrian Monk, a germaphobe. He is also known for other forms of OCD.

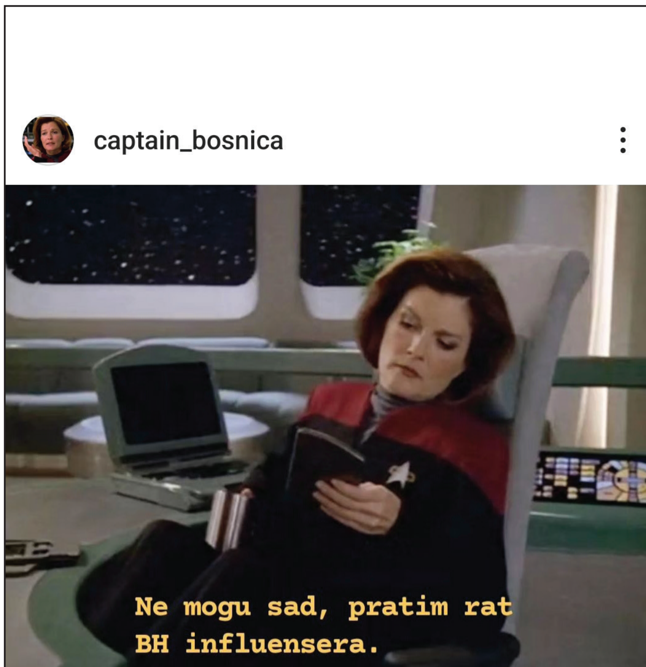
Translation: Stay a meter away from me.

This meme appeared during the Covid-19 period. The contextual relevance is obvious. The localization factors include the use of the metric system and of course the text is not in English. Note how the global content provides the script opposition (good/bad, healthy/sick) and the limited logical mechanism (Monk is afraid of germs under normal circumstances, even more so during a pandemic).

(4)

Anchor meme: Captain Janeway (Kate Mulgrew), from Star Trek: Voyager. The series aired originally between 1995 and 2001.

Translation: I can't do it right now, I'm following the war of BiH influencers.



Context: Whatever is happening on the Enterprise is not important, since influencers in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are the main concern. This reflects the habit of the BiH society to disregard many social, political and financial problems in favor of ephemeral topics, even when their own lives are affected by the negative situation in the country. In Bosnia, just like in many other countries in the world, influencers use social media (primarily Instagram and TikTok) to present their content, which varies in themes and popularity. The majority of Bosnian influencers present their opinion on (or advertise) music, makeup, fashion, etc., but in many cases will reflect upon political, social and other more serious events in the country and in the region. Some have a considerable following (for example, football player Edin Džeko has a following of 2.5 million, Hakan Kahraman is the most popular Instagram star overall, with a 4.1 million following, and so on – https://starngage.com/app/global/influencer/ranking/bosnia-and-herzegovina). Interestingly, aside from many "beauty wars", as well as some intriguing Instagram wars among politicians (who gladly use Instagram and the X platform to promote their opinion, with a fierce reaction to all who disagree), BiH influencers

will participate in charity work, and their most recent and notable activity being in July 2024, when they raised money to help treat cancer patients in Tuzla (https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/onkoloski-pacijenti-u-tuzli-dobili-humane-uslove-lijecenja/240719111).

Localization: Both the mention of the BiH influencers and present time references localize the meme. The action of Star Trek Voyager takes place in the second half of the 24th century.

(5)

Original image: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton after the Terminator 2 filming.

Translation: We've left the kids at my parents and we've just arrived in Baška Voda for May 1, to rest a bit. We've taken the Thursday and Friday off, so we'll have 6 days in total. Truth be told, prices at the coast are high,

but what can you do, honestly, the same is everywhere.

Localization: This image can be connected to many Yugoslav and, therefore, Bosnian families, who had more or less stable lives during the period of Yugoslavia, provided they were part of the 'middle class'. They could afford an extended weekend for May 1 and go to the Croatian coast. It is a tradition still popular today, albeit the Croatian coast is much more expensive now, which is what the mime refers to. Linda and Arnold look like such a couple in this picture, mostly because of their clothes and hairstyles. Even though it's 1991, the 80s fashion was still popular. The meme can therefore be seen in the context of Bosnian families in the 80s, but also in today's context, since the tradition of going to the Croatian coast because of its proximity still exists.

(6)
Original image: The Shining
Translation: Get into the house right now!

Localization: Parents in Bosnia become really angry when their children play outside longer than expected, especially after sundown. Also, if children do something bad while playing outside, parents show anger by saying “Mrš u kuću!” To the kids, being at home is a form of a punishment. The word “mrš” in Bosnian is offensive, but the emotional reaction of parents in anger is so high that they tend to use it with children.

(7)
Original image: Unfaithful (movie)
Translation: He: Has the iftar been announced? She: Yes.

Localization: The meme depicts two main characters form the 2002 movie Unfaithful, Connie Sumner (played by Diane Lane) and her lover Paul Martel (Olivier Martinez). She is a married woman, but starts an affair. This is a screenshot of one of the scenes when she goes to him. In the Bosnian context, the two are like a couple who are fasting, but they are not allowed

to have sex before iftar. In the Islamic tradition, during the Ramadan period (the holy month for Muslims), one should abstain from all forms of sin, as much as possible. Aside from that, the fasting period (no food, no drink) starts at sundown and ends at sunset. The meal taken after sunset to break the fast is called 'iftar' (the fast can also be broken by any drink – water, tea, coffee, juice). However, the Bosnian Muslim interpretation of the dogma is different from that in the Islamic world: Muslims in Bosnia are more flexible and they do fast and pray during the Ramadan period, but once iftar is announced, some will indulge in different forms of activities (including sexual). So, these two in the picture are not technically breaking Islamic rules by waiting for iftar to have sex, but they are breaking the rules by having an affair and sex outside of marriage. Also, this may be seen as a reaction to the hypocrisy of the people who consider themselves to be religious, but are corrupt in many ways.

(8)
Original image: Gordon Ramsey
Translation: I don't know what to cook for lunch.

Localization: In Bosnia, food is widely discussed. However, Bosnian women always struggle with preparing lunch, because they're running out of ideas. Regardless of the professional field, women are expected to always deliver a good meal for the family, as if they were a Gordon Ramsey-type of chef. Note how irrelevant is Gordon Ramsey's specific biography, except for being ready identifiable as a chef, who presumably knows many recipes. Interestingly, the script opposition in this case is locally provided (meal ideas vs. lack of ideas) whereas the ostensive target and the situation come from the global meme (Ramsey as famous chef).

(9)
Original image: Erin Brockovich (played by Julia Roberts)
Translation: Leave the essays to me to correct.

Localization: Brockovich is a hard-working woman. In several instances in the film, she herself examines and reads various types of documents that no one else will read or hasn't read in years. Her thoroughness and detail when reviewing essays can be related to a teacher/professor who is the same when reviewing the essays of her pupils/students. Erin is actually a serious woman who doesn't take things for granted and will get the job done right. Such dedicated professors can be interpreted as Erin: hard-working, dedicated, capable. The fact that Erin has no formal education and that she dresses in this way was less important for this particular meme, but what can also be emphasized

is that women in general are sexualized if they look and dress well, and their education and capabilities are looked down on. Frequently, also, the entire region will mock English teachers by presenting them as good looking and not so bright.

(10)
Original image: Indecent Proposal (movie)
Translation: HE: I love you, Melina, more than money. SHE: Me too.

Localization: A Bosnian folk singer and his now former wife (30 years his junior) recently divorced and the process was all over news. He is a highly popular, rich singer, she became rather famous after marrying him. They both lived a highly publicized, money-oriented life. Her name is Melina, and she is by many considered a gold-digger. The image shown is also in sharp contrast to Haris' and Melina's appearance (he is unpolished, short and fat; she is botoxed). Essentially, the film is used to show how men use their money and influence to 'buy' themselves wives. Men with money feel somehow cheated when they realize that the women married them for money, and then they say all the worst about those women. In the Haris and Melina divorce process, Haris was publicly very critical of Melina. She – not so much. There is also a lot of Balkan misogynistic attitudes towards women here. That said, it is interesting to

notice that during the entire saga, many online media outlets in Bosnia (and in the region, since the singer has been popular for decades in former Yugoslavia) have published his statements on her betrayal daily, while she mostly kept quiet. Women keeping quiet and men talking (and being given) space is a stereotypical point concerning the Balkans: women are silent. They, in fact, frequently suffer in silence, are underpaid, exposed to different forms of violence (15 women have been killed in Bosnia in 2023 and 2024 alone – https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/femicid-zakoni-bih-ubistva-zene/33018807.html). However, the voices are slowly being raised in the country, partly by NGOs, activists, some politicians, as well as experts in different fields of science. For example, we see an increasing number of books and articles written about either the rights and position of women in the BiH society, or the rights of women to be recognized in the Bosnian language. Hence, the University of Sarajevo alone contains courses on gender studies, on women in language, their role in the society, etc. While the script opposition rich man vs. non-rich woman, is borrowed from the "indecent proposal" global meme, the remaining resources all come from the Bosnian context.

(11)
Original image: Carol (movie)
Translation: [mashallah]

Context: Rooney Mara (Therese, in the film) is in love with an older woman, Carol, played by Cate Blanchett. The story takes place in the 50s; the two of them fall in love and start a relationship. In this screenshot, Therese looks at her lovingly, and Carol sends her this sentence with 'mashallah'. The word entered the Bosnian language during the Ottoman period and is stylistically marked. Today it is used to a. express admiration, liking and approval, and b. to protect against the evil eye (Halilović et al., 2010, p. 663). Obviously, the use of the Bosnian word has a localization function.

(12)

Original image: An image of Jason Statham. He is out of character. He is wearing a nice (expensive) suit and is standing next to an expensive looking car.

Translation: I don't need school to tell me I'm illiterate.

Context: The Balkans (hence also BiH) is seeing a high popularity of essentially primitive men and women, many of them benefitting from

the transitional economy. Their wealth is considerable and the manner in which they've obtained it is questionable to say the least. Still, they even brag about obtaining such wealth without completing any formal education. What stands out here is that education is unnecessary and illiteracy is even favorable in their perception of life.

(13)
Source image: Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes
Translation: You can always divorce.

Context: Whatever trouble women in BiH encounter in marriage, there is a solution to the unbearable situation: a divorce. However, the process is frequently difficult, as women are either financially dependent, or are facing some kind of physical danger. The word "bona", the original meaning of which is "sick," is an elliptical sentence, the full form of which

is “May you never be sick” – “bona ne bila”. It has become a jargonized emphatic (vocative) form for reasoning with women. Also, there is a feminist aspect to this meme, considering that both feminists in the picture are terribly important for the USA, the world, and for the 1970s, and for today. A comparison can be made between women in America in the 70s and women in Yugoslavia. In the sense that - while women in America started a lot with the feminist awakening and advocating for women’s sexual freedom, the women in former Yugoslavia were, in certain aspects, pretty much nowhere in this regard; moreover – everything was (still is) patriarchal and divorce is frequently, in some regions, a living shame. The localization comes mostly from the language, but also refers to local circumstances, as seen above. Interestingly the script opposition (feminism vs. patriarchy) comes from the image of the well-known feminists, but all other knowledge resources are local.

The previous memes were collected as a convenience sample. Informants were asked to contribute memes and those more frequently contributed or that seemed more interesting were used. As such, the resulting memes are not necessarily “mainstream” while being clearly global. However, we also wanted to document the existence of localized versions of memes that were widespread in the US. So we specifically asked for versions of the “Woman yelling at cat” meme, analyzed by Attardo (2023, pp. 29–31). Our informants delivered also in this occasion. It should be noted that both of the “woman yelling at cat” memes were posted/produced by the instagrammer “captain_bosnica” whose modus operandi may be described as the localization of global memes (for example, their user image is an image of Capt. Janeway; see example 4).

(14) woman: I just want to listen to that song on YouTube in peace.

The cat stands for the Glovo commercial, which frequently interrupts the music on YouTube. Also, the word “rahat” is from the Ottoman Turkish, preserved in the Bosnian language. The meaning is “being at

peace, carefree" (Halilović et al., 2010, p. 1102) The meme expresses frustration over the Glovo commercial which appears on the YouTube channel in Bosnia to the extent that it has become almost impossible to play a song, or watch any other content on the channel.

(15) woman: Boljakov potok; cat: Buljakov potok

The Boljakov/Buljakov potok is a neighborhood in Sarajevo. Some people call it Boljakov, some Buljakov potok (the difference is the vowel: /o/ vs. /u/). The meme points out the 'division' among Sarajevans over that

issue. Some will get annoyed over that (the woman), while some will use the incorrect version deliberately to provoke (the cat). The meme can be seen as a ridicule of the people who can't wait to correct someone (grammar pedantry) on the one hand, and the tendency to argue over trivial issues in Sarajevo, in the other. Regardless, its topic is a hyper-local pronunciation issue. It should be noted that in both of the "woman yelling at cat" memes the logical mechanism is provided by the meme template, which sets up and hence motivates the opposition (woman vs. cat).

3. Conclusions

BiH memes are localized primarily by overlapping new BiH specific situations and targets on pre-existing global script oppositions and logical mechanisms. Sometimes the Language knowledge resource is responsible for the localization, as in examples 6, 8, and 12, as well as the last two examples of "woman yelling at cat." The sources of the memes freely use global referents and images which are "remixed" by applying them to local situations.

We of course acknowledge the limited nature of the sample of convenience. A more in-depth analysis, with a broader sample may reveal aspects of the localization of global memes that our sample missed. Further research may obviate this problem. Another limitation of the study is that we only marginally addressed the issue of repurposing of global formal meme templates (as in the "woman yelling at cat" example). The exact nature and incidence of this type of remixing remains to be determined.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Fansub Translation of Humour: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Translating humour is generally a rather difficult task, which has even been considered unfeasible due to its cultural embeddedness, emotional, social and expressive aspects that rely on verbal expression, but not exclusively. However, as Chiaro (2014) notes, it is the translation of the verbal aspect of humour that poses particular problems, as facial expressions and body language are more or less similar worldwide. The treatment of humour in audiovisual translation (AVT) imposes further constraints on the translation process itself. First, there are objective difficulties related to space and time restrictions, as the translation must fit perfectly into the scene (Dore, 2020). Secondly, there are limitations arising from the nature of AVT, as it relies on both visual and verbal expressions. This study focused on a particular mode of AVT called "participatory audiovisual translation" (Pérez-González, 2014, p. 233), which is a form of amateur subtitling, also called fansubbing. The analysis was carried out

on the amateur subtitling of the American series *The Office* into Croatian and focused on the strategies used in fansubbing to achieve a humorous effect, as well as the challenges faced by non-professional translators in this process. It was found that amateur translators resorted to close rendering of humour or toning down in most cases, while omissions were also a very common strategy. This means that, while fansubbing is a great resource for under-resourced languages such as Croatian, the complexity of AVT requires formal training for translators to be able to grasp the subtleties and nuances of this type of translation.

Keywords: subtitling, fansubbing, translating humour, audiovisual translation

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has been the topic of interest in the last couple of decades as this type of translation is in fact the product of the new era, enabled by the advancements in film industry and technology. As Díaz Cintas, Matamala and Neves (2010, p. 11) point out, today AVT is a fully-fledged discipline within the field of Translation Studies with systematic research on the topic from various perspectives – linguistic, sociolinguistic, cultural, technological, etc. As Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014) point out, AVT implies the synchronization of two codes: image and sound and is bound by time and space restrictions.

An area of particular interest within AVT is the issue of translating humour in this medium as a particularly challenging task that requires creativity, linguistic and technical skills. Various studies on the translation of humour in general, and in AVT in particular, have identified the various strategies that translators use to handle it and mitigate the potential loss of the humorous effect in the target language.

This paper further focuses on the phenomenon of fansubbing, i.e. AVT translation made by fans, on the case study of the American TV series *The Office* as the main basis of analysis. The aim was to analyse the strategies and humour-making resources used in fansubbing of this series to see whether a similar humorous effect was achieved in the translation from English (source language) to Croatian (target language). In

Croatia, the series does not have an official translation, so for analysis the fansub translation by the Croatian fansub community *titlovi.com* was used. Therefore, on the one hand, the goal was to raise awareness of the complexity and intricacy involved in translating humour and on the other hand, to demonstrate how fansub communities contribute in AVT to under-resourced languages, such as Croatian.

2. Translating Humour

The challenges and difficulties in translating humour have been the topic of many scientific works (cf. Attardo, 2002; Venutti, 2002; Popa, 2005; Martínez-Sierra, 2006; Jankowska, 2009; Low, 2011; etc.) This has been attributed to the different forms of humour (e.g. wordplay, joke, idiom, pun, sarcasm, irony, etc.), but also to the fact that it is based on specific cultural and linguistic features of the source language. Owing to that, there is always some loss in the translation of humour, in a qualitative or in a quantitative sense, resulting in a less humorous output or less humorous elements (cf. Venuti, 2002; Martínez-Sierra, 2006; Jankowska, 2009). However, many authors believe that, despite being a difficult task, translating humour is by no means impossible (Newmark, 1988; Chiaro, 2010; Jankowska, 2009), and the losses may be compensated with other humorous elements, e.g. some marked interventions by the translator, use of hypernyms, exaggerations, etc. (cf. Klaudy, 2014, cited in Kovács, 2020, Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2014). The most obvious proof of that is that humour is actually translated quite successfully. Kovács (2020) also points out that the success of translating humour depends on the subjectivity of an individual and on the genre, as certain types of humour, like situational humour, can be translated more easily than culture-bound humour. As stated in Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014), humour is always bound to some cultural or social references. The authors have identified three groups of references: geographical (names of geographical features), ethnographic (everyday objects, references to art and culture) and socio-political (socio-cultural life references, famous persons, events).

As Kovács (2020, p. 69) points out, a translator should primarily strive to achieve the humorous effect in the target language (TL) as this is the goal of a humorous text. This further complicates the process of translation as the translator must assess if the comedy will be comprehensible to the TL recipient. Sometimes this even means inventing new jokes related to a reference in the TL culture to replicate the effect. The translator also needs to evaluate whether the humorous effect is essential in translation or whether there are other priorities to be considered before tackling humour. In that sense, Zabalbeascoa (1996) introduced the concept of priorities, that reflect the intended goals of the source text and restrictions, i.e. obstacles and problems in establishing priorities. He proposed three planes for the evaluation of priorities: a vertical scale of importance from top to low priority, then the horizontal scale on which the translator decides whether humour is a priority for the entire text or a rhetorical device used to illustrate a point or entertain, and finally the equivalence-non-equivalence scale on which the translator decides whether it is important to follow the SL closely or not.

In order to translate humour more efficiently, scholars have proposed many classifications of strategies for the translation of humorous or culturally bound references. Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014, p. 202) differentiate 9 strategies: Loan, Calque, Explicitation, Substitution, Transposition, Lexical recreation, Compensation, Omission and Addition. Loans happen in references to culinary specialities, like “cognac”, place names or specific cultural or historical events. In that case, ST word or phrase is used directly in the TT without any changes as translation is not possible or because both languages share the same word. Calque refers to literal translation, i.e. word-for-word translation, for example, English ‘beer garden’ from German ‘Biergarten’. Calques have different degrees of transparency and in some contexts may be problematic for subtitling. In explicitation the translator tries to add some information, so that the audience may understand the text better. This usually entails using generalizations, such as hypernyms which have an explanatory function. For example, Heathrow (airport in London) can be translated only as London airport or as London Heathrow airport. Substitution is considered by the authors as a variant

of explicitation that is frequent in subtitling. It is resorted to in situations when there is a long term but owing to spatial restrictions, it is substituted with a shorter one, for example, Croatian phrase "postaviti na internet" can simply be translated into English as upload. Transposition refers to replacing a cultural notion from one culture with a notion from another. It can also be used in situations in which phrases and idioms are translated in a way to resemble that of the ST, for example, "it is raining cats and dogs" as "lije kao iz kabla" (literal translation *it is pouring like from the bucket*). Sometimes, when the speaker invents new words, it is necessary to resort to lexical recreation. A good example is the one from *The Office* where Michael said, "The business world is a doggy-dog world". Since doggy-dog is made up (the correct phrase is "dog eat dog"), the translators may translate this with made up word "pseći pas" in Croatian ("dog's dog"). Compensation is a strategy used when the translator wants to make up for any losses in translation. The authors consider this a particularly useful strategy for translating humour. Omission and addition imply removing or adding words, phrases, or information. Omissions are sometimes unavoidable either because of spatial restrictions or lack of equivalent in TL, but are also considered as a useful strategy as they save space. For example, the phrase 'The capital of France, Paris.' can be shortened into Paris, since target readers can be expected to know that Paris is the capital of France or vice versa. Addition also occurs in subtitling, despite spatial restrictions, especially in case of passages containing cultural references that require more explanation (Geoghegan, 2020, p. 10), i.e. that are not shared in the target culture.

3. Audiovisual Translation

AVT has experienced a growing interest since the 1990s and particularly in the 2010s. According to O'Sullivan and Cornu (2019), it developed differently in different countries, so for example in major film industries, like Germany, Italy and France, AVT favoured dubbing which is rather costly, which is why some other countries, like Belgium, Switzerland, Greece and Croatia opted for subtitling.

Chiaro (2009, p. 141) defines AVT as "the interlingual transfer of verbal language when it is transmitted and accessed both visually and acoustically, usually but not necessarily, through some kind of electronic device". Although there has been some confusion about the terminology and definition of the field until its establishment, e.g. "TV translation", "film translation", "cinema translation", "screen translation", "multimedia translation", "adaptation" (cf. Cho 2014; Díaz Cintas 2003; Chiaro 2009; Fois 2012; Zolczer, 2016), it has always referred to the process of conveying audiovisual materials from SL to TL combining the audio channel, i.e. what we can hear, with the image, i.e. things we see on the screen (Chaume, 2013, p. 105). In a way it combines technology to transfer a linguistic message of audiovisual content. Bartolomé and Cabrera (2005) differentiate as many as 17 audiovisual translation modes: dubbing, subtitling, voice over, interpreting, surtitling, free commentary, partial dubbing, narration, simultaneous translation, live subtitling, subtitling for the deaf and the hard of hearing, audio description, script translation, animation, multimedia translation, double versions and remakes. All this just illustrates how vast and complex the area of AVT is and what criteria and features have to be taken into consideration when considering and evaluating it.

Most of these modes can be classified into two large groups: captioning and revoicing. Revoicing encompasses modes in which oral output stays oral, while the SL is replaced with the TL, e.g. voice-over, narration, audio description, free commentary, simultaneous interpreting and lip-synchronized dubbing (Pérez-González, 2020, p. 32). Captioning includes modes in which oral output is changed into a written text shown on the screen. In this paper we will focus on the mode relevant for our analysis – subtitling.

4. Subtitling and Fansubbing

Hatim and Munday (2004) define subtitling as a method of translating audio-visual content, e.g. film and television. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007, p. 8) add that besides the dialogue, subtitles may contain other

elements such as letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, etc., as well as songs and voices off.

Subtitles usually appear in the lower part of the screen, in one or more lines, and contain the speaker's message in the original language or translated language. The process of subtitling needs to follow certain rules and criteria, but is also accompanied by specific restrictions, all of which directly affect the final output. It consists of specific phases: spotting or tagging (i.e. synchronizing the timing with the audio), translation (which also includes localization and adaptation), correction (refers to the overall flow of the subtitles) and simulation (i.e. review of the final product). As such, it can involve people of many different professions, e.g. spotting is usually performed by a technician, translation is usually performed by a translator. However, in recent years the development in technology has made it possible for one person to perform all phases, which is usually the translator. Subtitles can be printed on the film, i.e. "open", chosen by a viewer from a menu, i.e. "closed", or projected. In this paper, we focus only on the translation phase.

Owing to many rules and criteria that have to be satisfied in the subtitling process, the translation of audiovisual content is even more complex than written translation. To produce good subtitles, a translator must resort to specific strategies: elimination, rendering, and simplification (Antonini, 2005 cited in Chiaro, 2009). Elimination means omitting any information that can be deduced from the screen and any elements that do not alter the meaning of the original content (e.g. hesitations, false beginnings, redundancies, etc). Simplification implies simplifying and fragmenting the original syntax so the viewers can understand and follow the text more easily.

According to Khalaf (2016), the AV translator faces three main challenges in the process: technical, cultural and linguistic. Technical challenges refer to the space restrictions in subtitles, which is typically 37 characters per line, maximum two lines per image. Owing to that restriction, Uzelac (2017) estimated that the original dialogue has to be reduced by forty to even seventy-five per cent. Another technical aspect is time, as a subtitle

stays on screen for no less than one second to no more than 6 or 7 seconds, which means that some parts of the dialogue will have to be omitted or reduced so the translator needs to choose appropriate structures and expressions that the audience can read and understand the content. Cultural challenges refer to the translation of culture-bound elements. In that sense, culture-based humour is particularly challenging as in films, series and TV shows achieving the humorous effect is often more significant than conveying the exact meaning. In the category of linguistic challenges the translator needs to deal with grammar, syntax and lexis of a particular language, the dialects, slang, different accents and pronunciations, and grammatical mistakes that need to be conveyed as well.

This paper focuses on the category of cultural challenges and the way they are handled in subtitling from English into the Croatian language. Croatia is predominantly a subtitling country. The Croatian national television *Hrvatska televizija* began broadcasting international films and shows with subtitles in the 1960s. A professional service, Translation and Subtitling Department was established in 1989 and since then has performed the translation and subtitling of foreign content, lately even dubbing of documentaries and cartoons. A survey conducted in 2021 by the Croatian Association of Audiovisual Translators (CAAT)[2], showed that most audiovisual translators in Croatia are women (77.5 %). They are usually between 29 and 48 years old (72 %) and have a degree in language(s). When it comes to clients, 35 % of Croatian AV translators work exclusively for foreign clients, 36 % work exclusively for domestic clients, while around 29 % work both for foreign and domestic clients. Most of them have between 5 and 15 years of experience in audiovisual translating. Just like in the survey conducted in 2010 (Nikolić, 2010), the translators in this survey expressed dissatisfaction with their salary, as 43.2 % of the surveyed translators stated that they cannot earn an average Croatian salary[3], while 28.8 % can earn an average salary. They also

2 Available at: https://dhap.hr/Content/Anketa_hrvatski_01_02_2022.pdf (accessed on 26/2/2024).

3 At the time of the survey, this amounted to around 900 € net (1250 € gross).

expressed their concerns regarding the availability of work, inflow of machine-generated translations and possible reduction of their fees.

As Croatian is an under-represented language, movies and series offered by larger streaming services, like Netflix and HBO, are often translated by non-professional translators, fans of a particular film or series. This phenomenon, called fansubbing (the product is a fansub), is considered to have begun in the United States in the 1980s when Japanese anime were translated by fans (Diaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006). These subtitles made by fans are distributed on the Internet, which raises the issue of copyright (Liu, 2014). However, as Magazzù (2018) points out, fansubbing brought several benefits to the global market, the publisher and the audience, contributing to the promotion of a certain series or film, so no legal action has been taken against it. Massida (2015, p. 24) further emphasizes how fansubbing has stimulated Italian networks to fasten the process of releasing new films with translations and increased dubbing. As this practice is on the fringes of the law, fansubbers often declare that the translation will be removed as soon as the official translation is released, a practice called "notice of use" (Rembert-Lang 2010, pp. 32-33). Fansubbing process can involve many people with different knowledge or skills, e.g. raw providers that prepare the original material, the translators, timers who make sure that the subtitles will correspond with the spoken dialogue, typesetters who choose the font, editors and proof-readers that make sure the translation is natural and error-free. However, owing to modern technology, today this can be done by fewer persons.

The fansubbing trend has also appeared in Croatia, where there are two bigger fansub communities – *prijevodi-online.org* and *titlovi.com*. The number of active fansubbers in those communities is difficult to estimate, as they can move freely from one to another, or even work for both of them (Cemerin & Toth, 2017). The site *titlovi.com* was started in 2000 by Nikola Ristić, who has maintained the site together with a community of volunteer translators and has become popular not only in Croatia, but also in the region. These communities are the only way Croatian audi-

ence can enjoy popular foreign TV shows and movies as many of them do not have an official translation.

This paper analysed the subtitles produced by the fansubbing community *titlovi.com* for the American version of the series *The Office*.

5. Humour in the Series *The Office*

The Office is an American version of the British original mockumentary[4] sitcom depicting everyday lives of employees at the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The characters are all based on the roles in the original British series. The main staring cast includes Steve Carell as Michael Scott, a regional manager who believes he is the best boss, funny and adorable. Rainn Wilson in the role of Dwight Schrute and John Krasinski as Jim Halpert, both salesmen, who keep making pranks to each other. Jenna Fischer depicting Pam Beesly, a receptionist with a love for graphic design and arts.

The series was broadcasted on NBC from 24 March 2005 to 16 May 2013, consisting of 201 episodes in 9 seasons. The producers needed to adapt the British series for the American audience, which mainly involved changing British humour to American humour, i.e. switching the "culture code". Firstly, the references to famous persons, figures, organizations or events had to be altered and included in puns, for example, Abraham Lincon, NBA, slavery, Bob Hope, Saturday Night Live, Bono, Girl Scouts, Battlestar Galactica, The Muppets, etc. As another peculiarity in the series, Michael often modifies common phrases and idioms creating a humorous effect in puns and wordplay. In these cases, the translator has to decide how to render those phrases – to keep the humour or render them literally so the audience can understand the true meaning of the phrase.

The humour in this series relies mostly on puns, wordplay, malapropisms and connotations to cultural elements, which is why it poses a particular challenge to translators. They have to cope with linguistic and

4 "a facetious or satirical work (such as a film) presented in the style of a documentary" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

cultural challenges while trying to achieve the humorous effect without losing coherence in subtitles.

6. Results and Discussion

The analysis in this paper was performed based on all episodes available on the online streaming service Netflix with Croatian subtitles. After identifying typical examples of humour, the Croatian subtitles were downloaded from the Croatian fansub community *titlovi.com*. The renderings of selected examples into Croatian were categorized into four categories based on applied translation strategy: complete omission, weakening, close rendering and increased effect (Bucaria, 2008). Subtitles were subsequently compared and analysed in terms of achieving humorous effect.

Weakening means that humorous element was toned down in comparison with the original. The examples from the series are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of weakening of the humorous effect

Source text	Target text	Backtranslation
Michael: Where did you get that information? Oscar: manual Michael: Manuel who?	Michael: Odakle ti to? Oscar: Iz priručnika. Michael: Tko ti je taj?	*Michael: Where did you get that?* *Oscar: From the manual. Michael: Who is that?*
Humorous effect is based on the wordplay: manual and Manuel. However, the Croatian translation did not render this comic effect, as the translator was unable to find a Croatian equivalent to the word 'priručnik'.		
Michael: What's so funny Pam: You had to be there Michael: Oh, geography joke	Michael: Što je tako smiješno. Pam: Trebao si biti ovdje. Michael: Zemljopisna šala.	*Michael: What's so funny? Pam: You had to be here. Michael: Oh, geography joke.*
In American urban culture, "a geography joke" is a type of joke one must be present physically in a place to understand[5]. Croatian does not have such a phrase, so the comic effect is weakened.		

5 https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Geography%20Joke.

Jim: I have always been your biggest flan.	Jim: Dwight, žao mi je, jer uvijek si mi bio najdraži za podvaliti.	*Jim: Dwight, I'm sorry, because you've always been my favourite to play pranks on.*
This example is another play on words of the original phrase "your biggest fan". However, in Croatian, the wordplay has been completely omitted and replaced with a neutral phrase.		
Ryan: Dud you see Saw? Dwight: Of course I seesaw. Mose and I seesaw all the time.	Ryan: Jesi Saw gledao? Dwight: Naravno da sam sisao kao mali. Zajedno s Moseom.	*Ryan: Have you seen Saw? Dwight: Of course I sucked as a kid. Along with Mose.*
In this case, comic effect was a combination of two sources. One is a cultural reference to the American movie Saw and the other is the linguistic effect of homonymy. The combination of words "see Saw" was understood as the kid's toy "seesaw". The translator tried to achieve the same effect in Croatian, but his homonymy does not have the same intensity as the original.		

Although the translator tried to render the wordplays in Croatian, but owing to the complexity of the humour, based on more than just wordplay, part of the comic effect was lost.

Complete omission implies that the humour component was completely removed or replaced with a neutral expression. Table 2 brings examples of complete omissions from the studied series.

Table 2. Examples of complete omission of humour

Source text	Target text	Backtranslation
Michael: I have a cause, it is because I hate him.	Michael: Imam razlog. Zato što ga mrzim.	*Michael: I have a reason. Because I hate him.*
In this case, there is a combination of wordplay and partial homonymy with words "cause" and "because". The translator was unable to find a similar wordplay in Croatian, so here the comic effect was completely lost.		
Pam: Did you miss the bus? Jim: No, I just missed my wife	Pam: Zakasnio si na bus? Jim: Nisam, nedostajala mi je žena.	*Pam: Were you late for the bus? Jim: No, I missed my wife*
In this example, there is a play on meaning, as the word "miss" is polysemous, meaning "to be late to catch" and "feel sadness without the presence of". The humorous effect resulted from the unexpected use of a different meaning. This was omitted in Croatian, no adequate equivalent was found.		

<table>
<tr><td>Michael: Well, well, well, how the turntables</td><td>Michael: Da, da, da kako se samo priča preokrenula.</td><td>Michael: Yes, yes, how the story turned around.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">As mentioned previously, Michael tends to alter common phrases, and this is one of the examples. The phrase “the tables have turned”, meaning roles of two people have changed, was altered into “turntables”, meaning “circular revolving plate or platform”. The translator used the translation of the original phrase, not the misused one, but the humorous effect was lost.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Michael: I will have the spagetthi and a side salad
Waitress: Okay
Michael: If the salad is on top I will send it back.</td><td>Michael: Uzet ću špagete i salatu. Bude li salata na špagetama, vraćam.</td><td>Michael: I’ll have spaghetti and salad. If there is a salad on the spaghetti, I will return it.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Here is another play of meaning with the word “side”, meaning “food served separately along with the main course” and “position to the left or right of an object”. Again, the translator was unable to find an appropriate alternative in Croatian, so the humorous effect was lost.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Angela: Anyways, last night he was so tired he just “wanted a little Mexican brought in.”</td><td>Angela: Sinoć je bio tako umoran, htio je samo malo meksičke.</td><td>Angela: He was so tired last night, he just wanted some Mexican.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">In this example, humour is both linguistic, resulting from the two meanings of the word “Mexican” (as food or as person), and situational, having a reference to the fact that her boyfriend was having an affair with her fellow Mexican co-worker. The only reference kept in the translation was the one to Mexican food.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Michael: Two queens on Casino Night. I am going to drop a deuce on everybody.</td><td>Michael: Dvije kraljice na Kasino Večeri. Danas će mi se posrećiti dvostruko.</td><td>Michael: Two queens at Casino Evening. I will be doubly lucky today.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">This is another example of Michael’s intentional alteration of common expressions. In this case, the expression “drop a bomb”, meaning shock somebody, was altered into “drop a deuce”, which is slang for defecate. The translator did not include that in the Croatian version, thus losing the original effect.</td></tr>
</table>

Michael: When you meet that someone special you just know. Because a real relationship can't be forced. It should just come about effort-lend-lessly.	Michael: Kad upoznaš tog nekog posebnog, jednostavno znaš, jer prava veza ne može biti forsirana. Trebala bi doći bez muke.	*Michael: When you meet that special someone, you just know, because a real relationship can't be forced. It should come easily.*
The humour is achieved by Michael's mispronunciation of the word *effortlessly*. In Croatian translation, this was omitted and the word was translated correctly.		

In these examples, the humour was based on linguistic references, using polysemy, mispronunciation, slang in combination with wordplay which the translator failed to render in the translated version. It seems that linguistic challenges combined with situational humour and cultural references pose a particular challenge.

Close rendering implies that humorous content was retained in the TL version. Examples of this can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Examples of close rendering of humour

Source text	Target text	Backtranslation
Michael: I'm not superstitious, I'm just little stitious	Michael: Nisam praznovjeran, ali... Mrvicu sam znovjeran	*Michael: I'm not supersitious, I'm just little stitious*
This is the case in which wordplay in the original text is rendered as wordplay in the target text. The wordplay was achieved in the same way – by dropping the prefix from the word, so the effect was retained.		
Dwight: R is among the most menacing of sounds. That's why they call it murder not mukduk	Dwight: R je jedan od najviše prijetećih zvukova. Zato se i kaže umorrstvo.	*Dwight: R is one of the most menacing sounds. That's why it's called murrder*
In this case the phonestemic effect of the sound "R" is the same in English and in Croatian so it was easier to achieve the same effect. The translator managed to find a word that contains this letter so the effect was retained.		

<table>
<tr><td>Michael: Your dentist’s name is Crentist. Sounds a lot like dentist</td><td>Michael: Zubar ti se zove Krubar. Strašno zvuči kao zubar.</td><td>Michael: Your dentist’s name is Krubar. Sounds an awful lot like a ‘zubar’.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">The example contains a wordplay based on replacement of letters. Following the original, the translator strived to achieve the same consonance (Crentist – Krubar), so the humorous effect was retained.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Darryl: This particular time, I was reaching for a supply box on the top shelf, when one office worker, who shall remain nameless, kicked the ladder out from under me and yelled…
Michael: “Hey Darryl, how’s it hangin’?!”</td><td>Darryl: Popeo sam se na ljestve, a jedan je radnik iz ureda, ostat će bezimen, šutnuo ljestve i viknuo…
Michael: Izvisio si.</td><td>Darryl: I climbed the ladder, and an office worker, who shall remain nameless, kicked the ladder and yelled…
Michael: You’ve failed.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">This is an example of a combination of linguistic reference and situational humour. The phrase “How’s it hanging?” has the indirect meaning “How are things going with you?”, but in this context it actually has both direct and indirect meanings. In the Croatian version, the translator used the phrase “izvisio si” which also has the direct meaning as “dangling”, but also an indirect meaning “not to succeed”. Thus this Croatian equivalent is appropriately used because Darryl didn’t succeed in taking the supply box from the top shelf.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Jan: Surely you cannot be serious?
Michael Scott: I am serious. And don’t call me Shirley. Airplane.</td><td>Jan: Šališ se, dakako.
Michael: Ne šalim se. I ne zovi me Dakako. (Iz ima li pilota u avionu)</td><td>Jan: Certainly, you’re joking.
Michael: I’m not joking. And don’t call me Certainly. (From airplane)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Here there is also a cultural reference and a wordplay. The reference is to the movie Airplane! in which this particular wordplay was used. The translator in this case managed to retain the comic effect by finding an appropriate equivalent. Besides that, just like in the source text, the translator decided to put the reference to the movie Airplane.</td></tr>
</table>

Michael: Wish I could, but I can't. Well can, but won't. Should maybe, but *shorn't*	Michael: Volio bih da mogu, ali ne mogu. Mogu, ali neću, točnije. Trebao bih možda, ali *njeću*	*Michael: I wish I could, but I can't. I can, but I won't, more precisely. Maybe I should, but shorn't.*
In another play of words, Michael applies the pattern of a shortened negative form (n't) to the word "should" creating a funny wordplay. The translator also used wordplay in the Croatian translation to create a similar effect.		
Michael: A particular concern for office workers is a sedimentary lifestyle, which can contribute—	Michael: Za uredske radnike problem može biti sedimentaran način života.	*Michael: For office workers, the problem can be a sedimentary lifestyle.*
Humorous effect was achieved by wordplay, using "sedimentary lifestyle" instead of "sedentary lifestyle". As there is a similar word in Croatian, the humorous effect is achieved.		
Michael Scott: IMF I'd brought in some burritos or some colored greens or some pad thai. I love pad thai. Stanley: It's collard greens. Michael Scott: What? Stanley: It's collard greens. Michael Scott: That doesn't make sense. You don't call them 'collard people'... that's offensive.	Michael: Mogao sam donijeti malo burrita, zelenjave, tajlandske hrane, obožavam je. Stanley: Mislite na obojano povrće. Michael: To nema smisla jer crnce ne zove obojanima. To je uvredljivo.	*Michael: I could have brought some burritos, vegetables, Thai food, I love it.* *Stanley: You mean colored vegetables.* *Michael: That doesn't make sense because he doesn't call black people colored. That's offensive.*
Another example of a wordplay with homophones, collard as type of green vegetable and coloured referring to African Americans. Besides wordplay, there is also a cultural reference here to the coloured people, which is considered an offensive name. The translator tried to retain this by using similar expressions to evoke colour and offensive name for African Americans.		

The cases of close rendering contain mostly some kind of play of sounds, homophony, consonance or other examples of switching sounds within a word, which seem to be less difficult to translate from English into Croatian.

This still requires a level of creativity and improvisation by the translator.

Increased effect refers to those examples in which humorous effect is greater in the target version (Bucaria, 2008). The following table shows one such example from the series.

Table 4. Examples of increased effect

Source text	Target text	Backtranslation
Ryan: You, uh, you should have put him in „custardy"	Ryan: Trebali biste ga staviti u hladetinu da se ohladi!	*Ryan: You should put him in the 'hladetina (cold jelly dish)' to cool him down!*
The wordplay consisted of using the word "custardy" instead of the word "custody". Custardy implies "containing custard" which is a dessert while "to be put in custody" means to keep the person that has been arrested in prison. This also has elements of situational humour as the characters in the series were joking about the stapler in jello. The translator used a Croatian dish resembling jello to render the original and also tried to keep the wordplay with the same root of the words "hladetina" and "ohladi".		

This seems a particularly challenging category as it is rather difficult to follow the original text while still managing to create an even greater comic effect than in the original.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of fansub translations of the series *The Office* demonstrated just how challenging translation of humour is. From the given examples, we may conclude that in the majority of cases, humour was either weakened or completely omitted, which means that the translator was unable to find appropriate equivalent or think of another way of achieving the humorous effect. The task is even more complex owing to the nature of humour in the series, as it often consists of more than one reference or is based on more than one source. Thus, wordplays or puns often arise from the situation, which makes it difficult for the translator to convey them into Croatian and keep the comic effect.

In cases of close rendering, the translator improvised and managed to come up with a phrase or an expression in Croatian that could match

the humorous effect of the original. However, the examples of increased effect where rather scarce, with only one out of 20 cases. The question arises whether a professional translation would yield better results, which may be a topic of another future research.

It can also be concluded that in all of the examples the translator tried to follow the meaning of the original as closely as possible. Therefore, in some of the cases the humorous effect was lost. The translator also had to face a number of restrictions, like situational connectedness and cultural references, which limited the possibility of improvisations or original creations to achieve a comic effect. In cases where humour was based on redistribution of letters in a word, the translator managed to find an appropriate humorous alternative. On the other hand, humour based on semantic or cultural referencing was more difficult to tackle and usually resulted in weakening or losing the comic effect. This shows how the translator needs not only to have a thorough knowledge of the source and target language, but also of the culture, the slang and dialects of both SL and TL, knowledge of the series or movie he or she is translating, as well as its wider context, and in the end, creativity and sense of humour to be able to successfully improvise.

Nevertheless, fansub communities contribute to the popularization of different content and also hopefully, raise awareness of the importance of a good translation. Their prolific work has already drawn attention of scholars in different languages, while it still remains unresearched, especially when it comes to fansubbing in Croatia.

Note

This paper is based on the analysis conducted by the third author in partial fulfilment of the requirements for her BA degree (cf. Lacković, 2022).

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Teasing as Mutually Experienced Affection in Salinger's Franny and Zooey[6]

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ABSTRACT

Having assumed Salinger's view of literature to be the performance of human connection through interaction, the paper focuses on a particular interaction in his novel *Franny and Zooey* involving two members of the Glass family – the mother, Bessie, and the youngest son, Zooey with the aim to explore how the assumed uniqueness and esotery of their family language lends to teasing to be mutually experienced as affection. With a view of discourse in terms of a shared world constructed by active involvement of the participants who are attentive to the actions their respective talk may be doing, the analysis focuses on the verbal and nonverbal design features of teases (provocations) and their respective responses in two teasing episodes. The findings point to jocular mockery functioning as provocation whose dominant verbal design feature is exaggeration with its linguistic realization in the form of elaboration of mockery, overstatement, and ostensible approval. Prosodic features of provocation are mainly displayed in emphatic stress and dramatized sighs. With regards to response to provocation, its overall defensive nature is implied by means of self-explanation, justification, counter-mockery, as well as by one example of mother's reprimand. Besides the jocular nature of mockery, playfulness of provocation (and, for that matter, the overall interaction) is rendered by (self) repetition (of rhetoric questions,

6 I dedicate this paper to the loving memory of my Anja, to the joy and laugh we shared when reading the bathroom scene.

mainly) which, as a conventionalized discourse strategy, accomplishes affectionate bonding. Likewise, the function of interruptions, in light of the non-belligerent nature of the interlocutors' responses they trigger, is found to be that of benevolent attempts to take over the floor thus contributing to the dynamics of interaction.

Keywords: teasing, provocation, response, jocular mockery, affection

1. Introduction

Franny and Zooey was published in 1961 following the previous separate appearance of the two stories (*Franny* and *Zooey*) in The New Yorker in 1955 and 1957, respectively. It was the first book-length account of the Glass family members where all the seven children (of whom Franny and Zooey were the youngest), as well as their parents were enumerated. "Arguably, the book was an immediate best-seller because many people had already read the stories, liked them and spread the word, not because Salinger had hypnotized a generation of blind followers with an instant commodity" (Gehlawat, 2011, p. 65). Slawenski (2010, p. 261) notes that "[w]hen 'Franny' appeared in *The New Yorker* on January 29, 1955, it caused a sensation, becoming an instant favorite of critics and a fashionable topic of conversation among readers." As for *Zooey*, Slawenski (2010, p. 284-285) points to the fact that the novella had been conceived as a part of a novel about the Glass family, and that "[n]o story reveals Salinger's quest for perfection better than the novella 'Zooey'." The quotes above follow the line of doing "[j]ustice to J.D. Salinger" (Malcolm, 2001) argumentation triggered by the critical reception of the book which Malcolm (2001) described to be "more like a public birching than an ordinary occasion of a failure to please." Sublimation of the critical reception can be found in the review of Salinger's contemporary, John Updike, who ascertained in the *New York Times* (1961) that "[f]ew writers since Joyce would risk such a wealth of words upon events that are purely internal and deeds that are purely talk", and observed that "Salinger loves the Glasses more than God loves them. He loves them too exclusively. Their invention has become a hermitage for him."

It is the notion of "exclusive love" for the Glasses that the paper draws on to assume that such love for his creations emanates from the language Salinger endows them with, which makes them very human. Namely, the Glasses embody a very specific language, "a kind of esoteric, family language, a sort of semantic geometry in which the shortest distance between any two points is a fullish circle" (Salinger, 1955, p. 34), as Buddy, the narrator in *Franny and Zooey* puts it. The paper claims that, apart from transpiring from the "wealth of words" that Salinger spends on "pure talk" of the Glasses, as Updike put it, the esotery of their language springs from the "fullish circles" which contain the commonly shared (among the Glass family members) underlying assumptions about being in the world in light of their otherness. Among the many reasons for the Glasses' otherness, one has to do with prodigiously brilliant performance of each of the seven children displayed while being heard regularly on the radio quiz-show titled "It's a Wise Child", over the period of sixteen years. The public reception was such that the listeners were divided into "two curiously restive camps: those who held that the Glasses were a bunch of insufferably 'superior' little bastards that should have been drowned or gassed at birth, and those who held that they were bona-fide wits and savants [...] (Salinger, 1955, p. 37). Another reason for the Glasses' incompatibility with the rest of the world stems from the elder brothers' (Seymor and Buddy) preoccupation with spiritual matters passed onto the younger siblings, in particular onto Franny and Zooey, by taking over their education so as to promote the children's spiritual development. The particular spiritual development was grounded in the idea that education should not begin with "the quest for knowledge at all but with a quest for [...[no-knowledge", because one ought to strive for "[being] in a state of pure consciousness, [which means being] with God before he said, Let there be light" (Salinger, 1955, p. 65).

The paper is concerned with specific features of the language use (discourse) of the Glasses that give rise to subtle humour transpiring from a particular conversational interaction in the novel. More specifically, the aim is to identify strategies and categories of the interaction that con-

tribute to playfulness of the teasing taking place between Zooey and his mother, Bessie.

2. Theoretical Framework

The above stated assumptions regarding the specificities of the language the Glasses are endowed with by their creator make one postulate Salinger's view of literature to be the performance of human connection through interaction. Therefore, the suitable broader framework within which to set the analysis of the selected material is discourse analysis which takes the view of "discourse" as a process of social interaction, that is, language use (Schiffrin, 2001; Schegloff, 2001; Heller, 2001). Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) hold that discourse analysis "is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs." Within his broad definition of this subdiscipline of linguistics Slembrouck (2005, p.1, as cited in Aba-Juez, 2009, p. 9) concludes that discourse analysis "is also concerned with *language use in social contexts*, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers". With regards to the notion of "discourse", of relevance for our analysis is Bennett's (1978, p. 570) suggestion "to think through the general nature of human discourse in terms of the relationships that people create between themselves within the medium of discourse, [...] in terms of shared worlds of discourse". In other words, Bennett (1978, p. 574) prefers not to think of discourse as "exchange" but "as a shared world that is built up through various modes of mutual response over the course of time in particular interactions."

Schegloff (2001, p. 231) maintains that "[i]t is critical that the analysis of discourse incorporate attention not only to the propositional content [...], but also to the *actions* they [discourse units] are doing", particularly in conversation/interaction where participants are attentive to the actions their respective talk may be doing. As Gumperz (1982, p. 1) observes, "[o]nce involved in a conversation, both speaker and hearer must active-

ly respond to what transpires by signaling involvement, either directly through words or indirectly through gestures or similar nonverbal signals." The involvement and attentiveness to the potential actions of talk can be found in teasing which "constitutes a heterogeneous category of behavior" combining elements of "provocation and non-seriousness" (Haugh, 2017, p. 204). One of the definitions of teasing views it as

> [...] an intentional provocation accompanied by playful off-record markers that together comment on something of relevance to the target of the tease. A provocation can be verbal (a sarcastic comment) or nonverbal (a poke in the ribs). In a similar manner, off-record markers can be verbal (exaggeration, metaphor) or nonverbal (prosodic variation). (Keltner et al., 2001, p. 234)

Haugh (2017, p. 208) maintains that the design of teases is such that it invites some kind of affective response on the part of the participants ranging from amusement, to annoyance or irritation. The responses can be occasioned through "either some form of mocking, ridiculing or denigrating of the target" (Haugh, 2017, p. 208). The non-seriousness or playfulness of a tease are often cued by laughter, prosodic cues or various forms of exaggeration (Haugh, 2014). With regards to jocular tease responses, targets may respond seriously through rejection, defense, explanations, corrections, and so on (Drew, 1987, as cited in Haugh, 2017, p. 209). Yet another finding concerning playful teasing is that "it is very often occasioned by a prior transgression or (inadvertent) blunder on the part of the target" (Drew, 1987, as cited in Haugh, 2017, p. 209). "It is for this reason that it has been claimed that jocular teases constitute a way of reproaching others in particular kinds of situated contexts (Geyer, 2010, as cited in Haugh, 2017, p. 209).

One of the discourse strategies deployed in the analyzed material that signals involvement and attentiveness is repetition which "functions at the interactional level of talk [...] and provides a resource to keep talk going, where talk itself is a show of involvement, of willingness to interact" (Tannen, 2007, p. 61). Furthermore, "repetition not only ties parts of

discourse to other parts, but it bonds participants to the discourse and to each other, linking individual speakers in a conversation and in relationships." (Tannen, 2007, p. 61). Likewise, the phenomenon of interruption contributes to teasing being "interactionally achieved" (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012, p. 1104) among the participants and the paper views it as an interpretative category reflecting speakers' interpretations of "prevailing rights and obligations" in interaction (Tannen, 1983, p. 120). The prevailing rights and obligations stem from the view of discourse as "a shared world because the participants share both in the experience of it [...] and in the creation of it" (Bennett, 1978, p. 574). As both the experience and the creation of such discourse presuppose the assumptions and expectations on the part of the participants concerning the extent of participation, the willingness to take responsibility for the discourse construction, as well as the value they place on the participation, it is only in light of these assumptions, expectations and values that one can interpret certain behavioral phenomena as interruption (or something else, e.g. accidental overlap) and to interpret the interruption as belligerent or cooperative, deliberate or accidental, etc. (Bennett, 1978, p. 574).

3. Analysis

The narrative of *Franny and Zooey* follows spiritual crisis of the youngest of the Glasses children, Franny, from the moment she collapses in a college-town diner to the family's apartment in New York where she has taken refuge with her mother, Bessie, her father, Less and her older brother Zooey. The first part of the novel covers Franny's fainting spell which occurred during dinner with her boyfriend Lane, a student of an Ivy League college, when she expressed her disenchantment with the "phony" intellectuals in her college's Theatre Department. The spell occurred amidst her incessant muttering of the Jesus prayer which she had started shortly before meeting Lane and "by way of which she had been trying to follow the Russian Orthodox mystical classic *The Way of the Pilgrim* out of the spiritual bankruptcy" (Hungerford, 2010, p. 9) repre-

sented by both her college and her Ivy League boyfriend. The second part of the novel takes place in the family apartment, first in the bathroom where Zooey and his mother talk, then in the living room where Zooey tries to talk to Franny who is snuffling on the couch, and, finally, in two bedrooms – one that had belonged to their older brothers, Seymor and Buddy, and the other belonging to their parents. It is the telephone conversation between Zooey and Franny, which takes place between these two bedrooms, that provides the highlight and closure of the novel.

The analyzed material comprises the interaction/conversation between Zooey and his mother, Bessie, taking place in the bathroom. Namely, deeply concerned and worried with the state of mind and body of her youngest child Bessie enters the bathroom while Zooey is in the bathtub with the intention to persuade him to talk to Franny and find out the cause of her condition. Having entered the bathroom, Bessie has intruded into Zooey's privacy thus causing the setting, as a feature of context, to deviate from the expected or more appropriate settings for any conversation to take place. Such deviation provided room for teasing episodes within the ensuing conversation. The analysis focuses on the verbal and nonverbal design features of teases (provocations) and their respective responses in two teasing episodes which contribute to the overall relationships that the Glass family members create between themselves in their shared world of discourse. The relevant underlying assumptions contained in the fullish circles of the episodes pertain to the importance of literacy and literature (Episode 1) in the world of the Glasses and their unique approach to religion in general (Episode 2), both sparked and incited by the eldest sibling, the family's educational and spiritual mentor, Seymour, whose unexplained suicide has permanently scarred the rest of the family.

3.1. Episode 1 (Salinger, 1955, pp. 80–81)

Upon entering the bathroom while Zooey was in the bathtub and reprimanding him for staying in the tub the way he does, Bessie spots a manuscript on the floor that Zooey had been reading before she made

entrance to the room. With great interest she picks it up and reads the title out loud:

(1) " 'The Heart Is an Autumn Wanderer' ", she read, mused, aloud. "Unusual title."

Of relevance for this particular situated context is to note that Zooey has been successful in his career of a television actor despite his, some would say arrogant and presumptuous, contempt for the roles he has been tasked with to play, not to mention his doubts about acting in general. The reason for such disposition of his is hinted to us through the banality of the lines in the manuscript, in particular when juxtaposed with the style of Buddy's letter which Zooey had finished reading before turning his attention to the manuscript. Bessie's remark regarding the title (1) made her a target of Zooey's provocation, i.e. his "delighted response", in the form of partial repetition of Bessie's remark formulated within repeated questions:

(2) "It's a what? It's a what kind of title?"

The defensive nature of her response that followed is displayed in the form of self-repetition accompanied by emphatic stress, as well as in the justification she offers which gets interrupted by Zooey:

(3) "Un*us*ual, I said. I didn't say it was *bea*utiful or anything, so just ---"

Zooey's tease that interrupted Bessie's justification attempt starts with a dramatized sigh:

(4) "Ahh, by George. You have to get up pretty early in the morning to get anything really classy past you, Bessie girl. You know what your heart is, Bessie. Would you like to know what your heart is? *Your heart*, Bessie, is an autumn garage. How's that for a catchy title, eh? By God, many people – many *uninformed* people – think Seymour and Buddy are the only goddam men of letters in this family. When I *think*, when I sit down for a minute and think of the sensitive prose, and garages, I throw away every day of my ---"

Having in mind the banality of the lines in the manuscript that he had been reading, what Zooey is doing in (4) is implicitly expressing admiration for his mother's restrained comment regarding the manuscript title. This he does through jocular mockery directed to Bessie for encroaching on the sacred field of literature, assumingly reserved for her eldest sons (Seymour and Buddy). Playfulness of his tease is achieved by means of repetition of, that is, emphasis placed on rhetorical questions ("You know what your heart is, Bessie. Would you like to know what your heart is? *Your heart*, Bessie, is an autumn garage."), by exaggeration deployed in the elaboration of Bessie's usage of the particular adjective ("unusual"), as well as by juxtaposition of incompatible concepts functioning as objects of a mental process ("[...] and think of the sensitive prose, and garages [...]").

Zooey's tease is interrupted by Bessie's calm response:

> (5) "All right, all right, young man," Mrs. Glass said. Whatever her taste in television-play titles, or her aesthetics in general, a flicker came into her eyes – no more than a flicker, but a flicker – of connoisseurlike, if perverse, relish for her youngest, and only handsome, son's style of bullying."

We learn of the benevolent nature of the interruption from Salinger's account of Bessie's reception of her son's "style of bullying". Namely, the "flicker" in her eyes "of connoisseurlike relish" for Zooey's mockery points to her interpretation of the particular interaction which – in terms of presupposed assumptions, expectations and values on the part of participants in the process of discourse construction – is grounded in Bessie's implied familiarity with and relish for her youngest son's inclination to verbosity, with his eloquence and with the mutual feeling of joy and affection they share in such occasions.

3.2. Episode 2 (Salinger, 1955, pp. 84–86)

The entire bathroom scene revolves around Bessie's concern for Franny's state of mind and body. Besides urging Zooey to talk to his sister

expressed in the form of direct questions (e.g. "Have you spoken to your little sister yet?"), her cry for help in the matter is articulated through numerous soliloquies in which she laments about Buddy ("the one person that's supposed to know about all this funny business") being out of reach, or about none of the family members being willing to do something about it ("You're none of any help whatsoever. But none! [...] I never saw a family like this in my entire life. I mean it. You're all supposed to be intel*li*gent and everything, all you children, and not one of you is any help when the chips are down.")

One of the soliloquies, triggered by Franny's refusal to eat the chicken broth Bessie had cooked for her, is about Franny's dietary habits:

> (6) "I'd like to know just when she intends to put something halfway *nour*ishing into her stomach. She's eaten practically nothing since she got home Saturday night – but nothing! I tried – not a half hour ago – to get her to take a nice cup of chicken broth. She took exactly two mouthfuls, and that's *all*. She threw *up* everything I got her to eat yesterday, practically. [...] She said maybe she'd eat a cheeseburger later on. Just what is this *cheese*-burger business? From what I gather she's practically been living on cheeseburgers and Cokes all semester so far. Is that what they feed a young girl at college these days? I know *one* thing. I'm certainly not going to feed a young girl that's as run-down as that child is on food that isn't even ---"

Bessie's lament is interrupted by Zooey's ironic ostensible approval:

> (7) "That's the spirit! Make it chicken broth or nothing. That's putting the ole foot down. If she's determined to have a nervous breakdown, the least we can do is see that she doesn't have it in peace."

The ostensible approval ("That's the spirit!") is followed by irony in understating what should be done regarding Franny's "determination" to have a nervous breakdown. Both the ostensible approval and the understatement function as a provocation that relates to the topic of relevance for Bessie.

Bessie's response to such provocation starts with a counter-mockery ("Just don't be so *fresh*, young man [...]") only to be followed by explication of her strong position when it comes to the impact Franny's diet has on her body and mind:

> (8) "Just don't be so *fresh*, young man – Oh, that mouth of yours! For your information, I don't think it's at all possible that the kind of food that child takes into her system hasn't a lot to do with this whole entire funny business. Even as a *child* you practically had to force that child to even touch her vegetables or any of the things that were *good* for her. You can't go on abusing the body indefinitely, year in, year out – regardless of what you think."

The explication is met by mockery on Zooey's part which begins with the repetition of an ostensible approval ("You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right.") implying ironic commendation of his mother's position on what constitutes a healthy diet and continues as follows:

> (9) "You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right. It's staggering how you jump straight the hell into the heart of a matter. I'm goosbumps all over ... By God, you inspire me. You inflame me, Bessie. You know what you've done? Do yoy realize what you've done? You've given this whole goddam issue a fresh, new, *Biblical* slant. I wrote four papers in college on Crucifixion – five, really – and every one of them worried me half crazy because I thought something was missing. Now I know what it was. Now it's clear to me. I see Christ in an *entirely new light*. His unhealthy fanaticism. His rudeness to those nice, sane, conservative, tax-paying Pharisees. Oh, this is exciting! In your simple, straightforward, bigoted way, Bessie, you've sounded the missing keynote on the whole New Testament. *Improper diet*. Christ lived on cheeseburgers and Cokes. For all we know, he probably fed the mult---"

The exaggeration Zooey deploys in (9) is signaled by repetition of the rhetorical question, by dramatized sighs and exclamations, the emphatic

stress, and most notably by the paradox regarding Christ's eating habits ("Christ lived on cheeseburgers and Cokes."). His elaborated mockery bears testimony of the "fullish circles" that characterize the Glass' family language in that it implies one of the underlying assumptions contained in them related to religion. This is revealed to us in the freedom, intimacy and familiarity with which Zooey talks about the New Testament, about Christ and his actions, even his eating habits. Notwithstanding the apparent intention to denigrate his mother by way of ironically commending her "simple, straightforward, bigoted way" in having sounded "the missing key note of the whole New Testament", which stands in contrast to his academic efforts to unravel the mystery of Crucifixion, the response/interruption coming from Bessie shows that she is not insulted, but finds Zooey's talk warranting mother's reprimand for improperness:

> (10) "*Just stop that, now,*" Mrs. Glass broke in, her voice quiet but dangerous. "Oh, I'd like to put a diaper on that mouth of yours!"

The reprimand is enthusiastically responded to by Zooey (11) in the form of an understatement referring to his previous contribution. What is understated is both the extent of his participation in the discourse construction and his willingness to take responsibility for it:

> (11) "Well, gee whiz. I'm only trying to make polite bathroom talk."

4. Conclusion

Having assumed Salinger's view of literature to be the performance of human connection through interaction, the paper focused on a particular interaction in his novel, *Franny and Zooey,* involving two members of the Glass family – the mother, Bessie, and the youngest son, Zooey. With the aim to explore how the assumed uniqueness and esotery of their family language lends to teasing, as a heterogeneous category of behaviour, to be mutually experienced as affection, the analysis included two selected teasing episodes within the interaction taking place be-

tween Bessie and Zooey in the bathroom. The focus of the analysis was placed on both verbal and nonverbal design features of a tease (a provocation) and the consequent response deployed in achieving playfulness of teasing with affection and bonding as its outcome.

The findings of the analysis point to jocular mockery functioning as provocation whose dominant verbal design feature is exaggeration linguistically realized in the form of elaboration of mockery, overstatement, and ostensible approval. Prosodic features of provocation are mainly displayed in emphatic stress and dramatized sighs. With regards to response to provocation, its overall defensive nature is implied by means of self-explanation, justification, counter-mockery, as well as by one example of mother's reprimand. Besides the jocular nature of mockery, playfulness of provocation (and, for that matter, the overall interaction) is rendered by (self) repetition (of rhetoric questions, mainly) whose function of a conventionalized discourse strategy accomplishes affectionate bonding as a particular social goal in the analyzed episodes. Likewise, the function of interruptions in the analyzed teasing episodes, in light of the non-belligerent nature of the interlocutors' responses they trigger, is that of benevolent attempts to take over the floor thus contributing to the dynamics of interaction.

By way of conclusion, we find that Bennett's (1978, p. 574) suggestion to "think of discourse in terms of touch" aptly describes the approach one should take when considering Salinger's depiction of performance of human connection through interaction in his saga about the Glasses of which the novel *Franny and Zooey* is but one installment. The argument that "the one who touches can be affected not merely by the response of the one touched, but by actually having done the touching as well" (Bennett, 1978, p. 574) provides room for arguing that it is the touching points that are revealed through the herewith identified strategies and categories of the interaction.

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Cross-cultural Humor: Translation Challenges of Huckleberry Finn

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ABSTRACT

Humor, a cultural construct deeply rooted in linguistic and contextual nuances, poses unique challenges in the realm of literary translation. In this work, we will explore the transference of humor from Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn into Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian culture through different translations. As a humorist and satirist, Twain uses a humor style uniquely tailored to the Southern region of the United States. These specific American cultural references and socio-historical elements may be lost in translations, especially when it comes to transference of humor from one culture to another. Linguistically, differences between the source and target languages can create challenges, especially when transferring colloquialisms that contribute to Twain's humor. The study incorporates a comparative analysis of selected sentences and passages from Huckleberry Finn and their respected translations. It examines how certain translation strategies facilitate the transfer of humor, while also exploring the potential impact of certain strategies on the overall reception and understanding of the novel within the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian context. By shedding light on the complexities of transferring humor between cultures, this research contributes to the field of translation studies and linguistics, enhancing our understanding of the challenges faced by translators in preserving the comedic essence of works like The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, while ensuring their cultural reception to Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian readership.

Keywords: Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian culture, cultural adaptation, Huckleberry Finn, humor, linguistic challenges, Mark Twain, translation

1. Introduction

In this paper we will show the difficulties and challenges entailed in translating the specific humorous elements found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better recognized by his pen name, Mark Twain. We consider this novel to be an exemplar of cultural complexity due to its use of dialects, culture-specific items as well as multifaceted humor encompassing satire, comic situations and elements of American humor prevalent during that era. In light of all the aspects mentioned above, we find this to be a valid and compelling reason to explore how translators can effectively approach the translation of Mark Twain's humor, ensuring the preservation of all the necessary elements.

Analyzing translation strategies used in conveying the meaning of such a complex novel is important not only for the descriptive translation studies but also for literary studies. In this light, we are honing in on those particular comic elements that might prove challenging to apprehend for readers belonging to different cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had always been considered a controversial book due to its specific views presented in the novel along with the open and frequent use of racial slurs. A book that comes from a different century and a different territory, along with combining very specific dialects represents a genuine cultural treasure and a true challenge for translators.

Therefore, this paper will deal primarily with the comparative analysis of translations into Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian Languages of specific humorous elements of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Emphasis will be placed on the elements of culture and their transfer from English to the target culture. To what extent it is really possible to convey the distinct nature and essence of Twain's humor into Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language and culture is a question that we would like to explore with this translation analysis. By shedding light on the complexi-

ties of transferring humor across cultures, this research contributes to the field of translation studies and linguistics, since it deepens our comprehension of the obstacles faced by translators in upholding the comedic essence of works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, while ensuring their cultural resonance with readers of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian backgrounds.

For this translation analysis we will use the source text of Twain, M. (1993). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* New York: Barnes and Noble. The translations that will be analyzed are as follows:

1) Twain, M. (1952). *Haklberi Fin.* Novo pokolenje. Translated by Jelisaveta Marković.

2) Twain, M. (2004). *Pustolovine Huckleberryja Finna (druga Toma Sawyera)*. Globus media d.o.o. Translated by Zlatko Crnković.

3) Twain, M. (2005). *Doživljaji Haklberi Fina*. Daily Press. Translated by Nika Milićević / Leo Držić.

Hence, the translations we are analyzing are one from Belgrade, one from Zagreb, and one was translated by Nika Milićević who was a Bosnian and Herzegovinian translator and this novel has been issued with his translation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. The novel in these three translations is read throughout all three countries. Unfortunately, the third translation is an abbreviated version, and several chapters have been left out. This is why some of the examples do not have all three translations.

In the further text we will first determine the complexities of the cultural and social context within the novel. Additionally, we will show the specific challenges associated with translating Mark Twain's humor. In the third section, we will present a translation analysis of culture-specific humor elements and discuss the challenges in translating particular instances of humor.

2. Cultural Context of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The highly acclaimed novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set in 1830s or 1840s Missouri. Huckleberry Finn is a 13–14-year-old boy living in a country legally in the Union by the Missouri Compromise of 1820, but practically in the Confederation because, as Boyer (2006) explains, it was allowed to be the only slave state in the Union (pp. 240-241). Huck's upbringing and education, along with the social, cultural and religious context makes him believe that slavery is a part of a natural world order. Throughout the novel, Huck is astonished to find that Jim, the runaway slave, is actually capable of same emotions and reason as any other white person. As stated in the annotated version of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Michael Patrick Hearn (2001), "even in the slave South, only the lowest of the low used the word [*nigger*]" (p. 22). This word was not in the vocabulary of "properly brought-up Southern belles". However, it is also noted that "Huck says it out of habit, not malice". Therefore, his use of this word actually reflects his upbringing. However, social discrimination was also spread further to the Native Americans. "Injun" (a word also used in the novel), as Bercovitch (1999) explains is "a clue to the cultural connections implicit in the novel's double time-frame" (p. 14). We here talk about the period of Huck's adventures (the slavery era) and the authorial time (Indian-killing era).

Antebellum South was a predominantly rural region. Boyer (2006) argues that this is why the North in general viewed the South as backwards, illiterate and poor (p. 343). Life mostly revolved around agriculture. The technological improvements of the antebellum America included the steam engine, the cotton gin, the reaper, the sewing machine, and the telegraph (p. 310). The major commodities of the Southern agricultural economy were cotton, grain, tobacco, sugar, and rice, with the production of the leading cash crop and cotton, which were concentrated in the Deep South (Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana). The antebellum

South was also characterized by an "extremely unequal society", which was mostly noticeable in the agricultural sector (Ager et al., 2019).

Boyer (2006) explains that all the way from 1793, the Fugitive Slave Act guaranteed rights for a slaveholder to recover an escaped slave or 'fugitive' as referred to in the act (p. 212). And exactly as presented in the novel, Buchanan (2004) argues that runaway slaves from the South could use the Mississippi River as a means of escaping north, where they would be considered free (p. 20). In the same manner, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim, an escaped slave, wishes to navigate the Mississippi River by raft until reaching its confluence with the Ohio River, where their journey will continue towards Ohio "amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble" (p. 23).

Again, to Huckleberry Finn, an African American is just a *nigger* (in fact, this word was used 212 times in the novel). As noted by Salwen (1996) "Mark Twain illustrates life in the South through the actions of the main character Huckleberry Finn" who "has never perceived slavery as anything but a natural part of life". Even though slavery was abolished in 1804, Boyer (2006) argues that although it "had largely disappeared in the North by 1820, laws restricted black voting rights" (p. 266). In the South, slavery was still largely present. "As one northern state after another embraced emancipation, slavery became the 'peculiar institution' that distinguished the Old South from other section" (p. 338). Those who were in favor of abolishing slavery were called Abolitionists. Bercovitch (1999) adds that especially within the South, Abolitionists were met with resistance and disfavor (p. 11), and the main character of the novel exactly demonstrates this opinion.

There were other historical elements that contributed to the increase of slavery. As Boyer (2006) argues, it was a valuable commodity, especially for the Southeast planters and farmers (p. 253). Moreover, even though the American Colonization Society proposed a plan for emancipation, "under which slaveholders would be compensated for voluntarily freeing their slaves", this Society, in fact, never possessed sufficient funds to buy freedom for a large number of slaves (p. 299). The technological improvements of the antebellum America unfortunately did not bene-

fit everyone. In fact, the cotton gin "entrenched slavery by intensifying southern dependence on cotton" (p. 310).

A very prominent abuse of religion was evident in invoking the Bible when justifying slavery, and Boyer (2006) explains that it referred to "especially St. Paul's order that slaves obey their masters" (p. 349). This notion went even further:

Proslavery writers warned southerners that the real intention of abolitionists, many of whom advocated equal rights for women, was to destroy the family as much as slavery by undermining the 'natural' submission of children to parents, wives to husbands, and slaves to masters. (Boyer, 2006, p. 349)

> In fact, as Boyer (2006) adds, Southern clergy convinced everyone that slavery "was not only compatible with Christianity but also necessary for the proper exercise of the Christian religion. Slavery, they proclaimed, provided the opportunity to display Christian responsibility toward one's inferiors, and it helped blacks develop Christian virtues like humility and self-control" (p. 349). Zvonimir Radeljković gives a very valuable definition of the South as he explains that the South embodies various paradoxes inherent to America, but also more and more so to the whole modern world: from the merger of a pastoral social ideal with one of the rare modern conceptions and realizations of slavery, through the connection between the fundamentalist religious obsession of the "Bible Belt" and the ultimate betrayal of ideals of Christianity – and any other religion – in radical racism, to the glorification of the courage and martial skills of Southerners (who suffered catastrophic defeat in the Civil War against the numerically and industrially much stronger North). (Radeljković, 2005, p. 302)

In short, a society full of contradictions, social problems and dilemmas, morality and racism, is exactly the breeding ground for a literary satire such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and a very intriguing cross-cultural translation challenge. This exact paradox is exemplified in

the scene where Huck prays to God and writes a letter to Aunt Sally disclosing Jim's whereabouts. Bercovitch (1999) explains that this scene is funny because it is playful, satirical and odd, curious, and sinister (p. 23). This is an example of Twain's deadpan humor and satire of the then-society that was twisting the religious ideals for their own benefit.

When it comes to art, Boyer (2006) argues that the "single most popular dramatist in the antebellum theater was William Shakespeare" (p. 322). Indeed, references to Shakespeare were made as well in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. On the other hand, Bercovitch (1999) adds that while abolitionists were met with a lot of resistance, it was the minstrel shows that were "born out of precisely these conditions" (p. 11). Minstrel shows were highly popular and they forged enduring racial stereotypes. Interestingly enough, Boyer (2006) mentions that the author Mark Twain "recalled how minstrelsy had burst upon Hannibal, Missouri, in the early 1840s as 'a glad and stunning surprise'" (p. 338).

Boyer (2006) also explains that "the early nineteenth-century Americans were very heavy drinkers" (p. 297). Of course, heavy drinking directly affected the families' dynamics and it was inevitably linked to domestic violence, disease, and economic failure. One example of such a drinker and home-wrecker in the novel is Huck's father. Michael Patrick Hearn (2001) mentions that "pap Finn is the stereotypical Irish drunk of American humor" (p. 53). According to Hugh J. Dawson (1998) in "The Ethnicity of Huck Finn – and the Difference It Makes" (*American Literary Realism,* Winter 1998), he is "lazy, dirty, brutal, swinish, superstitious, bigoted, lying, illiterate, antireligious, foul-mouthed, financially irresponsible and destructive" (p. 9).

3. Challenges of Translating the Humor in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Delabastita (1996) argues that translating humor from one culture to another can be especially challenging task encompassing linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors. As humor is deeply rooted in cultural nu-

ances, wordplay, and societal norms, it is particularly complex to transfer it from one language to another. We may say that humor is culture-specific, because what is considered funny in one culture may not resonate in another (p. 128). This is especially true because humor is more often than not related to cultural references and historical events. Furthermore, Attardo (1994) adds that a significant portion of humor relies on wordplay and puns, which is usually difficult to directly translate. What Delabastita (1994) also notices is that some jokes simply lack equivalence in another language (p. 223).

When it comes to Southern United States, during the 1830s and 1840s, Southern idiomatic expressions of the time were rooted in the region's agrarian lifestyle and unique social structures. For instance, phrases such as "high cotton" (referring to a successful cotton crop), "fixin' to" (meaning "about to do something") and "bless your heart" (often used to convey sympathy or condescension) were commonly heard (Wyatt-Brown, 1982). Hayes (2013) makes an interesting remark that humor, in particular, seems "to function markedly differently in Appalachia, where jokes more often revolve around puns and semantic disjuncture than situational humor" (p. 24).

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) had a unique style of humor which can be referred to as *deadpan* humor, which Bercovitch (1999) defines as "the comic form familiar to Americans through a wide range of folklore, from Yankee Peddler to Riverboat Con Man, and particularly the Western Tall Tale. In this kind of humor, a joke is told "gravely", and the teller is straight-faced" (p. 8). It is very important to notice that when it comes to Twain, "the joke often reflects the peculiar historical conditions of the Southwestern frontier" (p.8). It is exactly one of the features of Twain's humor: "the connectives between the joke and its cultural contexts" and including "diverse situations, social, personal, and historical, and by joining these the humor points us towards connections within the culture" (p. 10). What is also noted is that Huckleberry Finn always speaks "gravely" of something funny to the reader, but, in fact, he is never a humorist and he rarely has fun (p. 10). Twain's humor, as evidenced in works like *The Ad-*

ventures of Huckleberry Finn and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* transcends mere amusement; it serves as a sharp, satirical reflection of the social, cultural, and political milieu of 19th-century America. Twain's humor is notable satirical, and his satire often takes aim at the prevalent societal norms and injustices of his time (Budd, 1986). Through humor, Twain dissected the hypocrisies of his society, particularly those related to race, class, and morality. Twain's use of regional dialects and vernacular is another facet of his humor deeply rooted in cultural context (Fishkin, 1985). In his writing, Twain authentically captured the speech patterns and colloquialisms of the American South in the 19th century. This linguistic authenticity not only added richness to his narratives but also provided insight into the cultural diversity of the region. Twain's humorous use of language highlighted the idiosyncrasies of speech in different parts of the country, showcasing the vibrant tapestry of American culture.

4. Comparative Translation Analysis and Discussion

For the purposes of this analysis, we will use specific humor elements from the already mentioned translations. We will first show the source text, and then the existing translations and then discuss the translation strategies and their outcomes.

In the following example, there is an implicit religious reference that contributes to the humor:

Source: Then Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. (10)[7]

Translation 1: Zatim me je mis Votson odvela u onu odvojenu sobicu i molila se bogu za moju popravku, ali to nije ništa pomoglo. (23)[8]

7 On each citation from the source text, the page mark refers to Twain, M. (1993). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Barnes and Noble.

8 On each quote from Translation 1, the page mark refers to: Twain, M. (1952). Haklberi Fin. Novo pokolenje. Translated by Jelisaveta Marković.

Translation 2: Onda me gospojica Watson odvede u komoru i pomoli se Bogu, al to nije ništa vrijedilo. (14)[9]

Translation 3: Zatim me je mis Votson odvela u onu sobicu i pomolila se bogu za me, ali od toga nije bilo ništa. (14)[10]

The *joke* in this sentence lies in the fact that miss Watson literally interprets Matthew 6:6 in the King James Version ("But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy ***closet***, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.") Miss Watson, as an extremely and here almost cartoonishly pious woman, believes that she actually has to enter a closet so that her prayer gets heard. Neither translator uses this Biblical reference. For instance, In Ivan Šarić's translation (2006) of the Bible into Croatian, this line looks like this: "Kad ti hoćeš da se moliš, uđi u sobu svoju, zatvori vrata i moli se Ocu svojemu u tajnosti! Otac tvoj, koji vidi u tajnosti, platit će ti." Most translators of the Bible use the word *soba* (*room*) while in the Serbian edition (Old Testament translated by Đura Daničić; New Testament translated by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, 1972), the translator uses the word *klijet* (a small house; cabin): "A ti kad se moliš, uđi u klijet svoju, i zatvori vrata svoja, pomoli se Ocu svojemu koji je u tajnosti; i Otac tvoj koji vidi tajno, platiće tebi javno." However, the translators of *Huckleberry Finn* used the words "odvojena sobica" (separate room), "komora" (chamber) and "ona sobica" (that room). None of these expressions can be found in the Bible nor is there an explanation that this sentence refers to Matthew 6:6. Thus, this hidden humor element remains unrevealed to the target culture readers.

Next example is also linked to religious imagery:

9 On each quote from Translation 2, the page mark refers to: Twain, M. (2004). Pustolovine Huckleberryja Finna (druga Toma Sawyera). Globus media d.o.o. Translated by Zlatko Crnković.

10 On each quote from Translation 3, the page mark refers to: Twain, M. (2005). Doživljaji Haklberi Fina. Daily Press. Translated by Nika Milićević / Leo Držić.

Source: I would see a man in Jericho before I would drop my business and come to him for the rubbing of an old tin lamp. (13)

Translation 1: I još – kad bih ja bio na njihovom mestu, pre bih se ubio nego što bih ostavio svoja posla i ugađao nekome zato što trlja limenu lampu. (28)

Translation 2: Osim toga, da sam ja na njihovom mjestu, prije bi dao da me vrag odnese nego što bi ostavio svoj poso i došo nome samo zašto što je protrljo neku staru plehnatu lampu. (16-17)

Translation 3: Not translated.

"Jericho" in this sense is a euphemism for Hell, since Jericho was often associated with Hell in the 19th century, based on biblical references (Old Testament—Joshua 6: 26-27; II Samuel 10: 1-5) as Michael Patrick Hearn notices this in his annotations. Jelisaveta Marković (translation 1) transfers the meaning by translating "pre bih se ubio" (*I'd rather kill myself*), although Huck's comic biblical reference is lost in translation. Zlatko Crnković (translation 2) is even closer with the meaning in translating the line as "prije bi dao da me vrag odnese" (*I'd rather let the devil take me away*), although *Jericho* reference is also lost. Nevertheless, since this reference might not be clear even to the native speakers of today, if a translator wishes to keep the word, they would have to provide a footnote explanation.

Next example carries two important references of the time:
Source: Honest *injun*, I will. People would call me a lowdown Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum – but that don't make no difference. (41)

Translation 1: Dajem ti poštenu reč. Neka mi kažu i da sam lenji abolicionista, [1]) i neka me prezru što drugujem – ali tu nema razlike. (69 – 70)

[1]) Abolicionista – pripadnik stranke koja je bila protivna ropstvu. – Prim. prev.

Translation 2: Časna riječ. Pa nek me prozovu i podlim, kukavnim abolicijonistom[1], i nek me prezru, svejedno. (40)

1. Abolicionist – pristaša društveno-političkog pokreta za ukidanje ropstva, osobito u SAD-u u prvoj polovici XIX st. (Op. prev.)

Translation 3: Časna riječ! Niti ću šta reći, niti ću se tamo vratiti, ma šta bilo. (36)

The first element of humor, or at least satire, lies in the expression "honest *injun*". Hearn (2001) explains this was "originally a sarcastic allusion to the Indian's purported propensity for thievery", but later it took its meaning from "the myth of the 'noble savage,' popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Chateaubriand, and James Fenimore Cooper" (p. 89). Most interestingly, in the unfinished "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians", Tom Sawyer explains to Huck that *Injuns* are "the noblest human beings that's ever been in the world" and that if an *Injun* "tells you a thing, you can bet on it every time for the petrified fact; because you can't get an Injun to lie, he would cut his tongue out first". Nevertheless, Twain actually doubted this popular notion and wrote many racist phrases about Native Americans. For this reason, we may say that to Twain at least, this expression is satirical and it means quite the opposite. Yet, Huck believes in this notion and uses it when promising a slave that he is not planning on disclosing his whereabouts. This element is translated as either *časna riječ* (lit. word of honor; solemn word) or *dajem ti poštenu riječ* (similar, it means: I give you my (solemn) word) which conveys the meaning but not the cultural reference as well. Furthermore, Twain's satire that lies behind Huck claiming that even if he is called a *lowdown abolitionist,* he is not going to betray Jim, again, brings out the

culture-specific item. Both Crnković and Marković used the translation strategy of explication in the footnote, which helps better understanding of this cultural reference. However, in the third translation, there is no explanation and even more, the word *abolitionist* is completely omitted. Additionally, Crnković enhanced the humor by adding a 'j' into the word '*abolicionista*' (abolitionist) which looks humorous as it amplifies Huck's ignorance, further emphasizing his illiteracy.

Next humorous remark also bears an allusion to a proverb:

Source:	Jim said bees wouldn't sting idiots; but I didn't believe that, because I had tried them lots of times myself, and they wouldn't sting me. (44)
Translation 1:	Džim je govorio i to da pčele ne ujedaju glupake; ali ja to ne verujem, zato sam ih više puta zadirkivao, a one me nisu htele ujesti. (74)
Translation 2:	Reko je i da čele ne bodu glupane, al ja u to ne vjerujem jerbo sam se višeput uvjerio da meni neće ništa. (42)
Translation 3:	Not translated.

According to Hearn (2001), Twain made a similar joke in "Chapters from My Autobiography" (*North American Review,* July 5, 1907): "The proverb says that Providence protects children and idiots. This is really true. I know it because I have tested it" (p. 95). Perhaps a reference to this proverb could have been made in the translations, for we have somewhat similar sayings ("Bog čuva pijance i budale" which means "God protects drunks and fools" or "Bog čuva djecu i budale" which is "God protects children and fools"), even though Huck's sentence is already funny enough and clear even in the translations (except for the third translation where this chapter, like many others, is abbreviated and thus many parts were not translated).

Next example bears a culture-specific item that contributes to the humor:

Source: I've always reckoned that looking at the new moon over your left shoulder is one of the carelessest and foolishest things a body can do. Old Hank Bunker done it once, and bragged about it; and in less than two years he got drunk and fell of the shot-tower, and spread himself out so that he was just a kind of a layer, as you may say; and they slid him edgeways between two barn doors for a coffin, and buried him so, so they say, but I didn't see it. (51-52)

Translation 1: Počeo sam i sam da mislim tako, iako mi se dotle uvek činilo da pogledati u mlad mesec preko levog ramena jeste najveća neobazrivost i ludost koju čovek može da učini. Stari Henk Banker je jednom učinio to, i tim se hvalio; i nije prošlo ni dve godine a on se napije i padne s tavana, i spljošti se tako da je ličio na pitu, tako reći; te umesto u mrtvački kovčeg metnuli su ga između dvojih štalskih vrata, i tako su ga sahranili, kažu, ali ja to nisam video. (86)

Translation 2: E pa, sad sam i ja tako nekako mislio, iako sam oduvijek držao da je gledanje mlađaka preko lijevog ramen jedna od najvećih gluposti i lakoumnosti koje čovjek može počinit. Stari Hank Bunker je to jedamput učinio i još se tim falio, ali nije prošlo ni dvije godine a on se napio i strovalio s tornja za lijevanje sačme i raspljesko se ko palačinka, tako rekuć, pa su ga mjesto u lijes položili među dvoja štalskih vrata i tako ga pokopali, kažu, al ja to nisam video. (48)

Translation 3: Počeo sam i sam da vjerujem u to, iako mi se dotle uvijek činilo da pogledati u mlad mjesec preko lijevog ramena jeste najveća neobazrivost i ludost koju čovjek može da učini. Stari Henk Banker je jednom učinio to, i tim se hvalio; a nije prošlo ni dvije godine, a on se napije i padne s tavana, i spljošti se tako da je ličio na pitu, tako reći; te umjesto u mrtvački kovčeg metnuli su ga između dvoje štalskih vrata i tako su ga sahranili, kažu ali ja to nisam video. (43)

Again, Hearn (2001) explains that the story of Hank Bunker was "once common to Southwestern tall tales" and that it "survives in contemporary comic strips and animated cartoons" (p. 106). He also adds that Twain "was fond of this exaggerated gallows humor and inserted examples of it everywhere in his early writing" (p. 106). Yet, although all three translators left the name itself, none of them explained this culture reference and even though the story itself and the way that Huck tells it may be perceived as humorous, the culture reference itself is lost in translation. Moreover, the third translation is, interestingly enough, identical to the first.

The following example is another religious allusion that carries the humor:

Source: "I doan' want to go fool'n' 'long er no wrack. We's doin' blame' well, en we better let blame' well alone, as de good book says. (64)

Translation 1: Ne volim da tumaram po kojekakvim olupinama. Ne traži vraga; bolje sedi s mirom, kao što piše u dobroj knjizi. (106)

Translation 2: - Šta da tumaram po tamo njekakoj olupini! Dobro nam je đe smo, bolje da ne vučemo vraga za rep, ko što veli Sveto pismo. (60)

Translation 3: Not translated.

The good book in American English is a synonym for the Bible. Here, Twain mocks their extreme religiousness which is actually followed by their complete ignorance of the Bible itself, because this old saying is not biblical, but as Hearn (2001) explains, it comes from 161 B.C., from Terrence's *Phormio.* "A common device in Southern and SW humor was crediting any old proverb to the Bible (or to Shakespeare)" (p. 126). However, this fact is not evident in the translations, and in fact, in the first translation it is not even clear that Jim is referring to the Bible, but to a good book in general. On the other hand, Crnković did translate it as *Sveto pismo* (The Scripture), which is exactly meant by the Good Book. Yet, the nuanced humor behind may be lost, although not only to the target culture but to the source culture as well.

The passage where Jim and Huck discuss the king Solomon may be one of the most famous scenes from the novel. Here, we selected two sentences from the passage:

Source: Don't you know about the harem? Solomon had one; he had about a million wives. (74)
...
"Well, but he *was* the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self."

Translation 1: Zar nisi znao ništa o haremima? Solomun je imao jedan; i u njemu je bilo oko milion žena. (121)
...
On ipak j e s t e bio najmudriji čovek na svetu; jer mi je to kazala udovica. (122)

Translation 2: Zar nisi nikad čuo za harem? Solomon je imo harem, on ti je imo oko milijon žena. (69

...
Ipak, kako bilo da bilo, bio ti je on najmudriji čovjek, tako mi je bar rekla sama udovica.

Translation 3: Not translated.

Bercovitch (1999) says that "no reader has failed to laugh at the incident and none can fail to notice that it concerns key structures of the culture – fatherhood, the Bible, schools, and civil authority – which are also key themes of the novel" (p. 13). The first thing here is that in the Bible (1 Kings 11:3) the King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Hearn (2001) notices that "American humor is full of jokes about all the troubles Solomon must have had with so many wives and lovers" (p. 140). Furthermore, the sentence where Huck explains that the widow told him that Solomon had a million wives actually is funny because the widow now "serves Huck's purpose in trying to win the argument with Jim." This is why in the translation of this sentence there should not be the word *barem* ('at least') because Huck strongly emphasizes his point with the widow, using her as a trump card to win the argument.

Source: "Looky here, Bilgewater," he says, "I'm nation sorry for you, but you ain't the only person that's had troubles like that." (117)

Translation 1: - Slušaj, Bridžvoteru, reče, ja te mnogo žalim, zaista, ali nisi ti jedini čovek koji je imao takvih nezgoda. (190)

Translation 2: - Slušaj ti, Bižvodurino[1] – rekne – meni te je zbilja žao, al nisi ti jedini koji je imo takvih nezgoda. (107)
1. Ovo iskrivljeno ime "vojvode od Bridgewatera" znači inače u izvorniku ("Bilgewater") smrdljivu vodu na dnu broda. (Op. prev).

Translation 3: "Pazi, Bildžvoter, ja te silno žalim, ali ti nisi jedina osoba koja je imala takvih nezgoda." (72)

Hearn (2001) explains that the word *bilgewater* refers to the "disgustingly foul and noxious water which collects in the bottom of a ship's bilge" (p. 221). Instead of the original name *Bridgewater,* "Twain thought this a great comic name and used it frequently." The first translator keeps *Bridgewater* and doesn't change it to *Bilgewater* at all. This contributes to a complete loss of the comic element. The second translator translates the word literally and uses an interesting augmentative that contributes to the humor. He further explains the name in the footnote. The third translator does the same as the first.

Source: Why, before, he looked like the orneriest old rip that ever was; but now, when he'd take off his new white beaver and make a bow and do a smile, he looked that grand and good and pious that you'd say he had walked right out of the ark, and maybe was old Leviticus himself. (150)

Translation 1: Jer, dok je ranije bio najružniji i najaljkaviji stari nevaljalac na svetu; sad, kad skine svoj novi beli šešir od dabrovine, i pokloni se, i nasmeši se, izgledao je tako dostojanstven i dobar i smiren kao da je izišao pravo iz Nojevog kovčega, i da je glavom sam stari Izrailjev prvosveštenik. (237)

Translation 2: Prije toga je izgledo ko zadnja propalica, a sad, kad bi skinuo svoj novi bijeli šešir od dabrovine, naklonio se i osmjenuo, izgledo je tako dostojanstven, fin i pobožan ko da je došo pravo s Noine arke, il čak ko da je i sam Levit[1] glavom.

1. Židov iz Levijeva plemena iz kojeg su isključivo uzimani svećenici; općenito svećenik. (Op. prev.)

Translation 3: Not translated.

Hearn (2001) explains that here Huck "garbles the story of Noah in Genesis 6: 15 – 9: 17 with the name of the third book of the Old Testament" (p. 275). Indeed, Leviticus is not a name for a priest or for any person. Leviticus is the name of the third book of the Old Testament and it means "Book of the Levites" and it is a book of laws relating to the priests and Levites and to the forms of Jewish ceremonial observance. However, Huck uses the name *Leviticus* like it is a name of a person. To some extent this joke is difficult to translate because in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian this book is translated as *Levitski zakonik* (lit. Law of the Levites) and it cannot be mistaken for a person. This is why the translators translate it as "Levit" (The Levi priest) and "Izrailjev prvosveštenik" (Israel high priest) and Crnković explains in the footnote what that is. However, this comic nuance is lost.

Source: … I mean the doctor was shipping a sick man to t'other world, and the preacher was pinting him right. (157)

Translation 1: … to jest, doctor je otpraćao nekakvog bolesnika na drugi svet, i sveštenik mu je svesrdno pomagao u tome. (247)

Translation 2: … oću da kažem da je doctor ispraćo nekog bolesnika na drugi svijet, a pastor mu je pokazivo put. (141)

Translation 3: Not translated.

Again, Hearn (2001) explains that doctors of the time "were not so venerated in 19th-century America, and were the frequent brunt of

jokes" (p. 285). The propositional meaning is translated and to our culture readers this is probably funny as well. Doctors are often an object of joke in our society as well and even today. This is why we can easily connect to this kind of humor.

Source: We didn't cook none of the pies in the wash-pan – afraid the solder would melt; but Uncle Silas he had a noble brass warming-pan which he thought considerable of, because it belonged to one of his ancestors with a long wooden handle that come over from England with William the Conqueror in the *Mayflower* or one of them early ships and was hid away up garret ... (245)

Translation 1: Nijedan kolač nismo pekli u umivaoniku – bojali smo se da se ona zalemljena mesta ne rastope; ali je teča Sajlez imao jednu vrlo lepu bakarnu crepulju sa dugačkom drvenom drškom koju je brižljivo čuvao, jer je pripadala jednome njegovom pretku koji je došao iz Engleske sa Viljemom Osvajačem na Majskom Cvetu ili na nekom drugom od tih prvih brodova ... (375)

Translation 2: Kolače nismo pekli u lavoru jerbo smo se bojali da bi nam se lem mogo rastopit, al je tetak Silas imo krasnu mesinganu grijalicu sa dugačkim drvenim drškom do koje je puno držo, zato jerbo je nekoć pripadala nekom njegovom pretku koji je došo iz Engleske s Vilimom Osvajačem na Mayfloweru il na kojem drugom od onih prvih brodova ... (216)

Translation 3: Not translated.

To those familiar with the American history this joke is hilarious. Huck believes that it was William the Conqueror who came on the May-

flower, even though there is 550 years of those two apart. Hearn (2001) suggests that "William the Conqueror is probably confused with William Bradford" (p. 397). Unfortunately, none of the translators explained the joke and Crnković even literally translated the name of the ship which may contribute to the oddness of the reference, but not necessarily to the humor.

The next two examples showcase a joke that Twain himself explained in a note to Chapter 11 of *The Gilded Age*: "In those old days, the average man called his children after his most revered literary and historical idols; consequently, there was hardly a family, at least in the West, but had a Washington in it – and also a Lafayette, a Franklin, and six or eight sounding names from Byron, Scott, and the Bible, if the offspring held out." Eggleston referred to the custom in *The Hoosier School-Boy* (1882) by naming a little boy Cristopher Columbus George Washington Marquis de Lafayette Risdale, a "victim of that mania which some people have for 'naming after' great men" (p. 30).

Source:	"Oh, I wouldn't hurry; next year'll do. Matilda Angelina Araminta *Phelps!*" (241)
Translation 1:	O, ne moraš se žuriti; biće vremena, duga je godina. Matilda Angelina Araminta F e l p s! (370)
Translation 2:	Ja se na tvom mistu ne bi žurila, možeš ti to i dogodine. Matilda Angelina Araminta Phelps! (213)
Translation 3:	Not translated.
Source:	But while we was gone for spiders little Thomas Franklin Benjamin Jefferson Elexander Phelps found it there (252)
Translation 1:	Ali dok smo mi hvatali pauke, mali Tom Franklin Bendžemin Džeferson Aleksandar Felps izađe na nju ... (387)

Translation 2: Ali dok smo mi hvatali paukove, mali Tomas Franklin Bendžamin Džeferson Aleksandar Felps naiđe tu na pacolovku ... (147)

Translation 3: Al dok smo mi ošli vata paukove, mali Thomas Franklin Benjamin Jefferson Elexander Phelps nađe mišolovku i otvori je da vidi oće li štakori izać iz nje, i stvarno su izašli. (224)

Even though the translators translated the names, this joke may not be so evident. The long names can definitely be considered comic, but an average reader, especially a child, may not be familiar with those names, let alone the custom of which Twain was writing. Thus, without a translator's note and the strategy of explication, humor is not completely transferred.

5. Conclusion

Chiaro (2017) says that "anyone who has ever tried to tell a joke in a language other than his or her own will know how easy it is for it to get lost in translation simply because what often seems so amusing in one language may just not be funny in another" (p. 414). Of course, humor is often possible without getting "lost in translation" if a joke is universal enough, that is, if it derives from the universal human experience. Nevertheless, there are indeed many instances in which for understanding a joke the reader / listener must have some knowledge of the source culture humor. If a humorous element contains a culture-specific reference, whether it is implied or explicit, it will undoubtedly pose a translation challenge, especially if that cultural reference is unfamiliar in the target culture.

Mark Twain's deadpan humor mostly revolves around social satire. At the surface, the humor appears light, primarily rooted in Huck's in-

nocence, naivety, and ignorance. However, upon deeper examination, we uncover some of the most profound issues of the antebellum society. This complexity leads us to the conclusion that his humor possesses multiple layers. The greater the number of layers, the more challenges translators face in deciding how to hand them and precisely convey them to a different culture and time, all while preserving the essence of the joke. An example of this necessity to interpret Bercovitch (1999) explains when he quotes this sentence: “You can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quit.” And regarding this utterance, he explains that “Huck doesn’t see the fun in all this; he’s simply frustrated. We do see the fun because we know we’re hearing a comic tale (by Mark Twain, humorist); but in order to take that step we have to interpret. In short, we interpret because Huck doesn’t” (p. 13).

In our comparative translation analysis, we observed multiple instances of humor stemming from a character’s ignorance. Nevertheless, this ignorance might go unnoticed if the reader themselves is unfamiliar with a particular element that the author deems important to grasp. Consequently, in specific cases, the translators opted to provide explanations of such elements in translator’s notes. Yet, this was not always the case. In fact, in some examples the element was not only not explained, but it was also “lost in translation” (*the good book* translated as *dobra knjiga* (a good book) or *the closet* translated simply as *soba* (room)). In the examples where the humor was linked to the universal human experience, translation was understood (“Jim said bees wouldn’t sting idiots” and “the doctor was shipping a sick man to t’other world”).

Our exploration into the intricacies of humor in translation unveils the delicate balance required by translators when navigating the cultural nuances inherent in humor. While universal humor elements may transcend language barriers, many instances, as exemplified in Mark Twain’s works, depend on a shared cultural understanding. As we have seen through the comparative analysis, humor transference depends not only on linguistic dexterity but also on a profound understanding of the source and target cultures.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Translation of Humorous Texts: Complexities and Implications for Translation Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper qualifies selected contemporary humorous autobiographical prose as used to teach translation from L1 (Serbian) to L2 (English) at the university level in light of the student achievement in the translation tests. Linguistic theories of humour (GTVH, Script-Based Theory of Register) are applied to the selected source texts to determine the tools employed for narrative and humorous effects. Also presented are the findings of the analysis of the translation techniques used by students in their formal translation tests (mid-terms and finals), including the percentage of erroneous translation. The results show the complex syntax of the source texts to be a major issue for students and indicate a discrepancy between the non-linguistic knowledge contained in the texts and that of students, with the implication of cultural information misinterpreted and incorrectly or inadequately rendered. The inadequate overall grammatical and semantic sophistication of students' renditions indicates only partial appropriateness of linguistically creative/challenging humorous narrative texts for linguistic, cross-linguistic and translation education. The findings are directly relevant for modern-day philology given the growing domination of English as mediating foreign cultural influence and impacting on small language cultures and cultural production. Accordingly, the authors stress the need to continue to shape or refocus translation education to better sensitise students to cross-linguistic interference.

Keywords: translation education, translation techniques, humorous texts, semantic script, register, AI text analysis

1. Challenges of Tertiary Translation Education: Source Text Selection, Teaching Methodology and Marking Validity

In the digital age, the quality of translation, especially from such globally impactful languages as English to minor ones, has never been of greater concern, given the volume and pervasiveness of English-mediated culture and cultural production. Despite the marketisation and overall acceleration of the translation industry, national education systems are still responsible for responding to such influences and providing language students with the knowledge and skills needed for them to operate autonomously and accountably as professional translators. With translation being one of the most difficult language skills, syllabus construction must take account of appropriate source text (ST) selection, teaching methods and test validity.

The relevant literature suggests contrastive analysis to be of great importance for the teaching of translation and advocates the use of humour as a tool to make students sensitive to the structural and semantic differences between different languages (Nilsen, 1989; Vega, 1989, as cited in Deneire, 1995, p. 291). However, according to Pintado-Gutiérrez (2012, pp. 175-6), just how we should teach translation is still a matter of controversy. She differentiates between three types of translation – interior (learners to themselves), explicative (teachers to learners), and pedagogical, insisting that the last be treated not as a tool by either students or teachers to complete another exercise, task or explanation, but as an exercise of pedagogical value in its own right. With pedagogical translation increasingly present in the curriculum, which nonetheless needs to specify strictly the principles and objectives on which to implement it for pedagogical value, Pintado-Gutiérrez (ibid., p. 179) quotes consolidation of the use of structures in the foreign language through their active use to be one of the objectives of pedagogical translation. Postulating that peda-

gogical translation should fulfil a communicative function, she proposes teaching it through Willis' three-stage model of task-based instruction, aiming to foster learners' communicative competence and autonomy (ibid., pp. 186-191).

Studies into university translation education (Bosnian/BCMS and English, bidirectional) have been conducted in a research setting similar to the one discussed in this paper (University of Tuzla, B&H). The study results published concern error analysis and using the Think-aloud Protocol (TAP) to identify trouble spots in translation education. They highlight the importance of teaching translation for enhanced overall language proficiency, including communicative competence (accuracy, flexibility and clarity). The error analysis study (Hadžiahmetović Jurida & Pavlović, 2013) pinpoints the use of articles, the formation, use and agreement of tenses, the use of if clauses etc. as the most common error areas, concluding that error analysis helps to determine what strategies students use when translating, but not recommending any remedial teaching strategies. Likewise, the TAP study (Pavlović & Hadžiahmetović Jurida, 2013) focuses on process-oriented translation education concerns over product-oriented ones, determining areas of negotiation between students collaborating on translation. Its conclusions indicate the predominance of the kinds of language facts negotiated (50+% lexical/semantic; 30+% morpho-syntactic, depending on whether L1-to-L2 or L2-to-L1, but with a negligible difference). Like in the error analysis study, the discussion and conclusion here are primarily diagnostic. The example sentences suggest the STs used in the error analysis study were newspaper articles and those in the TAP study nonfiction (popular history). The results of these two studies are roughly comparable to those presented here, despite this study having a different focus.

This paper looks at a case study conducted with English undergraduates at the Faculty of Philology, University of Banja Luka, and its implications for source text selection and test marking validity in L1-to-L2 translation education, as well as indirectly for translation teaching strategies. In the academic year 2022-2023, a collection of short stories titled *Osmeh*

za svaki dan (*A Smile a Day*) by Jelica Greganović (2005) was used as the STs to teach and test English 1 L1-to-L2 translation (Year 1, Semester

1). We hypothesised that while humorous texts can be expected to appeal to students as readers, their lexical and/or syntactic complexity may be well beyond students' interlanguage, with adverse effects on the quality of their translations, especially in test conditions.

This study sought to:

1) Qualify the selected prose, mostly deemed as humorous, as the STs to be used to teach and test Serbian-to-English translation;

2) Analyse the translation techniques used by students and locate the points of discord between the teacher's expectations and students' achievement;

3) Consider the possibility of determining the semantic proximity of students' lexical choices to the translation equivalents as proposed by the course teacher/paper authors; and

4) Problematise and evaluate the course teacher's marking criterion validity.

Subsidiary to these primary objectives and hoped to provide additional insights, AI (Lexicool, Frequency Level Checker, Grammarly) was used to:

1) Quantify the difference between the grammatical accuracy and lexical richness of self-directed versus enforced student text production (stories vs. translations); and

2) Ascertain to what extent AI and teacher text correction criteria overlap.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Sample and Setting

The study sample included 47 Year 1 English undergraduates of the Faculty of Philology, University of Banja Luka (UNIBL), taught in the winter semester (15 weeks, 2 contact hours per week) of the 2022-2023 academic year. With the entrance examination being at the CEFR B2 level,

upon enrolment, most students' proficiency may be estimated at B2 or higher, and roughly up to 15% lower. L1-to-L2 translation is one of the five obligatory elements comprising English 1, all tested and equally weighted in writing, which makes the exam structure rather complex (10 ECTS; equivalent to 250-300 hours of study time) (Statut UNIBL, 2022, p. 28). With the focus of the English 1 L1-to-L2 translation lessons mostly grammatical, not lexical, the goal is to consolidate students' awareness of and ability to distinguish between the parts of speech in English, as well as their grammatical and communicative knowledge of tenses in English, particularly of tense agreement in narrative texts, and of English word order at the phrase and sentence level.

2.2. Source Text Determination: GTVH, Script-Based Theory of Register

Determining the humorous STs used in the translation lessons may help to establish discrepancies between the educational goals as perceived by the teacher and students' needs. The first theory addressed is Raskin and Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), proposed as an extension of Raskin's Semantic Script Humour Theory (SSHT) to account for the totality of semantic, linguistic and non-linguistic features of humour (Attardo, 1994, pp. 222–229). The GTVH achieves this by means of 6 knowledge resources (KRs), organised into a hierarchy for analysis of ordinary jokes, with each resource shaped by the preceding one: Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language. According to Attardo, any humorous text will present opposed scripts (Script Opposition, SO), but it will differ in terms of the specifics of its narrative organisation, the social and historical instantiation etc., depending on the place and time of production (1994, p. 226).

Raskin defines a script as a "large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it" (1985, p. 81). According to him, opposed scripts define the structure of ordinary jokes. Attardo (1994, p. 200) claims that beyond the single or few oppositions found in ordinary jokes, a longer text can be reduced to a complex case of jokes, with scripts extending through several sentences or the entire text (the "main

scripts") and creating multiple script oppositions (macroscripts). Chlopicki postulates the presence of "shadow oppositions" as the deeper script oppositions, whose scope encompasses the entire text and which are responsible for the overall perception of humour, rather than for the individual surface oppositions (1987, p. 19, as cited in Attardo, 1994, p. 210).

The second linguistic theory of humour applicable to Greganović's texts is pragmatic and concerns the mixing of registers for humorous effects. Attardo builds on the GTVH and his polythetic theory of register to account for the comic in humorous texts beyond jokes, establishing a connection, through lexical items, between script theory and lexical register variation (1994, p. 245). He defines register humor as "the concomitant (overlapping) activation of two or more scripts that weakly activate some scripts, among which there are at least two that are in a relationship of (local) antonymy" (1994, pp. 252-3). Whereas according to the SSTH the opposition must be between two scripts activated directly by text processing, in the case of register humour a humorous sense will be activated only weakly as a result of overlap and opposition (1994, p. 253).

The linguistic and semantic innovativeness and/or peculiarity of Greganović's texts may be examined with regard to Raskin's concept of combinatorial rules, according to which a speaker/hearer can deem a sentence semantically coherent or well-formed (1985, p. 86). To explain the mechanics of humour and other kinds of communication not to be taken at face value, Raskin claims that metaphors, implicatures and language innovations are often the outcome of

> the combinatorial rules [are] instructed not to discard syntactically or semantically deviant sentences but rather to introduce minor changes in the scripts causing the deviance and calculate the semantic interpretations conditional on these changes. (ibid, pp. 91-92)

2.3. Semanticity of Students' Translations

The third theory addressed to qualify, for pedagogical purposes, the appropriateness of the STs used is that of the script-based lexicon (Raskin, 1985). Raskin's script-based theory posits that all the information a speak-

er has about his or her culture equals a semantic network which comprises the full set of scripts in the lexicon and their links, all the non-lexical scripts and their links, as well as the links between the two. The existence of long-distance links between scripts also accounts for the establishment of connotative associations between a situation and the linguistic materials used to refer to it. Raskin's notions of link and emphasis can be used to propose the extent of equivalence between an L1 and L2 lexical unit. The links can be very short, indicating semantic proximity within the script, and the relation emphasised (Raskin, 1985, pp. 82-5). Here, an attempt is made, by specifying relations of equivalence, synonymy and semantic proximity, to qualify students' renditions of selected lexemes and lexical sets in relation to the source units by proposing variable-length links.

2.4. Translation Procedure and Tools Analysis

In order to assess students' translations, the authors focused on specific linguistic structures (clauses, phrases and words) that conveyed the majority of the humorous meaning. The students' solutions were compared against the authors' using the following translation transformations and techniques described by Hlebec:

1) Literal translation – a translation which refers to the primary (word-for-word translation) or secondary meaning of a word;

2) Permutation – swapping places of parts of the original text in translation;

3) Morphological shift (transposition) – changes in translation at the morphological level (e.g., word class, grammatical category of the word);

4) Syntactic shift – changes in translation at the syntactic level (e.g., changing a passive sentence with an active one or substituting a participle clause for a relative clause);

5) Lexical shift – changes in translation at the lexical level (mainly generalisation and narrowing of meaning);

6) Omitting – reducing the original text by not translating parts of it;

7) Adding (amplification) – adding content which is not part of the original text;

8) Antonymy in translation – translation using the opposite meaning of words; and

9) Explanatory translation – explaining the original text by sequencing it to its semantic elements. (Hlebec, 2009)

Since students offered various translation solutions for the source texts, the authors of this paper decided to observe parts of the original text in accordance with the linguistic units being translated. The translation solutions were carefully arranged in alignment with Hlebec's classification and presented in the form of percentages and graphs.

2.5. AI Text Correction and Analysis for Marking Validity

The validity of the teacher's marking criteria is investigated with the assistance of the AI text production and alteration tool Grammarly, used to compare AI and teacher text correction. Grammarly is assumed to be reliable, given the volume of text fed to it and the continuous refinement of its algorithms. Equally, the reliability of teachers as assessors also tends to change, with qualitative and quantitative alterations in their marking criteria and practices over time. Here, three students' translation tests are analysed by Grammarly and the corrections are compared against the original marking procedure and results by the course teacher. According to Grammarly's explanation of how the application works, its algorithms are trained on naturally written text and may not be as good at handling sentences with deliberately inserted mistakes (Grammarly). Conversely, non-native teachers are trained to identify mistakes associated with learners' interlanguage, which might not be comparable to those made by native speakers.

To assess the appropriateness of the STs relative to students' interlanguage, AI was used to establish the difference between the grammaticality and semanticity of students' self-directed texts (stories) and enforced texts (translations). The texts analysed are stories written in the English integrated skills test, with minimum elements enforced and unconnected to the translation test. Such tasks allow a great deal of authorial freedom, unlike the translation test, with STs possibly limiting in many

ways. Two tools were used to provide statistical information and determine the complexity of students' translations and stories. The first is Lexicool, which produces various counts (paragraphs, sentences, words, characters etc.) and statistical information on the repetition of phrases and keywords. According to the tool website info, it can be used to optimise text and avoid unnecessary repetitions (Lexicool).

The second tool used is Frequency Level Checker, created with the support of Tokyo International University, Japan (Frequency Level Checker). It divides and counts words into four frequency groups or levels. The first two contain the first and the second most frequent 1000 English words and their word families as based on the General Service List of English Words by Michael West. Level 3 is the Academic Word List developed by Averil Coxhead and includes 800+ words (570 word families). The first two levels account for 70-80% and the third for 5-10% of all the lexis found on an average page of text. The word families include headwords, their inflected forms and some derivations, as per Bauer and Nation (ibid.). There are also the Outside Levels (lists), which contain, e.g., low-frequency words and proper names. They also obviously contain the words the software does not recognise as belonging to the previously specified levels, including misspelt English words.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Source Text Determination

Greganović is a best-selling Serbian author of autobiographical prose built around personal anecdotes. Her texts mix professional and private, in particular family, themes with commentary on issues such as the standard of living, loss of true intellectualism to elitism, ubiquitous commodification, etc. These elaborated anecdotes also serve to dispel popular myths or superstitions or to otherwise differently qualify or contemporise a range of traditional literary and non-literary themes. They narrativise and/or ironise modern-day popular views and tendencies as standing in contrast to common sense and the outlook grounded in

pre-21th-century reality, as well as gaps between generations, education levels, and cultural codes and mindsets. The author's position is that of a middle-aged discerning woman intellectual, whose humour ranges from benevolent self-mockery to full-force sarcasm. Thematisation of the private and personal corresponds to the topic range of classic comedy as dealing with "lower subjects".

While some of Greganović's text yields to script analysis, its intellectualism and pervasive irony make the expansionist SSTH approach largely inadequate; hence multiple determination as the preferred approach (Attardo, 1994, p. 267). Greganović manipulates scripts to create all four combinations of text (overlapping/non-overlapping; non-opposed/opposed), which may read as plain narrative, humorous, or ambiguous (also, metaphorical, figurative, allusive, obscure, etc.; Attardo, 1994, p. 203). She plays with registers, building text with meta and complex scripts, which at times resembles the language of the press, while at others of fiction proper. The selection of the stylistic devices used will be more comprehensively profiled if, besides the Script Opposition (SO), the other KRs as per the GTVH are accounted for.

The stories are not hierarchically organised, but rather have the plot as the main element, which may be taken to correspond to the Situation (SI) KR. The SI resource shapes the Narrative Strategy (NS) and Language (LA), with the Logical Mechanism (LM) representing part of the NS and the Target (TA) being constant (it has an empty value). The LM parameter is defined as reasoning errors that produce humorous effects and can range from a straightforward juxtaposition of opinions to more complex errors; here, the author ironises opposed mindsets, of which one is presumed normal by the author and the other abnormal, corresponding to the main binary opposition of, e.g., actual/non-actual ("666"), possible/impossible ("Emanciploitation"), or false analogies ("Forbid Reality!"). The LM is sometimes contained in the dialogues as a misunderstanding between the protagonists, failed expectations, the author's private epiphanies, etc. The narrative and stylistic devices used are bathos, dramatic visualisation and sensory detail, enlistment, metaphor, ellipsis, hyperbo-

le, hypocorism, anthropomorphism, etc.

Selected texts from among those used as lesson and test material are analysed in this chapter. “Emanciploatation” and “Forbid Reality” thematise and/or narrativise gender stereotypes, gender (in)equality, commodification, and the dictates of visual culture and social media representation. An invective targeted at the commodification of life in general and objectification of the female body, “Forbid Reality” verges on grotesque. The descriptions in the story, like those in “Emanciploatation” and “Divine Retribution”, evoke physical actions and assumed physical sensations given in quick succession, reminiscent of slapstick comedy. Using physical humour, the author contrasts scenes from family life (mother coming back from work and finding the yard and the rest of the family is disarray; family on beach vacation) as it most typically is and as we see it in commercials and ads. The opposed scripts feed sarcasm targeting the idea of the physical unattractiveness of women’s bodies after giving birth, tabooed through the dictate of visual representation, in public and the media, of the human body as desirable only if young, fit and well-kept.

“The Green Mile and a Black Cat” dispels the deeply entrenched black cat stereotype and promotes new-age sensitivity of humans to animals, in particular to cats as common pets. To do so, the author connects an anecdote from her family life – taking care of a gravely sick cat as if it were a child – with the Hollywood dramatisation of the idea of self-sacrifice, shown in “The Green Mile”, as the ultimate human feat and value. The actions of the self-sacrificing film protagonist are equalised with the whims and workings of a cat – the connection between the two explicated by a female member of the family, the author’s daughter – serving as the protracted punch line. The supposedly ignorant and unassuming author in the role of narrating mother thus redeems black cats and knowers of deeper truths, of the secrets of life and death, here represented by her daughter, who in the folklore of many nations have been considered witches and discriminated against or ostracised.

Many of the stories contain scripts that mostly overlap, but are often not opposed, commanding an allusive or obscure – not humorous – inter-

pretation. "666" is about a day in the life of the author, which she spends at a book fair. The dominant script is a complex one, incorporating the experiences of a publishing author, the publishing community, taxi rides, events at a book fair, etc. However, the script that makes "666" allusive and mysterious concerns references to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, which goes amiss for the reader unfamiliar with the novel. "666" is on reading habits, with the author arguing that complaints about people not reading enough are unfounded because reading has, historically, been an elitist pastime and the privilege of the few not from the ranks of aristocracy lucky enough to be educated. To prove that avid readers are few, she leads us through a series of situations which to the people she meets are not allusive, but whereby the author evokes Bulgakov's 20th-century classic. This protracted punch line is reinforced with the closing scene of a HADES cleaner van parked outside her home and keeps running to the very end of the text.

3.2. Translation Techniques: Analysis of Students' Renditions

Specific lexemes, phrases and clauses in students' translations were observed to determine which translation techniques were utilised. The calculations are based on the overall frequency of occurrence of these techniques within the translations, indicating that some linguistic units contained more than one of them.

3.2.1. Example 1: "Forbid Reality" ("Zabranite realnost")

Example 1 below comes from Greganović's story "Zabranite realnost" ("Forbid Reality").

Stvarnost je mnogo lepša, ona živi u reklamama svuda oko nas. U njima vesela majka, ispeglana, uglancana, stara jedva dvadeset godina, utrčava posle radnog dana u <u>dvorište sa upravo depiliranom travom, čije zelenilo prosto uživo vrši fotosintezu</u>. [...] Istovremeno, u realnosti koja ne postoji zato što je krajnje fuj za gledanje, majka sažvakana od celog dana na poslu, četvoronoške uteturava u dvorište. U jednoj ruci vuče cegere iz prodavnice, u drugoj gomilu stvari koje su deca zaboravila u autu, trećom

rukom se probija kroz pampase dvorišta koje niko nema vremena da popase. (Greganović, 2005, p. 46)[11]

The underlined noun phrase in the excerpt above was analysed in depth. The findings show the percentages as follows.

Lexeme level:

1) generalisation 50% (cut, trim)
2) narrowing of meaning 25% (wax)
3) omitting (25%)

Noun phrase level:

1) syntactic shift 37.5%
2) transposition 37.5%
3) adding 12.5%
4) error 12.5%

The most frequent technique used at the lexeme level is generalisation, while at the NP level syntactic shift and transposition prevailed. Although error is obviously not a translation technique, it was pinpointed here in case it became statistically significant as a failed translation.

3.2.2. Example 2: "Emanciploitation" ("Emanciploatacija")

Example 2 was taken from "Emanciploatacija" ("Emanciploitation").

"Uostalom, nema prave šumadijske pasuljčine bez soli sa Himalaja. Moja prababa je samo nju u variva mećala, a kad je nestane, baba uprti bošču, pa pravac Himalaji, tamo nalopata so, dovuče se nazad i ima za neko vreme." (Greganović, 2005, p. 194)[12]

11 "Reality is much more beautiful – it lives in ads and commercials all around us. In them, a jolly mother, perfectly ironed, all decked up, barely twenty years old, runs – after a day at work – into a depilated yard whose putting green is photosynthesising right before your eyes. [...] At the same time, in reality – which does not exist, because it is yuck to watch, mother – drained after spending all day at work, crawls into the yard on all fours. In one hand she's dragging shopping bags, in the other a pile of things the kids forgot in the car, and with her third hand she is pushing her way through the lawn turned into pampas because no one has taken the time to graze it." (All transl. by S. M. & J. J. R.).

12 "Anyways, you can't really cook a traditional bean stew without Himalayan salt. Only this type would my great-grandma put in stews; when she ran out of it, the old woman'd head straight to the Himalayas, dig out a couple of shovelfuls, fill her shawl with it and lug the load back home, stocking up on it for a while."

The quoted extract turned out to be rather challenging for translation as it consists of elements of a dialect, an augmentative, and an atypical humorous verb (*nalopata*).

Lexeme level:

1) generalisation 100% (great-grandma, scarf, put, take, bring)

Phrase level:

1) transposition 84.6% (enough to use for some time)
2) explanatory translation 15.4% (a big scarf for head)

Syntactic level:

1) syntactic shift 84.6% (while making beans)

Error 46.2%

At the lexical level, the students used generalisation as the only translation transformation, while at the phrase level, transposition was more frequently used than explanatory translation. At the syntactic level, they mostly used syntactic shift. The high percentage of errors confirmed the difficulty of the chosen sentences.

3.2.3. Example 3: "Emanciploitation" ("Emanciploatacija")

"Dok sam to raspakivala, Žmu je seo da se odmori, sipao čašu vina da ga se Kraljević Marko ne postidi..." (Greganović, 2005, pp. 195-6)[13]

In the sentence above, attention was paid to the lexeme *Žmu*, which represents the Serbian word for "husband" split into syllables and spelled backwards, and the noun phrase in which "glass" is the headword.

Lexeme level:

1) generalisation 38.5% (husband)
2) narrowing of meaning 7.7% (Hubby)
3) no translation 53.8% (Žmu)

Phrase level:

1) error 72.2%
2) transposition 18.2%
3) antonymy in translation 9.1%

13 "While I was unpacking, Hubby sat down to get some rest and poured himself a glass of a wine so fine not even a prince would be ashamed of it..."

The analyses indicate that students struggled to comprehend this permutation, which is typical of slang, as most of them did not translate it at all. Among those who attempted it, some resorted to generalisation or narrowing of meaning using the familiarity marker (Hubby). Regarding the noun phrase, the high percentage of errors suggests that the majority of students were unable to convey the meaning of the phrase in a grammatically and semantically appropriate manner.

Based on the analysis of 4 targeted lexemes, 12 clauses, and 6 noun phrases from excerpts taken from 6 texts, the following conclusions were drawn regarding students' preferred translation transformations and techniques.

Figure 1 (Appendix) shows that of the techniques the most frequently used at the lexical level, generalisation (59.1%) is the most common, while literal translation is not used as often (18.9%). Students are also prone to leaving words from the source text untranslated (17.9%). Narrowing of meaning (2.6%) and transposition (1.9%) are less frequent.

Figure 2 (Appendix) shows that when translating targeted noun phrases, students mainly used transposition (33.2%), syntactic shift (19.8%), omitting (18.4%) and generalisation (15%). Cases of adding (6.8%) and permutation (3.7%) were less frequent and are not included in Figure 2. However, the high percentage of errors (33%) suggests significant challenges for those translating these linguistic units.

According to Figure 3 (Appendix), transposition (65.3%), generalisation (50.08%) and syntactic shift (28.1%) were the preferred techniques when translating clauses. Omitting was used in 17.44% of cases. However, the relatively high percentage of errors (24.6%) indicates that students also encountered significant difficulties translating structures at this linguistic level.

3.3. ST Grammaticality and Semanticity: Some Problem Areas for Translation

A judgement of the grammaticality and semanticity of Greganović's texts would have to do with the speaker's ability to distinguish between

normal, i.e., well-formed sentences and grammatically and semantically deviant sentences (Katz & Fodor, 1963, p. 45, as cited in Raskin, 1985, p. 60). A sentence from "The Green Mile and a Black Cat" ("Zelena milja i crna mačka") is analysed here as an illustration of the complexity of Greganović's prose. The original sentence reads: "Marica koja nije rešila da se mazi je iskazivače ljubavi kažnjavala noktima ili laganim, upozoravajućim ugrizom." We may translate it as: "If Marica didn't feel like cuddling, she'd punish the affection-provider-wannabe with claws or a love bite."

If one translates the sentence directly, as quite a few students did, the target text will be inadequate in a number of ways, including an incorrect use of the past simple to translate *rešila*, from *rešiti*, "to decide", instead of the past perfect, or a translation of the imperfective verb form *kažnjavala*, from *kažnjavati*, "to punish", in the past continuous instead of the past simple. At the register level, the clause *koja se nije rešila* anthropomorphises Marica, attributing to the cat a volitional act resulting from decision-making. Most students translated this word for word, disregarding the rules of the use of relative clauses. A syntactically "purer" sentence in Serbian might read: "Ako se Marici nije mazilo, one željne da joj iskažu ljubav kažnjavala bi noktima ili laganim ugrizom upozorenja," which then devoids the sentence of the anthropomorphised – or hyperbolised – independence of the cat as a species. Still, unless students were offered both versions of the sentence, the original and the modification, we cannot tell either would be less challenging to translate than the other.

3.4. Semanticity of Students' Translations

One of the STs used in the finals was chosen to show the semantic proximity of students' renditions of individual words or phrases, where appropriate, to their equivalents, as selected by the authors (Table 1, Appendix). An online English thesaurus was also consulted (https://www.thesaurus.com/). The test was taken by a total of ten students in July 2023. For the 9 words or expressions listed in Table 1, 26 (28.89%) translations are equivalents, 19 (21.11%) synonyms, 8 (8.89%) may be considered as be-

longing to the same or proximal semantic field, and 37 (41.11%) to a distant semantic field (or no link can be established because no translation was offered). This possibly indicates the extent of the overlap between the author's and students' linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge.

Thus, an equivalent of the word *Žmu*, a special kind of slang for husband in Serbian, would be Hubs or Hubby, as was proffered by one student; five students wrote "Husband" and four kept the source word, possibly surmising that it was a proper name. This type of slang was popular in the second half of the 20th century and is rarely used nowadays; hence, it may be assumed not to be a part of students' common knowledge, whether linguistic or non-linguistic. Similarly, *čestito* literally translates as "honestly"; in the source text, it is used with "wake up", and none of the words offered by students ("normally", "completely", "properly") collocates with it or is listed as synonymous with "fully".

Greganović's prose is translatable because it contains referential and self-referential humour (non-punning humour). Overall, students' solutions were relatively successful when dealing with high-frequency, denotative lexemes and with scripts connected with segments of contemporary life that are part of their general and individual experience. In numerous cases, erroneously chosen English lexemes can be attributed to students' lack of extra-linguistic knowledge, not only their linguistic competence.

3.5. AI vs. Teacher Text Analysis and Correction

Table 2 in the Appendix contains statistical information obtained with Lexicool for a ST (an extract from "Forbid Reality"), three students' translations and their stories. It shows a tendency among students to use shorter words on average than those in the ST. Also, a comparison of students' target texts (TTs) and stories indicates a preference for shorter words in self-directed texts, which may be interpreted as an inclination to use short high-frequency words in test conditions. The high word-per-sentence count, especially in the case of S3, is the result of run-on sentences and poor use of punctuation. While Lexicool reliably recognises

some word combinations (NPs, VPs, V+prep), these results are overall not entirely reliable.

Table 3 (Appendix) contains statistical information obtained with Frequency Level Checker for the three students' translations and their stories. The Frequency Level Checker results indicate students generally tend to use lower-frequency (Levels 2 and 3) words more in their self-directed texts than in their TTs. Relevant for students' L2 semantic knowledge, the tendency to use more Level 2 and 3 words in self-directed texts might be indicative again of a discrepancy between the lexical and non-lexical script knowledge of the author of the ST and of students. A relatively big number of words in the Outside lists is due to spelling mistakes and ungrammatical forms (e.g., leybel, hunging, hagging, planty, photosintenses, etc.). S2 is the only one who completed the translation, which explains the higher total and Level 1 word counts. No explanation is offered here for the difference in the total word count by the two tools for some of the texts.

Table 4 in the Appendix sums up Grammarly's reports for the six texts considered. The total score by Grammarly varies depending on the criteria selected, especially for domain and intent. Thus, for S1's translation, it drops from 71 for Creative (domain) cum Tell a Story (intent) to 68 for General/Tell a Story to 61 for General/no intent specified to 59 for Academic (domain only; no intent). The same goes for the issues to be corrected, with some obviously tolerated for certain domains and intents. The scores for unique word use (words used in the text only once) and rare words (outside the 5000 most commonly used English words) remain the same. Because the analysis goals for the translations excluded Tell a Story as the intent, the scores might be lower and the correction criteria stricter than for the stories, where the domain was Creative, the intent Tell a Story, the audience Expert and the formality Neutral.

Processing a single text successively in Grammarly produced different readings even when the same criteria were selected, raising the issue of the tool reliability; while the overall text score values are of little importance here, it is the textual issues the AI tool identified that are relevant.

Grammarly has criteria for correctness and clarity, listing ungrammatical, unclear and wordy sentences/text, comma misuse within clauses, punctuation in compound/complex sentences, etc. A comparison between the translation marking criteria and the Grammarly scores reveals a high overlap in text correction. The test marking results show the translations were penalised for ungrammatical forms and phrases (e.g., isn't exist, the garden grass which are not eaten yet, it's terrible to watching, had fell, the reality… she lives) seriously impacting on the grammaticality of the text, and the same mistakes were also all underlined for correction by Grammarly. Whereas the software also corrects punctuation and use of articles, this is mostly tolerated in the English 1 L1-to-L2 translation test. Obviously, Grammarly cannot account for specific teaching settings and it can only be used for very particular purposes such as this study.

4. Conclusion

The results and discussion point to several conclusions. Contemporary humorous prose can be a good choice for translation education. It is good for language awareness development overall as it often preserves old language and contains dialects, adages, stylistic devices, etc. If combining different registers, it may also be beneficial in the area of selected or specialist lexis acquisition. Humorous prose can appropriately be used as source texts with strictly specified teaching objectives, such as training students to develop schemas to process text at the syntactic level as aware of the different syntactic organisation of L1 and L2. Explaining different sentence element functions, paraphrase, element manipulation etc. can be used as a strategy to help students deal with structurally challenging sentences. Grammatically and semantically complex texts are probably best used with junior and senior-year students.

Deciding if a student's erroneous translation is attributable to his or her linguistic knowledge or knowledge of the world, i.e., encyclopaedic knowledge (Raskin, 1985, pp. 64-5) implies deciding if failed translation results from that person's inadequate education or a gap between

the kinds of knowledge of the world available to the teacher, text author, and student. Raskin (ibid., p. 75) aptly claims that human history can be perceived discretely as a sequence of different worlds. Another line of enquiry worth giving consideration is Raskin's idea of semantic and non-semantic scripts and the overlap of the two between generations in a fast-developing world grounded in technology.

A pedagogical idea to be tested is that by Pintado-Gutiérrez quoted in the introduction. The use of Willis' three-stage task cycle for pedagogical translation might prove fruitful if special emphasis is put on specific problem areas, even with highly complex texts. Nonetheless, even if they are used for their linguistic or non-semantic curiosity on occasion, grammatically and lexically complex tests are best avoided in tests. Also, for further research, this study points to the potential of AI for exploring the correspondence between human achievement and the evaluation of that achievement.

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Appendix

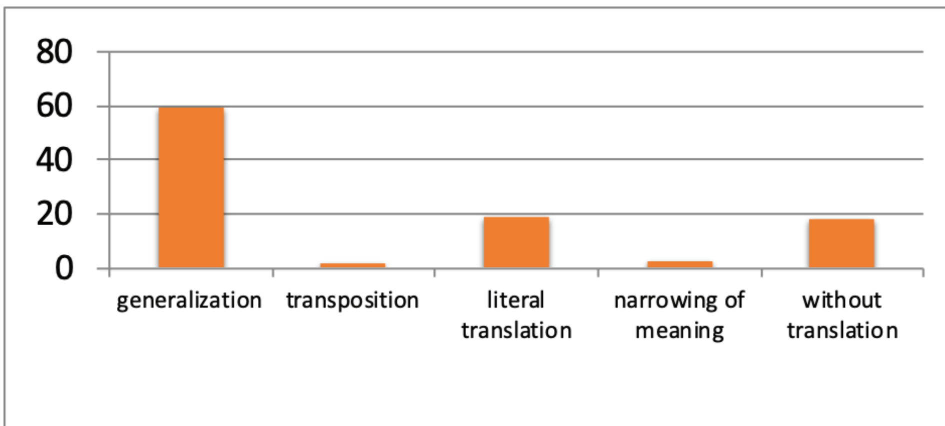

Figure 1. The most frequent techniques used at the lexical level

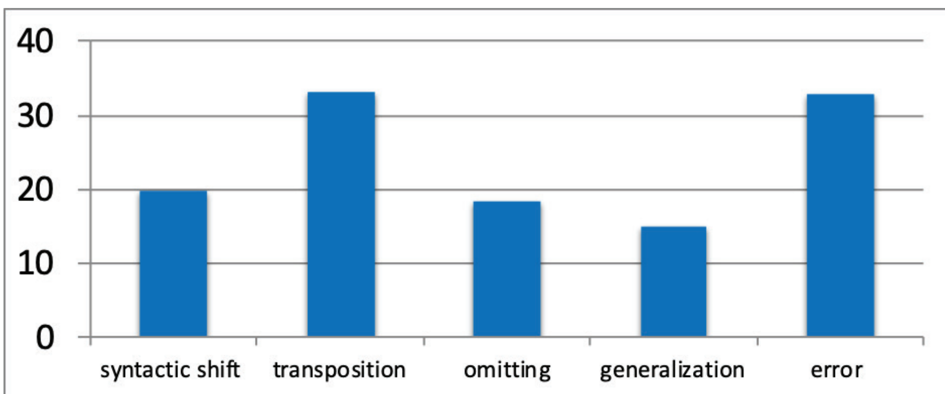

Figure 2. The most frequent techniques used at the phrase level

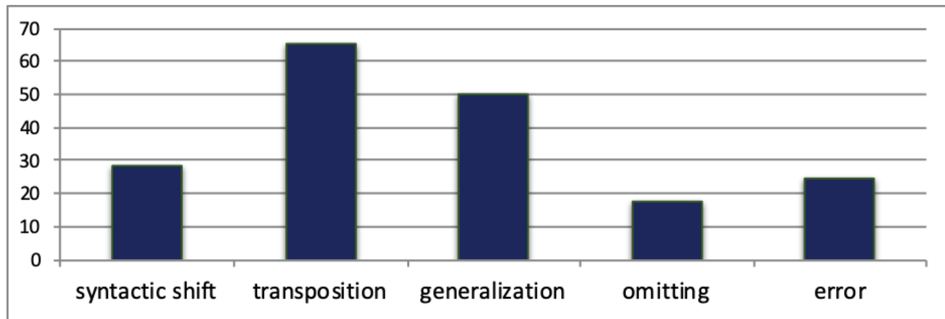

Figure 3. The most frequent techniques used at the clause level

Table 1. Variable-length links between English equivalents of source words and students' translations

Source text word or phrase with English equivalent	Equivalent	Synonym	Same semantic field	Distant sem. field/no transl.
čestito fully				10
ranjenik sa Neretve a wounded/injured soldier (a WWII Partisan wounded in the Neretva Battle)	5		4	1
Žmu Hubs (Hubby)	1	5		4
bračna postelja our marriage bed	4	1		5
sujeverno superstitiously	1			9
totalna anestezija a general anaesthetic		8	2	
stona lampa a desk/table lamp	6			4
tek izleženo pile a newly hatched chick	6		2	2
krpice (pod bradu) pieces of cloth/fabric	3	5		2

Table 2. Statistics obtained with Lexicool (TT – target text (translation); SDT – self-directed text (story))

	ST	S1 TT	S2 TT	S3 TT	S1 SDT	S2 SDT	S3 SDT
Sentences	8	9	11	8	18	24	32
Words	189	171	267	233	289	371	420
Words per sentence	23.62	19	24.27	29.12	16.06	15.46	13.12
Characters per word	4.99	4.73	4.36	4.38	4.49	4.33	4.02
2-word comb. (syntagms)	N/A	4	8	4	14	12	20
3-word comb. (syntagms)	N/A	0	1	1	6	1	1

Table 3. Statistics obtained with Frequency Level Checker (TT – target text (translation); SDT – self-directed text (story))

	S1 TT	S2 TT	S3 TT	S1 SDT	S2 SDT	S3 SDT
Level 1	138 (80.70%)	224 (83.90%)	193 (82.13%)	249 (86.16%)	329 (88.92%)	330 (80.10%)
Level 2	15 (8.77%)	16 (5.99%)	18 (7.66%)	18 (6.23%)	20 (5.41%)	13 (3.16%)
Level 3	2 (1.17%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (1.04%)	0 (0.00%)	4 (0.97%)
Outside lists	16 (9.36%)	27 (10.11%)	24 (10.21%)	19 (6.57%)	21 (5.68%)	65 (15.78%)
Total	171	267	235	289	370	412

Table 4. Statistics obtained with Grammarly (TT – target text (translation); SDT – self-directed text (story))

	S1 TT	S2 TT	S3 TT	S1 SDT	S2 SDT	S3 SDT
Text score	68/100	74/100	61/100	57/100	69/100	63/100
Total issues	13	13	19	25	23	31
Critical issues	7	10	16	15	13	22
Advanced issues	6	3	3	10	10	9
Unique words	61%	57%	59%	53%	51%	47%
Rare words	29%	23%	23%	25%	28%	26%

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Bridget Jones's Diary: Lost in Translation?

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ABSTRACT

Verbally expressed humour is notoriously difficult to translate. The problems usually occur due to either cultural or linguistic factors, or sometimes a combination of the two. If a joke relies on the linguistic mechanisms of a language such as homonymy or polysemy, it may be difficult to find a match in the target language due to the differences in the linguistic systems. On the other hand, if a joke is rooted in the culture, it may be incomprehensible to the target audience if translated literally. This study examines how humour in the novel Bridget Jones's Diary by Helen Fielding (1998) was rendered in the Croatian translation of the novel (Dnevnik Bridget Jones, 2013) and the Croatian subtitles of the film (Dnevnik Bridget Jones, 2001). Initially, we planned to base our research on twenty examples of humour from Fielding's original which were also included in the film. Since audiovisual translation involves technical and linguistic constraints which may limit the subtitler's choices, we hypothesised that literary trans-

lation would be more successful in preserving the humorous effect of the original novel. However, our findings show that there are very few examples of humour present both in the book and the film and that the two translations of the source text are considerably different. The most striking differences are the frequent use of the visual channel to convey humour in the film and the number of humorous scenes present only in the film or the book.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, humour, literary translation, translation, translation strategies

Introduction

Humour is believed to be a universal human trait; yet, when we try to transfer it from one language to another, we realise that it is not as universal as it may seem. Even though humour can sometimes be universal and therefore suitable for literal translation, there are also many instances of humour which cause problems in translation. How do we translate a joke which contains cultural references? How do we deal with humour based on wordplay? Do translators have to use different approaches depending on the medium? Such questions have prompted us to explore the issue of humour in the literary and audiovisual translation of the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding (1998), which is well-known for its humour.

We examine how different media influence the choice of translation strategies and which version manages to preserve the humorous flavour of the original better.

2. On the Bridget Jones Phenomenon

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* originated as an anonymous column in *The Independent*, which appeared regularly from 1995 to 1997. The column depicted the adventures of a thirty-something, single woman living and working in London in the 1990s. Fielding's revised version of the column was published in novel format in 1996 and went on to be a bestseller when it was published in paperback. It is considered to be the

"single urtext" of the phenomenon that came to be known as "chick-lit" (Ferris & Young, 2006, p. 4).

The incongruity between Bridget's expectations and the eventual outcome of the situations in which she finds herself is the source of the humour in the novel. Indeed, the unexpected outcome of the situation will be considered the punchline of the respective joke. In the novel and film, the thirty-two-year-old Bridget is seen trying to juggle the conflicting options open to young women in the 1990s: independence, a successful career, sexual freedom, just to name a few, as well as the quest for a meaningful relationship with a man. Whereas women's options were severely limited before the Women's Liberation Movement (1960s–1980s), young women like Bridget grew up in the 1980s in an environment where very few such limitations existed, and thus women could and wanted to "have it all." Bridget struggles to manoeuvre her way through the options open to her, presenting her views and confusion in a confessional style, self-deprecatingly. Albeit not everyone finds *Bridget Jones's Diary* humorous. The author has been critiqued for her depiction of the fictional Bridget's blatant disregard for feminist ideals and her quest for a "functional relationship with responsible adult" (Fielding, 1998, p.3). Fielding, however, addressed the critics, noting that "It's good for women to be able to be funny about women and not to be afraid to be funny. [...] Sometimes I've had people getting their knickers in a twist about Bridget Jones being a disgrace to feminism and so on. But the point is, it's good to be able to represent women as they actually are in the age you're living when you're a writer" (Fielding quoted in Jones, 2011).

An additional factor which generates the humour in the novel is the plot's mirroring or rather modernising of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.* Austen's classic comedy of manners is the template for *Bridget Jones's Diary,* parodying to a certain extent the classic romance conventions in a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century social context. The parallels between the classic and *Bridget Jones's Diary* is brought even more to the fore in the film adaptation of 2001, which was scripted by Helen Fielding, Andrew Davies (scriptwriter for BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* mini-series [1995]) and Richard Curtis (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually,* etc.).

Whereas the novel's humour is achieved exclusively through verbal expression, the film adaptation manages to translate and preserve the novel's humour using visual and aural channels in addition to the verbally expressed humour (VEH). Surprisingly, very little is translated verbatim from the text to the screen as far as VEH is concerned, which our analysis will show.

3. Humour

The word *humour* dates back to the theory of humours of mediaeval medicine (Attardo, 1994, p. 6). Chiaro (2010) claims that nowadays it has become "an unclear umbrella term" (p. 13), encompassing notions such as "comedy, fun, the ridiculous, nonsense" (p. 14).

Attitudes towards humour have changed over time. From the ages of Plato and Aristotle until the end of the 19th century, theorists mostly questioned the moral and social acceptability of humour. The prevailing opinion was that laughter was vulgar, sinful, and should be controlled as it was an expression of one's superiority over other people. What one laughs at was considered an indicator of one's education, refinement and social class (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). This line of thought is characteristic of Superiority Theories of Humour.

From the 19th century onwards, a lot of theorists began to realise that laughter could be beneficial by providing release and an optimistic frame of mind. The theories studying positive psychological and physiological effects of laughter are called Release or Relief Theories of Humour (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, pp. 4–6).

Incongruity Theories are characterised by a cognitive approach to humour. They analyse which mechanisms, in addition to ridicule and derision, can be used to cause amusement (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 5). According to these theories, the cause of laughter is the perception of something incongruous—the beginning of a joke creates the expectations, while the ending violates those expectations, i.e., it is incongruous with the beginning (Morreall, 2023).

What is notable, however, is that there is no consensus on the definition of humour. Taken broadly, it can be understood as "any object or event that elicits laughter, amuses or is felt to be funny" (Attardo, 1994, p. 4).

How do we recognise that a text is humorous, then? Chiaro (2010, p.19) posits that all theories of humour "potentially leak" and claims that we might be asking the wrong question. She suggests that, instead of trying to fit humour into a theory, we should trust our instincts because humour is innate to humans. Similarly, Raskin (1985) believes that humour is a universal human trait, albeit partly natural and partly acquired.

3.1. The Translation of Humour

It is well-known that humour is difficult to translate. The reasons vary—humour may be rooted in culture and thus incomprehensible to the members of another culture. It can also rely on the linguistic mechanisms of language such as polysemy or homonymy and thus be impossible to replicate in the target language. As this study deals with film and literary translation, subtitling constraints should be noted as an additional obstacle. Subtitles are divided into two-liners which remain on the screen for a very limited time; therefore, they have to be simple and concise. These temporal and spatial constraints can considerably hamper the subtitler's creativity.

Chiaro (2010, pp. 11–12) lists four strategies which are commonly used to translate VEH:

1. leaving the VEH unchanged
2. replacing the source VEH with a different instance of VEH in the target language
3. replacing the source VEH with an idiomatic expression in the target language
4. ignoring the VEH.

3.2. Zabalbeascoa's Classification of Jokes

The classification of jokes employed in this study was introduced by Patrick Zabalbeascoa (1996). It seemed particularly suitable because the jokes are classified from the translator's perspective and pertain to the field of audiovisual translation. The classification will be listed and briefly explained below.

1. International jokes, i.e., jokes which are understood by a universal audience, do not rely on either language-specific mechanisms or cultural knowledge; therefore, they are not difficult to translate.

2. National-culture-and-institution jokes contain cultural references, thus background knowledge is required to appreciate them in translation. Zabalbeascoa suggests adapting such references in a way that the target audience can understand them while retaining the humorous effect of the original.

3. National-sense-of-humour jokes are popular in some countries and constitute a kind of tradition, e.g., some communities tend to make fun of themselves whereas others do not. Such jokes may be controversial, and attention should be paid not to make the translation offensive.

4. Language-dependent jokes rely on linguistic mechanisms such as homophony or polysemy for their effect. Zabalbeascoa notes that such jokes pose no problem if the source and target language are closely related. However, major shifts are required in other cases.

5. Visual jokes can be purely visual, relating to what one sees on screen or visually coded linguistic jokes as in the image of a button representing the idiom *button (up) your lip*. In the second case, translators are forced to compensate by using the word(s) that fit the image.

6. Complex jokes combine two or more types of the jokes listed above (pp. 251–254).

4. Research

4.1. Aims, Sample and Hypothesis

This study aims to explore the differences between the translation of humour in literary translation and subtitles. The sample used consists of:

1. The novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding (1996)—source text (ST)
2. *Dnevnik Bridget Jones* (2013)—Croatian translation of the ST, translated by Duška Gerić Koren, the target text (TT), and
3. *Bridget Jones's Diary/Dnevnik Bridget Jones* (2013)—movie with Croatian subtitles.

Initially, we intended to focus on VEH only. However, our findings have shown that VEH from the source text has frequently been replaced or supplemented by visual humour on screen; therefore, visual jokes had to be taken into account.

We explore whether the translation strategies employed by the literary translator differ from those used by the subtitler and hypothesise that, due to subtitling constraints, literary translation will be more successful in preserving the humorous effect of the original novel.

4.2. Methodology

Initially, we intended to choose twenty examples of VEH from Fielding's original as a basis for our research. Since adaptations for the big screen do not follow the novels they are based on verbatim, the criterion we planned to employ was the inclusion of the chosen instances of humour in the film. However, our research has shown that such instances are rare because the literary and audiovisual translations of the ST are considerably different.

Therefore, the few examples found in both translations will be discussed first. Subsequently, the differences between the literary and audiovisual translation of the ST will be examined in more detail.

The jokes were selected using Zabalbeascoa's classification outlined in chapter 3.2. By comparing the original and the two translations, we identify the translation strategies used by the literary translator and subtitler respectively, employing Chiaro's criteria listed in chapter 3.1.

4.3. Results and Discussion

Surprisingly, we found few examples of VEH present both in the ST and the film. This could be explained by the nature of audiovisual texts in which the visual channel and verbal component create meaning together, thus making it difficult to translate longer instances of VEH only verbally. As our results will show, the film opts for a visual representation of ST VEH quite frequently.

In the examples where ST VEH has been translated using verbal means, there were no surprises. Both the literary translator and subtitler employed similar strategies which fit into Zabalbeascoa's account of how specific types of jokes are commonly translated.

An example of VEH which requires no intervention in either of the translations can be seen when Bridget arrives at the Alconbury's "Tarts and Vicars" costume party dressed as a Playboy bunny, not knowing that the party theme had changed. Appalled, her mother exclaims: "What on earth do you think you're wearing, darling? You look like a common prostitute" (Fielding, 1998, p. 170), which was translated as "Što to, za ime Boga, nosiš? Izgledaš kao obična prostitutka" (Maguire, 2001, 00:36:16–19) and "Što si to, za Boga miloga, obukla, zlato? Izgledaš kao obična prostitutka" (Fielding, 2013, p. 150). This can be classified as an international joke. In both instances, the translator and the subtitler adopted Chiaro's first translation strategy and left the VEH unchanged.

One of the few humorous scenes that is rendered practically verbatim, albeit at a different point in the film, is the scene where Bridget is having dinner with the smug marrieds, and the couples descend on Bridget asking why she, like all women in their thirties, cannot find and keep a man. In her annoyance, Bridget rehearses a sarcastic response to herself: "*Because actually, Woney, underneath my clothes, my entire body is covered in scales*" (Fielding, 1998, p. 40). Koren (TT) translated this as "*zato što je, zapravo, Woney, ispod odjeće cijelo moje tijelo prekriveno krastama*" (Fielding, 2013, p.41), opting for the word "krasta," which denotes a scab whereas the ST's "scales" covers everything from fish or reptile scales to dry, flaky skin. The translation does, nevertheless, communicate that

the reason for the thirtysomethings' lack of success with men is down to some physical deformity.

As opposed to only thinking the sentence in the ST, the film has Bridget say the sentence out loud at the dinner party, much to the horror of the guests. The film's ST, "I suppose it doesn't help that, underneath our clothes, our entire bodies are covered in scales," is rendered faithfully with "Čini se da ne pomaže to sto nam je ispod odjeće cijelo tijelo prekriveno ljuskama" (Maguire, 2001, 00:51:58-00:52:03), thus applying Chiaro's first translation strategy.

Another example from both the ST and the film where the VEH is translated without any changes is when Bridget is given her second reporting assignment: the Elena Rossini case in the novel or the Aghani-Heaney case in the film:

> ST: Was hanging around outside the High Court for ages with the camera crew and a whole gang of reporters all waiting for the trial to end... Suddenly realized I'd run out of cigarettes. So I whispered to the cameraman, who was really nice, if he thought it would be OK if I nipped to the shop for five minutes and he said it would be fine, because you're always given warning when they're about to come out and they'd come and get me if it was about to happen. (Fielding, 1998, pp. 240–1)
>
> TT: Ne mogu vjerovati što se dogodilo. Visila sam pred sudom stoljećima, sa snimateljskom ekipom i cijelom bandom novinara koji su čekali kraj suđenja. Zapravo smo se jako dobro zabavljali... Iznenada sam primijetila da više nemam cigareta. Pa sam šapnula kamermanu, koji je bio doista ljubazan, misli li da mogu skočiti do trgovine na pet minuta, a on je rekao da će biti u redu jer uvijek upozore kad izlaze, a oni će doći po mene, ako se to dogodi. (Fielding, 2013, p. 212)

The film condenses the ST VEH into perhaps even more effective VEH:

Source language (SL): Am suddenly hard-headed journalist ruthlessly committed to promoting justice and liberty. Nothing can distract me from my dedication to the pursuit of truth. Well, almost nothing. Right. I'll just pop to the shop for some ciggies.

Target language (TL): Odjednom sam opasna novinarka. Nemilosrdno predana borbi za pravdu i slobodu. Ništa me ne može odvratiti od potrage za istinom. Pa, gotovo ništa. Skočit ću samo do trafike po cigarete. (Maguire, 2001, 00:56:03–21)

The ST, although comic, is not as humorous as the adaptation, where the incongruity of something as mundane as being out of cigarettes suffices to distract the self-professed, hard-headed journalist who is dedicated to the truth.

On a high after snapping up an exclusive interview for "Sit Up Britain," Bridget decides to celebrate her success with her friends by throwing a dinner party. In both the literary translation and the Croatian subtitles, the VEH is rendered using Chiaro's first translation strategy. Bridget enters in her diary: "Will be marvellous. Will become known as brilliant but apparently effortless cook" (Fielding, 1998, p. 256). The translation makes no changes: "Bit će savršeno. Postat ću poznata kao sjajna kuharica koja kuha bez prevelikog napora" (Fielding, 2013, p. 224). The film slightly alters her comment in voiceover, but the humour is the same: "Have sneaking suspicion that I'm also genius in the kitchen as well" / "Čini mi se da sam genij i u kuhinji" (Maguire, 2001, 00:58:09–13). The punchline of this joke in both the novel and the film is the final product of her genius: blue soup and orange marmalade with a last-minute omelette to salvage the dinner. The incongruity between Bridget's expectations and the final result is, like much else in her life, off the mark and the source of the humour in both the novel and film.

All of the above examples can be classified as international jokes according to Zabalbeascoa's classification and require no interventions or changes to preserve the humour, thus, in these instances, both the trans-

lator and the subtitler adhere to Chiaro's first translation strategy.

We found only one example of VEH common to the ST and the film which can be classified as language-dependent. It appears in a text message Bridget sends to her boss, who has just queried the "health" of Bridget's inappropriately short skirt at work. Bridget replies in both the ST and film that she is "Appalled by management's blatently sizist attitude to skirt" (Fielding, 1998, p. 24). Both the literary translator and the subtitler ignored the VEH, translating the text as "Zgrozilo me neukusno procijenjivanje duljine kojemu je uprava podvrgnula suknju" (Fielding, 2013, p. 27) and "Zgrožena stavom uprave prema suknji" (Maguire, 2001, 00:12:21–25).

The joke is language-dependent in that Bridget has coined a new term—"sizist"—following the example of adjectives formed with the suffix -ist, such as "racist" or "sexist." Unable to coin an appropriate equivalent, both the literary translator and the subtitler ignored the VEH in this case. However, the literary translator incorporated a spelling mistake to reflect Bridget's misspelling of "blatently" by misspelling "procjenjivanje" as "procijenjivanje," thereby establishing the conditions for another example of VEH when her boss corrects her spelling in a subsequent message.

There are also two instances in the adaptation from novel to film where VEH has been translated using a combination of VEH and visuals to preserve the humour. One such scene from the ST and the film are Bridget's date preparations. The scene in the novel likens women's beauty regimes to agricultural activities, with Bridget asserting that "Being a woman is worse than being a farmer," contemplating what it would be like to revert to nature and then concluding that it is no wonder that "girls have no confidence" (Fielding, 1998, p. 30). None of this extract is problematic for translation and the translator used Chiaro's first translation strategy (Fielding, 2013, pp. 32–33). In the film, however, the entire scene has been adapted visually and is introduced by Tom who tells Bridget to "First, look gorgeous" / "Prvo, izgledaj zanosno" (Maguire, 2001, 00:15:34–38). The scene then shows Bridget going about her beauty

routine in a very clumsy way, thus preserving the humour but using visually expressed humour instead of VEH.

A similar approach is taken to Bridget's disastrous report from Lewisham fire station. In this scene, the VEH remains unchanged, that is, Chiaro's first translation strategy is used, and the ST is translated to the screen practically verbatim. [As the scene is rather lengthy, it will not be reproduced here in full (Fielding, 1998, pp. 222-3; Fielding, 2013, pp. 195–196; Maguire, 2001, 00:48:48-00:50:08)]. In this instance Richard, the production manager, is giving Bridget instructions via video link. Bridget is told to put on make-up, a miniskirt and fireman's helmet, to point a fireman's hose, and to slide down the fireman's pole and head straight into the interview, all of which is translated faithfully by the translator and the subtitler. The humour in the situation arises from the fact that just as Bridget has started sliding down the pole, the station cuts to Newcastle, and she tries to climb back up the pole, only to be ordered to slide down again and to wind up the "interview" as they had run out of time. Although the hapless Bridget's assignment is thwarted in both the novel and the film, the visual of her bottom sliding down the pole in the film heightens the humour and Bridget's humiliation: "Excellent. Am national laughingstock. Have bottom the size of Brazil" / "Odlično. Smije mi se cijela država. Imam stražnjicu veliku kao Brazil" (Maguire, 2001, 00:50:14–19). In the novel, characters make reference to liking her "report," which keeps the humiliation fresh in her mind and the reader's.

As can be seen from the examples above, there are very few scenes in the film which have been adapted from the novel verbatim, making our initial sample very small. However, during our research, different translation strategies of VEH were observed in examples that existed only in the film or only in the novel, which can suggest reasons for the prevalence of individual strategies and types of jokes in different media. Even the examples above illustrate that the scriptwriters took great liberties in adapting the source text. Besides omitting several subplots, like the timeshare embezzlement scheme Bridget's mother's Portuguese lover, Julio, was part of, and several subplots related to her friends, the film condens-

es elements of the main plot and adds other elements which are not in the novel at all to achieve a humorous effect.

Surprisingly, we only found one example of VEH in the film where the source VEH was replaced with an idiomatic expression in the TL. When Bridget finds out that her boss and lover, Daniel Cleaver, is engaged to Suki from the New York office, she contemplates her future as one of two choices: “to give up and accept permanent state of spinsterhood and eventual being eaten by Alsatians or not” (Maguire, 2001, 00:44:41–49). She resolutely declares in the film that “I will not be defeated by a bad man and an American stick insect” / “Neće me poraziti loš čovjek i američka čačkalica” (Maguire, 2001, 00:44:53–57). The subtitler uses Chiaro’s third strategy, using the Croatian idiom “čačkalica” (toothpick) to connote the idea of an extremely thin person. The punchline follows in Bridget’s subsequent statement, where Bridget declares that “Instead, I choose vodka and Chaka Khan” / “Umjesto toga, biram votku i Chaku Khan” (Maguire, 2001, 00:44:58-00:45:04). Her choice is incongruous with her initial determination and is rendered even more comic in the film, where the scene shows Bridget falling down drunk and lying there senseless while Chaka Khan is heard on screen singing “I’m Every Woman,” a song of female empowerment.

The punchline itself is also present in the novel, however, depicted in a very different way. Bridget drowns her sorrows with her friends and comes home drunk, entering in her diary: “2 a.m. Gor es wor blurry goofun tonight though. Ooof. Tumbled over” (Fielding, 1998, p. 187), which was translated as “2.00. Mbaš mmmm smo se ndombro nzabamvljale. Uf. Mpompikmnula nsamse” (Fielding, 2013, p. 165). The translator successfully communicates the drunken slurring in the ST. However, the film’s rendering of this scene is more humorous through the combination of VEH, the visual and the soundtrack, making the inherent irony in the scene between Bridget’s desires and reality more vivid.

An example of where the VEH was ignored altogether can be seen in the film when Bridget is cooking for her friends and Darcy notes with surprise that the soup is blue. Bridget surmises that the blue string with

which she tied the vegetables must have bled. Mark Darcy responds with "Oh, it's string soup" / "A, to je juha od uzice?" (Maguire, 2001, 1:00:02–05). Although the direct translation is humorous in and of itself—who would make soup out of string?—Darcy's response denotes comprehension and humour, giving the term string soup another connotation. However, it is not clear from this example whether the omission of the original VEH was intentional or whether the subtitler was unfamiliar with the culinary term "string soup" which is a term usually denoting a green bean soup.

The film contains much more straightforward humour in comparison to the novel. For example, when Bridget goes job hunting, which is not in the novel because her mother finds her the job, the audience has a good laugh at Bridget's failed job interviews and her lack of general knowledge and current affairs. Asked by one prospective employer what she thought of the El Nino phenomenon, Bridget replies: "It's a blip. I think, basically, Latino music is on its way out" / "To je prošlost. U biti, mislim, da vrijeme latino muzike prolazi" (Maguire, 2001, 00:46:13–17). In her second interview for a children's show, when asked why she wanted to work in television, she replies, "Because I'm passionately committed to communicating with children. They are the future." / "Zato što sam osobno posvećena komuniciranju sa djecom. Ona su budućnost" (Maguire, 2001, 00:46:21–28). When asked by the interviewer whether she has children of her own, her reply is "Oh, Christ, no! Yuck!" / "Oh, Bože, ne. Fuj!" (Maguire, 2001, 00:46:28–30). No less funny is the third interview where she admits that she needed to leave her current job because she had "shagged" the boss. To her surprise, she is told to start work on Monday, but the incongruous element which creates the humour in this scene is her future boss telling her that "And incidentally, at "Sit Up, Britain" no-one ever gets sacked for shaggin' the boss. That's a matter of principle" / "I usput, u "Uspravi se, Britanijo" nitko ne dobiva otkaz zbog seksa sa šefom. To je stvar načela" (Maguire, 2001, 00:46:43–52). Besides being unexpected, this scene paints a clear picture of the boss who is hopeful that Bridget might continue her previous behaviour. All of these examples are

straightforward, international jokes according to Zabalbescoea, and thus create no problem for the translator, and Chiaro's first translation strategy is used.

Having found a new job, when Bridget informs her soon-to-be former boss that she is leaving, he attempts to persuade her to stay. Bridget, however, remains resolute and states: "If staying here means working within 10 yards of you, frankly, I'd rather have a job wiping Saddam Hussein's arse" / "Ali ako ostanak ovdje znači raditi u krugu od 10 metara od tebe, iskreno radije bih Saddamu Husseinu brisala guzicu" (Maguire, 2001, 00:48:11–14). Again, this is also an example of an international joke, which is straightforward, with the subtitler simply replacing the measurement "yards" with "metres" to facilitate understanding.

There are also examples of visual humour in the film, where the VEH is undermined by the visual on the screen, forming the punchline of the joke and creating the humour. For example, after a friends' night out drinking, Bridget claims: "At least now I'm in my 30s I can hold my drink" / "Sada u 30-im bar mogu podnijeti piće" (Maguire, 2001, 00:11:10–13). The visual punchline belies her ability to hold her drink and sees her stumbling out of the taxi and falling flat on her face.

Another example of the punchline being produced visually and verbally is when Bridget arrives at the launch of *Kafka's Motorbike*. She psyches herself up by saying, "I am the intellectual equal of everyone else here" / "Jednako sam pametna kao i svi ovdje" (Maguire, 2001, 00:17:45-50). As she turns, the camera focuses on author Salman Rushdie talking to a group of men about the theory of the novella, and when asked by Rushdie what her opinion was on the matter, Bridget, out of her depth, haplessly asks where the loo is, thus belying her own self-assessment. Again, the humour in both of these examples is international and Croatian allows for a direct translation to preserve the humour.

At the same launch, Bridget is asked by Perpetua to introduce her to Mark Darcy. Bridget rehearses in her head how to introduce people to each other: "Introduce people with thoughtful details. Perpetua, this is Mark Darcy. Mark's a prematurely middle-aged prick with a cruel-raced

ex-wife. Perpetua's a fat-ass old bag who spends her time bossing me around" / "Spomeni zanimljive detalje kada upoznaješ ljude. Mark je srednjovječni seronja s bivšom ženom iz okrutne rase. Perpetua je debelguza starica koja provodi vrijeme maltretirajući me" (Maguire, 2001, 00:18:41–54).

The text presents no problems for the translator because the humour is international, and Chiaro's first translation strategy suffices to preserve the humour. However, the punchline comes slightly later in the film and is completely unexpected, when Mark Darcy, the top human-rights barrister, introduces Bridget to his colleague Natasha, and says, "Bridget works in publishing...and used to play naked in my paddling pool" / "Bridget radi u izdavaštvu i igrala se gola u mom bazenčiću" (Maguire, 2001, 00:19:21–24).

Another example of a visual joke, however with VEH interpolated in the visual, comes towards the end when Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy are fighting in the street, and they end up in a restaurant where one of the guests is having a birthday party. As the cake is being carried down the stairs by the waiter and all the guests start singing Happy Birthday, both Darcy and Cleaver stop fighting and join in, singing "Happy Birthday, dear what's-his-name" / "Sretan ti rođendan, dragi kako-god-se-zoveš" (Maguire, 2001, 01:08:11–15), only to resume their fighting immediately after the singing is done, with Cleaver tackling Darcy and crashing through the window onto the street. Again, the subtitler adheres to Chiaro's first translation strategy as the joke is international and presents no difficulties to the translator.

Much of the visual humour is related to Bridget's thoughts and resolutions. For example, Bridget decides that she "Will put a stop to flirting first thing tomorrow. Good plan" / "Prestat ću koketirati odmah sutra. Dobar plan" (Maguire, 2001, 00:13:04-00:13:07), however, the following visual sees Bridget arriving at work in a see-through top, which completely undermines her firmness of character.

Another source of VEH in the film are allusions to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which Fielding cites as a source for her plot. These are

handled in a subtle way, which only people familiar with Austen's work would understand immediately. However, knowledge of Austen is not specifically required to understand the humour. The first such VEH is a homage to the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, spoken in voiceover as Bridget walks through a shopping centre to meet her mother: "It's a truth universally acknowledged that the moment one area of your life starts going okay another part of it falls spectacularly to pieces" (Maguire, 2001, 00:26:45-00:26:55), which the subtitler translated using Chiaro's first translation strategy as "Univerzalno je prihvaćena istina da u trenutku kada vam na jednom polju krene kako treba, na drugom se sve raspadne." Whereas this sentence creates no problems for the translator or for the general audience's comprehension, the comic effect does depend on the viewer's knowledge of Austen's novel, making such an example a national-culture-and-institutions joke according to Zabalbeascoa's classification of jokes.

Further allusions to Austen in the film are the scene when Darcy disparages Bridget to his mother: "I do not need a blind date. Particularly not with some verbally incontinent spinster who smokes like a chimney, drinks like a fish and dresses like her mother" / "Majko, ne treba mi sudar na slijepo. Pogotovo ne sa nekom brbljavom nesuvislom usidjelicom koja puši, pije i odijeva se kao njezina majka" (Maguire, 2001, 00:04:32–40). This scene echoes and modernises Fitzwilliam Darcy's snub of Elizabeth Bennet at the Meryton Ball when he refuses Mr Bingley's entreaties to dance with her: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (Austen, 2007/1813, p. 19).

The source VEH includes two similes "smokes like a chimney" and "drinks like a fish," which have not been translated by the subtitler, perhaps due to character restrictions. There are equivalent idioms in the Croatian language like "puši kao Turčin" (smokes like a Turk) and "pije kao smuk" (drinks like an Aesculapian snake) which could have been used. Nevertheless, the translation does stress Bridget's vices, but not their excessiveness, which appears to be the point that Darcy is making in an exasperated way. Again, the humour in this situation depends on

knowledge of *Pride and Prejudice*, as does the scene where Darcy declares to Bridget that he likes her just the way she is (Maguire, 2001, 00:53:05-00:54:08), which comes as unexpectedly as does Mr Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth Bennet (Austen, 2007/1813, pp. 154–156).

As opposed to the film, where the majority of the VEH can be classified as international jokes, the novel contains many instances of national-culture-and-institutions VEH, which require different translation strategies.

For example, at the beginning of the novel when Bridget arrives at the annual Turkey Curry Buffet, she is greeted by the sleezy Geoffrey Alconbury, whose behaviour is described as "He did a jokey Bruce Forsyth step then gave me the sort of hug which Boots would send straight to the police station" (Fielding, 1998, p. 11), which was translated as "Zakoračivši poletnim džokejskim korakom Brucea Forsytha, stisnuo me u zagrljaj zbog kojega bi neki dežurni moralist odmah pozvao policiju" (Fielding, 2013, p. 15).

This quote contains two national-culture-and-institutions references: the first is to Bruce Forsyth, whom the translator explains in a footnote as being a comedian and television quiz show compère, and the other is to Boots, a pharmacy chain in the UK, which also developed photographs for its customers and was known to contact the police if there was anything inappropriate in the photos such as naked children (Fowler, 1995). The translator used Chiaro's second translation strategy here, substituting Boots with the phrase "vigilant moralist," making the reference clear to all readers. What the sentence is implying in a humorous but subversive way is that "Uncle" Geoffrey's hug was highly inappropriate. Unfortunately, the translator mistook the word "jokey" for the word "jockey" and translated accordingly, rendering the "jokey Bruce Forsyth steps" "jockey steps" and thus making the meaning unclear.

A further national-culture-and-institutions VEH is Bridget's comment in the novel about Mark Darcy when she first meets him: "It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party. It's like being called Heathcliff and insisting on

spending the entire evening in the garden, shouting 'Cathy' and banging your head against a tree" (Fielding, 1998, p. 13), which was translated as "Pomislila sam kako mora biti prilično smiješno zvati se g. Darcy, stajati sam i uobraženo promatrati ljude okupljene na domjenku. Baš kao da se zoveš Heathcliff i ustrajno želiš cijelu večer provesti u vrtu dozivajući: 'Cathy' i udarajući glavom o drvo" (Fielding, 2013, p. 17).

In this example, the translator assumes the reader's knowledge of Emily Brontë's Heathcliff and Cathy from *Wuthering Heights* and of Mr Darcy from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and translates using Chiaro's first translation strategy. The humour lies, of course, in the comparison of Mark Darcy who is indirectly being accused of posing like Austen's Mr Darcy, who is also aloof and "snooty" in social situations. Indeed, just as ridiculous as a man who might be called Heathcliff and behaves like Brontë's Heathcliff.

An example of international humour in the novel which is translated in accordance with Chiaro's first translation strategy is Bridget's revelation about dieting:

> ST: "I realize it has become too easy to find a diet to fit in with whatever you happen to feel like eating and that diets are not there to be picked and mixed but picked and stuck to, which is exactly what I shall begin to do once I've eaten this chocolate croissant" (Fielding, 1998, p. 75).
>
> TT: "Jasno mi je da je postalo prejednostavno pronaći dijetu u koju se uklapa ono što ti se jede, a i to da dijete ne postoje zato da bismo ih birali i miješali, nego zato da bismo ih birali i poštivali – baš to ću početi raditi čim pojedem ovaj čokoladni *croissant*" (Fielding, 2013, p. 70).

The humour comes about as Bridget's earnest revelation on dieting is incongruous with her conclusion. After making a list of everything she has eaten and noting next to the food which dietary programme it is compatible with, she realises that she has been dieting incorrectly. She will, however, mend her ways after she has eaten her chocolate croissant.

An example of a language-dependent VEH in the novel, which has been ignored in the translation, is an excerpt from a newspaper Bridget

was reading: ST: "Open up paper to read that convicted murderer in America is convinced the authorities have planted a microchip in his buttocks to monitor his movements, so to speak" (Fielding, 1998, p. 93) / TT: "Otvaram novine i čitam kako je osuđenik na smrt u Americi uvjeren da su mu vlasti ugradile mikročip u guzicu kako bi nadzirali njegove pokrete, nazovimo to tako" (Fielding, 2013, p. 86).

The humour in the source text is connected to the microchip which is used to monitor the physical movement of prisoners, but as the chip has been planted in the buttocks, the movements monitored can also be bowel movements. This polysemy does not exist in the Croatian language; thus the humour could not be preserved.

Another pun which cannot be translated into Croatian is seen at one of the editorial meetings at "Sit Up, Britain," when Richard wants to do a feature on "dirty vicars" and why women fall for them. Bridget suggests he interview Joanna Trollope.

> ST: "A trollop?" he said, staring at me blankly. "What trollop?"
> "Joanna Trollope. The woman who wrote *The Rector's Wife* that was on the telly. *The Rector's Wif*e. She should know." (Fielding, 1998, p. 210)
>
> TT: "Drolju?" pitao je, buljeći u mene. "Koju drolju?"
> "Trollope, Joannu Trollope. Ženu koja je napisala *Rektorovu ženu* koja je prikazana na televiziji. *Rektorova žena*. Ona bi morala znati." (Fielding, 2013, p. 184).

The humour is lost here because the pun turns on the homophone *trollop* which, besides denoting a promiscuous woman, also denotes the surname of the author of *The Rector's Wife*. Although *drolja* is an appropriate equivalent to *trollop,* its lack of homophony with Trollope renders the humour non-effective. The translator could have applied Chiaro's second translation technique and invented an author's name that would rhyme with *drolja* and thus preserve the VEH.

5. Conclusion

Certain conclusions can be drawn from the above examples about the nature of literary and audiovisual translation. First, our research shows that the VEH in the film can be predominantly classified as international jokes. It presented few problems for the subtitler, who predominantly applied Chiaro's first translation strategy, that is, they left the VEH unchanged. The VEH in the film is supplemented with visuals which enhance the VEH and in many cases is the punchline of the joke. This is not the case with the literary translation, which required other strategies to preserve the humour inherent in the novel. One of the difficulties in translating the novel is the presence of national-culture-and-institutions jokes and language-dependent jokes which required further explanation, paraphrase or even invention on the part of the translator to preserve the humour.

One of the reasons why the humour in the film is predominantly international, whereas the humour in the novel frequently relies on cultural references, could be the fact that the film was aimed at an international audience; therefore, cultural allusions could have hampered the comprehension of the humour. Another possible explanation are subtitling constraints. Cultural references frequently require additional explanations in translation, which is rather easy to do in literary translations where footnotes are common. On the other hand, that is not possible in subtitles due to spatial constraints, which could be the reason why a substantial number of cultural references from the novel has been omitted in the film. However, this shortcoming has been compensated by the use of the visual channel in the film.

While cultural references can be explained in footnotes, the same strategy cannot be applied to language-dependent jokes. Homophony, polysemy and similar linguistic mechanisms are mainly unique to a language and thus difficult to replicate in translation. Therefore, it is understandable that linguistic humour, albeit rare, was predominantly ignored in both literary and audiovisual translation.

The novel and its audiovisual adaptation convey humour differently which subsequently affected the translation. The humour in the source text largely fits into the Incongruity Theory of Humour as most jokes rely on the punchline being incongruous with the beginning of the joke. While the novel expresses incongruity verbally, the film mainly does so visually. However, we cannot claim that the film is less successful in preserving the ST humour than the literary translation. Each translation has to adapt to the requirements of their respective medium and, in our opinion, does so successfully. Watching a film while reading subtitles requires more cognitive effort than reading a translated novel; therefore, rendering humour visually makes it possible for the audience to enjoy the film and appreciate the humour in a relaxed manner.

Finally, we can conclude that our hypothesis has not been confirmed. The humour has been preserved in both translations, albeit in a different manner. The manner used in both cases suits the medium, thus Bridget Jones has not been lost in translation.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Ambigumour in Social Media – A Cognitive Account of Novel Humorous Portmanteaus

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ABSTRACT

Humour has been the focus of numerous cognitive studies with the aim of unravelling the underlying mechanisms involved in the creation of humorous concepts. This paper seeks to elucidate the humour present in portmanteaus by examining the emergence of novel portmanteau words on social media (Instagram), which have become increasingly prominent over the recent years. Unlike traditional portmanteaus such as "smog" or "motel", which are well-established in the English language, this study focuses on the linguistic innovations that have arisen in the context of social media. Conceptual blending theory is employed as an effective tool for analyzing these novel portmanteaus and for explicating their humorous meaning. Examples of novel portmanteaus are employed to illustrate the humorous concept and results suggest that through blending different mental spaces in a novel and creative manner, these linguistic creations engender new concepts. The intricate interplay between language, cognition, and creativity is emphasized, underscoring the significance of these linguistic inventions in creating humour in social media discourse.

Keywords: conceptual blending, humour, portmanteau, social media.

Introductory Remarks

Social media platforms have become a prolific stage for linguistic creativity and innovations. Portmanteaus are one such linguistic phenomenon, often having humorous and captivating impact and reflecting the evolution of language in digital era as they are "originally created for comic effect" (Cannon, 1986, p. 728). The result is the emergence of novel ideas and concepts which reflect the creativity of online communities[14]. In our examples, novel portmanteaus tend to merge unexpected and unrelated concepts, which later lead to comic effect. The term portmanteau will be used for the purpose of the paper pertaining to two words fused together in a single lexical unit in order to not confuse them with the term blend/blended space. The paper aims at unravelling the underlying mechanisms of meaning construction of humorous portmanteaus found in social media, with a particular focus on the role of conceptual blending.

Conceptual Blending Theory

The elaborate theory of conceptual integration by Fauconnier and Turner (1994; 1998) lies at the heart of our study and will be used to account for how the blending of unrelated concepts contributes to humour in our portmanteaus. The theory focuses on the central integration network comprising four mental spaces – two inputs, generic space and blended space. Each of these mental spaces has its own structure, elements and relations. What is important is that mental spaces are materialized based on conceptual domains grounded in our experience. According to Coulson and Oakley (2000) "blending processes depend centrally on projection mapping and dynamic simulation to develop emergent structure, and to promote novel conceptualization, involving the generation of inferences, emotional reactions, and rhetorical force" (p. 176). Below is the central integration network comprising generic space, two

14 **Acknowledgements:** The author would like to extend gratitude to *The Cunning Linguist* Instagram user for generously allowing me to use his original examples in this paper.

inputs, and blended space, although the number of inputs is not limited and may be more than two.

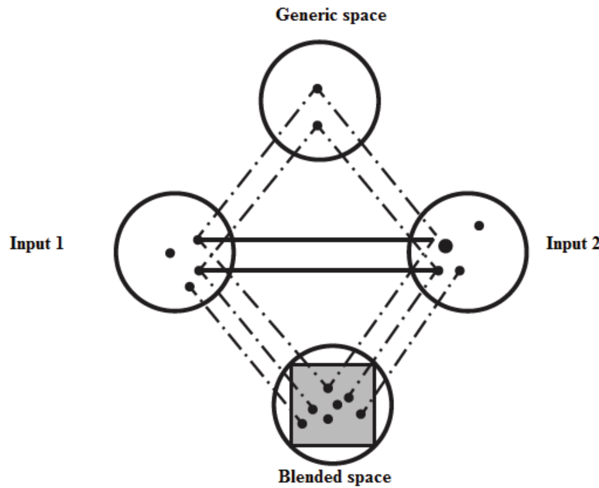

Figure 1. Basic integration network (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 46)

Solid lines establish connections between elements in inputs, while dotted lines represent connections between elements that are common or shared among the inputs. The generic space is a mental space that does not contain specific content itself but it rather provides a framework for elements from other inputs. It is flexible and abstract and is not tied to any specific content. The blended space emerges as a result of blending or integrating concepts from different inputs, featuring elements projected from these inputs. These projections tend to be partial and lead to an emergent structure via three possible processes (*composition, completion* and *elaboration*) (Fauconnier & Turner, 1994, p. 47). The emergent structure is actually a result of contextual modification of the concept in one domain to the elements from another domain. The authors also suggest that there are *vital relations* among mental spaces (*cause-effect, change, time, identity, intentionality, representation* and *part-whole*) which should be compressed in order to achieve *human-scale* in the blended space (Fauconnier & Turner, 1994, p. 93).

Finally, in order to ensure we cannot simply link anything with everything else, Fauconnier and Turner (1998, 2002) introduced optimality principles – *integration, web, unpacking, topology, good reason, and metonymic tightening*. Integration means that the blend is a unit and can only be manipulated as such. Web refers to the web of suitable mappings to the inputs which must be preserved in case of manipulation of the blend. Unpacking means that the blend must enable the listener to entirely reconstruct the entire network. The topology principle suggests that the relations of the elements in blend should match the relations of their counterparts. Good reason means that every element in the network must be connected to other spaces and must hold pertinence in the running blend. Finally, metonymic tightening principle claims that when elements with metonymic relations are introduced into the blend, these metonymic relations shorten the distance between them.

Incongruity, Humour, and Conceptual Integration

The theory of conceptual integration acknowledges and accounts for incongruity as an essential component in the blending of mental spaces. Incongruities within these spaces are central to the generation of creative and humorous meanings. A great body of work has provided accounts of what humour actually is. Martin (2006, p. 29) gave a psychological account of humour saying that "it is essentially a positive emotion called mirth, which is typically elicited in social contexts by a cognitive appraisal process involving the perception of playful, nonserious incongruity, and which is expressed by the facial and vocal behaviour of laughter", adding that it is a universal activity that most people experience many times over the course of a typical day (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 30). In linguistics, Raskin's Theory of Verbal Humour (1985) provided a framework for understanding humour as a cognitive and linguistic phenomenon, emphasizing the role of incongruity and script violations in generating laughter. Indeed, incongruity has been recognized as the major technique for producing humour (Koestler, 1964; Attardo, 1994; Goatly,

2012). In his accounts, Koestler (1964) connected humour and incongruity by introducing the concept of bisociation, arguing that humour often aroused from merging of two previously incongruous concepts. These positions on incongruity as being one of the grounds for humorous effect production will be supported by our examples as incongruity between mental spaces in our networks will play a crucial part in construction of comic meaning.

However, Coulson (2002, p.1) argues that not just any combination of frames results in a comic effect, depending on a subsequent set of assumptions (Suls, 1972 cited in Coulson, 2002). In her paper "The Menendez brothers virus: Analogical mapping in blended spaces" Coulson (1996) continues to investigate the role of conceptual blending in humour demonstrating how the fusion of seemingly unrelated concepts can lead to amusing outcomes. Her example is about a computer virus which not only erases computer files and occupies their space but also portrays itself as a victim of abuse. It is a blend between a computer virus and the infamous case of two brothers who killed their parents defending themselves with alleged abuse they had suffered in childhood. The humour results from blending victimhood and computer virus scenario, resulting in a computer virus suggesting to be a victim of abuse just like the Menendez brothers were in real life.

Fujii also investigated blending in some humorous examples inferring that "one key feature of the blend is a compression of elements with clashing socio-cultural values. The role of contextual meaning or projection of contrasting interactional frames is also crucial in humorous meaning construction" (2008, p. 195). The author continues by suggesting that because elements in the blend are deliberately contrasting with what is considered real, the conceptual integration theory highlights how humour is created by bringing together different sets of knowledge and condensing layers of inconsistency to generate the precise level of mental and social tension needed for humour.

More recently, there have been empirical studies on humour in terms of conceptual blending. Meng and Gao (2011) inferred that internet catchwords tended to be humorous and certified the role of conceptual blend-

ing in accounting for the novel meanings. In the analysis of puns, based on conceptual integration theory, Zhang (2018) proposed that a primary purpose of puns was to produce humorous effect. In another study on playful blending and cognitive motivation, Lefilliatre (2019) suggested that the purpose of playfully motivated blending was to obtain a higher cognitive salience in discourse (p. 14) and that the reference stood out from the environing text if the intention was humour (p. 23). Delibegović Džanić and Berberović (2021) investigated humour in political cartoons using the conceptual blending theory and reached a conclusion that incongruity played a pertinent part in the construction of humorous blends. In addition, the authors claimed that incongruity emphasized the bizarre scenarios resulting from the merging of real and absurd scenarios. Another study on humorous aspects of conceptual blending in politicized discourse on lexical level was conducted by Vengaliene (2016) who suggested that the reader achieved a benefit of being given an evaluative attitude and a deeper insight due to the compression enabled by the blending mechanism (p. 182). Xiny & Wencheng went a step further by combining conceptual blending and relevance theory. They implied that these two theories "can supplement for each other in explaining humour" (2019, p. 298).

Whether analyzing internet catchwords, puns, or political cartoons, all these studies highlight the central role of conceptual blending in the accounts of the creation of humour, with an emphasis on incongruity. Still, we shall see that in the case of humorous portmanteaus incongruity is only one of the underlying principles resulting in ridicule, along with salience and unexpected phonetic resemblance between the original and new words. Namely, salience has already been recognized as crucial for generating comic effects (Brône & Feyaerts, 2003; Brône, Feyaerts & Veale, 2006; Dynel, 2011; Booth & Booth, 2017; Veale, 2019). Below, we will try to give answers to how conceptual blending explicates humorous effect of these lexical units and which cognitive mechanisms are at play during meaning construction.

Application of CBT on Humorous Portmanteaus

Avalunche (avalanche+lunch)

As we will observe with subsequent instances, it is notable that both input spaces play a role in the emergence of a humorous element within the blend and that incongruity becomes apparent on the level of opposed domains. The generic space covers the structure helping us design the elements in both inputs. It is in the very generic space that we already observe the incongruity between the inputs in terms of nature, scale, and purpose. On one hand, there is a natural, large-scale, unsafe event in which snow, rocks, and debris fall down rapidly causing a disaster. Furthermore, what we know of avalanche is that it may have devastating consequences and cause destruction to landscape and humans. On the other hand, there is a human-driven, small-scale, enjoyable event where people eat food. The midday meal, commonly referred to as lunch, is an action undertaken either individually or collectively, manifesting as a scheduled routine intrinsic to human activities. It should be noted that not all elements in the inputs are relevant for our network, such as details of the materials falling down during an avalanche, a detailed account of what initiates an avalanche, plates, eating utensils, kitchen, table, or chairs, which is why they are not listed.

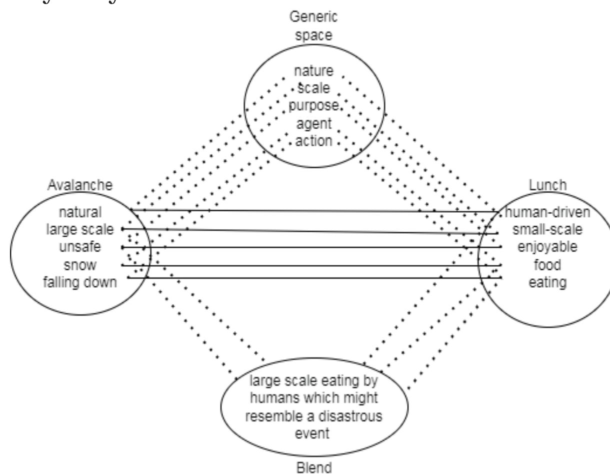

Figure 2. Conceptual integration network for Avalunche

The generic space dictates the mapping of the corresponding elements from inputs 1 and 2. In other words, we may impose the notion of a small-scale event onto a large-scale event, physical onto abstract, everyday onto extraordinary, etc. Given that inputs are totally opposite concepts, we shall now assume that incongruity will play a pertinent role in the blend and the construction of meaning of the novel concept. Once we mapped the elements from both inputs, in line with Fauconnier & Turner (2002, p. 47), a selective projection occurs and the cognitive operation of composition helps us combine elements from the two inputs, resulting in a richly compressed blend. The outcome through completion and elaboration is the emergent structure in which we observe a human agent eating a lot of food so fast that the scene might resemble a disastrous event of an avalanche. When we say an individual eats their lunch fast and in large amounts, completion helps us understand what it means even though avalanche does not operate exactly like eating food. The elaboration by enriching the blend helps us create a richer mental picture of the new concept and we may imagine a comedic aspect of having lunch in terms of large amounts of food we devour. The meaning construction involves not only mapping between elements from the two inputs, but also the construction of a blend space in which we blend the salient property of avalanche (scale of operation) with the knowledge of people eating food. This account is in line with Koestler's implication that "one can obtain comic effects by simply confronting quantitatively different scales of operation, provided that they differ sufficiently in order of magnitude for one scale to become negligible compared with the other" (1964, p. 66). We now perceive the meaning of the portmanteau as funny and slightly absurd.

Here we should point out that the humorous effect in the blend coming from the incongruity between the two target concepts is also triggered by the salient property of avalanche, i.e. large-scale. Admittedly, salience is regarded as one of crucial aspects of conceptual blending as it holds significant importance within the framework due to its role in shaping the emergent structure. As Coulson suggested, "the challenge is to activate

the appropriate information and to integrate it with abstract narrative structure" (2002, p. 5). Hence, the salient property of large-scale from the frame of avalanche and the scale integration actually helped us access the meaning resulting from the blending process. This one element from input 1 is crucial as it will become emergent property of lunch in the blend space. In other words, lunch being a large-scale event involving massive food consumption is selected to bring life to the lunch eating scene in the blend.

Lastly, another aspect that substantiates the element of derision is the circumstance that our target portmanteau bears a phonetic resemblance to the original word "avalanche". It might be accounted for by the fact that listeners usually expect to hear the original word, which is avalanche, and unexpectedly hear the portmanteau. This clarification is in line with Koestler's claim that humour depends primarily on its surprise effect (Koestler, 1964, p. 91).

Pockalypse (pocket+apocalypse)

The account of our second example closely parallels the initial one, particularly concerning the juxtaposition of two incongruent concepts from the two inputs. The incongruity becomes apparent in both inputs as structured in the generic space, wherein once more, a dichotomy between a small-scale and a large-scale event is discernible. The scalar dimension itself assumes significance within our integration network, as it serves as a salient property embedded within the second input. This property has a pivotal role in elucidating the process of meaning construction inherent to the development of our emergent structure as the salient property of input 2 will later become the salient property of the blend.

Consequently, there is a concept of apocalypse which is an event affecting the entire planet or even entire universe, also known as the end of the world. It is an abstract concept which is often associated with something extraordinary and dramatic, involving a collective fate. On the other hand, there is a physical concept of a pocket, a small confined compartment sewn in clothing, and utilized for practical purposes such as

storing items. It is related to personal belongings and is a practical aspect of everyday life.

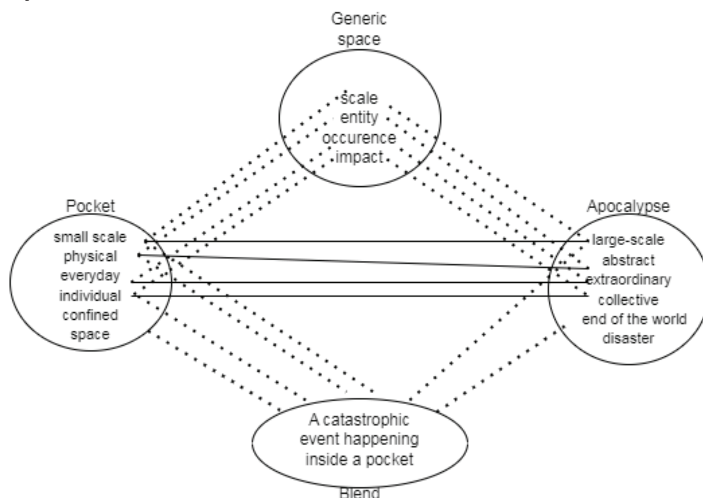

Figure 3. Conceptual integration network for Pockalypse

Again, we assume that incongruity contributes substantively to the humorous impact inherent to our blend, albeit with a concomitant influence on the process of meaning construction owing to the salient property in terms of scalar dimension. The emergent property of the pocket being a home to an end-of-the-world event is selected to animate the scene in the blend. The completion process of filling in the gaps in the blend space helps us design a scenario in which a catastrophic event takes place in one's pocket and different items are impossible to clutch.

Buttox (but+botox)

The incongruity and an unexpected combination of concepts in our third portmanteau yet again results in an absurd image of surgical enhancement of human rear ends. The first input consists of elements often associated with a casual tone, whereas the second input implies a serious medical procedure which brings to mind a more serious clinical context. It is not only one aspect of the two inputs that the conceptual incongruity

emerges from. Namely, we encounter discordance at the levels of occurrence, entity, action, and function.

In input one, there is a naturally occurring entity which is an anatomical part of the body, serving functions related to posture and movement. Common perception is that buttocks exist as they are without any need for enhancement, having functional roles that are essential for human activities. The functions and actions of the human rear end result from biological evolution and, presumably, do not require any deliberate aesthetic interventions.

The second input describes a medical treatment often employed for cosmetic purposes to reduce wrinkles and fine lines on human face. In contrast to the natural feature mentioned earlier, we now encounter an artificial entity known as botulinum toxin. Unlike the vital muscle structure shaped by evolutionary processes, botox does not serve a functional purpose. Instead, its purpose is centred on altering an individual's appearance through a purposeful intervention.

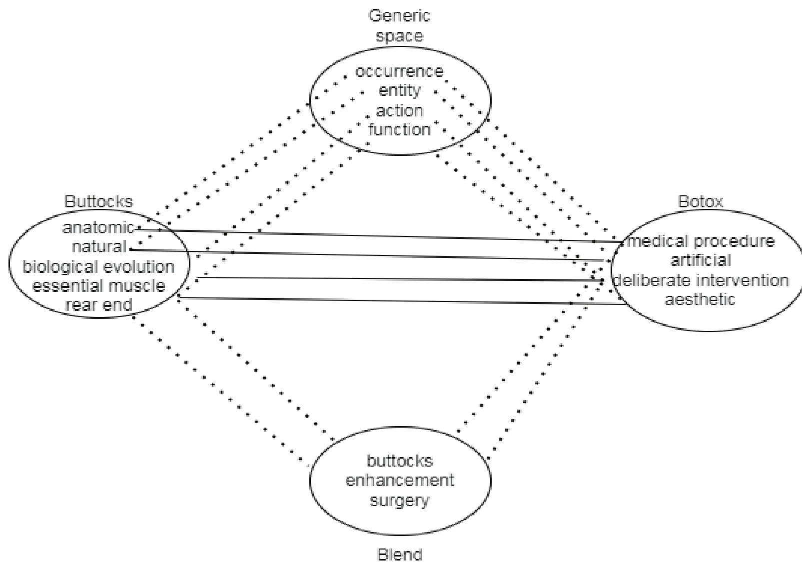

Figure 4. Conceptual integration network for Buttox

Furthermore, we should consider the matter of salience, as it plays a crucial role in constructing the meaning of the blend. Salience allows us

to interpret the deliberate intervention highlighted in the second input as the most noticeable aspect in the blend. This emphasis on deliberate intervention becomes a catalyst for the humorous effect in the blend. This is because it's being juxtaposed with the anatomical body part, which inherently lacks the need for aesthetic enhancements. In essence, the deliberate intervention stands out and triggers the ridicule within the blend due to its contrast with the natural state of the anatomical body part. Yet again, the emergent property of human bottom being deliberately modified for aesthetic purpose is selected to bring to life the buttocks appearance scenario in the blend. The completion and elaboration processes help us create a scenario in which there is a buttocks enhancement surgery resulting in absurd exaggeration, which later leads to a comic effect.

Along with the conceptual incongruity, the phonetic resemblance between the botox and buttocks again plays a pertinent role in the resulting humorous effect. When spoken aloud, buttocks and botox share a similar sound, which catches the listener off guard because something else related to the body is usually expected.

Instagrammie (instragram+grannie)

Instagrammie is yet another evidence of incongruity producing a humorous effect in the blend as the network merges two opposing concepts of modern technologies and traditional relationships. The incongruity in the network is again encountered at the level of two opposed inputs. Incongruity in terms of function and form is evident from a social media platform in first input suggesting we operate in the digital realm as opposed to intimate and personal function in input two suggesting physical presence as opposed to the digital realm. Grandmother is a close and dear family member who evokes kindness, care, and intimate relationship, whereas Instagram is a digital platform which allows virtual communication. Furthermore, we encounter incongruity on the level of impact, as social media tend to have global impact as opposed to family relationships which tend to have local impact.

It is in terms of generation (modern versus traditional) that we ac-

tually meet the key incongruity, i.e. the salient property which will later in the blend serve as a clue to the meaning of construction and the final effect of ridicule. What happens is that the modern technology is usually used by younger generations as opposed to grandmother who evokes traditional values. The salient property of traditional is what we perceive as crucial for the blend and it plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning. Actually, it becomes the emergent property in the blend which helps illustrate the scene.

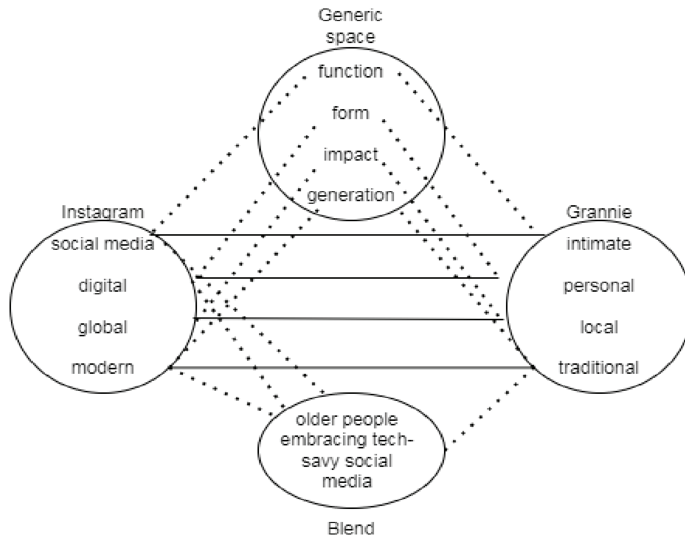

Figure 5. Conceptual integration network for Instagrammie

The emergent structure via completion and elaboration now describes a scenario of a modern social media platform being used by old people, which is not a very common phenomenon. It is the unexpected image of a granny using social media that triggers the humour in our portmanteau. Besides incongruity and salience, the ridicule is evoked by the phonetic resemblance between the expected word (instagram) and the one the listener actually hears (Instagrannie).

Chairdrobe (chair+wardrobe)

The term Chairdrobe exemplifies a unique portmanteau, distinct from other examples in its amalgamation of terms within the specific

domain of Furniture. Given the absence of domain incongruence, a presumption arises that incongruities would similarly be absent on other contextual levels, as it involves two entities or spaces involved with clothing. However, incongruence does arise concerning function, form, and use. Non-essential elements, such as the materials constituting chairs and wardrobes, have been excluded from the inputs as they are not relevant for our network.

Incongruity in terms of function arises from the fact that a chair is a piece of furniture designed for sitting or it offers comfort for various activities. However, wardrobe suggests that it is a piece of furniture used for storing clothes, accessories, and other personal items, protecting them from dust. In form, the first input presents an object featuring a seat and backrest, while the second input encompasses shelves, drawers, doors, and compartments. Speaking of incongruity in terms of use, chairs are used frequently and immediately during daily activities, whereas wardrobes are used less frequently.

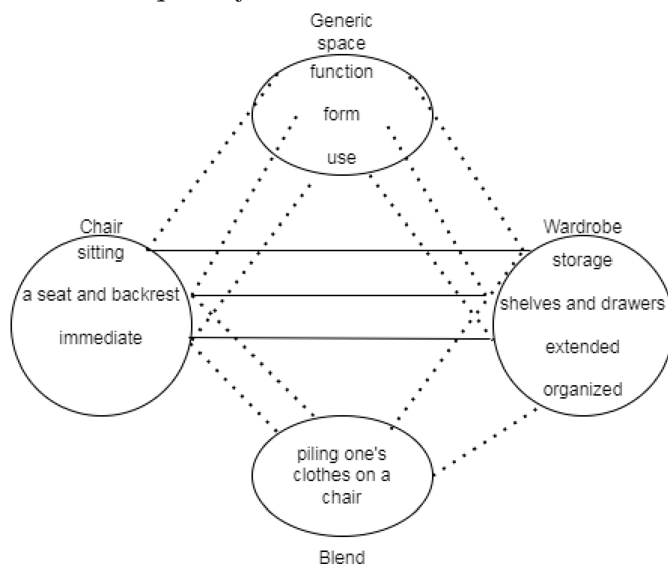

Figure 6. Conceptual integration network for Chairdrobe

The ridicule in the blend arises not only from the incongruent function, form, and use, but the salient property from the input two, which is

organized, once mapped into the blend, plays the pertinent part in the construction of the meaning. As chairs are not meant for any storage other than sitting, we may infer that the salient property of the wardrobe, organization, now becomes disorganization. How so? We suggest that the incongruity between the two inputs leads us to infer that each opposed element in the inputs has its counterpart, which is this case is organized-disorganized. In other words, chairs do not necessarily suggest disorganization, but once the function, usage, and the purpose of the chair changes in the blend, we conclude that it obtains the property of disorganization. What happens now is that is the emergent structure through completion and elaboration suggesting a scenario in which people use chair as a convenient dumping ground for clothes instead of properly putting them away.

Finally, the phonetic resemblance between wardrobe and chairdrobe adds to the humorous effect, as the listener again hears a word similar to the one expected.

Concluding Remarks

Our analysis of humorous portmanteaus employing conceptual blending theory reveals a constant pattern of humour arising from the juxtaposition of incongruous elements in two distinct input spaces. The incongruity often revolves around differences in scale, purpose, nature, impact, function, and form, contributing to ridicule and absurd scenarios. Another pivotal role in shaping the emergent structure is salience, which further intensifies the humorous effect. It is particularly salient property from input 2 that becomes emergent property in the blend selected to vitalize the scenario. Hence, along with apparent incongruence, salience served as a logical rule that governed our networks helping us shape the emergent structure. Despite the fact that incongruity is the base of the construction of humorous meaning, without considering salience, the construction of the meaning is not feasible. Phonetic resemblance to the original words also contributes to humour due to the element of surprise.

Namely, the word that reaches the listener is not the word they expect to hear. Ultimately, our analysis demonstrates that humour is a nuanced interplay of cognitive processes, including the blending of disparate concepts, recognition of incongruity, and the activation of salient properties.

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PART TWO: ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES, LITERARY THEORY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

REVIEW ARTICLE

Making Fun of Academia is a Serious (Literary) Business

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ABSTRACT

Academic or campus novels have enjoyed a wide popular reception by their readers and critics alike, ever since this fiction sub-genre emerged on the Anglo-American literary scene. The appeal had mainly revolved around hilariously funny characters across diverse university settings, although English departments, or the Humanities in general, attracted most attention among authors who dared to display a variety of intricacies about both inner and outer aspects of academic life. Quite often, a harsh satire intermingled with dark humour that coloured events and persons involved in activities not necessarily deemed appropriate or dignified. The paper focuses on several British novelists (Kingsley Amis, David Lodge, A.S. Byatt) and their seriously humorous and critical treatment of issues related to a specific literary rendering of academia in UK from mid-1950s to early 1990s. It, primarily, compares the use of literary techniques and devices that can add elements of humour into the books under consideration, i.e. Lucky Jim, the Campus Trilogy (Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work) and Possession. Film and TV adaptations of these novels are also covered to a certain extent in the paper, mostly as an illustration how humour from the books can be transposed on the screen and with what effects.

Keywords: academic fiction and its variations, humour and satire, literary transposition in film/TV versions.

1. What is Funny in Academic Fiction?

Since most of critical reviews and cover blurbs on different books tend to describe the academic fiction as comical and humorous, even hilarious, one must immediately ask: what does make that kind of fiction amusing and "uproariously" and "preposterously" funny? In his 1992 Introduction to *Lucky Jim*, David Lodge wrote that this book "introduced a new tone into English Fiction":

> The style is scrupulously precise but eschews traditional 'elegance'. It is educated but classless. While deploying a wide vocabulary it avoids all the traditional devices of humorous literary prose – jocular periphrasis, mock-heroic literary allusion, urbane detachment. It owes something to the 'ordinary language' philosophy that dominated Oxford when Amis was a student there. It is a style continually challenged and qualified by its own honesty, full of unexpected reversals and underminings of stock phrases and stock responses., bringing a bracing freshness to the satirical observation of everyday life. (Lodge, 2000, p. vi)

The more extended answer to the initial question should be: different things, issues, situations and characters in each and every book under such a label. For "a serious academic scrutiny" this is not good enough: one must start with the notion of humour and explain it properly before addressing the actual topic of her/his paper. Let's comply with it. Despite a widespread notion that "humour" is something that everybody is aware of, there have been many opposing notions about its nature, and, even more so, about its connection with laughter.

> Philosophers have been writing about laughter and humor since the time of Plato, but humor did not mean funniness until the end of the seventeenth century, and only in the eighteenth century were amusing, funny, and comic used to mean humorous. So, through history, most discussions about what we now call humor have centered around laughter. (Moreall, 2009, p. 28)

The author, who happens to be both a philosopher and an expert in these issues that can be consulted in many books he has written on the topic, argues that humour considered as amusement is not to be understood as emotion: “Amusement, by contrast, involves cognitive and practical disengagement from what is going on around us. We are not serious, not concerned about dangers and opportunities, and not prepared to act.” (Moreall, 2009, p. 33) However, it seems that research on humour has encompassed several diverse areas in psychology. It covers, at least, three recognizable and distinct types of humour, such as the cognitive (that can be summed up as an answer to the question: “What makes something funny?), developmental (“When do people develop a sense of humour?”), and social (“How is humour used in social interactions?”). So far – just enough!

2. Academic Novel and Its Variations

Nevertheless, one should also, in compliance with usual research standards, offer a possible definition of academic fiction, or, at least, academic/university/campus novel. It must start with medieval feuds between “Town and Gown,” or fierce conflicts between unruly members of academic community (i.e. students) and law-abiding and pious citizens that have happened to suffer a lot from their riotous neighbours. Students seem to be particularly anxious to perform such libertine behaviour in the spring, during the Easter break, when they feel freed to exercise all kinds of forbidden activities before the time of final exams and the summer vacations. It is especially evident in American universities, where, according to Hazard Adams, the academic year goes through three solar stages or cycles: “The fall quarter, or hope, the winter quarter, or endurance, and the spring quarter, or anticipation.” (Adams, 1988, p. 99) It appears that each generation of students in the past wanted to leave their distinctive mark in the forms of various pranks and humorous events that would be remembered and often imitated and repeated by next gen-

erations. And it was deemed to be "normal" to pursue unruly behaviour even during the most important ceremonies, such as convocations, or bestowing honours to the most distinguished members of Academia, dons (Professors) or students alike. Some of them had found way in mid-20th century within the new literary sub-genre nowadays labelled as Campus Novel, University Novel, or the Novel of Academia. Lodge makes a difference between a "Varsity" novel that is mainly "about goings-on of young people at Oxbridge" and Campus novel. (Lodge, 2000, p. vii) For Lodge, *Lucky Jim* (1954) is a classic comic novel, a seminal campus novel, and a novel which seized and expressed the mood of those who came of age in the 1950s." (Lodge, 2000, p. v-vi) It inaugurated the British version of their American counterparts, having been initiated by Mary McCarthy and her book *The Groves of Academe* (1952).

However, Merritt Moseley also mentions the term "college novel," but argues quite correctly that the most appropriate general label could be "academic novel." (Moseley, 2007, p. viii) In his opinion, "campus novel" covers mostly students, and "college" is usually used in American context for a higher education institution, which has been understood by most people in the English-speaking world (and elsewhere) as Academia. In more recent decades the generic term "academic community" has come into use, which brings together all the persons engaged in teaching, studying, or research at the post-secondary education level, as well as all the others who perform certain administrative or technical duties. Therefore, "academic novel" should encompass all the aspects of fictional higher education/ university life, be it students, professors, administrators, or scholars linked with the academic setting or background. Or anybody else, such as alumni or external benefactors (wealthy donors, such as Julius Gore-Urquhart from *Lucky Jim*), associated to it, for that matter, and even unfortunate factory managers, such as Vic Wilcox (*Nice Work*), or provincial cousins Sir George and Lady Bailey (*Possession*), who must endure their eager and imposing academic partners/visitors (Robyn Penrose in *Nice Work*, or Roland Michell and Maude Bailey in *Possession*) that invade their non-academic premises or households under different

pretexts. Following such a distinction, it is possible to identify the three types of British academic fiction within the scope of this paper:

1 "Proper" academic novels are those that remain mostly at and around university setting (*Lucky Jim*, *Changing Places*, and to some extent *Small World* and *Nice Work*) be it teaching, staff meetings or conferences taking place within the premises.

2 "Semi-proper" academic novels focus mostly on picaresque or international travelling motifs associated with gatherings of scholars at their meetings all over the world (*Small World*),

3 "Quasi-proper" or "pseudo-proper" academic novels (*Nice Work*, *Possession*) with academics involved in issues mostly related to people/ events outside university, either as a part of bringing academia closer to the "real sector" (*Nice Work*), or as a backdrop for a romance-cum-detective thriller story (*Possession*).

It is obvious that the analysis will be mostly directed towards the first, and to a smaller extent, the second "type" of novels. Given such an approach, it is conceivable to propose three kinds of academic fiction humour, depending on the observed quality and degree(s) of their social interactions:

1. Simple, crude, mostly physical and easy to grasp by a large audience or readership – "low" (in *Lucky Jim*, and in some aspects of *Changing Places*),

2. More complex, a combination of physical and intellectual features, intended for a selected type of educated readership / audience – "medium" (*Changing Places*, *Small World*),

3. Rather sophisticated, almost entirely intellectual, tailored to ridicule higher academic circles and meant for a refined type of readers – "higher" (*Small World*, *Nice Work*, *Possession*).

3. Campus Novels from Humorous or Satirical Perspective?

Most consulted critics have found direct similarities between the works of Henry Fielding, whom Amis liked and very much praised ever

since his studies at Oxford, notably his novel *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling* (1749) and its more recent re-interpretation in *Lucky Jim* (1954). They were both "humorists, as well as moralists, stressing human follies, especially our appetitive passions and self-exonerations" (Bell, 1998, p. 2). In his essay "Traditional Comedy and the Comic Mask in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*" (published originally in 1978), Bruce Stovel states that there are four characteristics of traditional comedy which figure centrally in the novel:

1. the happy ending,
2. the use of festivity (the arty weekend, the midsummer ball, the Merrie England lecture),
3. the positive mood (good will eventually triumph), and
4. the pervasive comic irony. (Stovel, 1998, p. 158-169)

It can be reasonably argued that it is not the case in terms of all the academic fiction and its humorous elements, which had been earmarked as one of the key features of this sub-genre. Despite the crucial role that *Lucky Jim* has exerted on, particularly, British academic novels (Lodge, 2000, p. viii), and even if the aforementioned three main types of humour within them are considered as highly arbitrary, as well as equally arbitrary categorised aforementioned "types" of academic novels; there are different degrees of how certain authors decided to transpose both humour and satire into their respective books. Each one of them is rather specific even when, as in *the Campus Trilogy*, they happen to be interconnected not only because of their characters, themes or the simple fact that they are sequels. In a larger sense, they all form a cluster of fictional works that revolve about similar yet diverse academic settings that must be regarded both as a sub-genre with all its recognizable features but also as specific, separate books. Such an approach requires a holistic interpretation, where the parts (novels) interact with the sub-genre as a whole, and, vice versa, they mutually influence each other. And it should not be taken lightly just because the humour in some of them is crude or easy to grasp, or more refined and, therefore, difficult to understand or appreciate. It was Lodge who made it very clear:

> *Lucky Jim* is not, for instance, as *continuously* funny as one remembers it being, or as its legend might lead new readers to expect. There are many passages in it where we are not invited to chuckle, or even smile; passages, usually to do with the hero's sentimental education that are surprisingly serious in tone and import. (Lodge, 2000, p. vi)

In other words, to go to the title of this paper: Making fun of academia is a rather serious literary business, or activity for that matter. However, there are some common threads that emerge in the assessment, and the analysis should begin with the central, focal point in the novels under scrutiny here. In his Introduction to the collection of essays dedicated to the topic of academic fiction, Merritt Moseley astutely observes:

> Discussions of the academic novel are, by and large, too humorless. *Most academic novels are comic*. This does not, or need not, make them satiric., and the non-satiric comic novel is not necessarily less worthy than the satiric novel or the so-called "serious" novel (in the lingeringly) Puritan sense whereby comic works cannot also be serious). The academic novel may pursue some of the ideological projects attributed to it by Terry Eagleton or Peter Widdowson, it may be, as Janice Rossen argues, an analysis of power relations; but is also very often *funny*. (Moseley, 2007, p. 18)

Although Moseley, as an editor, opened the pages of his collections to diverse views and opinions by renowned critics from the previous, as well, as his contemporary deliberations, it is obvious that he is inclined to treat the academic novels primarily from their comic and funny perspective. He leaves the satirical features aside, and similar to Stovel's views to some extent. Such an attitude has been for a long time a common approach to Kingsley Amis' exemplary academic novel *Lucky Jim*, for it focuses on obvious examples of comic situations/characters. One might refer here to Moseley's approach as a combination of outer aspects of crude humour, as exemplified in Jim Dixon's

facial expression when displaying his dissatisfaction with almost everybody within his closed circle of academic fellow-colleagues or acquaintances. He also produces disturbing sounds that reflect his drunkenness or bad mood and laughs uncontrollably as if to confirm that he is not ready (or unable) to hide his true feelings unless he praises Professor Welch for the sake of winning his favour about keeping his job at the University. When he speaks in the situations that can be described as "sober" or "normal," he is rather careful when he needs to keep the pretence of being earnest, dedicated and hard-working academic; whereas, when not concerned about his "outer" aspects, Jim's language is harshly critical and uncompromising in his open contempt for his university environment. Moseley finds "that the high incidence of comedy, ranging from the most delicate verbal touches to broad farce, in academic fiction, is one of the most valuable and welcoming traits." (Moseley, 2007, p. 19) In his view, such an approach to "humor adds to the pleasure of readers." (Moseley, 2007, p. 19) In other words, it is the humour that attracts wide readership to this literary sub-genre and not some larger social, political, or spiritual issues in the novels having been written during the 19th and the first half of 20th century. It can be partly explained by the dire need to both demystify the academic setting and observe it from a different, more entertaining, democratic or "lighter," perspective after the still remembered horrors of the World War II; but also, to consider the influx of numerous persons into academia from the lower ranks of society. In this sense, the academic novel from the 1950s is more realistic and appealing than the musings on the times when going to college had been the exclusive opportunity to young people from rich upper classes (usually referred to as "gentlemen-commoners") and it reflected their recollections about that stage of their life as mostly as a waste of time in terms of what they, in fact, could learn from their tutors.

On the other hand, one must, at least mention, the context that had led to the emergence of academic novel. Due to the massive losses of human lives during World War II, and the need to replenish the educated elites of the country once the hostilities ended, the British government had passed the Education Act in 1944 that made the secondary education

obligatory, as well as opened the gates of higher education for thousands of former soldiers as a reward and compensation for their war service. It may be argued that such a political decision was not only pragmatic, but it also brought into the focus formerly unknown or unrecognised places of higher learning, such as Leicester (University College in 1927, the University in 1957) in the Midlands, or Swansea in Wales (University College of Swansea in 1920, The University of Wales Swansea in 1996). Since they could not confer their own degrees, due to the fact that they had been attached to the more prestigious and famous predecessors, there was a general feeling that their level of studies, as well as competence and other aspects of academic life, was lower; thus, attracting equally unpromising students and their respective pretentious teachers. They have been aptly described by a distinguished author Somerset Maugham, who had been flabbergasted by their lack of manners and sophistication:

> They do not go to university to acquire culture, but to get a job, and when they have got one, scamp it. They have no manners, and are woefully unable to deal with any social predicament. Their idea of a celebration is to go a public house and drink six beers. They are mean, malicious and envious. They will write anonymous letters to harass a fellow undergraduate and listen to a telephone conversation that is no business of theirs. Charity, kindliness, generosity are qualities which they hold in contempt. They are scum. They will in due course leave the university. Some will doubtless sink back, perhaps with relief, into the modest class from which they emerged; some will take to drink, some to crime, and go to prison. Others will become schoolmasters and form the young, or journalist and mould public opinion. A few will go into Parliament, become Cabinet Ministers and rule the country. I look upon myself as fortunate that I shall not live to see it. (Bradford, 1989, p. 23)

If Maugham was quite right in his critical observations about these academic upstarts, he also pointed out that their everyday behaviour defies

centuries old traditions and regulations. Most Campus novels are, almost by default, remembered because of their disruption of imposed rules and order. And, again, they mostly describe such topsy-turvy events and conflicts, as well as rather humorous characters within English Departments, who seem to be the best raw material for such a fictional "small" world or microcosm. It is not to say that ridiculing academics does not provoke amusement and laughter, but, rather, that the authors themselves, having come mostly from within the academia as lecturers, researchers or critics/theorists, invested a lot of their creative energy and experience in their respective works to make them light and funny. However, while having this objective on their mind, they used all their cognitive and other mental faculties to provide a believable, realistic setting that could accommodate many diverse yet believable characters within the actual setting of their books. Although they share many similarities that must be associated with their chosen profession in specific time periods – from mid-1950s (*Lucky Jim*) to the late-1960s (*Changing Places*), through late-1970s (*Small World*), as well as 1980s (*Nice Work* and *Possession*) – they are, at the same time, retaining some joint features that inevitably place in the same camp, although, definitely, not in the same campus!

It is at this point that critics argue again about the nature of "funny" vs. "satirical." Many things can be and, in fact, are funny without being ironical or satirical. It is a kind of hearty laughter that most people are prone to when a joke is cracked, or when someone acts clumsily, or the actual situation simply invites the persons present to consider it humorous that make them laugh. It is usually associated with something unexpected or outside the "normal" state of things. One might even say that something becomes funny or humorous when it is out of "ordinary," but only in the presence of other people. Nothing is funny *per se* – it usually needs an audience that will react to a situation or person they find it comic enough to respond to it. A setting in a circus can be taken as an appropriate example, or even a metaphor. People go to circus, among other things, to watch the clowns making funny faces, imitating other people present by pointing out to the way they walk, look, act... The similar ex-

perience can be seen in comedies, either in theatre, or in film or TV. The common thing for all these situations is their visibility. Or, in the case of a radio show, it is the combination of the content-matter with a specific tone of voice that creates the illusion of comic act. And, consequently, an outburst of laughter that is short-lived, awaiting the next few lines that can ensure the continuity of the show until it comes to a normal conclusion within the pre-set period of airing. Although most radio-stations would hire professional text-writers to provide the script, an element of instant improvisation often takes place, and it adds to a feeling of immediacy and easy-going atmosphere.

The situation with literary artworks and their transposition into longer audio-visual shows (film or TV plays/series) is somewhat different. It is primarily due to their length that requires a careful composition or structure to produce the narrative in its complexity. The humour in them is not considered as the major feature of such a work, although there have been many books or films that displayed large quantity of comic and funny elements in them. However, such a humour has its limitations that need to be observed when inserting it within the overall structure of such shows. If it is too obvious, it is usually a rude, base humour that soon becomes repetitive and boring. That is why it must be distributed throughout the narrative, which is usually based upon the tension between two or more characters. Sometimes, it develops into the real conflict, as if it is a battlefield, which adds to the overall sense of drama and suspense. A reader/viewer becomes involved in an ongoing competition between the persons that happen to be on different levels of academic hierarchy. Those in charge – usually senior professors, deans or vice-chancellors/presidents in higher education establishments – try to retain their superior position together with the power and privileges such a status implies, whereas those in subordinate roles – students, junior lecturers or technical staff – search for possibilities to undermine their supremacy by a number of subversive activities. It is at this point that the “classic” academic novel seems to bifurcate into two parallel directions. On the one side, it stays within the confines of subordinate vs. superior character(s), where

lower type of humour tends to dominate, such as in *Lucky Jim*; whereas a more refined, "sophisticated" type of humour, often combined with irony, enters the domain of satire and sarcasm. This kind of humour is to be easily detected in the Campus Novel trilogy by David Lodge, consisting of his three consecutive novels: *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1979), *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988), as well as in A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Nevertheless, one could analyse *Changing Places* and *Small World* separately from *Nice Work* and *Possession*, since the latter two share certain features that somehow "step out" of the traditional university setting. They are more oriented towards the trend of bringing together "the real sector" – i.e. industry as in *Nice Work* – with the academic research, which figures to some extent in *Nice Work* as well, but it is combined with a detective search for clues and power game in *Possession*. Although it is not physically located within the university/campus walls, *Possession* is closely connected to the research and publishing aspect of academic life, as well as the prestige earned by discovering and presenting some earlier unknown facts to the world. If *Lucky Jim* and *Changing Places* revolve around courses of instruction or teaching in general within the usual academic year subdivided into prescribed portions of time (semesters or terms); *Small World* introduces the idea of a "global campus" through a number of academic gatherings/conferences/symposia across the world; whereas *Nice Work* takes its protagonist Robyn Penrose outside the university premises and plunges her into the setting of industry under the so-called "Shadow academia" scheme. On the other hand, *Possession* enters the areas of intrigues, professorial jealousy and struggling young academics (an American Roland Michell and a Britisher Maud Bailey) who try to discover hard evidence about the alleged love affair between a fictional Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash and the love of his life Christabel LaMotte. Therefore, most humorous aspects so visible in other campus novels are not present. It becomes even more obvious in the film version (2003), where it is associated with Roland Michell's lack of knowledge about certain British traditions or behaviour, but he is neither ridiculed in the novel nor in the film version. Or

all the other academics in them, for that matter.

Diverse aspects of humour can be easily recognised in *Changing Places*, as well as in two sequels by Lodge although to a lesser degree than in the first book. Lodge builds comic aspects of his two main academic characters Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp in the parallel, yet opposite situations, where they emerge as funny heroes due to their reversed roles. Nevertheless, there are some obvious similarities to the context of *Lucky Jim*. In many ways Philip Swallow is depicted as a possible advanced variation of Jim Dixon. He seems also to be stuck in the comparable situation, at the imaginary University of Rummidge in UK (most likely Birmingham, where Lodge has taught for decades), where he leads an uneventful life as a mediocre teacher who has not published anything of value for years. He clearly has no ambitions to meddle into the inner power struggle at his department and has no choice but to accept to go as an exchange scholar to the US University of Euphoria. At the time, it has been considered either as a punishment, or, closer to reality, an elegant way of getting rid of the academic whose presence/absence nobody will care even to notice, let alone miss. On the other hand, his American counterpart, a highly ambitious and equally productive in academic terms, Morris Zapp wants to disentangle himself from the troublesome divorce and usual legal complications in California he wants to avoid by going on exchange to Rummidge. For him, it is a kind of journey into academic wilderness since he shows neither the respect nor sympathy for his British fellow-colleagues. Zapp is clearly disgusted by their lack of expertise and prejudices against his own academic work that, paradoxically, dealt with the overall opus of Jane Austen as his lifetime endeavours.

> Their publications were vapid and amateurish, inadequately researched, slackly argued, and riddled with so many errors, misquotations, misattributions, and incorrect dates that it was amazing they managed to get their own names right on the title page. They nevertheless had the nerve to treat American scholars, including even himself, with sneering condescension in their lousy journals. (Lodge, 1979, p. 47)

Such views share certain resemblances with Professor Welch's high opinion about his own standing in Academia, despite the obvious incompetence and unrealistic self-evaluation that the eager American scholar immediately discerns in the provincial British context in *Changing Places*. Zapp can be seen as an early precursor of the generations-to-come academics, who will work hard in order to excel in the competitive, real-world business environment. His utmost ambition is to produce the final *magnus opus* on Jane Austen and to close that chapter once and forever. And not by providing some new and potentially commendable findings but to, literally, exhaust all the sources available, bring them together under his name, and seal them for the posterity. That is why he considers his exchange year to Rummidge more as a tourist trip rather than as a possibility to meet his counterparts and share some of his knowledge with them, or the community at large. In this way, Lodge embarks on his own version of sophisticated academic humour that revolves around the "Demon of Theory," as his renowned French colleague Antoine Compagnon would assert a few decades later in the book with the same title. Making fun of Academia has, indeed, become a rather serious literary enterprise. Such kind of fiction has obviously been intended for the privileged audience, well-versed in the context of heated debates among the top scholars and theorists about the issues in criticism Jim Dixon would absolutely abhor. Lodge literally deconstructs the very notion of "deconstructivism" through Zapp's attitude towards the British professors. He is not at all subtle in his views, but it is the way he has been described anyway. He might be an excellent critic and researcher, but he shares his base instincts towards other people with a version of "Americanized" Jim. If this kind of behaviour has been tolerated in Euphoria because of Zapp's status, and even appreciated as his distinct extravagant nature, Lodge will bring him down to earth when he finally starts to observe the real British people in Rummidge through different, more appreciative lenses. The similar inner transformation will make the otherwise shy and insecure Philip Swallow in Euphoria more open-minded and liberated, which make both of them more humane and closer to "normal" people.

Although the first two novels in the Lodge trilogy involve some external situations and events, such as students protests at Berkeley in 1969 in *Changing Places*, and ever more globalized settings of international academic gatherings throughout the world in 1970s in *Small World*; they both remain firmly within the metaphor of university as a closed-in microcosm. At the same time, these external events, and one should remember that Lodge had spent a year at Berkeley under the international exchange of scholar scheme there in late 1960s, indicated the beginning of opening of the campus novel towards the outside world. The action in *Small World* takes place literally all over the world, and it is no wonder that the central figure that makes it possible is a modest airline clerk Cheryl Summerbee at the Heathrow Airport. She handles the departure details for all the major academic characters, and, in a sense, redirects their tales within the framework of countless coincidences to the fruitful conclusion. Another key female figure behind the curtain is Miss Sybil Maiden, who is the secret mother of twins, Lily and Angelica, whom the real major protagonist Persse McGarrigle pursues all over the world. It makes this book a kind of picaresque narrative, quite in line with similar medieval stories, which Umberto Eco wonderfully recreated in his "mock academic" novel *The Name of the Rose*. However, this is a corporate, business-like world, in which academics behave more like travelling salesmen than traditional dignified university dons. The problem is that they do not sell their expertise as valuable merchandise (i.e. higher levels of knowledge), but are mainly concerned about power games, sexual escapades, or any other type of "worldly" pleasures. It is for this reason that the label "Campus Novel" should be attributed to the setting primarily taking place within a traditional university milieu of teaching and some research, with a number of extracurricular activities that want to assert specific cultural role most senior academics, such as a pretentious Professor Welch, seem themselves designated for.

The class division often comes to surface in the novel, but Amis uses them skilfully when addressing larger sets of issues, such as higher education, from the perspective of upper middle classes (i.e. the Welches

and a senior academic lot) and those from the working-class origins. It is there that his criticism is not just satirical but quite sharp and precise. The same applies for his ignorance of a high culture, which is a pervasive motif in the novel, in addition (or even a clear contrast) to everyday, boring academic duties, such as teaching, attending conferences, researching, and publishing articles or books. It is evident that Jim does not realize that "Culture" is included within the topic for his special course he is supposed to teach the next academic year, if stayed with the History department. The official title is "Medieval Life and Culture", which has been, definitely, suggested by Professor Ned Welch.

Such issues are constant threats to Jim's lack of competence, or even to his understanding of even a plain piece of information. He often has no clue of what it means when other people mention casually certain things related to their expertise, the line of work or social and academic standing, as if everybody must definitely know what it is all about. Jim responds to these challenges almost instinctively. Being a person of the people – a commoner and ordinary, totally unpretentious and hostile to everything what has always been outside his mental grasp and physical presence, he might appear rude and barbaric when referring to a "filthy Mozart", but, at least, he is honest and straight-forward in his views and opinions. The best strategy he could apply when faced with these false aspects of high culture is to make fun of those pretentious characters. Jim is an excellent imitator, who impersonates the way Professor Welch speaks, especially when his senior Department's don answers the phone with preposterous "History speaking," meaning both the subject and his supposed role in life. On the other hand, Jim can change his voice when making obscene phone calls from public booths to the Welches' residence, or to enact a marvellous if almost totally drunken performance in front of the solemn academic audience on the topic of "Merrie England." He had struggled for months to write something meaningful about it within the given timing but was eventually forced to admit that his findings were disastrous. His conclusion is definitely meant to put an end to yet another academic myth: "The point about Merrie England, is that it was about the

most unMerrie period in our history." (Amis, 1954, p. 227) Most of his observations within the lecture could be applied to the academic post-war provincial British setting that wanted stubbornly to keep the illusion of never-attained grandeur of the bygone days. Playing madrigals is yet another proof that the imitation of high culture is equally false as the ancient myths of happy, pastoral England, when Oxford and Cambridge had tried not to lag behind their medieval university counterparts in Europe. At that point, the rude humour transforms itself into a harsh satire, which can be detected in the final outcome of the narrative. Bradbury sees this as an example of personal and professional integrity: "Dixon represents the contemporary truth-teller, and his innocent language is an empirical morality, in which honesty is better than self-deceit, common sense better than pretensions." (Bradbury, 1994, p. 322) It is worth mentioning yet another Bradbury's sentence: "The force and the comic strength of the book lie in the cultural and linguistic substitutions it performs: common-sense prose replaces literary prose" (Bradbury, 1994, p. 321). By a sheer stroke of luck, Jim will eventually leave the History Department: he loses the job he has not been keen about anyway, but he gets both the girl and a position in London that suits better his abilities and views about the life in contemporary Britain in mid-1950s. As if the final predicament becomes self-evident: it is better to be lucky at the outside than to live in a self-imposed lie within the academic confines.

4. Mistaken Identities and Romantic Involvements as a Source for Humour

It is the devastating conclusion on the value of the British provincial academics and their futile efforts to follow the examples of the most prestigious Oxbridge examples and, eventually, succeed in their efforts. In *Lucky Jim* it is mostly the discrepancy between traditional expectations about the outer appearance and inner revelations about the faculty members that create a rather disconcerting, if not a totally negative picture about the academic world. The same applies to those who happen

to be within its immediate sphere, i.e. the family members, such as Mrs. Welch and her two sons Bertrand and Michel Welch, and the outsiders, such as Christina Callaghan, who are somehow connected to them. In *Changing Places*, it is based on a number of contradictions that gradually deconstruct the behaviour of two interrelated protagonists, Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp, as well as their respective spouses, Hilary and Desirée, in the context of the world which had entered into the process of transformation in the late 1960s. These changes have, in the meantime, become very obvious in *Small World* that is, at the same time, striving to be global while more and more fragmented. It could be well observed in the episodic structure of the book, whose academics are constantly on the move in airplanes from USA and Britain to Europe, Asia and back to Europe and America again. The key features in this novel are mistaken identities that provide a suitable backdrop for a number of seemingly not connected narratives to establish much-needed progression towards the resolution. Both *Nice Work* and *Possession* revolve around the idea of scholarly (re)search that would, eventually, bring closer not only two pairs of romantically involved couples (Robyn and Vic, Maude and Roland) and a possible union, if not the happy ending. In a way, the idea of creating a disturbance by a series of undermining events within the academic world, which provide the necessary tension and enable diverse aspects of humour to be inserted at places as both the important structural element and a cause for laughter and amusement, seems to work well within the subgenre of modern academic romance. Although the initial emotional attachment and a consequent "love stories" between Jim and Margaret, Philip and Hilary, Morris and Desirée, Persse and Angelica, Robyn and her previous companion, Vic and his wife, as the original couples undergo major changes in terms of new partners, they happen to be necessary for the evolvement of narratives to follow. In the process of quest, new persons would be sought out in order to re-establish the protagonists' desires towards fulfilment of their love urges. Therefore, Jim would be, in the end, united with Christina, Philip and Morris would not only exchange their academic positions but also their wives (and Philip has,

in between, a brief affair with Melanie Byrd, the daughter of Morris and Desirée), only to close their respective affairs in an act of reconciliation at the very end of the book in a mock film/TV section in the New York hotel.

If there is another unifying thread in most British academic novels, it is this aspect of romantic involvement that often includes illicit or forbidden sexual or extramarital activities. As if the university setting beyond the reach of the numerous limitations of the "outside" and real, conservative and moralistic, world is prone to such a libertine behaviour. There is not a single novel in this sub-genre that leaves this opportunity aside. In a way, it can be taken as yet another trademark of academic community, at least from the point of view of its college novel authors, who, by default, happened to be involved with teaching and research before embarking on their professional writing careers. This is not to say that sexuality has been a dominant topic just for the sake of revealing the specific kind of freedom that academics exercise as their own prerogative of being different from other "normal" people, but as both a structural literary device and a reflexion on the image of Academia as an adequate space for such a kind of behaviour. One needs to remember the context of the "sexual liberation movement" in the 1960s, which had, in actuality, emerged from the US universities alongside with the human and civil rights movement at the same period. Together with the first demands for other minority rights, which included feminist, gender and supporters of the same sexual orientation among the gays and lesbian, all these movements were directed towards the major changes within the social texture of the Western consumerist society. They had the similar type of liberating energy as the humour within the universities themselves in 1950s. It could be even argued that both aspects deconstructed the allegedly solid and conservative image "the groves of Academe" had had among the people in the outside world. That is why the diverse examples and possible explanations of both the "low" and "high(er)" types of humour in the selected novels should be presented.

Needless to say, that such romantic, or to be more precise, sexual relationships/partnerships are the source of confusion that, as a consequence,

produce humorous effects. It is one of those common features in academic fiction, since there a plenty of examples of extramarital "excursions" between, mostly, senior academics and their not necessarily younger lovers. In addition to Melanie and Philip in *Changing Places*, there is Robyn Dempsey and one of his students, who threatens to expose him if he did not give her a passing mark for her paper. *Small World* is the case in point. Philip Swallow would discover that Joy Simpson, with whom he had had a one-night stand at her home in Genoa, did not die in a plane crash, as he has been led to believe after the news report, but had another child, the girl whom he had fathered. Professor Arthur Kingfisher would discover, towards the end of the MLA Conference, that he had been the father of Angelica and Lily Pabst, with Sybil Maiden (!) at the moment he just announced his plan to marry his much younger Korean assistant Sung-Mi Lee. The same goes for Morris Zapp, who marries for the third time (!), to Thelma Ringbaum, the former wife of yet another academic loser Howard Ringbaum. Divorces seem to be almost normal for eager academics, whose spouses could no longer bear to be neglected because of academic duties or research of their respective partners. Entering freely into new relationships without too much hesitation about the consequences is in a clear contrast to the image of composed and intelligent professors. It makes them both vulnerable and funny, and somehow discredits their superior appearance as the role models of humane and academic integrity. However, as the overall situation has begun to change in UK with numerous cuts in the higher education in mid 1980s, and the Thatcher's government has devised a scheme to bring together the academia with falling British industry, a new niche for closer encounters between the characters from incongruous backgrounds duly opened up in *Nice Work*.

In order to appreciate a rather specific use of humour in this book, one needs to pay attention to the way it has been structured. The novel follows at least two set of parallel plots, each developed through the two quite opposite characters, who are supposed to learn more about each other during the ten weeks winter term at the University of Rummage. The basic idea is that a university lecturer pays regular weekly visit to one

of the local factories and see in person how the world of industry is operating. The academic side is represented by a younger temporary lecturer in English Literature, Dr. Robyn Penrose, whereas Victor Wilcox, in his early forties, stands as "a captain of industry", or, rather, the Managing Director of J. Pringle metal-working plant. Both characters ae quite unwilling to perform the task. Robyn, whose Ph.D. was on the industrial 19th century English novel, knows virtually nothing on that aspect of "real" life, since she has been too busy to absorb difficult literary theories on deconstruction and poststructuralism, as well as feminism, from the mainly French sources during her studies at Cambridge, and is trying currently to apply them in her lectures to a bunch of not so interested students. Victor, or Vic as he is usually referred to, on the other hand, is an eager and overambitious executive who had been entrusted to rationalize the working process and bring the factory on the profit margin when most of the similar plants in Western Midlands have shut down. Despite these initial differences, both characters share the earnest desire to do their respective tasks to the best of their abilities. It is Robyn who hopes to keep the permanent position once her three years as a substitute for the Dean of the English Department, as well as, at the same time, the Head of the Faculty of Arts, Professor Philip Swallow, comes to an end. Vic wants to keep not only his lucrative job, which enables him to support his wife and three children in a large and lavishly furnished Victorian-style mansion, but to climb further up at the business level, and, eventually, start his own company if his idea to invent a specific gadget goes through.

It is obvious that both are exerts and versatile in what they do, but completely ignorant on what the opposite party happens to be competent in. The ignorance is a major source of mutual misunderstandings and wrong opinions, not to mention a clear bias and different social class and background that seems to only intensify the tension that exists from their very first meeting. It is the real source of humour in the novel. Lodge acts again as an omniscient narrator, who alternates between the two sides in the manner somewhat reminiscent of his method in the previous two novels. Only this time, he dedicates quite a large portion of informa-

tion about the literary theories he wants to ridicule, through the intellectual exchanges between Robyn and her long-time companion/partner Charles, himself an academic at the University of Suffolk, a specialist in Romantic literature. Even since they met as undergraduates, they started to maintain a kind of open relationship, without even thinking to get married, or having children for that matter. In time, they both agreed to see each other on weekends (Charles mostly driving to Robyn's house at Rummidge), discuss endlessly the theories, political and social issues in the country experiencing drastic changes under the Tory government of Margaret Thatcher, and enjoying, what they call, "intellectual sex" that includes occasional massage and not the usual coital penetration. In this way, Vic's marriage to Marjorie is on the similar track, since she has lost the active interest in such things and is preoccupied with a handbook on dealing with problems caused by a menopause. These backdrop situations have been presented separately but occurring one after the other in the first third of the novel, which contained an abundance of little details necessary to set up the stage for Robyn's and Vic's multiple battles.

These battles are being fought every Wednesday when Robyn dutifully comes to the plant and follows Vic's activities as "a shadow." During long hours spent together, Vic is in a position to show his unwanted female guest the intricacies about the plant he runs quite efficiently, yet facing a number of everyday difficulties with both his crew of directors and workers in general. At first not interested a bit about her role, Robyn becomes involved in her noble attempt to inform an unskilled Indian worker that he was to be sacked due to his improper operating the machinery in the foundry. Lodge is very careful not to meddle too much on the racial and ethnic/immigrant issues, although he provides just about enough pieces of information to make his readership aware of the overall resentment that the majority of white Britishers had felt about their former colonial subjects who were ready to do the dirty jobs they no longer wanted to do, as long as they remained excluded from entering into the ranks of established class and gender-oriented system. Since Robyn as a fervent feminist and activist for academic rights also felt excluded for

these ranks, her intervention on behalf of Danny Ram, the untrained Indian worker apparently chosen to be sacked for not being able to operate the machinery in a devious trick to be played on him; shows both her idealistic views on how to "change the world" through the application of dubious literary theories on real life. However, this incident makes both her and Vic aware that they had to know not only each other personally better, but also their respective expertise and lines of work.

It is on this level that some glimpses of humour can be detected. As far as academia is concerned, or some academics, there is nothing new there. Lodge retains Philip Swallow, Bob Busby and Robert Sutcliff from his previous books as a convenient backdrop for making fun of their traditional routines, quarrels and inconsistencies. Even a cameo appearance of Morris Zapp towards the end of the book appears artificial and imposed without a real reason. The full focus is on Robyn and, to some extent, on Charles, who, eventually, leaves the scene fascinated by the lucrative prospects of being a banker in the City in London. Perhaps, he should also be considered "lucky" having escaped the boring university routines! Their conversation about academic issues only on some occasions lapse into some kind of humorous exchanges and comments on their zeal to excel as rebels, or even revolutionaries, in the field of literary theory. However, Lodge seems to ridicule himself by giving a lot of space to his own musings on metaphor and metonymy (as he wrote in his famous monographs on the topic), which appear far-fetched when Vic discusses them during the reverse shadow scheme while attending Robyn's tutorials. The same can be said about his interest in the English 19th-century novel, or Tennyson's poetry, although he tries hard not to appear stupid when posing right questions in the discussion group. On the other hand, Robyn has really never appreciated the world of industry, and on rare occasions can make comments on Vic's appearance or his ignorance in a blatant humorous manner. She begins to understand him better and to respect his honest efforts to improve the quality of the company doomed to be sold to the rival company he himself wanted to defeat. In-between, his infatuation with Robyn grows in regular portions.

Admiring her intellectual side develops into a secret erotic obsession, which comes to a fruition during the business trip to Frankfurt, where her knowledge of German helped him to close the deal successfully with the local manufacturers within the sum he had earmarked for the purchase of some modern machines. After the two of them end in the hotel bed and make passionate love during the night, Vic starts making fool of himself by insisting of his romantic devotion to Robyn. He is even ready to divorce his unattractive and depressed wife despite his dad's warning that he should not make the mistakes like many others in the similar situation.

In a way, most of the humour in the novel results from failed relationships, such as between Vic and Marjorie, Charles and Robyn, her brother Basil and his companion Debbie, and, eventually, between Charles and Debbie who, having left their previous partners, realize that their decision proved to lead to a disaster. Nevertheless, Robyn's insistence that her one-night stand with Vic was just sexual and nothing else seems to be justified in the end with Vic's reconciliation with his own family once he has been fired from his position by his superiors. As a sudden tour-de force Robyn receives a huge inheritance from her distant uncle Walter who died in Australia, which makes her 'a lucky Robyn!" Upon the invitation by Morris Zapp to apply for the position at Euphoric State University in the newly established Centre for Women's Studies (which is his devious scheme to prevent his former spouse Desirée to get it), she decides to stay at Rummidge as a concession to Philip Swallow's finally deciphering the real meaning of the word "*virement*":

> Apparently, it means the freedom to use funds that have been designated for a particular purpose, in a budget, for something else. We haven't had virement in the Faculty before, but we're going to get it next year.' (*Nice Work*, p. 383)

This is the last instance of Philip's growing deafness, which often creates confusion in his incorrect hearing the words containing mostly consonants and vowels. Whenever such a situation occurs, it is a kind of dry

academic humour that is somehow subdued. There is almost nothing of Jim Dixon's pranks, or really funny and witty dialogues in *Changing Places* or *Small World*. The only possible instance is Robyn's decision to send a Gorillagram to a bank in a City in the middle of the morning. It refers to a popular practice at the time to send a so-called Kissogram to, usually a male person, as an embarrassment, since the message is delivered by a girl in her nickers. However, since Robyn accepts to stay at Rummidge for another year, one could have expected the fourth instalment of the Academic Trilogy by Lodge to follow, but he cared not to write it. Perhaps he had it enough with the four episodes of BBC 2 TV series *Nice Work* he had written the script for in 1989. The mini-series was aired in October 1989 and received well-deserved praises both in terms of its literary adaptation and its production and actual execution. As it happened, it coincided with the fall the Berlin Wall and, consequently of Communism, which changed utterly not only the course of the world affairs, but also many aspects of British fiction that found itself on the crossroad. Some sub-genres, such as detective fiction, survived, but the others found themselves in a cul-de-sac.

5. Exhaustion or a Dead End of Academic Fiction?

Despite its popularity and impact on the postmodernist fiction in general, it can be concluded that the campus novel as a distinct literary sub-genre has reached its creative potential at the dawn of globalized world and its transformation into high-tech society towards the end of 20th century. This phenomenon somehow corresponded with the impasse of both the decades-long quarrels among the leading names in the field about the importance of theory and criticism in discussing, among others, the role of literature in the changing circumstances and conditions in the world at large after the long period of the Cold War, as well as the emergence of new literary voices from previously neglected cultures and their accomplishments, be it in the former colonies or other parts of the alleged "Third World." As observed from a historic distance, a few

decades into the 21st century, it can be concluded that the academic fiction exhausted its innovative and appealing topics and found itself in a dead-end. Occasional attempts to revive its characteristics by either the "old dogs" such as Kingsley Amis (*Jake's Thing*, 1978) or Lodge (*Deaf Sentence*, 2008) yielded no such good results. The same applies to the "new Turks" such as Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*, 1992), or James Hynes (*The Lecturer's Tale*, 2001). The same can be said for a number of books where creative writing is the focus of studies, or some extravagant and possessed writers undergo all kinds of transformations, be it an eccentric and all-knowledgeable Blue van Meer who is able to resolve a murder mystery (Marisha Pessl, *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*, 2006), or the lost memoirs from 18th century thief and a transgender person Jack Sheppard, suddenly discovered by a rogue professor two hundred years later (Jordy Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, 2018); or a group of aggressive members of a secret group attending a creative writing MFA programme (Mona Awad, Bunny, 2019). Students coming from different countries or from opposite social and class background have remained interesting narratives, such as the tender relationship between Seline, a Turkish student of linguistics and her older Hungarian fellow-colleague Ivan, who studies mathematics at Harvard (Elif Batuman, *The Idiot*, 2017); or a love story between Connell and Marianne coming from opposite social and class background who develop their relationship at the Trinity College in Dublin (Sally Rooney, *Normal People*, 2018). In one of the more recent titles, with similar backdrop, a groundkeeper and aspiring writer Owen Callahan falls in love with Alma Hadzic, 26-years old Princeton graduate who comes from a family of Bosnian Muslim refugees and teaches as a writer-in-residence at Ashby college in Kentucky (Lee Cole, *Groundskeeping*, 2022). These kind of romantic stories are often complemented by sexual escapades of an old professor in a small liberal college reminiscent of charismatic teacher, as it once had been the famous writer Nabokov, only in modern disguise as a notorious seducer of female students (Julia May Jonas, *Vladimir*, 2022). They belong to a long line of the traditional themes in academic fiction of turbulent intimate relationships between

professors and students (Pamela Erens, *The Virgins*, 2013; Susan Choi, *My Education*, 2013), or they cover some troublesome marital tissues (Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 2011).

It is interesting to note that, with a few exceptions, English Departments or Humanities for that matter, are no longer the main setting for campus novels. One needs to mention just a few examples: sports in Chad Harbach, *The Art of Fielding* (2011), maths in Christopher J. Yates, *Black Chalk* (2013), biochemistry in Brandon Taylor, *Real Life* (2020), or the book whose title says it all - Weike Wang, *Chemistry* (2017). On the other hand, there are novels whose main characters are admission officers (Jean Hanff Korelitz, *Admission*, 2009), or those who decide about the future students (Julie Schumacher, *Dear Committee Members*, 2014), or teach at prep schools (as in Tobias Wolff, *Old School*, 2003, or Curtis Sittenfeld, *Prep*, 2005); or as adjunct teachers (Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind*, 2021). Similarly, there was a spill-over from other sub-genres, such as teaching artificial intelligence (Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2.*, 1995), gothic romances (Elisabeth Thomas, *Catherine House*, 2020, or Emily M. Danforth, *Plain Bad Heroines*, 2020), or a film professor who teaches podcasting, as in the most recent novel by Rebecca Makkai, *I Have Some Questions For You* (2023). The list is far from being exhaustive, although it serves as a possible guideline for those interested in the most recent books that can be covered by the label academic fiction. Perhaps, it is best to end here (not to conclude!) with the title that pretends to be all-encompassing yet highly appropriate for this paper: *All is Forgotten, Nothing is Lost* by Lan Samantha Chang (2010). Let us hope that some new books of a kind, perhaps dealing with online or distance learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemics, will eventually emerge and rejuvenate the sub-genre with different insights of the life in academia. And let us pray that they will be funny and humorous and interesting to read! Otherwise, they will be definitely forgotten, and nothing, if at all, will be lost. What do you think?

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Humor and Women: Contemporary American Comedy

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ABSTRACT

In the long history of the dramatic genre, the subgenre of comedy, frequently conjoined with humor and laughter, has not always fared well. In Poetics, Aristotle proposed that comedy is a more trivial and lesser form of art than tragedy. This is both because of the object and purpose of its mimesis, and its first reception as an unserious form, as it was connected with "lampooning" and "phallic songs", and the "imitation of characters of a lower type" (1898, p. 9). When examining the condition of Elizabethan literature in his Defence of Poesie several centuries later, Sir Philip Sidney claimed that a key error of contemporary comedians was the presumption that "there is no delight without laughter … [when] Laughter hath only a scornful tickling" (1595/1993, p. 497). By the mid-twentieth century, however, the comic (sub)genre had firmly repositioned itself, eschewing the overpowering shade of tragedy and its reputation as inconsequential diversion.

Prompted by consistently repeated assertions that women dramatists have neither a sense of humor nor a place in theater, and informed by Colletta's "Postmodernity and the Gendered Use of Political Satire" (2014), Andrew Stott's Comedy (2005), and Howe Kritzer's "Comedies by Early American Women" (1999), this paper examines comic elements in two plays by American women dramatists: Wendy Wasserstein's "Isn't It Romantic?" (1979), and Lynn Nottage's "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark" (2011). Its purpose is to identify elements that provoke laughter and simultaneously attempt social critique, thereby rebutting claims against both the genre and women within it.

Keywords: comic genre, gender studies, theater studies, Lynn Nottage, Wendy Wasserstein, "Isn't It Romantic?", "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark"

1. Introduction

Any time the topic of humor is foregrounded in studies at the intersection of literature, theater and performing arts, a multitude of scientific and research avenues opens up. From seemingly simple clowning, to physical and dark humor, to satire, irony and parody, to improvisational street-theater and popular stand-up performances, literary and cultural concepts, forms and (sub)genres tied to the phenomenon of humor are bountiful. Nevertheless, the comic genre is necessarily one of the most general notions that first crosses the minds of researchers into theater and dramatic literature, and that subsumes the various manifestations of humor in theater and the arts. The genre of comedy has had a tumultuous and challenging history, both in practice and theory; its inherent features have developed and transformed as much as its reputation and reception have been ameliorated. Its relation to other dramatic forms and to various literary and cultural practices has been much debated in theoretical, historical and analytical literature, and its expansive considerations have included the standing of women authors and/or practitioners in this literary-art form, especially since the 1980s, and with the rise of feminist and gender (theater) studies.

The current paper focuses on American women and the comic genre, thereby combining the author's two major fields of interest—gender studies, and drama and the performing arts. The research is motivated by consistent negations of the serious nature/intentions of the subgenre and its women creators, and by recent gender-based backlashes that claim women authors have no sense of humor nor are they good at comedy-writing. To disprove these repudiations, the paper first examines the comic genre from a diachronic (historic and literary-theoretical) perspective; then foregrounds women in comedy, and their allegedly dubious relation with humor and the comic mirror; and, finally, analyses the comic elements in two selected plays by twentieth- and twenty-first-century American women authors.

1.1. Comedy in Literary and Cultural Theory

Frequently tied to mirth and brazen irreverence in general perception, comedy as a subgenre of dramatic literature and performing arts has historically been looked down on, and harshly evaluated in comparison to its much-more-esteemed sister, tragedy. According to Aristotle (1898), comedy "imitate[s] the actions of meaner persons" (p. 8), and "aims at presenting men as worse" (p. 6). It is generally associated with "lampooning" and "phallic songs", and with the "imitation of characters of a lower type" (p. 9). In his eponymous *Comedy* (2005), Andrew Stott imparts that the subgenre most likely originated from rural revelry songs (p. 4), and that it was presumably not recognized as a "significant literary form" (p. 4) until its inclusion in the City Dyonisia festival in the late fifth century BCE. Nicoll Allardyce (1931) asserts that from the earliest theoretical discourse on drama, comedy was the name given to a phenomenon that "dealt with joyousness and mirth, making use of humbler figures" (p. 85); and that by default, and in the minds of many literary and cultural figures, Dante included, it should "'begin adversely and terribly, but close on a note of happiness, delight, and charm,' being expressed in a style 'mild and humble.'" (Dante, as cited in Allardyce, 1931, p. 85).

Over time, the genre received additional features, in terms of: its subject matter, i.e., "familiar and domestic occurrences, not to say base and even vicious" (Daneillo, as cited in Allardyce, 1931, p. 85); its character types, i.e., "the middle sections of society—common people of the city or the country" (ibid.), more precisely "characters from rustic, or low city life" (Scaliger, ibid.), or "people in middle or low condition" (Chapelain, ibid.); and its structure, i.e., the ultimate happy ending (Chapelain, ibid., p. 85; Allardyce, 1931, p. 86; Stott, 2005, p. 1). It is generally accepted that comedy is to "be funny, and that during the course of its actions no-one will be killed" (Stott, 2005, p. 1); further, the genre is expected to involve situations "where some kind of problem must be resolved" (ibid.), and the consequent happy-ending followed by a "communal celebration" (ibid.) is anticipated. In the early days of its formation, comedy would rarely have included political and satirical criticism, but was rather "en-

couraged to move away from current affairs … [and] commended for its realistic representation of the human condition." (ibid., p. 5). This perception persisted well into nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century.

The overall tone of a comic play, in whichever form and/ or subgenre it appeared, had to be light and festive, and the effect it produced on audiences one of contentment and delight, such as arose from the expressive laughter and scenes of nuptial ceremonies, which commonly closed the plays. Select theoreticians protested such trivialization of the genre, including Sir Philip Sidney who claimed that although it was connected with "delight" (1595/1993, p. 497), comedy was not necessarily tied to laughter, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, who objected to authors and critics equating it with the types of characters that populated it. Despite these solitary efforts, before the twentieth century and the rise of Shaw's high comedies of ideas, Beckett's and Ionesco's tragi-comedies of the theater of the absurd, and Pinteresque comedies of menace (all from the Anglophone tradition), comic authors were to avoid seriousness in subject-matter and/or tone; non-funny and dark incidents in their plots; round and dynamic characters; ambiguous and open endings; and the evocation of empathy/sympathy (Čirić-Fazlija, 2019). As Allardyce (1931) points out, claiming M. Bergson as the original author of the interpretation: "comedy depends upon insensibility on the part of the audience. As soon as we begin to sympathize then we utterly lose the spirit of laughter, and we begin to sympathize when we see before us not types but personalities." (p. 188). In other words, unlike tragedies, whose ultimate goal has always been the audience's emotional release—achieved through its identification and adjacent empathy with the struggles of complex and multifaceted tragic heroes—comedies have not traditionally demanded such an impassioned response of its recipients. Rather, their immediate effect (and by-product), laughter, has been achieved through the viewer's comparative detachment from the stock, one-dimensional characters impersonated on the stage. Stott (2005) supports this understanding, and refers to the phenomenon as the "cruelty of comedy", which he explains is "a

certain degree of desensitization ... allow[ing the audience] to stand back and look upon human misfortune from an emotional distance ...” (p. 12).

Comedy has, however, proven a truly permeable genre, and contemporary culture, especially the performing arts and the subgenre of stand-up comedy, therefore teaches us that it may appear in its darker hue, and may probe serious, even taboo topics (e.g., cringe humor or rape jokes). Further, comedy can present either types or individualized characters, and is not obliged to offer a neat, happy resolution of the (external) conflict of its protagonists and society. Nor do the audiences laugh because they distance themselves from the grotesquely exaggerated features and demeanors of lower social types, but they smirk and guffaw, often with hesitation or embarrassment, or even sometimes guilt, because in the fairly individualized comic personae’s actions (the notorious comic voice) they recognize their own inadequacies and social expectations and mores, which they have been attempting to defy and surmount.

That the times and comic genre have indeed changed is testified to by Allardyce’s 1930s statement, that:

> The increase of sensibility, the product of emotion and of feeling, rapidly kills the available sources of the comic, and may explain not only the lack of appreciation we feel in many Elizabethan comedies, but also the fact that so few true comedies are produced in modern times. (p. 188)

This observation of the alleged death of comedy (Segal, as cited in Stott, 2005, p. 6) might have been truthful in the early twentieth century, but can no longer be taken at face value. Comedy, in whatever variant, form or medium, has claimed predominance in the performing arts of our contemporaneity (see Antler, 2011, p. 170), as proven in the number of its performers and suggested by many researchers, critics and reviewers, including Joyce Antler in “One Clove Away From a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians” (2011); Andrea Greenbaum in “Women’s Comic Voices: The Art and Craft of Female Humor” (1997); Jason Zinoman in “Female Comedians Breaking the Taste-Taboo

Ceiling" (2011); Shawn Levy in "The Trailblazing Women Who Changed the Face of Comedy" (2022); and Lisa Colletta in "Postmodernity and the Gendered Use of Political Satire" (2014), to name a few. And, unlike its incarnation prior to the twentieth century (especially that conceived and performed before the centuries' latter half), comedy is no longer light, unserious, apolitical or insignificant and silly tomfoolery for its disengaged audiences. This is largely the result of efforts by comic authors and performers, who have been pushing the genre beyond its literary- and socio-historic conventions and limitations. Additionally, Linda Hutcheon's opposition to claims that postmodernist playfulness and parody imply a lack of seriousness or substance has also helped create the contemporary, less biased, perception of comedy and comedians, whether authors or performers[15].

1.2. Women and/in (US) Comedy

Despite these changes, the issue of whether women can "do" comedy remains contentious. Do they possess a sense of, or penchant for, humor and satire? Are they funny (i.e., is this part of their nature and character), and is it proper (i.e., socially acceptable) for women to tell jokes? Are they mere recipients and/or targets of humor, or are they active agents in the evocation of laughter? That these questions and dilemmas have been part of public and scientific discourse involving theater and performing arts studies since ancient times (and gender studies for at least half a century) might seem unusual to contemporary audiences and critics. Surrounded by such fantastic performers as Tina Fey, Whitney Cummings, Ali Wong, Wanda Sykes, Sarah Millican, Sarah Pescoe, Alice Levine, Catherine Tate, Sophie Duker, and the still refreshing Whoopi Goldberg,[16] we do not doubt that women are as capable as men in this regard.

15 For more information on Linda Hutcheon's arguments in favor of postmodernism and postmodernist parody, see Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988); and Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms* (2000).

16 The selection of artists mentioned here is fairly random and only significant in that it reveals the author's comedic preferences.

Long-standing prejudices against women in the arena of public life, theater included, however, have led to more recent versions of insidious gender chauvinism, thinly veiled as ironic commentary. Such claims hold that women's anatomy and biology—i.e., having a uterus and the ability to birth a child—and social nurturing turn women into "tender hearts", who would "prefer that life be fair and even sweet" (Hitchens, 2007, n.p.), and that this prevents them from having a sense of humor or the ability to perform comedy, because humor is "a sign of intelligence", "filth … is what the customers want", and "jokes about calamitous visits to the doctor, or the shrink or the bathroom, or the venting of sexual frustration or furry domestic animals are a male province" (ibid., n.p.). Despite the fact that Hitchens's 2007 column raised quite a few eyebrows and received an appropriate "dressing down by really funny women" (Colletta, 2014, p. 208), humor and satire have traditionally been perceived as aggressive (ibid., p. 207) and even "confrontational" (Greenbaum, 1997, p. 117), and therefore the assumed domain of men:

> Humor is aggression[;] because women are not rewarded socially for being funny (but rather for being nice to men), and had to live a life dealing with what she terms trivialities, there is likely to be a difference in women's and men's senses of humor: women's humor is subtler than men's—it is rooted in everyday events. (Kramarae, p. 58, as cited in Greenbaum, p. 119)

It is questionable to even suggest that (American) women dramatists cannot and do not write in the genre of comedy, when the traditions of eighteenth-century American theater and performing arts (which were transplanted from the UK) included "acceptance of women as playwrights: … early American women praised and explored freedom in the comedies they wrote." (Howe Kritzer, 1999, p. 3). Moreover, in the meagre theatric production of the country's colonial era (prior to the American Revolutionary War), comedies by women (such as those composed by Mercy Otis Warren) offered images of the American female subject, and placed such characters center-stage in their versions of "the pursuit

of happiness [which is] a classic comedic theme but also one of the inalienable rights named in the preamble to the US Constitution" (ibid, p. 3). This tendency continued during the war's aftermath: in her text "Comedies by Early American Women" (1999) Amelia Howe Kritzer identifies four women comic authors in the New Nation period (1783-1815) who, although unable to acquire a living and profit from playwriting, helped shape American theater. These authors challenged the assumed gender dynamics in their plays as much as they transformed the comic genre. Dramatic authors Susanna Haswell Rowson, Judith Sargent Murray, Mary Carr Clarke, and Sarah Pogson unapologetically positioned their female characters "in the center, where they initiate action and speak their mind" (Howe Kritzer, 1999, p. 11). Consequently, their respective plays "assume[d] a basic level of power for women … [and] revise[d] comic form in their endings", placing an emphasis not on marriage ceremonies, but on the "reunion of families or communities, … offer[ing] a symbolic representation of America as a unified family or community in which *both males and females pursue happiness* as couples or *as individuals*" (ibid., added emphasis). Although a more conformist image of the American women would be projected in comedies by women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Howe Kritzer (1999) asserts that women's comedies of the early national period:

> present communities of women, old and young, signaling a concern with collective [sic], as well as individual, pursuit of happiness – and thus with the question of women's political power and status. … Within these female-centered communities, the women develop non-traditional strengths as well as traditional virtues. All the female characters actively pursue goals: … Most exhibit an emotional strength that carries them through danger and adversity, enabling them to place themselves in jeopardy to secure the safety or happiness of those they love. … The happy endings of the plays, however, provide reassurance that women do no permanent harm by their exercise of freedom, even if they encounter accidents. … Though they do not explicitly ar-

> gue for political rights, they demonstrate a consistent interest in the status of women. The female characters prove their ability to handle responsibility, and the playwrights signal optimism about their status in the future through the non-hierarchical groupings of men and women at the end, whose voices equally proclaim the greatness of the United States. (p. 12–13)

Discussing the idiosyncratic subject-matter, features, style and techniques of comedies and comic performances in (selected) plays by women, however, demands a more extensive study than this paper attempts. In its stead, attention will be drawn to another possible ground for the misconceived perception of women authors in comedy; namely, with the rise of feminism, both as a political theory and an activist movement, women dramatists have paid comic genre (in whatever subvariant) little to no attention (Chirico, 1999, p. 82). This is tangibly displayed in the number of papers in the 5th International Conference on English Language, Literature, Teaching and Translation Studies (5th CELLTTS) that foreground texts or performances by women.[17] Wrongfully assuming that comic plays either "lack authorial weight" or cannot "treat serious issues" (ibid.), and sensing that they could hamper criticism of the patriarchy and prevent a much needed social intervention pertaining to the marginalized and/or disenfranchised, most women dramatists relinquish the carnivalesque power of comedy, humor and satire. Moreover, those women authors who *have* selected the comic mirror and spirit of comedy as their auctorial genre and mode (e.g., Wendy Wasserstein) were initially condemned. As Chirico (1999, p. 95) claims, "Benedict Nightingale, writing about *Isn't It Romantic*, criticised Wasserstein's humor as 'too strong, too infectious', making it difficult to take her characters seriously and preventing Wasserstein from probing beneath the surface of the play to explore the pain

17 In honesty, the author of this paper also toiled with the selection of an analytical corpus: comedies by men were easy to find, but pre-1950 comic playtexts by women were as rare as solo women comic performers—needles in a haystack, or, as Levy (2022) ironically states when discussing stand-up comediennes: "a joke in and of itself" (n.p.).

more seriously".

To correct these wrongful assumptions and criticisms, the next two sections of the paper will focus on the two plays in the analytical corpus—"Isn't It Romantic?" (1983) by Wendy Wasserstein; and "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark" (2011) by Lynn Nottage—and analyze the elements they contain that incite laughter and (in)directly offer social critique.

2. Comic Elements in "Isn't It Romantic?"

Debuted in 1983, Wasserstein's "Isn't It Romantic?" is a play whose dramatic story portrays two white women in their late twenties, relatively fresh from college and on the verge of their adult lives in 1980s Manhattan, New York. Comprising a prologue and two acts of reasonably even length and pace (the first act consists of seven scenes, and the second of six), the play's text and plot are enveloped and interlaced with voices from one of the women's answering machine[18] and TV[19]. Thus, apart from the two main protagonists (one Jewish American and the other a WASP), and a medley of (six) side characters who are either colleagues or romantic interests of the women or directly related to them, the audience hears the disembodied pleas of a few offstage characters, giving the play a total of fifteen personae. Even before the central character of Janie Bloomberg and the play's principal problem are presented to the spectators, five specific requests set the prevalent comic tone and atmosphere. Janie, whose answering machine is flooded by messages from parents, friends, acquaintances, romantic interests, and possible employers, is accosted by her overbearing and eccentric Jewish American mother, Tasha; her assertive and seemingly business-minded best friend Harriet Cornwall; Janie's father and Tasha's avid supporter and parental 'partner-in-crime', Simon; Janie's distressed and recently divorced (and not to be seen on stage) college friend Cynthia Peterson; and a detached, professional-sounding operator. The voices interrupt Janie's life, making various kinds of demands on her, pressing her to call back, to postpone pre-

18 Such excerpts number eight (8) in total.
19 A couple of brief commercials interrupt the action.

vious arrangements, to call back to make new arrangements, or to give them her attention and a sympathetic ear. Most simply wish to intervene in her life and decision-making, or to influence her responses to life's challenges. The first scene, and its exchange between Janie and Harriet, postulates the play's dilemma: should a relatively young woman fresh from college opt for a career, or a husband and family life in her pursuit of happiness? The seemingly trivial plot deepens this early conundrum, to probe the question of whether a woman can make it on her own, or whether she needs a safety net of presumptuous lovers, husband(s), and/or overly-protective and influential parents commanding the trajectory of her life in order to live a fulfilled one. The dramatic story works against the backdrop of second-wave feminist ideals and the 1980s anti-feminist backlash. This is neither the first nor last play in which Wasserstein critically examined the effects of feminism on the lives of women; it is a theme that permeates all her comedies, from the landmark "Uncommon Women and Others" (1977), to "Isn't It Romantic?" (1983), Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Heidi Chronicles" (1988), Broadway-hit "Sisters Rosensweig" (1992), and the much-acclaimed "An American Daughter" (1997). As Jan Balakian (1999) appropriately recognizes:

> Wasserstein's plays dramatize women caught between these two conflicting sets of values and struggling to define themselves in a "post-feminist" America that still suffers from the backlash of sexism, of homophobia, and of traditional values. … Indeed, all of her plays reflect the fact that she came of age in the midst of the women's liberation movement. (p. 241)

Most of the laughter in "Isn't It Romantic?" arises from three distinct sources in the play. First is the caricatured representation of certain characters, such as Janie's parents and Harriet's mother, the two women's love interests, Marty and Paul, Vladimir, the taxi-driver whom Janie's parents push on her, just in case her relationship with Marty does not work out, and weepy and needy divorcee Cynthia, whose bounce back to the dating scene does not go as desired but is a source of anxiety and a

satirical commentary on the societal mores of mating. Especially funny is the representation of Janie's larger-than-life mother Tasha, who is both a prototypical and atypical Jewish-American mother, bursting on Janie whenever she sees fit, bossing her daughter around and meddling in her business.

The play's second, although not especially prominent, source of comedy, are the bits and pieces of dramatic irony scattered throughout. These take the form of incongruities between the onstage action and the content of messages coming from the answering machine or TV. For example, Janie expresses uncertainty about her near future, fretting over the life-choices ahead and stating, "I resent having to pay the phone bill, be nice to the super, find meaningful work, fall in love, get hurt", her only alternative being "Dependency. I could marry the pervert who's staring at us. … I could always move back to Brookline. Get another master's in something useful like Women's Pottery. Do a little free-lance writing" (Wasserstein, 1991, 1.1., p. 82). Shortly after this, she receives a message from Julie Sterne of *Woman's Work* magazine, telling her she did not get the job she applied for, because "Our readers feel you haven't experienced enough women's pain to stimulate our market" (ibid.). This is followed by a message from Harriet, informing Janie that she herself had got a job at the Colgate-Palmolive Company.

The third and chief source of laughter (and satire) are Janie's gestural responses and verbal repartees, which frequently serve as a personal commentary on social expectations and systemic gender inequalities, and hide her (and other women's) anxieties and pain beneath, thereby "creating a subtext to almost every conversation the audience senses on a nonverbal level" (Wasserstein, 1987, as cited in Chirico, 1999, p. 82). With these elements, Wasserstein manages to "reify her all-woman space" (Chirico, p. 82), and tackles serious issues pertaining to gender and feminist criticism by "permit[ting] women to disclose painful incidents while simultaneously deflecting that pain, and to discuss distressing events or feelings without naming them directly" (ibid.). Eventually, Janie defies attempts from her parents and partners to influence and control her life

choices, and “learns to trust herself” (Balakian, 1999, p. 150), even if her ending is bittersweet, as she senses that Harriet has betrayed the ideals they seemed to have shared. In this sense, the play’s title becomes an ironic and self-deprecating rhetorical question, because “these characters’ lives are frustrated, not romantic.” (ibid.)

3. Comic Elements in “By the Way, Meet Vera Stark”[20]

The other play in the focus of this paper, Lynn Nottage’s “By the Way, Meet Vera Stark” is a smart, hilarious and accurate critique of systemic gender and racial chauvinism and stereotyping in the US film industry. Much more openly comic than Wasserstein’s piece, Nottage’s comedy comprises two acts, with seven scenes altogether. Its action is set in Hollywood over a period of seven decades, and focuses on three pivotal years—1933, 1973 and 2003—which present the audience with snippets of the racialized American film industry. Act One, set in 1933, revolves around the actions of a young aspiring African American actress Vera Stark, who is working as a maid for her half-sister, while waiting for her breakout role. Act Two opens with a short clip of “The Belle of New Orleans,” played as the background to the start of a 2003 academic roundtable on Vera Stark’s legacy, which includes footage from “Vera Stark’s final interview on *The Brad Donovan Show* in 1973” (Nottage, 2013, 2.1, n.p.). Both acts are fast-moving, as per the author’s instruction in the notes.

Act One keeps a steady focus on the title character, and sets all its action in the early years of Hollywood’s Golden Age, just before the 1934 Production Code dictated the types of roles available to Black American actors (Young, 2016, p. 117–118). Act Two informs the audience not only that Vera Stark landed her breakthrough role, but also that she left a permanent mark on the US film industry, albeit continually performing race, adjusting her politics and ideals to her social reality. Further, the montage of film fragments and interview clips from two distinct temporal planes, juxtaposed with the contem-

20 A portion of this segment is connected with recent research by the author of this paper into how contemporary US drama has responded to crises, which it references in part.

porary perspective of a group of scholars, provides a stark contrast to these characters' claims and value judgments. The professed experts, in their attempt to honor Vera (and simultaneously revise film narratives about the Black actress), continue to construct her racial identity:

HERB: And the footage ends there. Thoughts?

AFUA: Raw // real.

CARMEN (*Giddy with excitement*): Das unausgesprochene.

AFUA: Yo, yo, my girl Vera was about to throw down. Wow. She called Gloria out on her own hypocrisy.

HERB: Yeah, but Vera didn't get real enough. In the end I find her apologetic posture disingenuous.

CARMEN: Wake up. It's not just what's spoken // but what's unspoken.

AFUA: But, but, but bottom line. What are we talking about? Vera made a film, a film that still draws huge ratings when it's broadcast on television. A film that occasionally makes me cringe when I see it, but I will confess that every time Vera appears on the screen I get giddy, I get excited. Why?

HERB: Clearly // because she—

AFUA: Because, when I watch Vera act, I'm watching a young woman, an artist, grappling with representations of self. Who am I? Who am I?—

CARMEN: Yes and no. // Yes and no.

HERB: Vera may have been a promising actress, but over the years she has presented such a contradictory narrative of self. It's hard to say who she really was. // Because—

(*Escalating*:)

CARMEN: Yes, but Vera believed that she was breathing fresh life into painful stereotypes, but ultimately she was … was denied agency // that's what I hear echoed in the footage and particularly in her relationship to Gloria Mitchell.

HERB: Even so, the Vera I know was aiding and abetting Hollywood's // distortion of history.

AFUA: Yo, my girl battled writers, // directors and producers who had no clue and little interest in who she was—

(*Herb, then Carmen, rise to meet Afua's energy.*)

CARMEN: So can we solely hold her responsible for perpetuating images // that have come to define how people still view African-American women on the screen today?

HERB: We all agree Vera was simply breathtaking in *The Belle of New Orleans*, but ultimately she still was just another shucking, jiving, // fumbling, mumbling, laughing, shuffling, pancake-making mammy in the kitchen.

AFUA: Stop! NO! My girl may have been many things, but she refused to be reduced to an image on the screen. // She says so much!

(*Furious passion*:)

HERB: Theories! Rumors! Conjecture! I don't give a goddamn! The images remain problematic. And those images are indelible, and they can't simply be apologized away—

CARMEN (*Passionately*): But we have to actively engage with them, listen to them and understand why they exist, and perhaps what the performer was attempting to tell us about the ethos of the time— (Nottage, 2013, 2.3, n.p.)

The play's overall funniness is enlarged by Vera's satiric and ironic responses and reactions to other characters, including her foil, her half-sister-cum-employer Gloria Mitchel, and by the scenes (as in the previous quotation) in which the academics exhibit the zany impenetrability of professional jargon, and their lack of knowledge about Vera and her fellow actresses, each insisting that they *know* (her) best. Laughter is also provoked by the scenes of racial passing and self-invention that foreground the incongruity between the self-imaging and actual identity of the Black actress characters. This is especially true with regard to the persona Ana Mae, who poses as a Brazilian woman, "Anna Maria Fernandez of Rio de Janeiro", thereby "masquerading for a living" (Nottage, 2013, 1.4, n. p.). Finally, the play's comic spirit is enhanced by the satirical representation of the then social expectations of "authentic" Blackness, which forces the characters into an impromptu performance. In Scene Four of Act One,

both Lottie and Vera, detecting an opportunity to acquire a desired film role, start to visually transform into the characters of slave women, when the film's director Maximillian claims:

> I vant [sic] the Negroes to be real, to be Negroes of the earth, I vant to feel their struggle, the rhythm of their language, I vant actors that ... no, I don't vant actors, I vant people ... Negroes who have felt the burden of hard unmerciful labor. (Nottage, 2013, 1.4, n. p.)

Vera and Lottie's verbal and non-verbal behavior immediately begins to alter, and Lottie even facilitates Vera's fabrications that meet the director's expectations of "authentic blackness" (Young, 2016, p. 115). Their unrehearsed performance is so effective that they both get roles in "The Belle of New Orleans", as domestic help. This scene is simultaneously comical and subversive, because even if Lottie and Vera's exaggerated performances border on the grotesque, and their "contrived nature ... [is] readily apparent to audience members" (Young, 2016, p. 115), their "morphing" (Nottage, 2013, 1.4, n. p.) mirrors the racialized imagery perpetuated by white males in privileged positions, splendidly captured in Maximillian's lines: "You see, Fredrick, this is what we need on the screen. Authenticity. ... This broken Negro woman, her sad mournful face, the coarse rhythm of her language tells the story of the South" (Nottage, ibid.).

4. Conclusion

The comic genre has for centuries been perceived as a cultural and literary phenomenon tied to stock characters, set themes, formulaic plots, happy endings, and audience laughter: light entertainment that does not demand deep probing into grave social matters, or emotional sensitivity to the plight of its protagonists. Even in scholarly research before the mid-twentieth century, the genre was considered as that form which required a certain desensitization of audiences and even a significant level of aggression in its producers and recipients, for its comic spirit to take

off. As such, it was also understood as a more masculine form of literary and cultural production, at least prior to the rise of gender studies.

This paper has demonstrated that although mirth and happy endings remain pervasive aspects of comedy, the genre has proven to be much more permeable than expected. It has changed over time to include the expansion of its ultimate effects and goals beyond careless laughter and light amusement, to encompass the discussion and critical representation of social injustice, and has opened its 'iron gates' to women authors and performers, despite bigoted backlash. With their careers and works, Wendy Wasserstein and Lynn Nottage, the two contemporary US authors whose plays were examined in the paper, have been a tangible denunciation of prejudice against comedies and women within them. Through its assessment of specific comic elements in Wasserstein's "Isn't It Romantic?" (1983) and Nottage's "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark" (2011), the paper has shown that women *can* do comedy, and that (their) comedies do not abstain from socially or politically relevant topics. Although neither play ends with a communal celebration or (marital) ceremony, both provoke enjoyment *and* thought in their humorous yet critical portrayal of women resisting systemic vilification.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

'With a harsh laugh'—Humor in James Joyce's Exiles

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ABSTRACT

James Joyce's play Exiles is commonly regarded as being an intriguing misstep by the master of narrative prose: Ezra Pound dismissed it as 'necessary katharsis,' and Anthony Burgess called it 'a grotesque attempt to make something dramatically viable out of the dead pedantic correctness of the hack translator.' Moreover, it has traditionally been viewed by critics as being of interest primarily as an earlier, under-formed, and largely unsuccessful exploration of the themes to become significant in Ulysses—notably, expatriation and sexual infidelity. This paper does not intend to defend Exiles as work bearing extended comparison with Joyce's incontestably greater accomplishments in the genre of the novel. Yet it seeks to explore the play on its own terms, not as a primitive testing of themes from Ulysses, but as a claustrophobic drama of interpersonal conflict. To examine this tension, the paper explores the play's use of humor, which is usually a characteristic element of Joyce's later writing, but which in the play is largely confined to expressions of disappointment, bitterness, and tension. This paper argues that in Exiles Joyce deliberately relegates humor, and scornful laughter, to expressions of disappointment or discomfort as a dramatic technique to increase the social tension among the main characters, as well as to demonstrate how obtrusive the unease and discomfort are with which these former friends interact.

Keywords: James Joyce, Exiles, humor, Irish theater.

The publication of *Ulysses* in 1922 startled readers with its numerous revelations, one of which was the sheer comic mastery of James Joyce. It is perhaps worthy of recollection that Joyce was not always considered a supremely witty and inventively comic author. His publications prior to *Ulysses* were not determinedly funny by any criteria: the poetry collection *Chamber Music* is lovelorn and deliberately antiquarian in approach; *Dubliners* has ironic depictions of social and political discomfiture, but there is little that is explicitly humorous in the collection; and the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is surely one of the most accomplished works in any language in its depiction of the development of a creative consciousness—yet *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is rarely amusing.

Having finished *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce almost immediately began his next work and, despite being under the dual pressures of financial discomfort and increasing eye trouble, he then produced two of the most relentlessly creative, narratively amusing, and stylistically innovative books in any language, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. These two novels are so compellingly humorous that the general lack of comedy in Joyce's earlier work may pass unnoted in a survey of his literary achievements.

Yet there was a transitional work between *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, and it is revealing in a way that these two masterworks are not. This effort was Joyce's strange and stodgy play, *Exiles*. The play is serious in intention and tough-minded in depicting the doubt that arises from sexual infidelity; as Richard Ellmann notes, "In *Exiles*, Richard [Rowan—the main male character] discovers in his wife's possible infidelity a trial of faith comparable to doubt for the believing Christian…" (Ellmann, 2009, p. 73). Yet it is the contention of this paper that *Exiles* does indeed have elements of humor in it and, secondly, that Joyce's approach to employing humor in the play lies largely in demonstrating how uneasy, uncomfortable, and unsettled the personal relations among the main characters are. The humor in *Exiles* is not funny in any normal sense, yet it does help to clarify the relationships among the characters,

even as it fails to amuse the reader or the theater patron in the parterre. By revealing how little the four main characters relax and speak comfortably with one another, the humor in *Exiles* contributes significantly to our understanding of how unsettled these ostensible friends are in the company of the others.

It is perhaps apposite to note that the play was one of Joyce's least successful works during his lifetime. In spite of the difficulties he encountered in getting *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* published, both were soon recognized as serious art when they appeared; *Exiles* still struggles to find an audience beyond those theater patrons motivated by a more general curiosity about Joyce's work. Even in its premiere it was regarded as lacking. Stan Gebler Davies has noted that "One Munich paper suggested the play was a little rarified for the general public; another, more rudely, dismissed it as 'Irish stew.' 'Flop' and 'fiasco' were the words Joyce attached to the production, which was immediately withdrawn" (Davies, 1975, p. 220).

One may, perhaps, begin well by allowing an important concession: Joyce's *Exiles* is not intended to be a comedy, and it would be naïve or ill-informed to propose that it should be read as such. This is a serious drama, not a lighthearted romance. Joyce himself, in notes to the play published after his death by his friend Padraic Colum, referred to the play as being "three cat and mouse acts" (Joyce, 1961, p. 123). This is suggestive, but not particularly illuminating. With whom are we to associate the cat or the mouse? Is Robert Hand the cat—trying to seduce Bertha—or is Richard Rowan the cat, toying with the affections of Robert Hand as the 'mouse' in a test of fidelity engineered by Richard? Is Bertha the cat for Robert, the mouse for Richard, or merely the prize for whom the two men contend?

The brief exegesis undertaken in this paper suggests that *Exiles* manipulates some conventions of humor, and (almost paradoxically) that these elements are not intended to be amusing, but are designed to heighten the awkwardness and discomfort of the situation we see enacted. If humor lightens social tension, uncomfortable and strained humor may analogously heighten dramatic tension. Joyce shows us four people

in a stressful and ambiguous situation, and their strained humor indicates how anxious and uncomfortable these friends—and possibly lovers—have become.

Exiles is often lightly regarded because the characters are broadly unsympathetic, and their dialogue tends to be portentous and leaden. As Anthony Burgess, a committed Joyce enthusiast, explained, “For much of the time we have the strange sensation that we are reading a rather stilted translation of Ibsen—there is a great lack of colloquial raciness [...] it seems to be a grotesque attempt to make something dramatically viable out of the dead pedantic correctness of the hack translator” (Burgess, 1965, p. 77).

As humor is inevitably subjective, we may find ourselves compelled to introduce an element of quantification by referring to a specific element of the play’s text: the stage directions. We may misunderstand, or simply fail to notice, a remark intended by Joyce as humor. Yet the stage directions indicate *precisely* where Joyce thought it important for the actors to laugh or smile. Examined thus, we find that in *Exiles* there are 19 stage directions telling the actor or actress to laugh. Of these, six of them—almost a third—are negatively modified: “laughs nervously”, “with a harsh laugh,” “Laughs scornfully,” “laughs nervously,” “laughs a little harshly,” “with a forced laugh.” This laughter is not the laughter of amusement, companionship, or relaxation. These laughs are manifestations of social discomfort. Their laughter is wary, ambiguous, and harsh. It is not generous, inclusive, or comfortable. It heightens the tension on the stage.

Usefully (for this manner of analysis) each of the actors onstage is directed to laugh at least once in the play: we may therefore interpret something of their characters’ motivations and circumstances by comparing and contrasting their laughter. To do this, we must first analyze and dismiss Archie, the child, who laughs at suitably childish things, but who adds nothing significant to the play, beyond the basic fact that his existence verifies the decade-long commitment of Bertha and Richard. His one laugh in the play is upon learning the word “smudges”: “smudg-

es, what is smudges?" (Joyce, 1961, p. 92). Similarly, the nanny Brigid has only one laugh in the play. It is good natured, and shows her affection for Archie, but demonstrates little more than amiability.

Beatrice—a far more significant character than the two just briefly assessed—also laughs once only, and we are informed that she does so "nervously" (Joyce, 1961, p. 94). It is clearly an expression of awkwardness, not amusement: contextually, she is bringing Robert's editorial about Richard to the Rowan's house. Her laughter is an expression of the anxiety that arises from her delicate position between Robert and Richard. She cannot foretell how Richard will react to Robert's editorial, and she is nervous about the outcome. It is certainly not carefree laughter.

Richard himself also laughs only once in the play, in bitterness, after becoming convinced that Robert is "A liar, a thief, and a fool! Quite clear! A common thief! What else? [*With a harsh laugh.*] My great friend! A patriot too! A thief—nothing else! [*He halts, thrusting his hands into his pockets.*] But a fool also!" (Joyce, 1961, p. 51). This laugh is consistent with Richard's uncommon combination of immense self-control and his nagging, suspicious doubt. He laughs not in amusement, but rather in what he regards as a verification of his suspicions. It is worthy of note, however, that this is the only moment in the play when he laughs (or at least, in which Joyce directs his actor to laugh). The central character of the play laughs only once, and it is in harsh displeasure. The context is not amusing, for he feels that his suspicions of betrayal and treachery have been confirmed.

The two remaining characters—Robert and Bertha—laugh more than do the others: Robert laughs six times, and Bertha eight times. Although there are negative moments of laughter for both of these characters, they are the only main characters in the play who appear to enjoy anything of what we are witnessing. Bertha is the most human and empathetic individual in the drama, and Robert, although he may be a somewhat preposterous and plump ladies' man, at least seems to have some of the appealing ability to laugh at himself on occasion.

To examine this, let us consider the passage in Act One wherein Robert attempts to seduce Bertha:

ROBERT: Those eyes must not go away. [*He takes her hands.*] May I kiss your eyes?
BERTHA: Do so.
ROBERT: [*He kisses her eyes and then passes his hand over her hair.*] Little Bertha!
BERTHA: [*Smiling.*] But I am not so little. Why do you call me little?
ROBERT: Little Bertha! One embrace? [*He puts his arm around her.*] Look into my eyes again.
BERTHA: [*Looks.*] I can see the little gold spots. So many you have.
ROBERT: [*Delighted.*] Your voice! Give me a kiss, a kiss with your mouth. (Joyce, 1961, p. 35)

This could well be performed as a light and comical seduction. As a seduction, it is ludicrous: "May I kiss your eyes"; "a kiss with your mouth?" This is clownish, absurd, and cretinous, but it serves two purposes. First of all, it diminishes Robert as a seducer, thereby increasing the potential shame and humiliation of losing one's partner to him. Secondly, it calls our attention to the fact that they seem to be enjoying one another's company, in the way that new lovers often take pleasure simply being silly together. Joyce has captured that sense of playful foolishness and contentment in being together that makes initial encounters with partners or lovers so pleasant.

The stage direction to "smile" offers similar evidence. Of the 14 instructions to the actor to smile, four of them are negatively modified ("with a forced smile" "smiles bitterly" "smiles faintly" "with a forced smile"), and others are contextually unhappy or sardonic smiles—in one instance, Robert claims that he might smile, but then makes "a little gesture of despair."

It is apposite here to address briefly a strangely neglected point in *Exiles*—Richard's description of his father as "the smiler." The passage is worth examining:

BEATRICE: The hardness of heart you prayed for... [*She breaks off.*]
RICHARD: [*Unheeding.*] That is my last memory of him. Is there not

something sweet and noble in it?

BEATRICE: Mr Rowan, something is on your mind to make you speak like this. Something has changed you since you came back three months ago.

RICHARD: [*Gazing again at the drawing, calmly, almost gaily.*] He will help me, perhaps, my smiling handsome father.

[*A knock is heard at the hall door on the left.*]

RICHARD: [*Suddenly.*] No, no. Not the smiler, Miss Justice. The old mother. It is her spirit I need. I am going. (Joyce, 1961, pp 24-25)

This is one of the few places in which Richard's determination to force some fidelity test upon the other characters seems possibly to waver. His relations with his mother were terrible; but she had a resolution, a tenacity, in rejecting him that he acknowledges, if not admires. For his father he seems to have broadly positive feelings, as the father is twice described as "smiling," and is then referred to as "the smiler." It is not entirely clear what Joyce meant by this, but perhaps Richard admires his father for having been amiable, if somewhat ineffectual, as a "smiler" in comparison with the 'hardness of heart' that he felt from his mother. In a sense, Richard is choosing his emotional attitude to the fidelity test he wishes to orchestrate for Robert and Bertha. By deliberately rejecting the approach of "the smiler," Richard chooses the colder, more confrontational approach of his mother. This deliberate choice between "the smiler" and "the old mother" helps us to understand the overall meanness of spirit with which the fidelity test develops over the second and third acts of the play.

At this stage of exegesis we should examine the actual humor in the play. There is little enough of it. Indeed, if there is anything approximating an unequivocal joke in the play, it is the series of comments Robert and Richard exchange:

RICHARD: [*Smiling.*] I can almost see two envoys starting for the United States to collect funds for my statue a hundred years hence.

ROBERT: [*Agreeably.*] Once I made a little epigram about statues. All statues are of two kinds. [*He folds his arms across his chest.*] The stat-

> ue which says: *How shall I get down?* and the other kind [*he unfolds his arms and extends his right arm, averting his head*] the statue which says: *In my time the dunghill was so high.* (Joyce, 1961, p. 43)

This is an amusing little joke about statues. It pleasantly deflates the pomposity of the average statue of a revered dead man on a plinth. Yet, as we learn in Act III, it is not witty, at least in the common sense that wit is spontaneous: this comment is instead a party piece, a pre-planned witticism, which Robert brings out when social occasions call for him to be diverting. It reinforces the audience's perception that Robert's charm is an assumed social pose, not a natural expression of his personality.

Yet there is another example of humor in *Exiles* that may yield more illuminating insight into the meaning of the play itself. This is a moment that is clearly a joke, and may indeed provoke actual laughter in the audience, but which also has interpretive implications:

ROBERT: [*In a different voice.*] Yes. I want to speak to you seriously. Today may be an important day for you—or rather, tonight. I saw the vicechancellor this morning. He has the highest opinion of you, Richard. He has read your book, he said.

> RICHARD: Did he buy it or borrow it?
>
> ROBERT: Bought it, I hope.
>
> RICHARD: I shall smoke a cigarette. Thirty-seven copies have now been sold in Dublin.
>
> [*He takes a cigarette from the box on the table, and lights it.*]
>
> ROBERT: [*Suavely, hopelessly.*] Well, the matter is closed for the present. You have your iron mask on today.
>
> RICHARD: [*Smoking.*] Let me hear the rest.
>
> ROBERT: [*Again seriously.*] Richard, you are too suspicious. It is a defect in you. He assured me he has the highest possible opinion of you, as everyone has. You are the man for the post, he says. In fact, he told me that, if your name goes forward, he will work might and main for you with the senate and I... will do my part, of course, in the press and privately. I regard it as a public duty. The chair of romance literature is

yours by right, as a scholar, as a literary personality. (Joyce, 1961, p. 38)

There are several jokes being made here. Richard's inquiry into whether the vice-chancellor bought the book, or simply borrowed it, is clear: borrowing it would indicate a lack of engagement with the text, and would deprive Richard of some pittance of royalties.

Yet there is something here more significant. If we focus on Richard's comment that "Thirty-seven copies have now been sold in Dublin," this seems clearly intended to be a humorous under-estimation by an author of the total number of sales of his book. The reader will recall that Samuel Beckett does something similar in *Krapp's Last Tape*. But Richard's lack of reception in Dublin may have substantial interpretive implications for us. Consider the ramifications: first of all, Richard's book seems to have attracted very little attention in Dublin's reading circles. Even the people in the play cannot convincingly be shown to have read this book on which he has labored for almost a decade. Robert may have read it, although he does not quote or cite it, and never unequivocally claims to have read it; and Bertha appears to have read it without comprehension ("I do not understand anything that he writes" [Joyce, 1961, p. 98]). Along these lines, if the book was largely ignored in Ireland upon publication, Robert's offer of helping him to get a job in the university will make Richard far more indebted to Robert than Richard can tolerate. Thus Richard sees treachery in Robert's offer, in a manner similar to Joyce's own detection of schemes aimed—he believed—at undermining him or his relationships: Ellmann notes that "Joyce throve on the plots and counterplots, tensions and countertensions, which he was able to find or often to read into his native city" (Ellmann, 1982, p. 291). Thirdly, Richard would find a deep personal insult in Robert's nonchalant statement that Richard deserves to have an academic chair in romance literature "as a literary personality." In Dublin, one may wish to win prominence as a scholar or as a writer, but not to be that pitiable figure of public derision, envy, and begrudgery, "a literary personality."

But if Richard is correct that there is little audience or interest in his work in Ireland, it may partially explain the concept of exile in the play, which is foregrounded by the very title. As has long been noted, these peo-

ple are not traditional exiles—the action takes place entirely in Ireland, and Richard and Bertha are more precisely described as expatriates than as exiles. Nobody evicted them from Ireland. Joyce's friend Italo Svevo questioned exactly this point: "Exiled! People who return to their home country!" To which comment Joyce rejoined, "It is dangerous to leave one's country, but still more dangerous to go back to it, for then your fellow-countrymen, if they can, will drive a knife into your heart" (Svevo, 1969, p. 5). Yet here we recall that Richard's humorous comment about selling thirty-seven copies of his book may have a broader implication than being a merely sardonic comment. To be exact: Richard's lack of a receptive audience for his book may in part account for his feeling of exile. His location of residence is one manner of exile, but as long as Bertha is with him, he is willing to accept this expatriation. What he perhaps cannot accept is writing for an audience of readers that are not in sympathy with what he has written with such effort. It is a reading of the play that cannot be proven conclusively, but such a reading coheres with the other elements of the drama. One may suggest, therefore, that Richard's apparently tart comment about selling thirty-seven copies of his book may well be meant to imply that his real exile is not based on exclusion from his homeland, but rather his spiritual and authorial exile from the audience that dominates his native country.

The brevity of this survey of the play's text is an implied testimony to the paucity of humor in a drama being examined for its humor, and *Exiles* is not a comedy. There is little humor in the play because it is a serious drama about people unhappily attempting to clarify their inter-relations. Yet this paper has advanced two major propositions that may influence our interpretation of the play. The first is that the stage directions, by which we may presume to learn Joyce's own conception of how and when he wanted his characters to laugh or smile, suggest that even the humorous moments in the play are intended to reveal strain and tension in the characters' collective relations. In this reading, the humor and laughter on the stage do not dispel tension, but increase it, by being notably unamusing and socially awkward. Secondly, Richard's apparently minor joke about the vice-chancellor not being among the thirty-seven people who bought his book may

indicate that Richard's literary work cannot find the necessary, informed, and autochthonous audience he seeks (and that fact of being exiled from one's sympathetic readership is one of the multiple forms of exile being questioned in the play). As this paper suggests, this possibility of being exiled from a sympathetic readership influences our understanding of why Richard is so reluctant to be helped by Robert, and why he is wary of being assisted in obtaining an academic position of high prestige and stability in Dublin. Although the romantic and sexual ambiguities in the play may never be conclusively resolved (Richard's "deep wound of doubt" [Joyce, 1961, p. 112]), it may be asserted that Richard's late recognition that his readership is not to be found in Ireland is another provocation for him to go away again, and continue his expatriate's exile back in Italy.

Exiles is not, in itself, a work of high accomplishment; it is therefore all the more intriguing as a work by a master that betrays a lack of mastery in its composition. It is a play of stilted dialogue and unappealing characters, set in a drab and unevocative Dublin—indeed, with its focus upon seduction, deception, and cuckoldry, it feels more Italian than Irish. As Peter Costello noted, "Rome was largely his inspiration for *Exiles* when he came to write that drama" (Costello, 1992, p. 270). Yet the play is not without humor, and it has been the intention of this piece to indicate the ways in which Joyce employed humor to illustrate the strain and tensions among the four main characters. That the play is not particularly convincing as a drama, nor amusing as a comedy, is perhaps the best verification of Pound's claim that the play was "necessary katharsis." If *Exiles* was an awkward experiment, his next work—*Ulysses*—changed everything, at least for those who understood the novel's unmatched ambition and magnitude.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Laughing to Survive: Humor as Adolescent Self-Defense in Sherman Alexie & Mark Haddon

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two of the most distinguished Young Adult novels of the 21st century, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie, and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, by Mark Haddon. The primary contention of this paper is that the two novels, outwardly quite different, in fact utilize humor as a self-protective means of defense when the first-person narrators deal with their perceptions of exclusion and otherness.

The two main characters of the novels are both the narrators of their tales. The stories are significantly different one from the other—one tells of a mentally different young boy with clinical mental diagnoses, whilst the other narrates the tale of a Native American who perceives his social and ethnic distinctiveness from the dominant whites in his society. Both narrators are, for these reasons, social outcasts; yet each uses humor as his primary adaptive emotional mechanism to mitigate his social isolation. Through humor both narrators fight against the social stigma they encounter, and—as this paper seeks to demonstrate—enable their authors to raise and to address problems of significant narrative delicacy (exclusion, physical and mental illness, ethnicity and stereotypes).

The paper argues that both novels, whilst outwardly dissimilar in plot and structure, nonetheless take a strikingly similar narrative approach. That approach is to utilize the narrator’s offbeat and idiosyncratic sense

of humor as a means of deflecting his own isolation and exclusion. This, in turn, enables the authors to raise, examine, and ameliorate some of the more sensitive themes of mental disability, ethic difference, and stereotyping, within a narrative approach that is reassuringly amusing—and therefore unthreatening—to the intended adolescent readership.

Keywords: Sherman Alexie, Mark Haddon, humor, Young Adult

1. Introduction

There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt.

—Erma Bombeck

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,* and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, were both published at the beginning of the 21st century, and both of these works rely heavily on humor. Outwardly quite different, both novels utilize humor as a self-protective means of defense for the first-person narrators as they deal with their perceptions of exclusion and otherness. Christopher and Arnold, the two main characters, use humor and humorous communication to help themselves navigate contentious social situations, and both of them rely heavily on language, and drawings. Chritopher, Haddon's main character, prevented by Asperger's from understanding figurative speech and idioms, uses simple sentences, and simple drawings to convey simple truths. In his case, being the butt of the humor is an unwanted distinction, although it makes for an engaging narration. On the other hand, Arnold, Alexie's protagonist, is a master of language, and uses irony deliberately against himself, others, and the various circumstances he finds himself involved in. Unlike Chritopher's, his drawings are more complex, and much richer in detail. Wanted or not, humor is what determines the way these two boys face the difficulties of life.

2. Humor in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

At first glance, Haddon's novel doesn't imply humor at all, as it deals with a fifteen-year-old teenager, Christopher Boone. The boy has Asperger's syndrome, lives alone with his dad and his pet rat Toby, very much enjoys detective stories and his biggest hero is Sherlock Holmes. As the novel unfolds, it seems that Christopher's trouble is not only his illness, but also his almost complete social seclusion due to deep distrust in people other than his father and Siobhan, one of his teachers, and, ultimately, his troubles with language, because he cannot understand any kind of figurative speech. As Siegelman puts it, Christopher is a concrete and literal character, and this is one of Haddon's biggest achievements: " (…) he has written a surprisingly and mordantly funny book about a hero who claims he has no sense of humor" (Siegelman, 2005, p. 56). The issues that Christopher has, combined with short chapters, few characters, and compelling settings, create a solid basis for a humorous novel of coming of age, where ongoing misunderstandings woven with suffering and insecurity, portray an engaging boy's courage depicted in a clever, and entertaining way.

Written from a first-person point of view, this book comprises short chapters that alternate between the mystery-solving phase and those in which Christopher talks about himself, his family, and his life. What strikes the reader immediately is the language, i.e. the sentences have basic structure, they are short, and very simple. The Asperger's syndrome does not allow Christopher to understand linguistic nuances; complicated, stratified and expressions with multiple meanings; and turn of phrases for him have no meaning at all. The boy is trying to solve a murder mystery in his own, simple way, with his own, simple narration. And, as the plot develops, readers witness Christopher using humor unintentionally, because readers see it, and understand it, but the boy does not; moreover, he does not understand that it is this simple humor that depicts his courage even when life is confusing at all times.

This is a point of significance. In an interesting twist on the first-person Bildungsroman, Christopher's syndrome causes inability to see the nuances language can produce, because as Van Hart suggests: "Haddon's protagonist is an accomplished mathematician and logician and has an incredible capacity for memorization. However, he admits he has trouble interpreting subjective data such as emotions and facial expressions" (Van Hart, 2012, p. 29). De facto, much of the comedy of the work derives from his misperceptions and inaccuracies in the attempt to describe life around him, because his syndrome interferes and causes him to humorously misunderstand and depict what he observes. An example of this may be seen in chapter 11. As soon as Christopher has discovered Mrs. Shears's dead dog in her backyard she observes him there, and calls the police. The following passage relates the encounter between Christopher and the police officer:

> The policeman squatted down beside me and said, "Would you like to tell me what's going on here, young man?"
> I sat up and said, "The dog is dead."
> "I'd got that far," he said.
> I said, "I think someone killed the dog."
> "How old are you?" he asked.
> I replied, "I am 15 years and 3 months and 2 days."
> " And what precisely where you doing in the garden?" he asked.
> "I was holding the dog," I replied.
> "And why where you holding the dog"? he asked.
> This was a difficult question. It was something I wanted to do. I like dogs. It made me sad to see that the dog was dead. I like policemen, too, and I wanted to answer the question properly, but the policeman did not give me enough time to work out the correct answer.
> "Why were you holding the dog?" he asked again.
> "I like dogs", I said.
> "Did you kill the dog?" he asked.
> I said, "I did not kill the dog."
> "Is this your fork?" he asked.

I said, "No."
"You seem very upset about this," he said.
He was asking too many questions and he was asking them too quickly.' (Haddon, 2003, pp. 7-8)

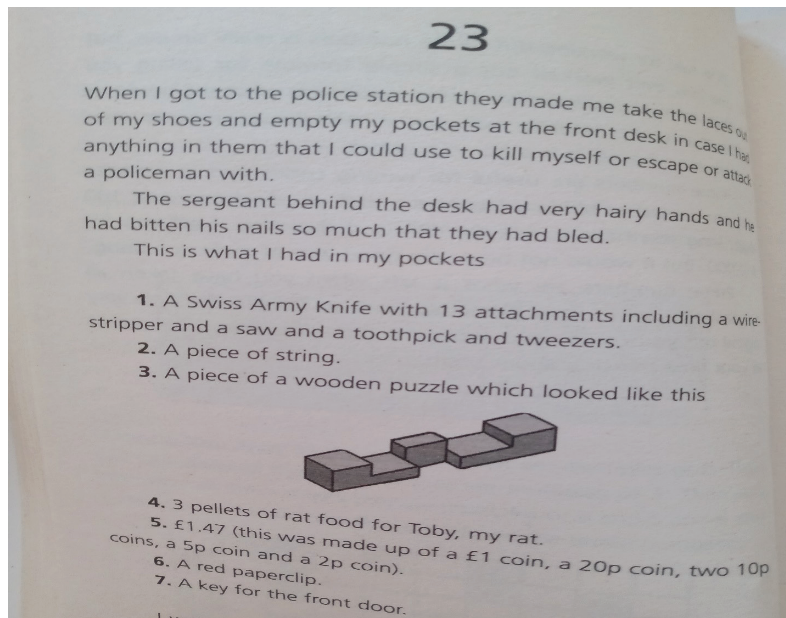
This exchange is amusing for us as readers, because his almost pedantic precision is not helping the police

officer; yet we also understand, as Christopher does not, that police questioning can and will be used against a potential suspect. Yet the discussion begins to distress him, and Christopher groans and rolls himself up in a ball whenever he is very upset, which happens during this interrogation as well. So, while he is on the ground, the police officer tries to hold his arm and it is when the boy hits him. Christopher dislikes very, very much to be touched. A mentally-challenged child being questioned by a law enforcement officer, and striking out in distress, would not in normal circumstances be considered comedic. The boy does not perceive the gravity of the situation, and living according specific rules he has made for himself make him blunder even the most basic of situations. In fact, and what makes this episode amusing is, after a brief chapter of digression, how Christopher further faces his meeting with the police officer: "The policeman looked at me for a while without speaking. Then he said, 'I am arresting you for assaulting a police officer.' This made me feel a lot calmer because it is what policemen say on television and in films" (Haddon, 2003, p.11).

When Christopher discovered the dead dog, and police came, he was not scared as the police officer used language and behavior patterns that were known to him, and the boy cooperated. But, in the moment he had to face a challenge, such as answering questions too quickly and without any time to process their implications, he closed himself to the world, and when the same world (the police officer in this case) forced his attention, Christopher did the only thing he knew how, i.e. he defended himself by kicking, and obviously got himself into significant trouble. This represents a humorous anecdote not because we find funny that a boy affected

with Asperger's syndrome gets himself into trouble with a police officer for a crime he did not commit, but he commits a crime (assaulting an officer) precisely because he cannot properly comprehend how to behave during the questioning. Being affected by a mental illness leads Christopher to perceive reality differently from the others, and the way Haddon depicts the boy's escapades, i.e. the language used by the author, helps to convey a message of courage and determination in a positive, relatable way, which is respectful of such an important, delicate topic.

Another aspect that is important to the plot is Christopher's attempts to explain his experiences through drawings and charts. Throughout the book, the main character supplies extra material to his own story through drawings, and various tables and charts. These artistic expressions are very simple in form and content, as they clearly follow the boy's rationale and physical ability. An example is given by the same thread of chapters concerning Christopher's interaction with the police after he is found next to the dead dog. Once the boy is taken to the police station, he describes what happened at the front desk, and provides us with narrative text as well as a little, simple drawing:



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When I got to the police station they made me take the laces ou of my shoes and empty my pockets at the front desk in case I had anything in them that I could use to kill myself or escape or attack a policeman with.

The sergeant behind the desk had very hairy hands and he had bitten his nails so much that they had bled.

This is what I had in my pockets

1. A Swiss Army Knife with 13 attachments including a wire-stripper and a saw and a toothpick and tweezers.
2. A piece of string.
3. A piece of a wooden puzzle which looked like this
4. 3 pellets of rat food for Toby, my rat.
5. £1.47 (this was made up of a £1 coin, a 20p coin, two 10p coins, a 5p coin and a 2p coin).
6. A red paperclip.
7. A key for the front door.

Undemanding, small-scale drawings (such as this one on page 16) are unnecessary to readers as the information they provide has already been clarified by the text itself. Yet a mentally ill boy might well find them helpful, as through artistic expression he copes more easily with his "lack of intuition in social interactions, disturbed communication patterns and narrow interests" (Lesinskiene, 2002, p.91). Through drawings, Christopher underlines his expressiveness, and clarifies meaning more to himself than the readers, as he is well aware of his reduced abilities. For the readers, on the other hand, the substance of the plot is enriched by these little chunks of extra material, providing a fuller sense of humor and narrative fun, as well as contributing to textual variety.

Slightly earlier, in chapter 13, Christopher tells us openly that this is not going to be a funny book,

because of his inability to understand jokes and their language. For him everything has a literal connotation, and this is why he only likes things he can clearly understand, such as math, numeric patterns, and science. There is no space for humor in logic, but there is always a way to depict humor through language, or behavioral patterns, even when the narrator is mentally ill. People who like and use humor tend to do so in order to show that they do not take themselves too seriously, yet Christopher is exceptionally serious about everything he says, or does, and this is exactly where humor lies – his original view of people and circumstances, and his simple language actually convey the funny side of the plot, and of the structure of the book. An example of his liking of numerical patterns leads him to number his chapters with prime numbers, so the chapters are numbered 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, and so on. The fact that this unhelpful seriation is unusual is immediately apparent to the reader, but not to Christopher. In fact, in chapter 19 he explains prime numbers, and thus his choice for the numbering. It is yet another example of his liking for math, which liking he employs not just to explain himself as a character, but also to keep himself close to logic and an unquestionable truth, and away from the chaotic world that surrounds him. Another example may be seen in the fact that the boy relishes TV channels that deal with

discovery and animals; this is a way of protecting and isolating himself from the outer world, and situations that for him are utterly indeterminate. Thus, what appears to be narrative eccentricity is a manifestation of his syndrome. As is apparently often true of Asperger's, he takes comfort in basic patterns--in language, in simple behavior, in action—and he calms down, and cooperates with people in a socially acceptable manner.

Another feature of the novel is represented by the structure of every chapter, whether it deals directly with Christopher's mystery novel, or it is just another digressive chapter where he explains himself, his life and his habits. Every chapter of the novel is characterized by something out of the ordinary that is usually closely connected to his mental health and, at the same time, every chapter also includes a feature of the chaotic reality he lives in, being sick, raised by a single father, and having very few acquaintances. An example may be extracted from chapter 89, where we see that Christopher's mood might be easily manipulated by pure coincidence:

> Mr. Jeavons, the psychologist at the school, once asked me why 3 red cars in a row made it a Good Day, and 4 red cars in a row made it a Quite Good Day, and 5 red cars in a row made it a Super Good Day, and why 4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks.
> He said that I was clearly a very logical person, so he was surprised that I should think like this because it wasn't very logical. (Haddon, 2003, p.31)

Yet again, readers do not find Christopher's attempts to cope with reality to be intrinsically amusing, but they do find comedy in how he chooses to do it. It might be quite strange for such a logical teenager to be easily drawn by chance, but he is also a person enduring a serious mental disorder, and chances and accidents make him react to reality in his own way with courage and determination. He continues:

> I said that I liked things to be in a nice order. And one way of things being in a nice order was to be logical. Especially if those

> things were numbers or an argument. But there were other ways of putting things in a nice order. And that was why I had Good Days and Black Days. And I said that some people who worked in an office came out of their house in the morning and saw that the sun was shining and it made them feel happy, or they saw that it was raining and it made them feel sad, but the only difference was the weather and if they worked in an office the weather didn't have anything to do with whether they had a good day or a bad day. (Haddon, 2003, p.31)

These lines clearly explain Chritopher's reasoning, where for him an accident leads to order, and also suggests how the same fact, put in a different context, might provide a different meaning. It is up to individuals to decide what to believe, and how to react to circumstances, but he also points out how it is the choice of context that matters, because meaning is always the same. Once again, readers enjoy Christopher's reasoning, and even more the veiled humor behind it. The humorous aspect of the novel is given by the positive aspects of Christopher's decisions and the opportunities those decisions create for him, rather than the disadvantageous outcomes that these same decisions provide at times.

Throughout the novel, the language and behavioral patterns dictated by society are unclear to the main character. This misunderstanding, and many other incongruities throughout the book, are generally treated with light-hearted humor. Yet the reader must keep in mind that these discontinuities are the result of the narrator's neurological irregularity. It is not stupidity or recklessness that create the humor here, but candor and fear, and the way they are dealt with.

2. Humor in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

There is an immediate point of similarity between the two books: in both the protagonists suffer from a disorder that is connected to their

brains. For Christopher, as we have seen, his medical problem is Asperger's. Arnold Spirit, Jr.'s—the protagonist of *The Absolutely True Diary*—is physically disabled because (among other ailments) of a surplus of spinal fluid in his skull at birth. In addition, he was born with 42 teeth instead of 32, problems with his eyes, and he is notably skinny, possessing huge hands and feet, and an enormous skull. As he observes, describing one of his frequent seizures, "yep, whenever I had a seizure, I was damaging my damage" (Alexie, 2015, p.3).

To contextualize, in brief, Arnold Junior was born and raised in a Spokane Indian reservation, in Washington state, where he was bullied by other kids his whole childhood. After an incident at school, where he categorically refused to study from math books that were 30 years old (by a twist of fate, he got the same book his mom used when she was a student), he is visited by the teacher, Mr. P, whose nose he broke inadvertently with that same book. After this visit, Junior decides to leave the reservation, and go to the all-white school of Reardan, a nearby town. Once there, at first, he is completely ignored, and when the bullies of the school try to humiliate him, and he faces them, he starts making friends. Junior is a very bright boy, which secures him his first friend, the school's nerd Gordie. Through basketball, he gains social prominence and starts dating the most popular girl at Reardan, Penelope. This is a very brief and simplified summary of the plot, but the novel is full of outsider irony, just like *The Curious Incident*. Indeed, both novels use unusual narrative structures and digressive stylistics to emphasize the boys' thoughts and actions—but also to remind us that they are medically different. These digressions, or short eccentric chapters, are not just humorous diversion: they are also manifestations of the protagonists' mental and/or physical disabilities.

These characters are, however, markedly different within their narrative eccentricity: Junior does not have Christopher's difficulty in understanding language, and is actually very good in being deliberately ironic, using abundantly figurative speech. His understanding of literal and implied language is excellent. Consider when he describes his decision to express himself: "So, I draw because I want to talk to the world. And I

want the world to pay attention to me. (…) I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny lifeboats" (Alexie, 2015, p.7). Junior's apparently straightforward expression of wanting to talk to the world unravels even as we read it: lifeboats are perhaps helpful in surviving floods or broken dams, but they are not elements of communication. One may survive a flood, but not communicate with it. Yet Junior quite easily advances the concept that he wishes to communicate with a flooded land by sending it a lifeboat; this imagery is confused, entangled, and amusingly wrong: but it still reveals the confession of intense loneliness and isolation of a young man.

As the plot develops, the text becomes significantly more challenging, and unlike in Christopher's experience, where a dog is killed with a garden fork, in Alexie's novel, there are several human characters who die in harsh accidents. There is a particularly grim episode in which Junior has just found out that his sister and her husband passed away. It was a horrible death: Mary and her husband had a party in their mobile home. They were so drunk that they passed out on the cot in their trailer. In the meantime, someone tried to make a soup, and forgot about it. The couple burned, though they at least never woke up. Junior explains the event:

> All my white friends can count their deaths on one hand. I can count my fingers, toes, arms, legs, eyes, ears, nose, toes, penis, butt cheeks, and nipples, and still not get close to my deaths. And you know what the worst part is? The unhappy part? About 90 percent of the deaths have been because of alcohol. Gordy gave me this book by a Russian dude named Tolstoy, who wrote: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Well, I hate to argue with a Russian genius, but Tolstoy didn't know about Indians. And he didn't know that all Indian families are unhappy for the same exact reasons: the fricking booze. Yep, so let me pour a drink to Tolstoy and let him think hard about the true definition of unhappy families. (Alexie, 2015, p. 200)

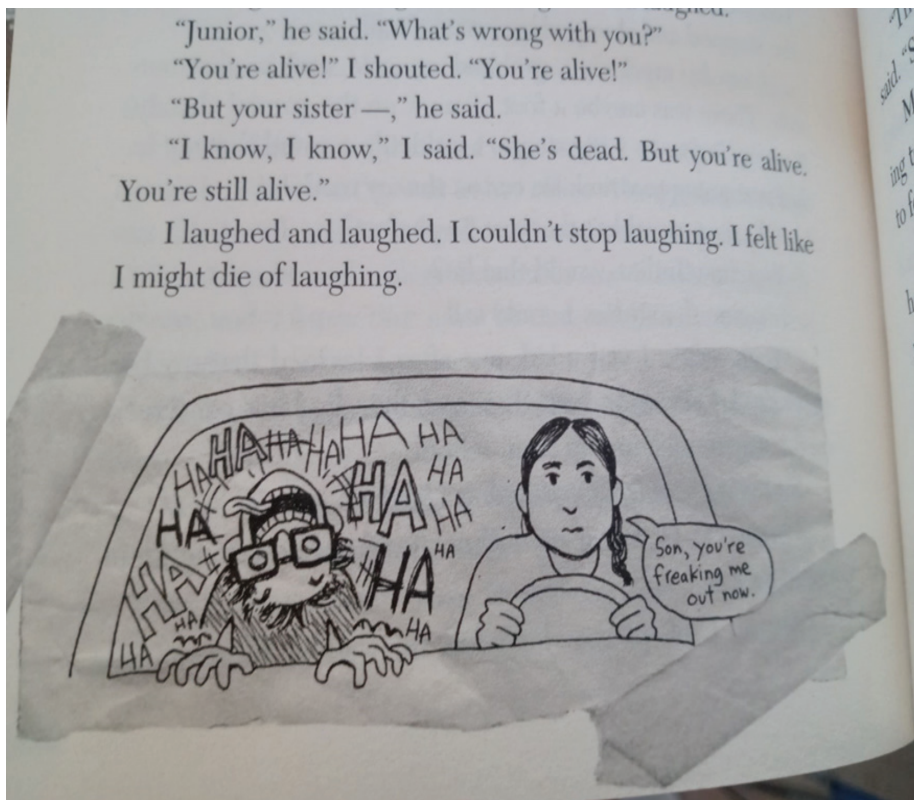
This should be a passage of unremitting seriousness and solemnity. It recounts a tragic loss of life in conditions of alcoholic stupor. Yet, Junior is sharp enough not only to understand the tragedy that has just happened, but he is also strong enough to see the irony behind the death of his sister, and more, to be sarcastic about it through figurative language and an example from one of the major Russian classics, *Anna Karenina*. Junior wants to invite Tolstoy to ponder about his statement while having a drink. The irony is unmistakable, as well as is the black humor behind Junior's words. The poverty and poor conditions the Native Americans face in their everyday life is the major cause of alcohol abuse, which leads to more than one death in the book, and each one of these tragedies is related through sarcasm, and bleak humor, i.e. a very clever way to face terrible loss and pain. As Alexie himself said in an interview in 2010:

Well number one, being funny, people think you're not being serious. Humor when used politically always goes after people with more power and systems and institutions that have more power. The problem comes when it's a joke about somebody with less power than you, and so you have to be very careful with that stuff. Not to say that I don't mock people with less power, but you always have to be hyperaware of that. (...) we all self-mock. And so it's a way of joining their tribe. I can speak to any audience of any political persuasion because I'm funny, you know. Give me twenty minutes – and I've done it with a conservative crowd. I'll have them laughing at Jesus jokes. And so it's really a passport into other people's cultures. A temporary visa. Journalist: There you go. A green card. Alexie: Humor is my green card. (Alexie, quoted in Nelson, 2010, p.43)

Humor is his tool used when dealing with delicate and controversial themes, such as is a story about a physically disabled and poor Indian teenager who has to deal with life's challenges with nothing on his side besides his intelligence, courage, and wit. When life hits him hard, he hits back harder, through words and drawings, finding solace in his own bleak humor and irony.

This episode of Mary's death continues, as well as does Junior's joc-

ularity. Once he has been told the news, the boy waits outside the school for his father to come and pick him up, and the circumstances of this episode turn out to be preposterous. There is a snowstorm outside, and while freezing in front of the school, Junior has suddenly a mad idea that his dad will never make it, that he is having a car accident, and that he will die too. When his father finally arrives, Junior's reaction is to dissolve into laughter, as he himself displays in the text, which is augmented by one of his own drawings:



"Junior," he said. "What's wrong with you?"

"You're alive!" I shouted. "You're alive!"

"But your sister —," he said.

"I know, I know," I said. "She's dead. But you're alive. You're still alive."

I laughed and laughed. I couldn't stop laughing. I felt like I might die of laughing.

Both the drawing and its text are important, as the irony of the situation is evident, as are the language choices. The text of the page suggests the boy's exhilarating mood, now out of control with pain and relief, but it is the drawing the gives an extra dimension to the whole episode. Junior draws himself with his head twisted upside-down by the hard laugh-

ter, holding firmly to the dashboard of the car, as if he needed something solid that will keep him stable while his whole body is shaking. What is curious, and adds more humor to the whole picture, is his father, driving while completely composed (there is a snowstorm outside), and puzzled by his son's reaction. Mary is dead, and Junior is laughing uncontrollably. Even if the father's face and posture suggest calm, his words are clear: he is made uncomfortable by his son's reaction. The boy is out of his wits because he is happy that his father is alive. His sister is dead, but at least he still has his father, safe and sound, despite his being an alcoholic. At least for now, one of the alcoholics of his family is well, and they are together. And for our purposes, we note that Junior is clearly in a state of uncontrolled shock. His physical abnormalities—his excess of spinal fluid, his exaggerated extremities—in the end do not set him aside as being freakish. In a sense, the abnormality lies in the real world, and it is the distorted, laughing Junior who, laughing with the hysteria of shock, is sending lifeboats back to a world of disorder and despair.

3. Conclusion

This paper has briefly outlined the narrative approaches taken in two prominent and recent Young Adult novels. Both of the main characters have medical disorders that lead to social awkwardness and ostracism. Both have troubles integrating with—or even understanding—the world around them. One might not, at first glance, consider either of these basic premises as being promising grounds for Young Adult fiction. But much of the humor of both books derives from the attempts by these two eccentric protagonists to fit in with a world that finds them abnormal. Yet—as we see—Christopher and Junior humorously misunderstand or misinterpret a world that deems them abnormal. We are also invited to consider the value of the normative when it is laughable, ludicrous, and exclusionary. As Cart puts it, although dealing with another novel and another topic: it "remains a model of the realistic novel, which, through sensitive treatment of subject and the creation of believable, sympathet-

ic characters who behave believably, can deal with a serious social issue without being didactic" (Cart, 1996, p. 214). Cart's quote refers to *Night Kites* by M.E. Kerr, an LGBTQ+ Young Adult novel, and even if the topic of Kerr and her counterparts, Haddon and Alexie, are quite different, Cart's words apply well to *The Absolutely True Diary* as well as to *The Curious Incident*, as these writers, like Kerr 20 years before them, decided to deal with sensitive topics, creating compelling plots, and appealing, curious characters, whose lives were depicted (unlike in Kerr's book) in humorous ways.

Haddon has created Christopher who is mentally troubled by his Asperger's, while Alexie's Junior has a clear mind, but he is an outcast because of his physical disabilities and his ethnic difference from his colleagues. Both books explore the comedy that commonly arises from telling a story about an outsider; yet in both books, we see that humor is heavily sympathetic and understanding towards the sick and the outcast: with Christopher and with Junior, two teenagers who have the courage to deal with pain and loss in their own way.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Terrifyingly Humorous: Joshua Ferris's Portrayal of Contemporary American Work Culture and the Myth of the American Dream in Then We Came to the End and A Calling for Charlie Barnes

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ABSTRACT

Joshua Ferris's use of humor to discuss and present the dark reality of the well-established (ideological) representations of American private and public life has garnered much attention in recent years. Building upon previous studies about work culture, contemporary American culture and humor theories, which include Clare (2014), Lawrence (2018), Lytle (2021), Saval (2014), Rank et al. (2014), and Ross (1998), the aim of this paper is to discuss how Ferris's use of subversive humor in his debut novel Then We Came to the End (2007) and his recent work of fiction A Calling for Charlie Barnes (2021), offers a satirical lens through which anxieties and dehumanizing aspects of contemporary work culture and the myth of the American Dream are exposed. In Then We Came to the End, Ferris presents office workers who not only despise their jobs but experience a sense of paranoia as their company initiates the process of downsizing. Ferris sheds light on the alienating aspect of corporate culture and the relentless pursuit of success through humorous characters and episodes. Whereas Then We Came to the End presents office workers who

hate their jobs, but simultaneously wish to remain in the same stifling corporate structure, A Calling for Charlie Barnes presents the eponymous protagonist as an active, yet unsuccessful, agent of American individualism. In A Calling for Charlie Barnes, Ferris presents the American Dream, through the use of humor, as an ideological construct that promises more than it can deliver.

Keywords: Ferris, work culture, American Dream, humor, success myth

1. Introduction

To the question of what part humor plays in his fiction when tackling serious themes and issues, Joshua Ferris's answer was simple, "it undercuts it but at the same time it just makes it bearable" (Midtown Scholar Bookstore, 2021, 15:34). Likewise, this paper argues that, in line with the aforementioned quote, Ferris's use of humor in *Then We Came to the End* (2007) and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* (2021) makes the reading of these two novels "bearable" insofar as the subject matter which is at its core serious, dark and even terrifying (in a limited sense) is rendered less pessimistic through the use of humor. But it additionally does something else. Ferris's blend of 'the serious' and 'humorous' through subversive humor reveals and mocks the incongruities present in contemporary corporate structures in the US and American cultural myths of success.

Then We Came to the End and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* serve as poignant choices for analysis in a few different ways. Firstly, *Then We Came to the End* was Ferris's debut novel which (being published in 2007) anticipated the market crash of 2008 with its critical stance against contemporary corporate structures where workers feel alienated. Conversely, *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* is Ferris's most recent novel which focuses on a failed agent of American individualism who spent his entire life following the tenets of the American Dream – all to no avail. By the end of his life (after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer), Charlie realizes how 'unsuccessful' he was. Therefore, thematically, these two novels deal with the collective and the individual(istic) respectively. Moreover, both

novels abound in what Ferris is well-known for today: the blend of the serious and the humorous.

The remaining discussion of this paper is divided into four additional sections. The following section deals with the notion of humor in general as well as Ferris's use of humor as a tool of subversion of both corporate and individualistic strivings in the American socio-cultural matrix. The third and fourth sections after that deal with individual novels and the significance of humor in *Then We Came to the End* and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* respectively. The fifth and final section serves as a general conclusion for the entire paper.

2. Oscillating Between 'the Terrifying' and the Humorous

What is perhaps the only ubiquitous trait that various theories of humor share is summarized by Jerry Farber (2007), "we experience humor as a form of play" (p. 69). Continuing from there, however, proves to be more troublesome. After providing a brief overview of, and the problems that come with the three major humor theories (superiority, release and incongruity theories), Farber (2007) concludes, "humor remains somewhat mysterious and elusive" (p. 68).[21] As it turns out, pinpointing why people find something humorous is not a simple task; and it was certainly not for the lack of trying. Even more peculiar is the use of humor as a form of resistance, where humor becomes a means of the oppressed/victims to mock, subvert and/or laugh in the face of the oppression.[22] In this regard, Chris A. Kramer's contribution to the theory

21 Certain scenes or pieces of dialogue in *Then We Came to the End* and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* could be analyzed through the incongruity theory of humor (as the most popular humor theory nowadays) or through the Benign Violation Theory (See McGraw & Warren., 2010; McGraw et al., 2012) as the most recent theory of humor. However, this paper is interested more in contextual and general incorporation of humor (context rather than content) on Ferris's part and what such incorporation and, as this paper argues, blend with 'the terrifying' might achieve in terms of resistance against/critique of hegemonic economic/political structures or narratives.

22 Which additionally deepens Farber's notion of perceiving humor as a form of play.

of humor through "subversive humor" serves as a suitable starting point when analyzing Ferris's fiction. For Kramer (2020), "subversive humor" means,

> [...] a form of protest or resistance to systemic structures of oppression or an unjust status quo. It is at once serious in the sense that its content is impactful and significant and that its motivations are critical, yet it is also playful in that it is open, creative, imaginative [...]. (pp. 154-155)[23]

Ferris's two novels under consideration in this paper share the same aspects: they are simultaneously "serious" and "playful." *Then We Came to the End* and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* are serious novels in the sense that the subject matter revolves around alienating corporate practices and structures (*Then We Came to the End*), and the myth of the American Dream as an ideological narrative which fails Charlie Barnes who is additionally diagnosed with pancreatic cancer (*A Calling for Charlie Barnes*). Simultaneously, however, "the playful" aspect makes its appearance through humorous narrativization, silly episodes, and characters' utterances. In that way, then, Ferris cautiously and constantly 'oscillates' between the serious and the humorous in order to reveal those ideological narratives, as well as the process of commodification of human beings under capitalism.

What particularly is serious/'terrifying' in these two novels and why is the blend of the serious and the humorous so significant? After all, literary production is replete with fictional writings which blend serious and humorous elements (Charles Dickens as one of the best examples);[24] and the purpose of satire is precisely to critique serious issues through

23 Kramer started discussing "subversive humor" in his Dissertation, where he proposed, "I make the case that a subset of humor that I will refer to as 'subversive humor', can be used as a means to combat oppression" (2015, p. 1).

24 In various interviews (recorded and written), Ferris has revealed other literary works which influenced him when writing both *Then We Came to the End* and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes*. Some of the most prominent include Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* (1957); Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949); Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956) and; Don DeLillo's *Americana* (1971) (from which he borrowed the phrase for the title of *Then We Came to the End*).

humor. This paper argues that, on a fundamental level, Ferris's novels are certainly a continuation of those traditions. However, what is common to Dickens's and Ferris's novels, *and* satire in general, is the context in which and about which they write.[25] As Alison Ross (1998) argues, "The social context is important for the creation and reception of humour" (p. 2).[26] For a humorous 'text' (for example a joke) to be successful, context is crucial. But, this paper argues that the same 'rule' applies to the subject matter which is serious and/or tragic. What makes *Then We Came to the End* and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* 'terrifyingly humorous' therefore is the shared social context readers *and* characters from the two novels experience.[27] For agents of the American Dream who believe in the 'success narrative' of that form of social mobility, there is something 'terrifying' when they realize the incongruence between the idealized and realistic rates of success.[28] Likewise, for anyone who is about to enter or who is already in the marketplace and a labor force, the alienating aspect and the exploitative nature of a process of production can seem 'terrifying'. Ferris's novels in question seem serious or terrifying precisely because readers, in some form or another, share similar destinies with his characters. And yet, both Ferris's characters and the readers, more often than not, wish to remain in the same alienating and stifling (corporate) structures precisely because the alternative (no job, potential debt, poverty) often seems much direr. As the we-narrator relates in *Then We Came to the End*,

> We fell into it helplessly, the way jilted lovers know only one subject, the way true bores never transcend the sorry limitations of their own lives. It was a shrill, carping, frenzied time,

25 This is not to say that Dickens and Ferris wrote about the same social context, but they respectively tackled and critiqued their own contemporary contexts through the incorporation of humor and 'serious' social commentary.

26 This is Ferris's one assertion supported in *Then We Came to the End*. One character from the novel is reading a memoir by a breast cancer patient and she states, "'The point I'm trying to make,' she said, grabbing a tissue forcefully from a box on the desk, 'is that there is really little humor in a diagnosis of cancer. And what humor there is, is humorous only in the context of a whole lot of sadness [...]'" (Ferris, 2007, p. 184).

27 As Ruth Maxey (2016) writes about *Then We Came to the End*, "Ferris links narrative experimentation to the national *zeitgeist* [...]" (p. 209).

28 As Rank, Hirschl & Foster (2014) relate, this is called "American paradox" (p. 80).

and as poisonous an atmosphere as anyone had ever known – and we wanted nothing more than to stay in it forever. (Ferris, 2007, p. 356)

Still, humor is an ever-present factor in Ferris's fiction in general and the two novels in question specifically. Ferris's use of humor serves as resistance through subversion of the idealized representations of American success myths and corporate marketplaces in the contemporary US. Resistance here does not necessarily mean 'revolutionary' or even violent struggles against such systems and structures. Indeed, humor for most characters in *Then We Came to the End* serves as a motivational force which helps them survive another day in their 'boring' and mundane lives. Perhaps this is the reason why Ralph Clare (2014), in his recent study about the representation of corporations in American cultural texts, *Fictions Inc.,* criticizes *Then We Came to the End* as a novel which (un)intentionally supports the oppressive neoliberal corporate system, suggesting that it is the corporation which is victorious in the end and not the workers. In that sense, whereas Melville's Bartleby can openly (and directly) refuse his employer's demands in the workplace, Ferris's resistance against the oppressive qualities of the contemporary corporate structures is more subdued.

However, Ferris's use of subversive humor should not be easily disregarded. As Ross (1998) argues, "Much humour is an attack on people in superior positions of power and influence; in a sense, it is the fight-back of the victim, who has only words to use against money, might and status" (p. 57). Therefore, various humorous episodes in *Then We Came to the End* serve as resistance 'from below'. In that sense then, if suppression of anti-corporate sentiments and political myths (see Zakaras, 2022) are the main tools of the political and the corporate in the neoliberal formation of polities to keep the workforce in the status quo, then humor is the weapon used by those from below. Humor, in instances like these, is always-already subversive.[29] The subversion, in Ferris's case, operates on

29 This is a less radical stance than Kramer's when he stated, "On one account, *any* work of art is subversive by its very nature" (2020, p.156, emphasis in the original).

varying levels, however.

In *A Calling for Charlie Barnes,* Ferris combines humor with the discussion about the myth of the American Dream on one level. On another level, however, Ferris tackles the topic of death. And as Ross (1998) warns, "Humour on the topic of death also ranges from generally acceptable to the shocking and offensive" (p. 66). Even though a taboo topic when combined with humor, for Ferris, it is a necessary "transgression" he must tackle in order to even produce humor. Ah Ferris stated in one interview:

> The social constraints are intense [...]. You have to trust both yourself, I think, and your audience to know that you're leaving social constraints behind, because it's in transgression; it's in statements that appall or leave listener aghast that humor starts to get generated [...]. (Midtown Scholar Bookstore, 2021, 44:28-45:15)

This is precisely why *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* is in a sense more daring in its subject matter than *Then We Came to the End*. Trying to be humorous in a novel about a man in his sixties who has just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and who realizes that *his* American Dream was one long nightmare must come with a 'social contract' where readers understand that this is where humor "starts to get generated." The stakes for Ferris are, therefore, much higher than with *Then We Came to the End*. If the 'terrifying' prevails over the humorous and *vice versa*, *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* would be bound to become either a staunch social commentary or a trite comedy about a dysfunctional family – and this novel is neither of the two. Without the balanced combination of subversive humor with serious issues which tackle both the private and the communal aspects of life, *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* would not be able to find readers who could accept the novel's humorous elements.

3. "Is this boring you yet?": Subversion Through Humor in *Then We Came to the End*

Then We Came to the End falls under multiple novelistic sub-classifications: a post-9/11 novel; an office novel; and a work novel (Russell, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, in her essay "We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration," Natalya Bekhta proposes "we-narratives" as a new form of narrative structure where the narrator becomes expressed in first-person plural pronoun (we), and as the main representative of this new trend of narrativization is, for Bekhta, Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*. Bektha (2017) defines we-narratives as:

> [...] a narrative situation with a dominant category of person where 'person' refers to a group who narrates and who is also a character, consistently using the first-person plural pronoun for self-designation and self-reference. In other words, narration by collective subjectivity is the *dominant* mode of we-narrative. In terms of knowledge, feelings, and focalization scope, we-narrator creates a holistic supraindividual level that supersedes a mere aggregation of individual characters and thus cannot be identified with or reduced to an 'I' speaking on behalf of such a group. (p. 165, emphasis in the original)

Indeed, *Then We Came to the End* establishes its narrative tone from the very beginning, "We were fractious and overpaid. [...] Most of us liked most everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled" (Ferris, 2007, p. 3). The first few sentences quoted here set the tone that Ferris will follow throughout the novel: the tone simultaneously oscillates between the mundane with a hint of humor and allusions to a "fractious" corporate environment. *Then We Came to the End* is a novel about ad agency workers during a time of corporate downsizing due to the 2000 dot-com bubble burst. In this novel, Ferris explores the dynamics of office politics, the fear of layoffs, as well as the mundane rou-

tines, gossip, and insecurities of various characters who, even during the downsizing process, can only think about passing an hour doing as little as possible. As the we-narrator reveals:

> Some of us loved killing an hour of the company's time and others felt guilty for it afterward. [...] By the end of the fiscal year, our clients had paid us a substantial amount of money to sit around and bullshit, expenses they then passed on to you, the consumer. (Ferris, 2007, p. 16)

The story gets complicated when the agency receives a pro-bono marketing campaign to produce an ad that would make breast cancer patients laugh. Workers, pressured by this seemingly impossible task combined with the growing paranoia due to layoffs, often turn to everyday silly episodes from their personal and office lives.

Where the aspect of 'terrifyingly humorous' marks its presence most clearly is in the representation of the type of work the novel's characters do. Producing ads might seem a creative undertaking – and to an extent it is[30] – but Ferris openly reveals how "boring" and repetitive it truly is. In fact, the workers themselves are aware of it:

> Our business was advertising and details were important. If the third number after the second hyphen in a client's toll-free number was a six instead of an eight, and if it went to print like that, and showed up in *Time* magazine, no one reading the ad could call now and order today. No matter they could go to the website, we still had to eat the price of the ad. Is this boring you yet? It bored us every day. Our boredom was ongoing, a collective boredom, and it would never die because we would never die. (Ferris, 2007, pp. 3-4)

In passages like these, Ferris does not only present the production of ads as a "boring" undertaking; he likewise plays with the profession's

30 Still, Mark H. Lytle (2021) correctly blames the current formation of consumer capitalism for the "creative destruction" which came to characterize it (p. 26).

'uselessness' for anything other than the promotion of a commodity. In the grand scheme of things, making a misprint of a client's phone number seems nothing more than an inconvenience which can hardly affect the market in the age of digitalization and globalization. The workers in the agency overcame boredom through numerous activities and meticulous gossip. They gossip about almost anything and anyone. Their ancestors might have gathered around a fire to convey stories; these corporate workers gather around a copy machine, or in a meeting room to discuss recent episodes from their lives. These stories constantly combine a serious tone and/or subject matter with humorous takes or interjections. But it is precisely through those mundane activities and gossip that subversion occurs.

Agency workers' jokes, pranks, and sarcastic comments are a way of rebelling against the rigid and impersonal nature of the workplace. It is through humor – either serious episodes from their lives which contain humorous elements, or 'silly'[31] activities they do to pass the time – that they maintain their individuality and resist the pressure to conform to corporate norms. Likewise, as Alison Russell (2017) argues, language serves as the most important tool for these workers as they "use language to resist or disrupt the firm's power over them" (p. 2). In that way, the workers reclaim a sense of agency, which is collectivized formalistically through the collective narrative voice (Russell, 2017, p. 3). Examples of silly episodes abound in *The We Came to the End*. Even during the entire process of downsizing, about which the workers are collectively afraid, they continue to engage in activities which subvert the expected and normative behavior in a corporate environment. Some examples of such behavior include pushing each other down the hall in a swivel chair; changing each other's radio stations; pretending to do work by carrying paper down the hall when in fact they are looking for candy; Hank Neary would bring a library book and copy all the pages and read them, pretending to

31 The word 'silly' appears throughout the paper as an intentional choice since Ferris himself used the word to describe his process of writing humorous episodes in *Then We Came to the End*, "When I was writing it, I was getting silly" (ReadRollShow, 2010, 0:39).

be reading work documents; during the downsizing period, they would "send an e-mail from their [person who was fired] computer addressed to the entire agency" (Ferris, 2007, p. 36); one worker challenged himself to spend an entire day without using his mouse or keyboard. Through these moments, the workers resist the corporate grip that tries to control them.

More importantly, however, these episodes suggest a more 'terrifying' element. The workers do not only resist the hegemonic corporate norms; they likewise question their place in such a system and the negative consequences they need to live with. Many of these workers suffer from depression[32] and other mental problems:

> Marcia Dwyer was on Prozac. Jim Jackers was on Zoloft and something else. Dozens of others took pills all day long, which we struggled to identify, there were so many of them, in so many different colors and sizes. Janine Gorjanc was on a cocktail of several meds, including lithium. (Ferris, 2007, p. 57)

This outcome, which is a direct consequence of the corporate environment which surrounds the agency workers, is inevitably tied to not only mental pressures put on them but also to their physical surroundings. As Nikil Saval (2014) writes in *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*, "Transposing the factory model to the office turned white-collar work into numbing, repetitive labor" (p. 13). The growing paranoia initiated by the downsizing process, combined with a mysterious commission (from an organization that does not exist) to make an ad that would make breast cancer patients laugh only increases the terrifying aspects associated with the corporate world – alienation, feeling worthless, fear for one's position in a company, mistrust etc. Still, Ferris always returns to humor even in these dire situations. One of the best examples of this oscillation between the terrifying and the humorous appears when Tom Mota gets fired. Shortly after, Tom's chair disappears from his office and a quasi-investigation is initiated. The office coordinator visits Chris Yop in

32 Liam Connell's analysis of the novel in his *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* suggests that depression is caused precisely because the workers in *Then We Came to the End* view their profession as meaningless (2017, pp. 106-107).

his office and asks him about his office bookshelf and his chair. When the office coordinator reveals that each piece of furniture has a serial number she can trace to find missing office furniture, Chris Yop becomes worried because it was he who took Tom's bookshelf. Shortly after, Chris is also fired and he suspects that the main reason is that the office coordinator thinks Yop took Tom's office chair. As layoffs increase, one of the employees, Marcia, confesses to her colleagues that she, too, will be fired soon. Her main reason behind such thoughts is not larger economic forces beyond her control,[33] but:

> "Because, I'm the one who took Tom Mota's chair," she confessed. "You understand? Tom's chair is in my office. It's always been the rule that when someone leaves, if you get in there first you can take their chair. I got in there first, I took Tom's chair. I didn't know anything about serial numbers. Not until that tool started jabber-assing about them yesterday at the input. Since then I've been on eggshells. It's made me crazy." (Ferris, 2007, p. 107)

When reading passages like these (combined with the overall context of the scenes), readers of the novel cannot help but constantly shift from laughter to pity for these workers some of whom put the blame for their professional termination on an office chair. Perhaps this shift between two oppositional emotional reflexes occurs in readers precisely because of the shared sense of paranoia in those situations. Therefore, while we can 'feel' the humorous, we likewise sense the underlying terrifying feeling which almost all characters in the novel experience.

33 Downsizing in *Then We Came to the End* occurs because of the dot-com bubble burst at the turn of the century, but, as Zygmunt Bauman warned in *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, "in the world of big corporations progress means today first and foremost 'downsizing', while technological progress means replacement of living labour with electronic software" (2005, p. 64).

4. "He *was* a clown": Dreaming and Humor in *A Calling for Charlie Barnes*

A Calling for Charlie Barnes is the most recent novel by Joshua Ferris published in 2021. It revolves around a failed entrepreneur Charlie Barnes who spent his entire life chasing the American Dream. At sixty-eight, Charlie is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer which makes him question his life choices. Even though he tries to rekindle his relationship with his children, the only one who is willing to listen is his foster son, Jake Barnes, a novelist and the narrator. The novel is structured as a retelling by Jake of Charlie Barnes's life after his death. The story is mostly set in 2008, when Charlie is diagnosed with cancer. But as the novel progresses, readers are left to wonder which episodes from Charlie's life were reality and which ones were fiction (as told both by Charlie to Jake and from Jake to the readers). As with *Then We Came to the End*, the novel combines elements of grief with humorous characters, scenes, and takes. Readers are, once again, asked to cry and laugh almost simultaneously. But, at its core, *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* is a story about American individualism and the 'pursuit' of success which never comes to fruition for Charlie Barnes, a would-be self-made man.

Whereas the we-narrator in *Then We Came to the End* signifies workers as a collective body that is continuously exploited but expected to 'do better',[34] *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* is interested in American individual-

34 The entire concept of neoliberal subjects and subjectification rests upon the insistence on constant self-improvement. In a rather convoluted sense, corporations in the US are viewed as "persons" under legal definitions (Clare, 2014, p. 9), and neoliberal subjects are viewed as "business enterprise" (Chowdhury, 2022, p. 208), that are expected to endlessly improve (and control) their own behavior, desires and feelings according to the prevailing neoliberal notion of 'success'. In *Then We Came to the End*, humor partly lies in the fact that agency workers go against that neoliberal mantra of self-improvement. They have no desire to 'work on themselves' and be 'diligent workers'. They would rather waste the agency's time and money than try to improve the quality of their work. On the other hand, *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* presents self-blame as the main driving force of self-improvement, "The temptation to blame himself had always been very strong. If a product didn't perform, the marketplace wasn't the problem" (Ferris, 2021, p. 155). For a detailed discussion about neoliberal subject-formation and "self-othering" as a psycho-discursive undertaking and as one form of neoliberal (self-)subjectification, see Chowdhury, 2022.

ism present in the twentieth- and twenty-first century US. Charlie Barnes is an agent of American individualism and the mixture of the serious and the humorous occurs precisely in Charlie's failure to achieve *any* success in his pursuit of the American Dream. As the narrator reveals quite openly:

> He [Charlie Barnes] was too proud and too pressed for time to be reviewing all his damn failures. We'd be here all year. Steady Boy [Charlie's nickname] didn't have a year. Steady Boy had cancer [...]. [...] His achievements – ha! He'd spend half his life prepping the next big thing. It never panned out. Steady Boy did not, in fact, have a hard time holding down a job. He just never wanted to be a sucker, a schlub, or a midlevel this or that. Like anyone, he had hoped to make a killing, become a household name, live forever. Well, he would not, now. That was just a done deal. (Ferris, 2021, p. 11)

The pursuit of success – which for current neoliberal subjects means happiness (Chowdhury, 2022, p. 207) – requires health and time, neither of which Charlie possesses. It is a form of fallacy to believe (like Charlie does) that success can bring (some) happiness. As Lawrence R. Samuel (2018) writes in *Happiness in America*, "Our system of free market capitalism (the American Way of Life) and aspirational ethos (the American Dream) are actually better designed to generate stress than happiness" (p. 16). Ironically, Charlie himself comes to understand that the chase of the American Dream has been one long stressful experience of failed business endeavors and degrading family relationships. Charlie has a habit of calling his previous business partners' companies and complaining about how they have failed him and his grand business visions. When he tries to reach Jimmy Cayne, a man answers the phone and tells Charlie he has the wrong phone number. This is followed by Charlie's shouting about Jimmy Cayne and his confession about pancreatic cancer. However, at the end of the phone call, Charlie admits to the unknown man on the phone:

> "Fact of the matter is, I've spent my entire life pursuing the American dream, only to find out here at the eleventh hour that

it was nothing but a scam. The books were cooked. And now I'm dying. I've wasted my life." (Ferris, 2021, p. 15)

It is only in Charlie's current state in life that he understands that he wasted his life, but his ideas, inventions, and patents at the time seemed genius to him. This is where Ferris employs humor to present Charlie's business ideas as either miscalculated or nonsensical inventions for which the marketplace had no need or desire. When Charlie saw his friend Happy peel off his toupee and toss it in the air for his dog to catch, he came up with an idea he called the Doolander. Charlie simply could not "shake the image of that flying toupee. The ticklish absurdity of such a thing taking flight and its proven ability to make people laugh whispered in his ear of monetary potential" (Ferris, 2021, p. 79). He was determined to patent a frisbee in the shape of a toupee. And after correspondence with a developer, bankers, cold calls with potential investors, written letters to Walt Disney, "Still, too many people failed to get it" (Ferris, 2021, p. 80). And before the Doolander, there was Endopalm-T which was meant to kill off overgrown weeds. If Endopalm-T "was not designed to crackle upon application or to release a visible miasma unscatterable even by a stiff wind, it did a damn fine job of eliminating every living thing it came into contact with" (Ferris, 2021, p. 51). So, when Charlie and his brother Rudy applied the product on their Aunt Jewel's lawn, the results worked wonders, but "then Jewel came stumbling out of the house calling the name of her dead husband. 'Leonard, is that you? I don't feel too good, Len.' She collapsed on the porch [...]" (Ferris, 2021, p. 52). That was the end of Endopalm-T. Then came the Clown in Your Town™. In 1962, Charlie earned money as a clown but then came up with an idea to have "a cadre of Chollies [Charlie's clown name], a franchised fleet of clowns, and army of profiteering performers sweeping the nation" (Farris, 2021, p. 52). The business quickly failed before its inception because the would-be partner disappeared with Charlie's money. For what they are worth, failures are a constitutive element of the American Dream which the ideological narrative of success tries to disparage (Samuel, 2014, p. 15). While Charlie

was married to Charley Proffit, they both loved social work, that is at least what Charlie said to his then-wife. But when he finally revealed that he wanted to do something more with his life, Charley was shocked by all the things Charlie had kept hidden:

> "Look, I moved around, Charley. Didn't want to just settle. Figured if I kept looking, sooner or later I'd find the perfect thing."
> "Old Poor Farm," she said, "is the perfect thing."
> "I don't make that much at Old Poor Farm."
> "What you make is not what matters. What matters is what you do."
> "You see, I've just never thought like that."
> "This is all news to me," she said. "How many jobs have you had?"
> "Total? Jeez," he said. "Dunno. Never counted."
> "Ten?"
> He gave it some thought. "Forty, maybe?"
> Her eyes bugged out. "Forty?" (Ferris, 2021, p. 103)

Jake Barnes understands the significance of cultural myths such as the American Dream and he adamantly tries to subvert such ideological constructs which do not glorify *individuality* but *individualism*. As he states at the end of his retelling of Charlie's life as presented by Jake:

> He *was* a clown, in my retelling. And something worse than the real thing: the metaphorical clown that men become in the eyes of other men when their dreams flop and some dickhead with a bullhorn is there to broadcast it, disclosing all his insecurities and failures to the world. (Ferris, 2021, p. 226, emphasis in the original).

Here, Jake directly blames himself for disclosing his father's failure, but he understands that the only way to present Charlie Barnes as he truly was, is to openly discuss all his failures *as well as* his merits. The rest of the family becomes enraged with Jake for revealing Charlie's past mistakes and 'embarrassing' moments precisely because they understand that such subversion of ideological narratives about American individualism must not be disclosed. They completely misunderstand Jake's intention

of subverting those cultural myths, instead focusing their anger on Jake's supposed misrepresentation of Charlie as a person. Again, humor finds its way in those episodes in the novel when individual members of the Barnes family verbally attack Jake. Rudy, Charlie's brother, openly states:

[...] But then you come along and give us your take on things, and there's only one word for it: unlikable. You don't really do likable, do you, Jake? You do quirky sometimes, you do dysfunctional, you do weird, diseased, mentally ill. You do ugly and unpleasant. You do varieties of the damned. We didn't stand a chance from the beginning. And now look. Sure enough, the decency is gone. The charm is gone. (Ferris, 2021, p. 224)

Therefore, whereas Barbara, Charlie's wife, verbally reprimands Jake because he "turned [Charlie] into a clown" (Ferris, 2021, p. 209) through his biographical accounts of Charlie's life, Jake can only respond that that was the entire point. For Jake, "the charm" which is ascribed to the American Dream and rugged individualism must be completely dismantled because it is nothing more than a dream. Interestingly enough, towards the end of the novel, Jake also confesses that he too wanted to be a self-made man and that he was "more than happy, as Charlie had been, to brush off reality and embrace the dream" (Ferris, 2021, p. 188). Unlike Charlie, however, Jake recognizes that an alternative version of reality for the majority of people is part and parcel of the American Dream.

5. Conclusion

In Joshua Ferris's novels *Then We Came to the End* and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes*, humor plays just one part in his social critique of contemporary corporate structures on one hand and materialistic individualism on the other. The novels analyzed in this paper constantly oscillate between the humorous and 'the terrifying'. For the purposes of this paper, 'the terrifying' served as an umbrella term which encompassed all those negative emotional reflexes which both characters and readers can relate to as neoliberal subjects. Precisely because *Then We Came to the End* deals

with corporate workers, and *A Calling for Charlie Barnes* tackles an unsuccessful self-made man, readers can inevitably relate to either of the two oppositional representatives of contemporary American economic (and cultural) visions of work and success. 'The terrifying' is, therefore, terrifying only because we 'know the feeling' and we recognize all those alienating, suffocating, disdainful moments which abound in both novels analyzed here. However, Ferris's critique heavily relies on humor which always subverts the well-established corporate and political myths which have been used in the social practice of commodification of human beings to present a more optimistic image of reality.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Humor in Popular Women's Confessional Writing: A Case Study of Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones Series

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to show how humor and women's confessional writing are intertwined in three installments of one of the most popular chick lit series: Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary (1996), Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason (1999), and Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy (2013). Beginning with a brief discussion of what chick lit and confessional writing are, the paper explores how Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones series humorously "confesses" Bridget Jones's ups and downs in physical (food preparation and consumption), moral (familial ties), intellectual (reading habits and preferences), and social (interpersonal and personal writing skills and traveling) aspects of her everyday life. The paper concludes by considering, in the light of possible objections, some consequences of our argument: it asserts that in popular women's confessional writing, such as chick lit, humor is indeed an essential ingredient of both its appeal to the ever growing readership of this popular fiction genre and a means of social and cultural critique of the imperatives imposed on women in contemporary times.

Keywords: the Bridget Jones series, chick lit, diary, humor, Helen Fielding, women's confessional writing

1. Introduction

Any definition of popular fiction consists of a complex combination of the different meanings of the term "fiction" with the different meanings of the term "popular." An obvious starting point in any attempt to define popular fiction is to say that popular fiction is simply fiction that is well liked by many people. The quantitative aspect of this formulation could be confirmed by sales of (e-)books – for instance, by some estimates "crime fiction currently constitutes fully a third of the fiction published in English worldwide" (Smith, 2006, p. 137) – as *popular* of popular fiction would appear to call for it. A second way of defining popular fiction is to assert that it is the fiction that is left over after we have decided what is Literature;[35] it is a definition of popular fiction as inferior fiction. In this definition, popular fiction is "conceived as the opposite of Literature, [which] . . . is thus commonly regarded as self-contained, enclosed and completed by the author's apparent uniqueness, rather than as part of a shared and broad-based species of writing such as 'crime fiction'" (Gelder, 2004, pp. 11, 40), there to accommodate novels and short stories that are mass-produced, commercial, and fail to meet the required standards of Literature as an individual act of trans-historical creation. In this definition, the notions of inferior and transhistorical raise a number of issues. For example, William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* has perplexed literary critics from the moment the novel appeared in 1931 as Faulkner himself repeatedly emphasized that the novel was to be seen as "a cheap idea . . . deliberately conceived to make money" (1932, p. v), a commercial enterprise satisfying "current trends" (1932, p. vi), and "the most horrific tale" (1932, p. vi) he could invent. The same point can be made about William Shakespeare, who is now regarded as the embodiment of Literature, yet up to the nineteenth century his plays were part of popular theater. A third definition of popular fiction draws heavily on the previous one as it looks at it as "mass fiction" – a hopelessly commercial fiction, mass produced for mass consumption. The sales of the *Harry Potter* series, the *Hunger Games* trilogy,

35 I adopt here Ken Gelder's term Literature: he ascribes a capital L to the term to distinguish it from literature as a general field of writing.

A Song of Ice and Fire series or the *Bridget Jones* series would undoubtedly confirm this definition. Yet, the afore-mentioned mass fiction perspective might be sanitized by seeing popular fiction as a form of public fantasy, as a collective dream world. In this sense, the *Harry Potter* series, for example, functions in much the same way as dreams: it articulates the collective "wish-fulfillment of the need to be special – and how much more special can one be than to be admitted into a magical world filled with like-minded people who have talents above and beyond the real world?" (Hiebert, 2009, p. 202). Other definitions of popular fiction could include the views on popular fiction as folk fiction, as a site of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate cultures or as a postmodern terrain of interpenetration of fiction and commerce.[36]

What all these definitions have in common is the idea that whatever popular fiction is, it is definitely "a craft" (Gelder, 2004, p. 17), which is simple, fantastic, sensuous, often humorous, caught up with "danger" and "intrigue," excessive, exaggerated, plot-oriented, and exciting (Gelder, 2004, p. 19). The last trait unambiguously points out that popular fiction "often enjoys a particular kind of reader loyalty, one that can build itself around not just a writer and his or her body of work (which certainly happens) but the entire genre and the culture that imbues it" (Gelder, 2004, p. 81). One of the key words in the afore-cited quote that encapsulates contemporary critical views on popular fiction is, without doubt, *genre*. Understood as the "process" organized around "loose rules of plausibility and probability which means that certain generic elements are *expected* and therefore indispensable if a genre is to be recognisable (to authors, readers, institutions) at *specific times*" (Wilkins, 2005) or as "a means of categorising fictional formulae" (Bloom, 2002, p. 86), genre is the most productive way to think about popular fiction as "the entire field of popular fiction is written for, marketed and consumed generically: it provides the primary logic for popular fiction's means of production, formal and industrial identification and critical evaluation" (Gelder, 2004,

36 The given definitions of popular fiction have been inspired by John Storey's interpretation of popular culture in his *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 5th edition, pp. 5-13.

p. 40). The afore-mentioned definition of genre contains the second most important concept recurring in discussions of popular fiction – *formula*. As “a completely conventional structure of conventions” (Cawelti, 1972, p. 119) or the list of “certain textual ‘elements’ . . . bound up in industry and reader expectations” (Wilkins, Driscoll, & Fletcher, 2022, pp. 40, 162), formula makes genre even more specific by imposing “a much more limited repertory of plots, characters, and settings” (Cawelti, 1972, p. 121) to it. For instance, fantasy must have a certain setting, a particular cast of characters, and follow a limited number of lines of action. A fantasy that does not take place in alternative or parallel worlds, does not feature (magical) characters involved in a quest, and does not depict the conflict between the good and the evil with a hope-infused resolution, is simply not a fantasy novel. A mystery that does not involve some kind of crime and a crime-solving protagonist is not a mystery novel. That is why popular fiction is often termed *genre fiction* or *formula fiction* – the fiction that shares “multiple characteristics and features, allowing them to be characterized as belonging to a specific genre” (Herald, 2006, p. 31).

Being a popular fiction (sub)genre, “chick lit,” as a story about a young woman (or a group of young women) in her (or their) late twenties or thirties struggling with career and relationship issues, follows a certain formula (Ramsdell, 1999; Regis, 2003; Parv, 2004; Saunders, 2004; Ferriss & Young, 2005; Herald & Wiegand, 2006; Mlynowski & Jacobs, 2006; Smith, 2008; Harzewski, 2011; Montoro, 2012) whose “ingredients” are:

1) urban setting in contemporary time
2) single everywoman protagonists in the late twenties to thirties age range
3) mostly female first person point of view
4) mostly female first person narrator
5) thematic issues centering at women in their late twenties and thirties: love issues, career issues, marriage, female bonding and comradery, urban family of single friends, struggles to live up to beauty and fashion industry demands, female day-to-day rituals, family, the influence of media, consumerism, travelling, etc.

6) a more realistic and partly parodic view of women's life
7) witty, saucy, and humorous language
8) romantic comedy elements
9) the extreme ease of identification.

With a female first person narrator as one of the formulaic traits, the (sub)genre often creates the mood of an intimate, personal *confession*, which is, according to Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1978),

> a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (pp. 61-62)

If confession is, as Foucault asserts, a ritualized method or technique for producing truth and, thus, a way of asserting "truth" about one's self, which more often than not challenges the given definitions of gender, family roles, mind/body, culture, the popular/the canonical, mainstream/margin etc., texts with confessional tone are then to be considered non-mimetic and engaged in construction of some pre-textual truth, an effect of the process by which a person thinks of themselves as individual, responsible, culpable and, therefore, confessional. As such, confessions are inseparable from "justice, medicine, education, family relationships, . . . love relations, . . . the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, . . . the most solemn rites" (Foucault, 1978, p. 59), allowing historical, cultural, and social self-inscription and self-construction, the most common examples of which are memoirs or autobiographies, letters, journals, and diaries. Diaries, in particular, offer innumerous possibilities for self-inscription and self-construction because of both their multipurpose character – they can be "a research tool for historians, a therapeutic instrument for psychologists, a repository of information about social structures and relationships for sociologists, and a form of literature and composition for

rhetoricians and literary scholars" (Bunkers & Huff, 1996, p. 1) – and their modifiable content and form. The latter feature of diary is brought into being by its discontinuousness, allusiveness,[37] redundancy, repetitiveness, unfinishedness, non-narrative character expressed by diarists' inability to control the sequence of events because they "write with no way of knowing what will happen next in the plot, much less how it will end" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 202), secretiveness that frees from the duty or obligation or need to please or persuade potential readers – parents, husbands, friends, children, siblings, relatives... In being open to both the sheltered and unsheltered exchange, diary can, according to Lynn Z. Bloom (1996), take the form of either a truly private, authentic or honest diary (p. 25) or a private diary as a public document (p. 28). Truly private, authentic, or honest diaries are, according to Lynn Z. Bloom (1996), characterized by bare-bones purpose, scope, and style, daily allotment of space form, chronological structure, the necessity of contextualization because they are not self-coherent, little concern with the authorial image, the lack of in-depth analysis of secondary characters, and historical, cultural, economic, medical or social value (pp. 25-27).

As a narrative method of fictional self-inscription and self-construction, diary has often been utilized in literature in the form of diary-novel – a "hybrid creation trying [more or less successfully] to reconcile two contrasting aesthetics" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 207) of the actual and the apocryphal. Diary-novels produce

> a kind of "diary effect" in the manner of Barthes's "reality effect." On one side, these elements include length, the fact of repetition, a massive number of things left implicit, discontinuity and gaps in information, and a "first draft" character of writing. On the other side we have immodesty (exposing things about oneself that one would presumably have an interest in keeping secret, such as weaknesses, embarrassment, and faults) and indiscretion (every diary compromises other people, whether by

37 Personal writing "acts as a *mnemonic sign* for the person writing, 'that way I'll remember' – but remember *something other* than what is written about" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 170).

> revealing things about some people to third parties, or by revealing how one really sees other people without telling them). (Lejeune, 2009, p. 228)

In addition, in purporting to "show the day-to-day reflections of *one or more characters*" (Field, 1989, p. 6, emphasis mine) where "day-to-day" actually refers to "contemporary events to provide material for *the narrative*" (Field, 1989, p. 8, emphasis mine), diary-novels are always governed by their authors and are "always written to lead to the ending" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 207).

2. Bridget's Humorous Confessions

One of the most famous chick lit diary-novels, which is also considered to be the (sub)genre's prototypical text and the embodiment of the original chick lit formula, is, without doubt, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). Its sequels *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999) and *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013) successfully continue the narrative formula of Fielding's original diary-novel.[38] The novels' form, purpose, scope, style, and structure, even though governed by Fielding and more or less predictable in terms of what turns and ends Bridget's diaries will take, mirror a truly private diary as far as Bridget Jones is concerned. The dated dairy entries, sometimes including meticulous minute-by-minute details of Bridget's day, infuse "the [depicted] situations . . . with the palpable feeling of exposure" (Guerrero, 2006, p. 92), the example of which is the entry of Friday May 5:

> Spent the morning mooning about in mourning for lost baby but cheered up a bit when Tom called to suggest a lunchtime Bloody Mary to get the weekend off to a healthy start. Got home to find a petulant message from Mother saying she's gone to a

38 *Bridget Jones's Baby: The Diaries* (2016), the last novel in the series, is not included in the analysis as the paper focuses on the original text and its sequels. *Bridget Jones's Baby: The Diaries* is the prequel to *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013) and was published as the follow-up of the film of the same title.

> health farm and will call me later. I wonder what's the matter. Probably overwhelmed by too many Tiffany's boxes from lovesick suitors and TV presenter job offers from rival production companies. (Fielding, 1998, p. 120)

Bridget's diary entry is candid, spontaneous, chronological, elliptical, self-examinational, confessional, people and places are not closely identified, the events are not in-depth analyzed because Bridget writes for herself, no reader outside her immediate family and community can understand the entry without the extra-textual information. She charges her writing with humor and emotional contents, and takes psychological or emotional stance toward people she mentions in her entry. Being written in Bridget's "quirky comic vernacular" (Harzewski, 2011), the diary entries, although fictional, convey the notion of authenticity, of being an in-depth personal and intimate account of Bridget's experiences. This effect is further emphasized by the continuous use of slang, colloquialisms, spelling issues, and "an immediate, abbreviated style that makes it seem as if Bridget writes about her experiences as they happen" (Mabry, 2006, p. 196) as well as by occasional falling into "almost phonetic spelling and stream-of-consciousness sentence structure"[39] (Mabry, 2006, p. 196). The afore-mentioned narrative techniques vividly depict Bridget's state of mind and reinforce the idea that *she* is the one confessing her own story.

Bridget's confessions "revel . . . hilariously in her insecurities, her mistakes, and her failures even as . . .[they] . . . [qualify as] her successes; as a result, . . . the humor of the novel is not consciously created by Bridget but rather is generated at her expense" (Marsh, 2004, p. 52). In addition, Bridget's diary entries, as a confession of a sinner who has no intention to reform and who eventually comes to like her imperfect image better than others' perfection she strives for, allow the reader to further identify with her as the "cultural impulse toward guilt and confession, as well as toward the paralyzing normativizing demands upon the physical com-

39 Such a structure conveys the idea that Bridget is actually writing the entry while she is still drunk: "2 a.m. Argor sworeal brilleve with Shazzan Jude. Dun stupid care about Daniel stupid prat. Feel sicky though. Oops" (Fielding, 1998, p. 68).

ponent of the subject" (Adolph, 2009, p. 161) are a part of their everyday life and thus an instigator of readerly empathy.

With Bridget as the object of humor in Fielding's novels, her diaries record "with humor [and irony] the many factors that [might] influence her to change – not only her mother and her rivals, but also self-help books, diets, and other imports from American popular culture" (Marsh, 2004, p. 53) as well as "the ever-present spectre of failure that accompanies such an intent" (Guenther, 2006, p. 85). Those humorously ironic (or ironically humorous) records crystallize around the following aspects of Bridget's life[40]:

1) physical (tranquility or sleep; eating or meals; activity or exercise)
2) moral (inner life, religious or meditative; domestic and familial life; economic life)
3) intellectual (intellectual life required by work, relative to a profession, to obligations; intellectual pursuits unrelated to obligations; literary life), and
4) social (letter writing, correspondence; traveling life: voyages and tours, business trips, comings and goings; civil and social life; entertainment; passive and contemplative life; numerical life or life expressed in numbers; mnemonic life; rational life).[41]

In the series, the depiction of the physical aspects of Bridget's life focuses mostly on food preparation and consumption. There are manifold diary entries in each installment of the series about food buying, food preparation, recipes, menus, food consumption, dieting, and weight obsession. In fact, harassed by cultural demands to achieve physical perfection and an ideal weight, Bridget begins almost every diary entry with her weight, the number of consumed calories and alcohol units, constantly obsesses about those issues, and eventually subverts her calory and weight tracking by humorously/ironically commenting on her weight reduction attempts. Table 1 (see Appendix, Table 1)

40 The given aspects are based on Lejeune's four categories of the "diverse uses of daily life" (2009, p. 115).

41 Further analysis will focus on one segment of each aspect of Bridget's life.

The humor/the irony of Bridget's daily obsessions with her ideal weight, and by extension food consumption, reaches its peak at the end of each installment in the series as her weight at the beginning of the each novel and that at its end are either the same or but one pound different. Having just 58.5 kg, Bridget is not overweight at all, which is an ironic comment on cultural and media standardizations imposed on women, thus resulting in "women's skewed relationships to their own bodies" (Whelehan, 2004, p. 74).

The elusive quest for bodily perfection is further called into question by Bridget's social life and her eating habits. Bridget is a regular visitor of family's, family friends' and friends' parties where everything revolves around talking, eating, and drinking, unsuccessfully follows recipes in cookbooks, makes a catastrophic dinner consisting of "blue soup, omelette, and marmalade" (Fielding, 1998, p. 271), and meticulously lists her diet the example of which are the following entries, hinting at how Bridget humorously misuses diets by combining several different diets and relying at any given moment on the one that allows her to eat exactly what she wants. Table 2 (see Appendix, Table 2)

Just as food consumption makes the integral part of each installment's focus on the physical aspects of Bridget's life, so too are familial ties and the reflections on family bonding inseparable from the depictions of the moral aspects of Bridget's life. Throughout the series, Bridget's father is thus presented as a dependable und understanding father figure always there to offer a shoulder to cry on. Table 3 (see Appendix, Table 3)

Unless he himself needs one because of his wandering wife:

> At 2 o'clock Dad arrived at the door with a neatly folded copy of the *Sunday Telegraph*. As he sat down on the sofa, his face crumpled and tears began to splosh down his cheeks. "She's been like this since she went to Albufeira with Una Alconbury and Audrey Coles," he sobbed, trying to wipe his cheek with his fist. "When she got back she started saying she wanted to be paid for doing the housework, and she'd wasted her life being our slave." (Our slave? I knew it. This is all my fault. If I were a better person,

> Mum would not have stopped loving Dad.) "She wants me to move out for a while, she says, and . . . and. . . . " He collapsed in quiet sobs.
> "And what, Dad?"
> "She said I thought the clitoris was something from Nigel Coles's lepidoptery collection." (Fielding, 1998, p. 48)

Although loving and supporting, Bridget and her dad's relationship fades, however, into the background as in the series the greater emphasis has been put on Bridget's relationship with her mother Pamela who is presented as a (comic) power figure to both Bridget and her husband because of her "late in life feminist awakening" (Smith, 2008, p. 123):

> I know what her secret is: she's discovered power. She has power over Dad: he wants her back. She has power over Julio, and the tax man, and everyone is sensing her power and wanting a bit of it, which makes her even more irresistible. So all I've got to do is find someone or something to have power over and then ... oh God. I haven't even got power over my own hair. (Fielding, 1998, pp. 66-67)

Pamela's power over Bridget stems from three sources:

1) "a cultural imperative to strive for multiple and contradictory female ideals" (Guenther, 2006, p. 86)
2) Bridget's guilt for not fulfilling her mother's intentions for her (successful career, marriage to a well-off man, certain kind of looks, which are tied to the afore-mentioned cultural imperative imposed on contemporary women), and
3) Bridget's "need to defend herself against her mother's explicit and implicit accusations" (Marsh, 2004, p. 58).

Pam's attempts at Bridget's improvement eventually pay off as at the end of *Bridget Jones's Diary* Bridget humorously confesses that she has "finally realized the secret of happiness with men, and it is with deep regret, rage and an overwhelming sense of defeat that I have to put it in the words of an adulteress, criminal's accomplice

> and Glist celebrity: 'Don't say 'what,' say 'pardon,' darling, and do as your mother tells you'" (Fielding, 1998, p. 307).

Pam further serves as a comic mock feminist to Bridget and her husband, the comic effect being achieved by Pam's use of Aesop's fable to sketch her new found feminist/feminine awakening: "'I feel like the grasshopper who sang all summer,' she (the second she sensed I was losing interest in the breakdown) revealed. 'And now it's the winter of my life and I haven't stored up anything of my own'" (Fielding, 1998, p. 71). She decides to leave her husband as she "had spent thirty-five years without a break running his home and bringing up his children" (Fielding, 1998, p. 53) and deserves more sexual fulfillment. She also wants to build a different career because "having children isn't all it's built up to be. I mean, no offense, I don't mean this personally but given my chance again I'm not sure I'd have" (Fielding, 1998, p. 196). Bridget also falls "upon 'feminism' when she is trying to see female perspectives, as when, after hearing her mother's plan to leave her father for a younger man, she notes that she 'was thinking it all over and trying, as a feminist, to see Mum's point of view' (54)" (Guenther, 2006, p. 91). Yet, like her mother, despite recognizing the rhetoric of feminism and female empowerment, Bridget fails to live up to its standards, offering the reader a satirical perspective on the feminist belief that women must and should have it all: "the financial independence that comes from having a successful job, an aesthetic reflective of current fashions, a relationship with someone whom others approve of, and most of all the appearance of effortless coolness" (Wills, 2019, p. 75) Bridget's views might be said to situate her either as a post-feminist as she in a sense ties feminist values with the past (Whelehan, 2000, p. 137) or as a "lipstick-feminist" as her "preoccupation with body image, clothes, shoes and general appearance far outweighs concerns with feminism multifariously understood as any kind of political, social or philosophical involvement with women's rights" (Montoro, 2012, p. 118). In the rest of the Bridget Jones series, Bridget and Pam's relationship loses this feminist/feminine touch and falls into the comic routine of the all-knowing hyperactive mother and the always-needed-to-be-told daughter.

In addition to food consumption and familial ties as the physical and moral aspects of Bridget's life, further attention will be paid to her reading preferences and reading habits as the intellectual aspects of her life. Throughout the series, Bridget occasionally makes references to Eliot, Dickens, Shakespeare or Chekhov and is a *Pride and Prejudice* TV adaptation addict in *Bridget Jones's Diary*[42] and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*,[43] which emphasizes the novels' deliberate intertextuality with Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and "evokes fond affect in the reader as it imparts a romantic undertow to what is at heart a comic work" (Harzewski, 2011). Yet, despite Bridget's fondness for *Pride and Prejudice*'s TV adaptation and her superficial acquaintance with a few canonical authors of Western literature, her reading interests lie somewhere else. Bridget's reading universe is dominated by two types of text: women's magazines (e. g., *Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire, Hello!*) and self-help books (e.g., *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, Women Who Love Too Much, Ultimate Sex Guide, Goddesses in Everywoman, Through Love and Loss to Self Esteem, The Five Stages of Dating Workbook, How to Heal the Hurt by Hating, Zen and the Art of Falling in Love, One, Two, Three . . . Better, Easier Parenting, French Children Don't Throw Food*). Like Bridget's afore-mentioned attempts at embracing feminist ideals that turn into a controlling force Bridget fails to incorporate into her life, women's magazines and self-help books represent the societal controlling forces Bridget first embraces and then rejects as she cannot live up to the problematic standards and ideals they prescribe. For example, *Cosmopolitan* teaches Bridget how to *Feng Shui* her apartment, yet its promise of getting everything one wants in life if they

42 The "basis of . . . [her] own addiction, . . is . . . [her] simple human need for Darcy to get off with Elizabeth. . . . They are . . . [her] chosen representatives in the field of shagging, or, rather, courtship. . . . [She does] not, however, wish to see any actual goals. . . . [She] would hate to see Darcy and Elizabeth in bed, smoking a cigarette afterwards. That would be unnatural and wrong and . .. [she] would quickly lose interest" (Fielding, 1998, pp. 246-247).

43 "A wonderful thing has happened! Just spoke to PR lady and Colin Firth is going to call me at home over the weekend to arrange things! Cannot believe it. Obviously will not be able to go out of house all weekend but that is good as will be able to do research by watching *Pride and Prejudice* video, though obviously realize must talk about other projects as well" (Fielding, 2000, pp. 156-157).

put it in the right corner is actually both a humorous critique of media's image of ideal lifestyle and an ironic reflection on the problematic and pernicious content of women's magazines (Smith, 2008, p. 37):

> Thought this might be the perfect time to do the *Feng Shui* so went out and bought *Cosmopolitan*. Carefully, using the drawing in *Cosmo*, I mapped the ba-gua of the flat. Had a flash of horrified realization. There was a wastepaper basket in my Helpful Friends Corner. No wonder bloody Tom had disappeared.
> Quickly rang Jude to report same. Jude said to move the wastepaper basket.
> "Where to, though?" I said. "I'm not putting it in my Relationship or Offspring Corners."
> Jude said hang on, she'd go have a look at *Cosmo*.
> "How about Wealth?" she said, when she came back.
> "Hmm, I don't know, what with Christmas coming up and everything," I said, feeling really mean even as I said it.
> "Well, if that's the way you look at things. I mean you're probably going to have one less present to buy anyway . . . " said Jude accusingly.
> In the end I decided to put the wastepaper basket in my Knowledge Corner and went out to the greengrocer to get some plants with round leaves to put in the Family and Helpful Friends Corners (spikyleaved plants, particularly cacti, are counterproductive). . . . I *knew* the Feng Shui would work. Now-its task completed - I am going to quickly move the round-leaved plant to my Relationship Corner. Wish there was a Cookery Corner too. (Fielding, 1998, pp. 262-265)

The problematic nature of *Cosmopolitan*'s content is also visible in its prescriptions at how Bridget has to self-define herself: "Wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been traumatized by super-models and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its

own devices. I can't take the pressure. I am going to cancel and spend the evening eating doughnuts in a cardigan with egg on it" (Fielding, 1998, p. 59). Although she attempts, as the quote humorously shows, to rebel against the mass culture standards *Cosmopolitan* forces on her, the series shows that her attempts to reject those standards are hardly subversive. Bridget fails as she cannot "remove herself from its confines and is caught between the poles of satisfaction via the male partner and satisfaction via self and vocation" (Adolph, 2009, p. 159), which turns her into an ironically humorous example of "the sort of auto-objectification faced by women in a culture that demands perfection from both their careers and their figures" (Adolph, 2009, p. 158).

In addition to women's magazines, Bridget also reads self-help books such as *Women Who Love Too Much, Ultimate Sex Guide, Goddesses in Everywoman, Through Love and Loss to Self Esteem* or *The Five Stages of Dating Workbook,* hoping to improve her love/sex life and to transform into a person contemporary culture/society will approve of. In *Mad About the Boy,* Bridget turns to self-help books about parenting, hoping to become a perfect mother:

> Right! Caring for two children will become effortless now I have read One, Two, Three . . . Better, Easier Parenting, which is all about giving two simple warnings and a consequence, and also French Children Don't Throw Food, which is about how French children operate within a cadre which is a bit like in school where there is a structured inner circle where they know what the rules are (and if they break them you simply do One Two Three Better, Easier Parenting and then outside you don't fuss about them too much and wear elegant French clothes and have sex). (Fielding, 2013)

The effect of Bridget's reliance on self-help books is parodic. Instead of offering Bridget a spiritual guidance or helping her to self-define and self-examine herself or helping her to improve her parenting skills, self-help books create cultural and per-

sonal confusion in her life, "eventually lead[ing] to her ultimate disavowal of both her self-improvement plan and the self-improvement culture that she almost literally held to be sacred" (Guenther, 2006, pp. 88). A part of Bridget's confusion can, however, be ascribed to the fact that Bridget, rather than finding the secret to self-reliance in a single self-help book, reads them all, finding justification for what she already is, has or wants.

Lastly, Bridget's interpersonal and personal writing skills and traveling as the most humorous segments of the social aspects of her life will be discussed. As the table shows, Bridget's interpersonal and personal writing skills develop with each installment in the series, generating more comic effect as the series progresses. Table 4 (see Appendix, Table 4)

In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget becomes a comic pioneer figure of what is later to develop into sexting as she discovers the office messaging system as the medium of flirting full of sexual innuendo. In *The Edge of Reason*, Bridget further develops her writing skills by producing twenty-one self-help life resolutions/life goals/pros and cons/things to buy/things to do/people to invite/ lists,[44] the comic effect of which is achieved by the fact that those self-help lists outline the things Bridget has to do but actually never or rarely does. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget succumbs to the contemporary digital and social media craze by sending innumerous humorous texts to her friends and love interests as well as taking part in the followers hunt on Twitter.

As for Bridget's travelling experiences, her travelling adventures, and by extension their comic effect in the installments, exponentially rise

44 The lists include: 1) Pre-Law Society Dinner Countdown, 2) Plan For When Mark is Away, 3) Goals Achieved in Mark's absence, 4) Pros of Going (to mum's lunch), 5) Cons of Going (to mum's lunch), 6) Code of Dating Practice, 7) Smug Marriage Promotional Suggestions, 8) Why Jude must not marry Vile Richard, 9) Self-help books about to be thrown out, 10) Problems, 11) Spiritual principles have garnered from self-help book study (non-dating based), 12) So solution is to…, 13) Urgent bikini diet weight-loss target programme: week 1, 14) Holiday Aims, 15) Good things about being in jail, 16) New post-spiritual epiphany life resolutions, 17) (Not)having sex, 18) What to buy, 19) Emotional states, 20) Christmas gift list, and 21) Invitation list.

and fall in the series, "perhaps to distract the reader from the essentially depressing elements of Bridget's social situation" (Harzewski, 2011). In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget's travelling experience is domestic, modest, and ironically humorous. She travels twice: on a mini-break to a "nice country house hotel" (Fielding, 1998, p. 155) with Daniel Cleaver and to Edinburgh, both of which turn to complete catastrophes. Bridget spends what is ought to be a romantic mini-break among wedding party guests, freezing to death, and watching TV with Daniel. Her second trip repeats the mini-break pattern: instead of attending the annual Edinburgh Festival shows, she spends her time sleeping, watching television, and meeting friends for drinks. While the humorous effect of the first trip has been produced by Daniel Cleaver as the "instigator" and Bridget as a blind follower/an ideal "wingwoman," the ironic effect of the second trip is entirely "Bridget-inflicted." *The Edge of Reason* humorously plays with the *doppelgänger* motif and presents the readers with yet another "criminal" in the Jones family: like her mom Pamela who gets conned by Julio and then almost arrested for money embezzlement in Portugal, Bridget travels abroad to summer holidays to Thailand, gets duped by Jed, the drug smuggler, and spends two weeks in Women's Correctional Institute in Bangkok for drugs trafficking. Bridget's travelling experiences down spiral in *Mad About the Boy* to a comic mini break with her crush Roxter, full of toilet humor, in "The Bridal Suite" (Fielding, 2013) of a pub in Oxfordshire:

> Unfortunately, though, the Bambi was so huge that all I could do was put on my slip and lie face downwards on the bed, feeling as though there was a massive dent beneath me in the mattress containing the Bambi. Then suddenly a dog started barking, really loudly, right outside the window. It just wouldn't stop. Then the Bambi eased itself slightly and embarrassingly by letting out an enormous fart.
>
> "Jonesey!" said Roxster. "Was that a fart?"
>
> "Maybe just a teensy-weensy little pfuff of Bambi," I said sheepishly.

"Little pfuff? It was more like a plane taking off. It's even silenced the dog!" (Fielding, 2013)

3. Conclusion

Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones series has been a literary and commercial success ever since the publication of its first installment in 1996, which consequently sparked off the (sub)genre of chick lit. The story about Bridget Jones, a thirty-something London singleton with relationship and career issues that, after a number of obstacles and barriers, get resolved leading to a happily ever after ending with a twist as Bridget, now a widow with two children, eventually finds her happiness with someone else than Mark Darcy, is told in a freshly candid and spontaneous confessional diary form. Bridget's confessions, which have become an identification point for many a reader and an author as they generate "that's me" feeling, offer humorous, and at times ironic, insights into subjects that literally and symbolically constitute the core of every woman's life: personal development, food preparing and food consumption, literary influences and reading habits, romance, familial ties, free time, female bonding and networking, current cultural and social happenings, correspondence, travelling... What is more, "'Bridget's "development' is measured foremost by self-acceptance and ability to find humor in her all-too-specific personal improvement goals" (Harzewski, 2011). Her writings are peppered with playfulness, self-depreciating humor, and irony that make her persona as vivid and lifelike as if she were a real flesh and blood human. Such a narrative technique emphasizes not only the importance of humor in literature as a means of its appeal to readers but also testifies to the excellent narrative skills of Bridget Jones's creator – Helen Fielding whose writing has, first and foremost, been moved by the conviction that "'it's good for women to be able to be funny about women and not to be afraid to be funny'" (qtd. in Montoro, 2012, p. 202).

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Appendix

Table 1

Bridget Jones's Diary	Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason	Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy
9st3 (but post-Christmas), alcohol units 14 (but effectively covers 2 days as 4 hours of party was on New Year's Day), cigarettes 22, calories 5424 (Fielding, 1998, p. 120)	9st 5, (emergency: lacy pants have begun to leave patterns on self), items of lovely sexy slippy underwear tried on 17, items of giant incontinence-wear-style scary unsightly underwear purchased 1) (Fielding, 2000, p. 120)	175lb, alcohol units 4 (nice), calories 2822 (but better eating real food in club than bits of old cheese and fish fingers at home) (Fielding, 2013)

Table 2

Bridget Jones's Diary	Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason	Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy
Tuesday 7 March Breakfast: hot-cross bun (Scarsdale Diet – slight variation on specified piece of wholemeal toast); Mars bar (Scarsdale Diet – slight variation on specified half grapefruit) Snack: two bananas, two pears (switched to F-plan as starving and cannot face Scarsdale carrot snacks). Carton orange juice (Anti-Cellulite Raw-Food Diet) Lunch: jacket potato (Scarsdale Vegetarian Diet) and hummus (Hay Diet – fine with jacket spuds as all starch, and breakfast and snack were all alkaline-forming with exception of hot-cross bun and Mars: minor aberration) Dinner: four glasses of wine, fish and chips (Scarsdale Diet and also Hay Diet – protein forming); portion tiramisu; peppermint Aero (pissed). (Fielding, 1998, p. 74)	Saturday 19 July Urgent bikini diet weight-loss target programme: week 1 Sun 20 July 9st3 Mon 21 July 9st2 Tues 22 July 9st I Wed 23 July 9st 0 Thurs 24 July 8st 13 Fri 25 July 8st 12 Sat 26 July 8st 11 Hurray! So by a week today will be almost down to target weight so then, with bodybulk thus adjusted, all will need to do is alter texture and arrangement of fat through exercise. Oh fuck. Will never work. . . . Will concentrate instead on my spirit. (Fielding, 2000, pp. 278-279)	Sunday 5 August 2012 Weight (unknown, daren't look). 11 p.m. Have today consumed the following things. *2 'Healthy Start' (i.e. 482 calories each) muffins *Full English breakfast with sausages, scrambled egg, bacon, tomatoes and fried bread *Pizza Express pizza *Banana split *2 packets of Rolos *Half a Marks & Spencer chocolate cheesecake (actually, if am honest, whole of a Marks & Spencer cheesecake) *2 glasses Chardonnay *2 packets cheese and onion crisps *1 bag grated cheese *1 12-inch jelly 'snake' purchased at the Odeon cinema *1 bag popcorn (large) *1 hot dog (large) *Remains of 2 hot dogs (large) (Fielding, 2013)

Table 3

Bridget Jones's Diary	Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason	Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy
"Yes. How does a woman manage to get to your age without being married?" roared Brian Enderby (married to Mavis, used to be president of the Rotary in Kettering), waving his sherry in the air. Fortunately my dad rescued me. "I'm very pleased to see you, Bridget," he said, taking my arm. (Fielding, 1998, pp. 11-12)	"My son! Well, he's getting married, you know!" said Admiral Darcy, a genial bellower. The room suddenly went blotchy. Getting married? "Getting married?" said Dad, holding my arm, as I tried to control my breathing. (Fielding, 2000, p. 145)	"Wish Dad was here, to mitigate Mum and giggle with me about everything and hug me." (Fielding, 2013)

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

In Persuasion Nation and the Empathic Satire of George Saunders

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ABSTRACT

With five collections published between 1996 and 2022, George Saunders is among the most prolific and idiosyncratic masters of the short story in contemporary American fiction. He has been recognized as the leading 21st-century American satirist, building upon the legacy of Mark Twain, Nathanael West and Kurt Vonnegut, while reinventing satire for the new millennium in his own peculiar fashion.
While Saunders's interest in exposing social, political and individual folly is a partial nod to conventional satire, his work is sufficiently imbued with postmodern skepticism to embrace fully the traditional conviction of its corrective potential in a straightforward didactic sense. He uniquely blends brutal absurdity, bizarre situations and the cluelessness of his characters—all of which resonate with postmodern irreverence and skepticism—with narrative empathy for the underdog, thereby aligning his fiction with the post-postmodern sensibility, which has been dubbed "new sincerity" (e.g. by Adam Kelly).
The paper explores recurrent targets of Saunders's satire in selected short stories from his third collection *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), published in the challenging age of the Bush administration. It encompasses the self-serving glorification of technology and science and its ominous promise of perfectability, which conditions parents to upgrade their babies in "I CAN SPEAK!"; American consumerism and the terror of positive thinking rooted in the narrative of the nation's exceptionalism, alongside a dog-eat-dog attitude and a return of the repressed Other in "Brad Carrigan, American"; the toxic power of advertising and media brainwashing,

which crushes pockets of resistance in “In Persuasion Nation”; homophobia and speciesism in “My Amendment” and “The Red Bow” respectively, the former a viciously funny absurdist rendering of the rightwing wet dream of regulating the proper gender ratio within marriage; the latter targeting the self-righteousness of suburban Americans on a mission of vengeance to exterminate all the dogs in the village.

Keywords: Saunders, empathic satire, neoliberalism, exceptionalism, consumerism, media

1. Introduction

George Saunders was born in 1958 in Texas, and currently teaches creative writing at Syracuse University. He has been recognized as a leading American satirist of the 21st century (e.g., by Zadie Smith and critic Abby Werlock), alongside Gary Shteyngart and Paul Beatty, and his acknowledged influences are Mark Twain, Nathanael West, Kurt Vonnegut, and Donald Barthelme. In 2006, Saunders was awarded the coveted MacArthur “Genius Grant” and the Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2009 he received an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Story Prize, and the Folio Prize for his 2013 collection *Tenth of December*. Further distinctions include the 2013 PEN/Malamud Prize for Excellence in the Short Story; the Booker Prize in 2017 for his first novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*; and the 2023 Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction.

His opus includes a novel, a children’s book, novellas, and nonfiction works, but his favorite genre is the short story: he has published five collections to date, from the acclaimed *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996) to *Liberation Day: Stories* (2022). This paper focuses on the third collection, *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), in which Saunders revisits and expands his satirical exploration of the underlying theme in the first two collections: life under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, primarily its debilitating and humiliating effect on individuals entrapped in narratives of self-improvement, positive thinking and consumerism, and their response to these absurd or threatening situations. A significant dimension of Saunders’s critique of the neoliberal capitalist order is the perilous effects of internalized narratives about America (subsumed under the no-

tion of American exceptionalism) on the underdogs in the system, with whom Saunders clearly sides.

The invention of wildly absurd and bizarre situations and worlds (a trademark of Saunders's style) is key to the rich imaginative bravado of his storytelling, but also achieves a more difficult narrative feat: the creation of a peculiar *Verfremdungseffekt* in the reader. The absurdity in the fiction bounces back into reality, suggesting that our nonfictional experience is no less absurd or grotesque than what we are reading. Saunders's extravagant and brilliant distortions (sometimes almost Rabelaisian) open our eyes to the absurdity of our own reality, which is a plausible definition of satire. Regardless of whether the stories are set in an indefinite dystopian near-future, or in the equivalent of "now", Saunders persuades us that despite (or perhaps because of) their weirdness, these outlandish scenarios and events have already become our reality, and we, strangers in a strange land, are entangled in a losing game. Importantly, the characters' cluelessness and helplessness depend in great measure on their readiness to be "persuaded" to accept the validity of the narratives that mentally (and otherwise) enslave them. This points both to the collection's title *In Persuasion Nation*, and the reader's 21st-century reality of being both a target of and an accomplice in aggressive persuasion strategies by the triad of media, politics and advertising, which more often than not are one and the same thing.

2. Empathic Satire

Before turning to individual stories from the collection to highlight aspects of Saunders's critique of neoliberalism and his dismantling of the underlying national narratives of progress, efficiency, freedom, and prosperity, it is helpful to take a closer look at his unique brand of satire. This reveals a combination of the corrective impulse associated with traditional satire—which echoes standard definitions of satire as correction through ridiculing and shaming, or as telling truth to power—postmodern absurdity and irony, and narrative empathy with the predicament of the protagonists, which calls for the reader's affective engagement. Empathy (the ability of feeling the pain of others whom we do not personally know) re-

deems and complements the merciless satire and absurdity, so that cruelty and the cynical invective are not goals in themselves, but tools to highlight situations that invoke compassion in the reader; provoke thought by recognizing a fluid interpenetration of the absurd and the real; and, perhaps, stimulate change in the world beyond the pages of the book. In the essay "Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra", part of the nonfictional collection *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007), which details Kurt Vonnegut's influence on his writing, Saunders explains that he hopes to mobilize the reader mentally and emotionally. He compares his fiction to a black box, where "the reader enters in one state of mind and exits in another" (Saunders, 2007, p. 61). Vonnegut, whom Saunders understood to have become "a minimalist by aversion to bullshit" (Saunders, 2007, p. 64), taught Saunders not to reduce all fiction to mimesis, i.e., the notion that "a book was a kind of scale model of life, intended to make the reader feel and hear and taste and think just what the writer had" (Saunders, 2007, p. 61). Instead, if fiction is to be transformative, its value must be uncoupled from its resemblance to reality but anchored in the imperative that "something undeniable and nontrivial happens to the reader between entry and exit" (Saunders, 2007, p. 61). As in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, fiction facilitates transformation most efficiently when it is antimimetic: "our most profound experiences may *require* this artistic uncoupling from the actual. [...] If the change will be greater via the use of invented, absurd material, so be it. We are meant to exit the book altered" (Saunders, 2007, p. 62).

The profusely absurd material in Saunders' satire emanates a brand of humor alternately described as dry, absurdist, grim or wicked, or, as reviewer Jason Roberts remarked: "You'll find the work of George Saunders frequently described as 'funny,' but that's like calling a nuclear detonation warm – it's true, abundantly so, but it fails to accurately convey the forces unleashed" (Roberts, 2007). In a 2014 interview, Saunders stated that humor and comedy in literature were inextricably linked to the difficult reality, in which uncomfortable truths otherwise ignored or silenced could be voiced. This calls to mind not only Shakespeare's jesters, but also the conventional domain of satire (Saunders, 2014). In the same

interview, Saunders compared his satire to harsh affection or tough love, suggesting that, in order to satirize something

> you gaze at it hard enough and long enough to be able to say something true and funny and maybe angry or critical—but you first had to gaze at it for a long time. I mean, gazing is a form of love, right? (Saunders, 2014)

His satire of contemporary America therefore testifies to both his fury and affection, and the belief that uttering harsh truths may lead to greater clarity or awareness. Hayes-Brady notes this Saunderesque ambivalence, asserting that "the unapologetic absurdity of much of his work" reveals that "Saunders is inescapably angry with the state of contemporary America" (Hayes-Brady, 2017, p. 33). In reference to the aforementioned *New Yorker* interview, however, he also notes an explicitly acknowledged link between satire and compassion, and even a reformatory impulse in the sense that "the kind of social and political satire we see in *In Persuasion Nation* [...] is a way for Saunders to identify the problems he saw in contemporary America—to begin to speed his society from falseness to truth" (Hayes-Brady, 2017, p. 34). Such an attitude betrays a shimmer of the old humanist hope in the power of literature to contribute to social advancement, this time in the guise of a deliberate appeal to the reader's empathic potential, discerned in a large proportion of post-1990 contemporary American fiction. At the same time, the shock of the cruel humor provokes an affective response, because: "Humor is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to. The comic is the truth stripped of the habitual, the cushioning, the easy consolation" (Saunders, 2007, p. 63).

This also explains why Saunders's satire can be qualified as "post-postmodern" or "metamodern." Most broadly, we might understand the post-postmodern impulse in 21st-century American fiction as a reshuffling of the usual postmodern devices and sensibilities (e.g., irony, absurdity, skepticism and relativism) to make them work in a reconstructive rather than deconstructive way, by placing new emphases on characters, emo-

tions, family, relationships, and concrete situations. This post-postmodern turn in contemporary US fiction has been variously qualified as new sincerity (e.g., by Adam Kelly), new humanism (e.g., by Mary Holland), the affective turn (e.g., by Rachel Greenwald Smith), post-postmodern realism (e.g., by Madhu Dubey), and metamodernism (e.g., by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen). Saunders is regularly included in the group of US millennial writers associated with this imprecisely outlined post-postmodern aesthetic, alongside authors such as Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski and Joshua Ferris. David Foster Wallace was a watershed figure in this context, as he represented a bridge between postmodern and post-postmodern paradigms. In the repositioning of irony in fiction, which directly affects Saunders's take on satire in the new millennium, Foster Wallace's ground-breaking essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) is a crucial reference. Wallace recognized the cultural and historical importance of irony in 1960s youth culture and postmodern fiction, and its healing and eye-opening power to demask the American myths hypocritically celebrated by the media, especially early television. While irony at that time "was difficult and painful, and *productive*—a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease" (Wallace, 1993, p. 183), it could be assumed that "etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom" (Wallace, 1993, p. 183). Thirty years later, however, irony as a "dominant mode of hip expression" is no longer liberating but oppressive, boring, predictable and ineffectual, because it has become "singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace hypocrisies it debunks" (Wallace, 1993, p. 183). Wallace therefore pleads for a turn toward the post-ironic or unironic, to be ushered in by literary "anti-rebels," who will dare to "endorse single-entendre values" (Wallace, 1993, p. 192) and to "treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction," regardless of the inevitable disapproval and accusations of sentimentality, melodrama and credulity (Wallace, 1993, p. 193).

It seems Saunders is just the kind of post-ironic anti-rebel Wallace anticipated, which is unsurprising, considering that the two became

friends in the early 1990s and shared an interest in writing emotional fiction, as Saunders stated in the introduction to his 2013 collection *Tenth of December*. Saunders found a way to rehabilitate and reintegrate empathy, compassion, and pity, and in so doing overcame the culturally (televisually) institutionalized irony and cynicism that Wallace addressed in 1993. The outcome was an elusive fiction that featured an odd blend of empathy, absurdist brutality, and dry humor. Saunders's devotion to ethical issues via affective appeal and his hijacking of estranging absurdism for that purpose have become staples in his scholarship.[45] Layne Neeper, for example, identifies him as a postmodern (although post-postmodern would perhaps be more accurate) satirist, whose fiction deviates from the postmodern satirical mode through a tendency to emphasize moral issues, to raise awareness through shock, and to move readers by evoking their empathy for the protagonists' plight. Appropriately, the title of Neeper's article "'To soften the heart': George Saunders, postmodern satire, and empathy" cites Saunders's aforementioned essay on Vonnegut, from the passage in which he praises Vonnegut's humility and courage in his simple, direct treatment of the horrific: "Vonnegut's goal seemed to be to soften the heart, to encourage our capacity for pity and sorrow" (Saunders, 2007, p. 62). Saunders subsequently adopted this aim into his own artistic credo.

Affective engagement and empathic intention in Saunders's fiction are further analyzed by Michael Basseler, who discusses Saunders's blend of postmodern aesthetic devices (such as irony, satire, ambivalence, and surrealness) with compassion or empathy, in the manner of Thomas Pynchon, Vonnegut, or Foster-Wallace. Basseler analyzes Saunders's "ethics and aesthetics of compassion," which "aims at the reader's emotional and cognitive perspective-shifting" (Basseler, 2017, p. 167), thereby identifying his strategic empathizing on the levels of content and form. Alex Millen's discussion of Saunders's affective approach is informed by recent theories of affect (e.g., Rachel Greenwald Smith's) and linked to Saun-

45 This view is opposed by Jurrit Daalder who claims that any potential for empathy in Saunders's fiction is ultimately shattered by his cruel imaginary worlds and brutal violence.

ders's fictional demonstration of the devastating consequences of neoliberalism on communal and interpersonal levels, through an imposition of the imperatives of positive thinking, self-improvement, and neoliberalist definitions of freedom. Those "wonderful-sounding words" with ominous and sorrowful effects, are "registered, reproduced, and resisted in George Saunders's work" (Millen, 2018, p. 139).

Such neoliberalist narratives and related modes of persuasion—i.e., indoctrination and its various responses—are satirically and touchingly explored in *In Persuasion Nation*. Such a method invokes empathy and pity (within and outside the book) and confronts the reader with difficult questions about the impact of corporatism, omnipresent commodification, and exceptionalist discourse on all human ties, and on the human capacity for empathy.

3. In the Nation of Persuasion

The story "I CAN SPEAK™" opens the collection. It addresses the self-serving glorification of technology and science and the sellable promise of perfectability, which conditions parents to upgrade their babies. Saunders's satire, no matter how shocking, brutal, cruel, bizarre, or wicked, always aims at our reality, which looms large in this tale of widespread mass manipulation aimed at rendering acceptable a technologically created obsession with perfection. The acquisition of must-have status symbols turns children into parental projects. In a world defined by commodification (which seems outlandish only briefly, before we recognize it as our own world), the company cynically called KidLuv encourages parents to buy a product called I CAN SPEAK™, which is advertised in typical corporate jargon as "an innovative and essential educational tool that, used with proper parental guidance, offers a rare early-development opportunity for babies and toddlers alike" (Saunders, 2006, p. 2). The product is essentially a simulation, consisting of a latex mask fitted with an integrated speaking device, called SimuLips™. When put on the baby's head, the mask simulates adult speech. The story is written in the

form of a letter from a Product Service Representative to one Mrs. Faniglia, who has returned the product. The employer attempts to persuade Mrs. Faniglia to consider rebuying, and offers her a free upgrade from ICS1900 (the model she returned) to ICS 2100, which, with its "personalized plaster cast" (Saunders, 2006, p. 3) and phrases made from her baby's taped voice, sounds and looks more natural. The product is a perfect Baudrillardian simulacrum, a hyperreal asset meant to replace and supersede the real baby. That the baby virtually becomes a cyborg suggests the sellability of the transhumanist promise of enhancement via technology. In "I CAN SPEAK™", the commodification of babies goes hand in hand with the dehumanization of the parent-child relationship. The latter is directly proportional to the baby's (fake) linguistic efficiency and satisfactory performance: the simulated speech "*Makes you love him more*. Because suddenly he is articulate" (Saunders, 2006, p. 4). At the same time, language itself is commodified in the most literal sense, and, as Hayes-Brady points out, "if infant communication is ripe for this kind of commercial exploitation, language itself is brought into question" (Hayes-Brady, 2014, p. 35). The very experience of parenthood is translated into a marketable product, encouraging social snobbery and competition. Babies are used to sell prestige and the appearance of a successful lifestyle, which is especially important in a society where having children has become uncool:

> Sometimes we have felt that our childless friends think badly of us for having a kid who just goes glub glub glub in the corner while looking at his feces on his thumb. But now when childless friends are over, what we have found, Ann and I, is that there is something great about having your kid say something witty and self-possessed years before he or she would actually in reality be able to say something witty or self-possessed. The bottom line is, it's just fun, when you and your childless friends are playing cards, and your baby suddenly blurts out (in his very own probable future voice): "IT IS VERY POSSIBLE THAT WE STILL DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE IMPORT OF ALL OF EINSTEIN'S FINDINGS!" (Saunders, 2006, p. 4)

The empathic potential in the story manifests in the salesperson writing the letter. His language is typically bland corporate lingo, which seriously limits his potential for true human interaction and imposes the company's strictures on his way of thinking. Yet the salesperson is not a mere parody or figure of fun, especially when his humanity shines through the hollow corporate litany: "On a personal note, I did not have the greatest of pasts when I came here, having been in a few scrapes and even rehab situations" (Saunders, 2006, p. 7). In the most disarming part, his confusion and sincere self-doubt combine with his resolve to play by the rules of a losing game, illustrating the precariousness of the postmodern working class and workplace:

> Not that the possible loss of my commission is the reason for my concern. Please do not think so. While it is true that, if you decline my upgrade offer and persist in your desire to return your ICS1900, my commission must be refunded, by me, to Mr. Ames, that is no big deal, I have certainly refunded commissions to Mr. Ames before, especially lately. I don't quite know what I'm doing wrong. But that is not your concern, Mrs. Faniglia". (Saunders, 2006, p. 7)

Persuasion as ideological indoctrination is brilliantly explored in "Brad Carrigan, American." The story is set in a surrealist TV sitcom, in which the Carrigans are supposed to represent the perfect American family enjoying all the blessings of the ideal American life. The Carrigans are exposed to an endless stream of commercials and violent TV shows, and their lives are heavily scripted by invisible directors. Brad tries to stay positive and accept the absurd reality of his life: when Buddy the talking puppet dog was introduced without explanation, "he didn't question why Buddy was a puppet-dog and not a real dog" (Saunders, 2006, p. 85). He also accepts perfect strangers who suddenly turn up at the door, such as Chief Wayne, who "started coming around claiming to be his oldest friend in the world" (Saunders, 2006, p. 85). Brad is conditioned to believe it is his duty to accept anything without question, such as the frequent changes to their backyard announced by

music from invisible speakers, or when their kitchen suddenly becomes a cornfield. Brad is repeatedly required to perform patriotic acts of declarative optimism and positive thinking. His behavior is constantly monitored by his wife Doris and Chief Wayne (who later takes Brad's place in the show), to ensure he does not dissent from the dominant culture's mindset, which he finds more and more difficult to achieve, despite his best efforts. Doris warns him about his impending cancellation from the show if he does not learn the error of his ways and correct his attitude.

Brad Carrigan is a confused good guy, who does what he can to avoid being an outsider by "trying his best to stay cheerful and positive", and by training his self-discipline "to stay upbeat" (Saunders, 2006, p. 85). But the more he tries, the nastier the show becomes: "Now it's basically all mean talk and jokes about poop and butts" (Saunders, 2006, p. 85). This tasteless triviality is accompanied by the violence of TV shows such as *Final Twist*, where college students are confronted with a spiral of ever worsening news about their mothers, culminating in the final twist that they have been served to them grilled, or *Kill the Ho*, a vote-in reality show where viewers decide which of the six "loose, poor and irresponsible" (Saunders, 2006, p. 99) women in a TV household should die a computer-simulated death. To Doris and Wayne, Brad's objections to violence and immorality, and to the weirdness and superficiality of their lives, are seen as evidence of his unhealthy outsider mentality.

The story showcases the imperatives of positive thinking and consumerism as the highest form of American patriotism, underpinned and fueled by the self-glorifying mantra of American exceptionalism, and utterly devoid of empathy:

"This meal we just ate?" says Aunt Lydia. "In many countries, this sort of meal would only be eaten by royalty." "There are countries where people could live one year on what we throw out in one week," says Grandpa Kirk. "I thought it was they could live one year on what we throw out in one day," says Grandma Sally. "I thought it was they could live ten years on what we throw out in one minute," says Uncle Gus. "Well anyway," says Doris. "We are very lucky." (Saunders, 2006, pp. 97–98)

The demonstrated articles of belief in American civic religion are equivalent to national solipsism; they cannot translate into genuine compassion for the less fortunate nations and regions of the world, let alone a humanitarian or political impulse to do something concrete about it. The characters' immersion in the American micro-sphere demands that their sporadic notice of the plight of global others only reinforce indifference, and justify their minding their own business. At this point, the story becomes a brutal satire not only of the surreal absurdity of "ideal American life," but also of the underlying exceptionalist narrative of the American dream, constructed from the sub-narratives of optimism, corporatism and consumerism. Saunders's brilliant satirical take on the tyranny of fake self-improvement and misplaced optimism is displayed in a grotesque, Rabelaisian, scene about the Winstons' plastic surgery gone bad:

> But Mr. Winston has an arm coming out of his forehead, and impressive breasts, a vagina has been implanted in his forehead, and also he seems to have grown an additional leg. Mrs. Winston, short a leg, also with impressive breasts, has a penis growing out of her shoulder and what looks like a totally redone mouth of shining white teeth. "May? John?" Brad says. "What happened to you?" "Extreme Surgery," says Mrs. Winston. "Extreme Surgery happened to us," says Mr. Winston, sweat running down his forehead-arm and into his cleavage. "Not that we mind," says Mrs. Winston tersely. "We're just happy to be, you know, interesting." (Saunders, 2006, p. 106)

As the story progresses, Brad's consciousness is repeatedly invaded by images of unimaginable and undeserved suffering in the world: his backyard becomes filled with the charred talking corpses of the Belstonians, an Eastern European nation torn apart by a civil war that was propelled by "a cartel of military/industrial leaders" (Saunders, 2006, p. 90). As the genocide victims retell the horrific circumstances of their violent deaths and torture, Brad is confused by their history and politics. They remind him that "It might seem complicated, if the person trying to understand it had

lived in total plenty all his life, ignoring the rest of the world" (Saunders, 2006, p. 90). The brutal reality keeps seeping into Brad's American world in the form of reports of atrocities worldwide, alongside commercials for grotesque products that aim to create a new market demand. Starving undead Filipino children appear at his front door, and an HIV-positive African baby falls through the roof. These eruptions of the ugly reality "embody the return of the repressed political Other of American imperialism" (Trussler, 2017, p. 205), despite Doris and Chief Wayne's rationalizations that the atrocities and misery have nothing to do with them.

Brad attempts to act, to alleviate the pain, to provide shelter and to collect food, but his empathic and ethical response is seen as a weakness, even as a wicked and morbid obsession with distant horrors that taints the happiness of the American household. This might also describe a potential rightwing reaction to the story. To discipline Brad, Doris uses sex as a means of control, a reeducation that seems to work at first: "What right does he have to be worrying about the problems of the world when he can't even make his own wife happy?" (Saunders, 2006, p. 96). In the end, since Brad is incapable of giving up his humanity, his script is rearranged: he is "written out" of the show, ejected from his house, marriage and family, and replaced by Chief Wayne. The latter's "direct and positive way of dealing with life, so untainted by neurotic doubts and fears" (Saunders, 2006, p. 97) represents the model to be emulated, in contrast to Brad: "Why do you have so many negative opinions about things you don't know about, like foreign countries and diseases and everything? Why can't you be more like Chief Wayne? He has zero opinions. He's just upbeat" (Saunders, 2006, p. 101).

Once liberated from Brad's disruptive influence, the American household can go on living unburdened by ethical concerns, "in a hopeful atmosphere, where the predominant mode is gratitude, gratitude for all the blessings we've been given, free of neuroses and self-flagellation" (Saunders, 2006, p. 109). It can continue what Doris calls "the radical spreading-around of our good fortune" (Saunders, 2006, p. 103), which is not a call for the redistribution of wealth, as Brad is briefly misled to conclude, but a corporatist code for limitless consumption. In this biting sat-

ire, willingness to participate in the ongoing freak-show, where the sick nightmare of American life is sold as a fairy-tale of affluence and happy triviality, equals ideological and political blindness.

By contrast, in a world in which Brad's empathy is a disadvantage, getting cancelled and disappearing into nothingness becomes a profoundly ethical act. With his vanishing consciousness revolving around the necessity of a moral renewal rooted in empathy and pity, Brad Carrigan represents the social and political alternative. In this way, the brutal satire and black humor represent an affirmation of utopian thinking and an imperative to envision a morally and socially better world, against all odds.

The title story "In Persuasion Nation" which reads "as if Dalí wrote a commercial break sketch on *Saturday Night Live*" (Hayes-Brady, 2017, p. 33) is another brutal satire, this time of the food advertising industry and its methods of persuasion. The story displays a series of violent food commercials, which benumb Americans into the glorification of (junk) food consumption, and the acceptance of violence as a means of its promotion. Both the reader and fictional intended consumer are exposed to endless and debilitating media babble, which Donald Barthelme calls verbal dreck, or blague. In the essay "The Braindead Megaphone" from the collection of the same name, the title concept refers to the aggressive, loud, and stultifying voice of the corporatist mainstream. It drowns out all other voices with its metaphorical megaphone, i.e. the complicit media (Saunders, 2007, pp. 4–18). While "I CAN SPEAK™" demonstrates Fredric Jameson's theoretical point concerning incessant capitalist commodification by featuring technology as a new niche of corporatist appropriation, and shows the plight of a character who has to deal with his oppressive, boring and stupefying workplace, most of the selected stories foreground the constant vandalization of people's senses and minds with the toxic discourse of the media, either in TV shows, advertising, rightwing journalism, or life within a scripted environment. Specifically, "In Persuasion Nation" targets the advertising industry by highlighting characters from TV commercials who are unable to resist their scripted destinies. Unlike Brad Carrigan, these characters are stuck forever within their prescribed matrix, doomed to repeatedly endure

violence and humiliation. Saunders brings his grotesque dystopia and absurdist surrealism back to the real world, making us reluctantly recognize that the victimized characters are not unlike ourselves in their inability to pull away from intoxicating corporatist brainwashing.

The message in the first commercial is that consumption of Twinkies and Ding-Dongs (cake-based snacks) conquers all, even love, in a reversal of the ancient phrase *Amor vincit omnia*. The young man in the commercial is humiliated, because, a second after he and his girlfriend have declared their eternal love in an idyllic field of daises, she runs off after a huge Twinkie. The man then mends his broken heart by chasing a Ding-Dong. As Foster-Wallace notes in his aforementioned 1993 essay, such commercials reflect the more sophisticated phase of TV advertising that began in the 1980s, when TV appropriated postmodern irony and parody to boost the sales of products. These commercials laid bare and satirized TV's own strategies, while selling the viewer the illusion of superiority over the implied naïve buyers (pp. 177–180). Here, Saunders exposes the aggressiveness of those strategies by imagining all sorts of humiliation for the characters who enact this televisual "persuasion," which enslaves the viewers' minds by forcing desired consumption patterns upon them. This is a satirical literary transposition of Wallace's realization that "to the extent that it can train viewers to laugh at characters' unending putdowns of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance" (Wallace, 1993, p. 180). In the end, all are humiliated and enslaved except the movers behind the scenes. The commercials in the story become increasingly violent, representing Saunders's dark and brutal parody of television's shrewd corporatist self-exposure: a teenager leaves his grandmother to die in a traffic accident, because he cannot resist eating his microwaved MacAttack Mac & Cheese meal; an orange is stabbed by a Slap-O-Wack fruit bar for insisting it is a healthier food choice; a young man in a car commercial is tricked into losing his penis as part of another man's plan to snatch his *Pontiac Sophisto*; a pair of grandparents prioritize Doritos (a brand of tortilla chips) over the life of their grandson, thereby allowing a

bag of the chips to decapitate the boy and reduce him to two piles of mush; and a polar bear from the Cheetos commercial repeatedly gets struck in the head by an axe-wielding Eskimo, after breaking into his house to steal some Cheetos. Eventually, the victimized characters, "frustrated beyond reason by years of repetitively enduring the same physical/psychological humiliations in replay after replay of their respective vignettes," form a coalition of resistance, and attack and defeat their abusers, burying them "in a shallow mass grave" (Saunders, 2006, p. 119).

Their triumph is, however, short-lived, as their enemies come back to life in the form of a resurrected triangle of Slap-O-Wack bar, which experiences a quasi-spiritual epiphany in the desert and realizes that "the way to live righteously is to enact one's vignette" and "oppose [...] those who would undercut the proper enactment of the sacred vignettes" (Saunders, 2006, p. 120). The Slap-O-Wack piece grows and is mystically fused with a higher power, to become "a beautiful glowing oblong green triangular symbol" (Saunders, 2006, p. 121). The satirical use of pseudo-mystic vocabulary underlines that the green symbol (money) is the supreme power in the universe, and that the characters in food commercials are emanations of its divine inflow. In the end, the pockets of resistance are efficiently crushed, and the victimized return to enacting their prescribed roles. Since it is their job to enable the brainwashing, we can say that the brainwashers have themselves been brainwashed. The last to capitulate is the polar bear, who tries in vain to break away from his destiny as a victim of the Eskimo's axe. He is quickly found by the green triangle and ordered back to work, with the recommendation that he endorse positive thinking derived from a sense of purpose.

This purpose slowly dawns on the polar bear, when he wonders whether "the instances of elaborate cruelty he has witnessed ever since he was a small cub [are] believed to somehow positively impact the ability of the vignettes to cause 'buying'?" (Saunders, 2006, p. 128) The bear concludes that "this stupid system causes suffering wherever you look" (Saunders, 2006, p. 130). He realizes that all the suffering is caused by the profit-driven market, and that the triangular symbol is a false god. Unable to go on, he throws himself off a cliff, but "because no one in this

sub-universe can die without the express consent of certain important parties, does not die, but bounces" (Saunders, 2006, p. 131). As he shouts his vision that they may free their minds and know "a gentler and more generous GOD within us" (Saunders, 2006, p. 132), he only embarrasses the brainwashed conformist penguins, who dismiss him as a lunatic and go back to their scripted roles in their allotted commercial, "dancing the mindless penguin dance of joy" (Saunders, 2006, p. 132). The story illustrates Saunders's strategic engagement of the reader through empathy and pity, which rise exponentially against the numbing brutality and violence, until the polar bear grips our hearts at the end.

While the three stories discussed so far address top-down tactics for imposing corporatist profit-making agendas by selling technology (the first story), lifestyle and attitude (the second story) and food (the third story), "My Amendment" and "The Red Bow" take a bottom-up approach, and show the individual attitudes that reproduce and perpetuate the very type of discourse that has shaped them.

"My Amendment" satirizes the rightwing obsession with family values and heteronormative sexuality. It features a right-winger who writes a letter to a likeminded journalist, suggesting that the ban on same-sex marriages is a good thing, but it must be improved and refined. He consequently proposes a new amendment to the US constitution, which would ban "Samish-Sex Marriage" (Saunders, 2006, p. 45), i.e., marriages between feminine men and masculine women. His ideal is an absolute heteronormative purity, which should be achieved through the conscious effort of unadjusted women and men to fit patriarchal gender definitions. He therefore proposes the "Manly Scale of Absolute Gender," to measure what he calls "the Gender Differential." The scale is intended to help "determine how Manly a man is and how Fem a woman is, and therefore how close to a Samish-Sex Marriage a given marriage is" (Saunders, 2006, p. 47). When the gender differential detects a samish-sex marriage, he proposes either divorce or a behavioral adaptation to the prescribed norms of femininity and masculinity. He relates his own experience as an example, and proof that change is possible. By his own definition, he was a feminine man; he was proud of his

long blonde hair, used to gesture too much with his hand, spoke too fast, and cried often. But then he started "a classic American project of self-improvement" (Saunders, 2006, p. 49), and turned himself into a masculine man. Urging others to reform in the same way, he warns that if the sick trend were to continue, people would be "dating, falling in love with, marrying, and spending the rest of their lives with whomever they please" (Saunders, 2006, 50). The story is a playful rendering of the well-known rightwing strategy of instilling the fear of living without repressive moral guidance, while praising its scale of values as a shield against anarchy.

Finally, "The Red Bow" targets Americans' proneness to excessive violence and militia justice, in which the brutality of retaliation far exceeds the act that instigates it. It questions the vigilante mentality, and shows that for the love of bloodshed to be unleashed you only need a legitimate pretext, and a narrative about protecting the community. This upsetting violence-filled story suggests that the old American habit of self-enforced justice can easily turn to horrific bloodshed, whether the targets are dogs or stigmatized social groups. It also shows that the efficiency of extermination campaigns depends on the ability to persuade people to join them.

When an infected dog kills a girl, her frustrated, unemployed hillbilly of an uncle becomes the self-appointed leader of a brutal extermination campaign in their village, which first kills infected dogs, then those supposedly infected, then perfectly healthy dogs, and finally cats. The heartbreaking horror is set in motion by a backward loser from the socio-economic margins, who finds a purpose in life, and a means to become important. This points to the psychological mechanism by which hitherto passive and quiet people can become bloodthirsty murderers in peacetime, and war criminals in times of conflict. They achieve this by disguising their frustrations and personal vendettas as causes in the redemptive proto-fascist narrative of a heroic battle for the sake of the community.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literary Explorations of Cultural Representation, Cultural Cliché and Humour in Josip Novakovich's *April Fool's Day*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a result of an interdisciplinary research that deals with Josip Novakovich's 2004 debut novel *April Fool's Day*. The paper opens with the overview of the notions of cultural representation, cultural relativism, and cultural self-consciousness. Then follow short explanations of cultural generalisation, stereotype and cultural cliché, and examples of these notions employed in the novel, typically in order to reach humorous effect. The final segment of this paper deals with analyses and examples of literary humour based on the notions of Croatian history, mentality, and culture.

Key words: Josip Novakovich, April Fool's Day, cultural representation, literary cliché, literary humour, Croatia, the Balkans

1. Introduction

Although first published in 2004, when Josip Novakovich still resided in the US, his debut novel *April Fool's Day* is considered a part of Canadian Literature due to Novakovich's relocation to Canada in 2009. Originating from Daruvar, a multicultural city in ex-Yugoslavia and today's Croatia, and being one of many who escaped serving the Yugoslav People's Army just before the violent collapse of the Yugoslav state, Novakovich has brought an important cultural luggage to his new home on the other side of the Atlantic. Novakovich had decided to transform that cultural experience into a novel, actually, a fictional biography wrapped into numerous layers of cultural and historical reference and garnished with a fair share of humour.

The novel provides a fictional biography of Ivan Dolinar, a young man born in a Yugoslav town to a father who took an active part in WWII. The narration follows Ivan's childhood and troublesome youth in Yugoslavia that culminates in his unfortunate engagement in the Croatian War of Independence. What follows is an account of Ivan's equally unfortunate life in newly established Croatia, culminating with Ivan's death and his existential comments after he reappears in the narration as a ghost. The novel covers some 60 years of Croatian history spanning from the late 40s to the end of 90s or, perhaps, the beginning of the new millennium. Thematically, the novel could be divided into four main parts: The narration of WWII and the post-war period, the period of Yugoslav Socialism, the Croatian War of Independence and the post-war period, and the surrealist coda describing Ivan's after-life activities.

It would not be erroneous to say that the novel is conceptualized as a sort of an encyclopedia of modern Croatia (and the Balkans). The novel is abundant with historical, cultural, political, and psycho-sociological references to the Balkans, its state of affairs, and its (individual and shared) state of mind. The references range from authentic historical events and people, local geography, religion, art, social circumstances, roughness of a patriarchal society, music and art, education, politics, accounts of war(s),

burning socio-political issues, shared cultural notions, accepted clichés regarding the Balkans and its culture, (typical) humour characterized with a streak of dark irony and therapeutic self-criticism, all the way to personal, yet shared deep fears and hopes of the main characters. In short, *April Fool's Day* takes the readers for an interesting and very humorous ride through a Balkan-themed amusement park that consists mostly of one long tunnel of horrors.

The aim of this research is to explore cultural generalisations and stereotypes used in the literary world creation in order to achieve humorous effect, and to shed light on historical, cultural, and social features of humour employed in the novel. Throughout this process, the research remains interdisciplinary.

2. Possible Approaches to Literary Representation of Culture

In order to decode the way cultures are presented in literature, this phase of the research is firstly informed by the notions of cultural representation, cultural relativism, and cultural self-consciousness. Secondly, this research relies on literary theory, namely on the explorations of cultural generalisation, stereotype and cultural cliché in literature.

2.1. Cultural Representation, Cultural Relativism, and Cultural Self-Consciousness

In his initial research dating as far back as the 1960s, Stuart Hall states that cultural representation is, in my simplified interpretation, the production of culture-related shared meaning (such as traditions, beliefs, societal relations, language, cuisine, history, etc.) through language, discourse, and image. That production of meaning is circulated in what Hall calls the circuit of culture (Hall, 1997, p. 1), where shared meanings are produced, consumed, regulated, and represented by a certain society, only to help the construction of the cultural identity, and within that identity grounds for

the production of new shared meanings are established (Hall 1997, p. 1). As far as understanding that cyclical process encoding and decoding shared cultural meaning, Hall states: “Representation can only be properly analysed in relation to the actual concrete forms which meaning assumes, in the concrete practices of signifying, ‘reading’ and interpretation; and these require analysis of the actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds — the material forms - in which symbolic meaning is circulated” (Hall, 1997, p. 9). Novakovich’s novel offers an indeed wide range of cultural meanings presented through literary narration, providing a certain straightforwardness to the analyses. However, there is an additional feature that has to be addressed in the analyses: Novakovich’s novel acts as an interpretative cultural presentation between two radically different cultural circles, the one of the Balkans and that of the Northern America, and it brings in the objective and subjective elements of the Balkan culture, but often expresses them stylistically through the scope of the American culture, probably in order to make the matter more comprehensible for the American and Canadian readers. Dan Sperber notes that “A representation sets up a relationship between at least three terms: that which represents, that which is represented and the user of the representation” (Sperber, 1994, p. 162). The intended recipients of the cultural presentation in *April Fool’s Day*, the Northern American readership, or, better to say, their cultural expectations regarding the Balkans, have undoubtedly influenced Novakovich’s writing style. In order to make the cultural representation more consumable for the readers, Novakovich offers the expected notions of, for example, the drunken/stubborn/fatalistic/illogical/passionate/morally questionable/anarchic Slav, all that to different degree embodied in Ivan and other characters as well[46]. What saves the novel’s aesthetical integrity is that Novakovich truly posses a deep cultural insight into Croatian culture and is able to write from a position of a trustable source. However, in my opinion, there is a lingering impression that some features of characters and events in the novel have passed through a process of literary *Boratiza-*

46 It is perhaps significant to point out is that Ivan, the quite lovable main character who openly shows his weaknesses, and who is very easy for the reader to identify with, at least emotionally, is in the same time a murderer and a rapist.

tion[47]. That kind of literary approach inevitably raises questions regarding the ethical aspects of cultural representation and literary outreach.

Cultural relativism is another notion worth considering. Mark P. Whitaker defines conventional cultural relativism as "behavioural differences between various populations of people", he then adds that "these differences are the result of cultural (sometimes societal) variation" and concludes that "such differences [...] are deserving of respect and understanding in their own terms" (Whitaker, 1996, p. 478). Furthermore, Whitaker explains two types of cultural relativism. The first is ethical relativism, described as "the notion that the business of making universal, cross-cultural, ethical judgements is both incoherent and unfair because moral values are a product of each culture's unique developmental history, and can, thus, only be judged in relation to that history" (Whitaker, 1996, p. 479). The other is epistemological relativism "often defined by its critics as the assertion that systems of knowledge possessed by different cultures are 'incommensurable'" and that "people in different cultures [...] live in different, equally 'true', cognitive 'worlds'" (Whitaker, 1996, p. 480). Patterns of cultural representation in *April Fool's Day* seem to consequently follow Whitaker's postulates; although the characters and the events in the novel at some instances might seem overly stereotyped and entertaining in a bit 'culturally submissive' manner, the thoughts, actions and circumstances of characters are presented very unapologetically. Ivan takes the reader into his world with a perceptible intention to share his experience, often in a humorous way, but he never offers explanations that would make the reader feel better or less emotionally involved. Furthermore, Ivan vividly demonstrates the striking layering and transformation of his cultural reality; although the cultural venue does not change (the whole novel takes place in Croatia, with short excursions to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), Ivan's world is in constant and radical change, every stage of change offering a different cultural and emotional landscape.

47 Referring to Borat, a factious film and TV character created by the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen.

It is clear that Novakovich does not judge or mock any culture in *April Fool's Day*. The author rather uses the elements of culture to produce an insight into a culturally different world in an interesting and humorous manner. Author's compassion for his characters and their cultural circumstances is palpable in more than one instance in the novel. This brings us to the issue of cultural self-consciousness. According to W.E.B DuBois' "double consciousness" (a term related, if not greatly overlapping with cultural self-consciousness) is a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others"[48] (Du Bois, 1994, p. 8). This term was originally based on the cultural experience of Afro-Americans but is easily applicable in various other cultures around the world. The idea behind this term is to demarcate in what way the judgment of other cultures forms our own cultural representation, how this externally asserted self-understanding should be dealt with, and, consequently, who has the 'right' to present a culture and in what manner. If we follow the somehow customary concept that 'only a minority has the full right to express criticism or tell a joke about that minority', Novakovich is on the safe ground. Being a Croatian in origin who spend the first period of his life in Croatia, in this understanding of the problem, he has 'the right' to turn about 60 years of Croatian historical and cultural experience into literature that will be perceived as 'exotic, deeply touching, and endlessly humorous' in, just for the sake of an example, central Oklahoma[49]. The idea of 'the right' to turn shared cultural experience into literature in any possible way is, of course, completely vague. The 21st century brought forward the notion of 'triple consciousness', the one that attaches additional categories to the

48 In that respect, I find it unusual that very little was written about Croatian literature or literature created by Croatian authors from the point of view of post-colonial theories. It seems that the idea of 'white people' being politically and culturally dominated or even enslaved by other 'white people' is not entirely accepted as 'colonization'. When it comes to the formation of double consciousness in the Balkans, as well as in the analysis of Novakovich's *April Fool's Day*, the application of post-colonial research theories would probably prove very fruitful as well.

49 The New York Times wrote about the novel in 2004 and, under the title *'April Fool's Day': Ivan the Terrified*, M. Casey wrote that the novel was 'wickedly funny and deeply harrowing'. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/april-fools-day-ivan-the-terrified.html (Accessed March 2024).

one of race/nationality such as, for example, gender identity, making the process of self-identification more complex, and probably expanding the borders of the 'right to culturally represent' beyond any sensible limit. That would mean, in short, that in our times writing literature that contains cultural representation is more a matter of decision than a matter of certain cultural 'right'. However, every literary cultural representation will be judged according to the widely accepted literary standards.

2.2. Literary Cliché and Humorous Effect in April Fool's Day

In regards to literary standards, the first issue that should be tackled is the idea of cultural stereotypes turned into literary clichés by reckless overuse in writing. However, before briefly clarifying the terms, we should first mention cultural generalisation as "categorizing members of the same group as having similar characteristics"[50], a method of classifying reality which does not necessarily evoke negative connotations, and can be quite useful in various analyses. When the generalisations about a group become stereotypes then "all members of a group are categorized as having the same characteristics"[51]. Unlike cultural generalisations, cultural stereotypes are on many levels problematic phenomena, but both can turn into literary clichés through literary overuse. If and when cultural generalisations and stereotypes find their way into literature, and are there employed in an affirmative and highly repetitive manner, they might become a serious burden for the texts and their authors.

According to van Cranenburgh, "Clichés in literature can manifest themselves at various levels such as narrative, style, and characters" (van Cranenburgh, 2018, p. 34). This research is focused on the narrative and characters but it also touches upon the writing style used in Novakovich's creative process of world-making. It is important to observe how Novakovich chooses cultural and historical elements of the presented culture and how he turns those elements into literary narration. The choice is

50 As concisely explained by AFS-USA on their web page: https://www.afsusa.org/study-abroad/culture-trek/culture-points/what-are-generalizations-and-stereotypes/ (Accessed March 2024).

51 Ibid.

quite obvious; Novakovich uses basically all the regionally and internationally recognized 'typical features' of the Balkans. These typical features have been widely discussed and often used and overused in various literary traditions, to the point where they became either stereotypical or iconic. When it comes to characters, these features are, for example, confused but righteous men with inclination to alcohol and theft. When it comes to history, Tito's meetings with foreign leaders are explored in the novel, and, of course, the penitentiary on the Goli Otok plays an important role. Novakovich does not leave out Tito's Cuban cigars, parades and red stars. When describing the Croatian War of Independence, Novakovich employs several notions that were obsessively discussed in Croatia during and after the war, and that have gradually become central for Croatian cultural self-awareness; one of these notions being Croatia's (much explored culturally) shady role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (one part of Ivan's war path in the novel takes him to Bosnia). Regarding culture, Novakovich again plays it safe by choosing, for example, letters to Tito that at one time had to be written by primary school children, then the post-war newly rich businessmen who made their fortune through criminal activities, all the way to new-age heroin syringes on the floor of a park. Beyond doubt, Novakovich employs literarily numerous notions of Croatia that have long been regarded iconic, generalised and even stereotypical. He also puts special focus on those cultural notions of Croatia that might be interesting and alluring to the North American readers. But more important than all this is the way how Novakovich turns elements of represented culture into literary narration, and that is his highly humorous and deeply empathic approach. The fact that most of Ivan's adventures, and even those of the most of the secondary characters, manage to engage the readers into laughter and compassion, shows that Novakovich does not merely create a world made of a set of cultural clichés, but he manages to create a believable world populated by round characters. The key to analyses of Novakovich's world-creation in *April Fool's Day* is his literary humour. In the next passages, I will analyse several instances of humour from the novel with regards to cultural clichés based on cultural generalisations and/or stereotypes.

Edward C. Banfield notes six features of the individuals in a backward society (based on a research conducted in southern Italy): poverty, lack of education, political and economy opportunism, 'pathological distrust of the state and all authority', and individuals as 'despairing fatalist' (Banfield, 1958, p. 35-36). Banfield's seminal research could be applied transculturally. Especially interesting is the last feature of individuals, and that is 'despairing fatalists' because it can be noted in several instances in *April Fool's Day*. In times of Ivan's depression and despair, the narrator explains: "Yugoslavia was a metaphor for his own state of being, various republics not getting along, like a variety of his organs not getting along. He burped, and said, "La Yougoslavie, c'est moi" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 70). This instance shows Ivan's reconciliation with fate, and his perhaps self-destructive identification with 'something that he dislikes, and that will soon be gone'. Although the commentary 'Yugoslavia, that is me' displays a (self)ironic quality, it could also be seen as a streak of Ivan's ego-centrism.

T. Stoianovich notes in Balkan Worlds: "Serving to call people to work, remind them of their civic duties, and diffuse a secular conception of time, public clocks were erected in the Balkans only long after they had been set up in western and central Europe" (Stoianovich, 1994, p. 248). Stoianovich connects his claim consequentially to the Yugoslav philosopher Vladimir Dvorniković, who "distinguished between the time system of a space-dominated people and that of a time-oriented people", the people of the Balkans being predominantly space-dominated people" (Stoianovich, 1994, p. 247). This peculiar relation of the Balkan peoples towards time is reflected in numerous cultural and literary accounts of 'everything and everyone in the Balkans being late and in war with time'. This notion plays out in *April Fool's Day* when the narrator states the following: "Ivan, who considered time to be his personal enemy [...]" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 79), hence confirming what is usually been said and believed about the relationship between the Balkan people and time.

Novakovich's humour to a great extent revolves around the usual stereotypes regarding the Slavs, and these being connected to alcohol

abuse, theft, spite and distrust, hedonism and self-destructiveness, sexual imbalance, laziness, primitivisms of all sorts, anarchic tendencies, extremisms and fatalism, corruption, detachment from reality, the inclination towards the grotesque and extravagant, various coping mechanisms, uncontrolled emotionality which ranges from subtle tenderness to utter cruelty, and other features. Ivan's pondering on the state of things during the last phase of Yugoslav system, presented as a serious but nevertheless a humorous passage, is an illustrative example of Novakovich's stereotypical Slav:

> And we, Eastern and Central Europeans, and particularly Slavs, we all consider our governments to be absolutely the worst in the world. We are ashamed of our governments, and, as a rule, our government is ashamed of us, frying to improve us statistically, to say that we work more and drink less than we do. We think that there's no greater obstacle to human happiness than the government. So even if we have an institution pregnant with democratic potential, such as worker's self-management, we never even bother to attend a meeting unless absolutely forced. An as for voting, we circle any name without looking at whose it is, out of spite. To a Slav, there is nothing more disgusting than voting. We have an aversion to investing trust in any human being. So how could we single out someone we haven't met, but whom we know priori to be a social upstart and climber? So we spend these worker's self-management meetings, where democracy could be practiced, in daydreams of sex and violence. (Novakovich, 2004, p. 68)

In this passage, the stereotypical (and partially self-imposed) depiction of the Slavic attitude towards politics, humanity, and democracy is on display, with the information on the role of alcohol, spite, lack of trust, sex, and violence added to complete the picture. It is important to note that democracy in this Yugoslav sense refers to self-management, explained by Flere and Klanjšek as "Self-management, ideologically put

forward by M. Đilas and E. Kardelj and B. Kidrič, can be understood as a system attempting something between centralist/totalitarian planning and market economy. [...] Workers, at least in theory, got certain rights in the decision chain, nevertheless, self-government (samoupravljanje) became a rich source for numerous jokes (Flere & Klanjšek, 2019, p. 101). Indeed, self-management is thoroughly explored as a source of humour throughout the novel.

The stereotype of the 'Yugoslav gastarbeiter' could not stay under Novakovich's radar, of course. When Ivan explains his brother's life as a guest worker in Germany, he says: "Bruno worked from eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, and by the time he got home it was dark and rainy. He actually *worked*, and all he could do was to stare at the TV until falling asleep" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 73). Here the idea of work in Yugoslavia and Germany is put into a humorous opposition, not just semantically but also by the use of Italics in the word *worked*, which discloses that people in Yugoslavia actually worked very little, if at all.

Literary usage of the stereotype of a 'drunken Slav' is abundant in the novel, and one of the most humorous one is surely the instance when Bruno talks about drunken driving: "I drive much better when I am drunk. My nerves are calmer, so I don't swerve if I see a black cat on the road" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 205). This stereotype is also one of the basic notions in numerous jokes, stories, and (urban or rural) myths in the Balkans.

In my opinion, several instances in the novel show that Novakovich's choice of humorous stereotypes was influenced by the exposure to American culture. The following could serve as a proof to that claim: firstly, Novakovich chooses stereotypes about the Balkans which are widely spread in the American culture, secondly, some of the notions perhaps not so familiar to the American readers are literally explained in the text in order to retain the meaning and the humorous effect, and thirdly, Novakovich often tries to connect and embellish the narration with the references to American culture (there are two references in the novel to Canada and Canadian culture as well).

At one point in the narration, Aldo, Ivan's colleague from the university, is plotting to kill Tito. While watching Tito's car passing by in an official parade, Aldo says: "Look, his roof is open, like Kennedy's in Dallas," said Aldo. "What are we waiting for?" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 49). Perhaps the analogy would not be perceived so funny in America, as it could be in the Balkans.

There is a chapter in the novel titled: "Almost every southern Slav wants a fortified house with a fallout shelter" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 77). In that chapter, a humorous comparison of the Balkan and the American house building can be found: "The house had to possess thick concrete walls – unlike most American family homes (often seen in natural-disaster news on TV), which were built out of glue and sawdust [...]" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 79-80). This attitude towards the vulnerability of American home building seems to be a widespread stereotype, and not only in the Balkans. The remark in parentheses features a streak of dark humour wrapped up in a seemingly neutral statement and could be seen as humour typical of the Balkans.

After the War of Independence, Ivan is married with his old love Selma. Explaining his wife's upbringing style, Ivan states: "Selma was enthusiastic about raising children like little Americans. That certainly was a novel approach in the neighborhood" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 135). The humorous effect is largely contained in the comment about the 'novel approach in the neighbourhood', which both emphasizes the cultural differences between America and the Balkans and suggests that Selma's upbringing style was detached from reality of her surroundings.

As far as the reference to Canada is concerned, there is a very interesting instance in the novel when Ivan's friend Peter displays a Yugoslav flag on the wall, and Ivan comments: "[...] That's very Canadian of you—I've read they put their flags all over the place, homes, bars, churches, and buttocks" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 70). Here Novakovich plays with yet another cultural stereotype, which is also often ascribed to American culture, and that is the unrestricted attitude towards the use and display of the national flag. In my opinion, this instance is rather telling of the author's experience of the life on the American continent.

3. Focus on Humour in April Fool's Day

In this research, a wider definition of humour is applied, where the notion of humour includes all the shades of effectively humorous irony, sarcasm, cynicism, grotesque, etc. Humour as an artistic device is prominent part of literary representation, and indeed, elements of 'funny' are contained in numerous literary works, regardless of their historical, generic, aesthetic, or thematic definitions. Nevertheless, questions such as: What is funny? and What are the boundaries of funny? are often asked. In order to narrow the definition of 'funny', I will use the insight provided by M. Mulkay, who states that humor is "a kind of controlled nonsense" (Mulkay, 1988, p. 26). In *April Fool's Day*, one of the predominant stylistic features is a skilfully (sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly) induced state of controlled thematic and logical chaos, which, in turn, depicts the usually implied spirit of the time and the region, that is, the culture in which the narration takes place. Regarding the humor as a social activity, G. Baruchello writes:

> As with all other social activities, humour is guided by an unwritten and tacit social contract, however shaky and obscure this contract may be. There is, in other words, a mutable, murky, but nonetheless mutual understanding among the members of each social group about what is to be considered funny and what is not so—and whether or not each actual person learns and/or manages to abide by this understanding. This contract and its possible contents are vaguely and broadly defined by culture, not only in the wider sense of the macro-culture of societies and nations, but to a greater extent in the sense of each person's local and context-specific micro-culture, especially as this is dictated and/or monitored by one's closest associates, e. g., friends, families, bosses, and co-workers—again, more often than not, in a tacit manner. (Baruchello & Arnarsson, 2024, p. 278)

While this definition focuses on humour shared between the members of one specific culture, it provides the essential explanation of func-

tioning of (cultural) humour, and can easily be applied on defining what is 'funny' or, at least, entertaining about one culture to the members of another culture. Finally, exploring Grice's maxims can be very useful for the analysis of humor in *April Fool's Day* because most of the humour is based on contradicting Grice's basic rules of logical communication, and that further demonstrates some features of mentalities depicted in the novel.

The occurrence and the distribution of humor in *April Fool's Day* is not even or symmetrical; humour is abundant in the opening WWII and Yugoslavia chapters of the novel, there is much less humour in The War of Independence and the post-war period chapters, and then humour partially returns in the final, surrealistic chapter of the novel (which describes the main character after his death). This statistical distribution of humour shows, perhaps, that some recent historical events still do not provide enough emotional distance to be mocked properly. Furthermore, the quantity of humour in WWII and Yugoslavia chapters reflects a realistic tendency in our societies to, regardless of the political standpoints, view that period, especially the Yugoslav times, as highly humorous, ranging from plain funny and naïve to deeply bizarre.

In order to better present literary humour in *April Fool's Day*, I have divided humorous instances from the novel on the basis of their social semantics into humor based on history, mentality, and culture. While the examples of such literary humour in the novel are indeed numerous, I have tried to extract and explain only the most illustrative ones.

3.1. Humour Based on Historical Notions

April Fool's Day provides and intrinsic patchwork of accounts or hints of real historical events and personalities. Such elements of accepted historical reality are used both to motivate the narration and create characters. Sheer mentioning historical facts while depicting real-life situations and surrealistic destinies of characters provides one type of humorous effect. Very often, the historical facts are deliberately merged with popular myths and superstitions only to contradict their factuality, hence providing another type of humorous effect. Both types

of humorous effects based on history can be observed in the example that follows.

Milan Dolinar, Ivan's father, got married on the sixth of April 1941, the actual date when Belgrade was bombarded by Germany. Of course, this introduces a contrast between the 'happiest day in one's life' and the 'saddest day' in the history of the Yugoslav Kingdom, and produces a humorous commentary on Milan's future. Novakovich continues: "The king, having signed the pact with Germany, had already fled the country (taking along all the gold that could fit on his plane and dropping some to enable the plane to attain sufficient altitude to fly over the Bosnian mountains towards Greece – to this day people look for the gold in Bosnia)" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 1). The King's escape and the stolen gold are both historical facts while the alleged search for the gold is, of course, a matter of local myths and popular jokes, and it serves in the novel as a source of wry humour.

The following example shows how Novakovich amalgamates historical events and facts with main character's dreams. According to Thompson, "The person and work of Josip Broz Tito were protected by law from criticism. Article 136 prohibited "association for the purpose of hostile activity"' (Thompson, 1994, p. 11). At one point in the novel, Ivan is sentenced to four years in the infamous Goli Otok labour camp exactly for telling a joke about Tito. While in the labour camp, in his dream or hallucination he meets Tito and Gandhi. This is a reference to actual meetings of the two statesmen (usually in the frames of the activities of the Unaligned Movement). These events were meticulously photographed and reports were published in all the available media. Photographs of Tito and Gandhi (and others) have become a part of the recognizable shared visual identity of the Yugoslav nations. But Novakovich goes further; in the dream Tito offers Ivan a cigar, and then observes: "[...] he sucks too hard. Just look how he draws his breath, way too eagerly for my taste" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 53). This provides a humorous comment on the alienation and insensitivity of the ruling classes and on the vulnerability of those who do not actively participate in the distribution of power – even

in a nominally socialist society. Later on in the chapter, Tito confirms his ethical reservations towards Ivan and offers a conclusion to Gandhi: "See, I told you, you can't trust a strong cigar sucker!" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 55). This humorous statement emphasises the paradox of the power relations in a society where the scale of values at one point became quite questionable.

In the following example, Novakovich explores the literary device of a naïve narrator, one who is able and predestined to unwillingly undermine the claims he is trying to assert as true. Novakovich writes: "Yugoslavia was such a fabulously effective police state that the towns were safe – it was normal to walk the streets till midnight" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 8). Such claims are a sure source of humour for readers who will easily identify the paradox between the notions a fabulous police state and safety. Regardless of them being funny, all the notions in this example are historically based.

3.2. Humour Based on Notions of Mentality

In *April Fool's Day*, Novakovich is providing the reader with an extensive depiction of what is regarded a typical Balkan (or West-Balkan) mentality. This depiction is based on notions that range from a generally accepted views on the peoples of the Balkans to popular cultural believes, myths, and clichés. Features of the Balkan mentality are often presented adjusted to the eyes of the western readership (in the sense that these ideas are exposed as exhibits in a museum formed so that the westerners could take a safe and clear peek into the miraculous world of the Balkans and still have fun) but the choice of these features is undoubtedly done by an insider who knows that mentality well.

In depicting Ivan's father Milan Dolinar, Novakovich writes: "[Milan Dolinar] claimed he knew more about illnesses than all the doctors in the country combined" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 2). This is a reference to a factual feature of a patriarchal family in the Balkans, where the father, a *pater familias* figure, attributes himself with unlimited knowledge, regardless of his level or field of education. This also insinuates a particular

relation of the Balkan people towards medicine and health manifested in the popularity of alternative healers, herbalists, therapists, etc., as well as the tendency of do-it-yourself healing. Such attitude towards knowledge is all but Balkan-specific but it is skillfully used by Novakovich to depict literary character which make readers laugh.

Novakovich insists heavily on the significant cultural influence of religions in Yugoslavia, although religions were officially socially undesirable. In a very humorous instance in the novel, young Ivan, who was brought up in a religious family, is forced to write a fictional letter to Tito in his primary school (this being one of the standard exercises in the construction of the socialist consciousness; the practice was largely obsolete already in the 1980s, probably because Tito was dead and even the theoretical possibility of him replying did not exist). Young Ivan starts his letter with the following words: "Our Most High President: Hallowed be thy name, thy will be done abroad as it is done at home, give us our daily bread and soccer balls of leather [...]" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 14). Here Novakovich uses the naivety of a child to produce a humorous opposition between the socio-political establishment and the social reality. Furthermore, this example ridicules Tito's de-facto godly status within the society, and the game of football as 'god among sports'.

It is generally accepted that corruption is a prominent and resilient feature of the Balkan societies. The Yugoslav socialist doctrine had produced a model of an honourable working-class person of high moral standards, great productivity, and clear socialist political views. Such a role model worker was rarely present in reality, but the idea was, nevertheless, often used by the people of questionable ethical standards (or those who simply opposed the establishment) to justify their corrupt actions. One of the typical such actions was theft at the workplace. Indeed, workers, clerks, and higher classes alike were bringing home basically everything they could take at their workplace without being noticed. Novakovich deals with that phenomenon in describing Ivan's student days: "Next, Ivan and Aldo stole a chain of sausages, long enough to encircle the dorm." Aldo, Ivan's colleague at the university, a representative of the

self-entitled and bitterly disappointed person concludes: "That's Communism," Aldo said. "I don't get enough financial aid, though I am a Party member and a veteran. So I correct that" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 29).

Novakovich's humorous account of local mentality continues in the chapters dealing with Croatian independence as well. In these chapters we could already claim that Novakovich depicts Croatian mentality of the 1990s (although this mentality surely shared numerous features with other Balkan cultures in transition). Sudden capitalist renaissance, or, more accurately, the establishment of Eastern-Europe-style capitalism in Croatia during the 1990s (we could say it was a *Wild East* type of establishment) has led to high-scale organized theft and deep social injustice. In describing that period of the mentality formation, Novakovich wisely uses one subtle but very illustrative example. When describing the town doctor, he writes: "He was one of the first people in the town to have a Nokia" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 161). This example humorously depicts the rise of materialist attitudes in the society, where a Nokia phone becomes a funny (and historically accurate) symbol of wealth.

In the chapters of the novel dealing with the period of Croatian independence, Novakovich humorously touches upon one more important feature of Croatian (and Balkan) mentality, and that is a tacit or blunt contempt or lack of understanding for/of intellectuals. This is exemplified in the following conversation between Ivan and Bruno: "Those intellectuals," Bruno said. "When alive, they look dead, when they're dead they look alive" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 166). This statement serves both as an expression of distrust in the educated, and supposedly ruling, individuals (which can again be put into connection with Banfield's features of a primitive society) and an expression of disappointment with the new establishment which has largely failed to provide prosperity for the masses. Due to skillful wording, Bruno's statement is also highly humorous.

3.3. Humour Based on Cultural Notions

April Fool's Day is abundant with cultural reference, which should not come as a surprise. In order to depict Balkan characters in real time

and setting, cultural input was inevitable. There is an interesting example of culture-specific notion explored in the novel. Novakovich writes: "Tunguzia, the cynical El Dorado of the Slavs ("guz" meaning buttocks in most Slavic languages)" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 9). In this example, the humorous effect of the name Tunguzia[52], a term widely used across Balkan cultures, would be lost to most of the non-Balkan readers. However, Novakovich bluntly describes the etymology of the word Tunguzia and the semantic of the word 'guz' in order to preserve the humorous affect for the readers on the other side of the Atlantic, a device used several times in the novel.

When describing the widespread use of stand-up toilets in Yugoslavia, Novakovich writes: "One stood as if one were skiing, and read papers, novels, or textbooks" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 43). Although stand-up toilets are not entirely unknown on the American continent, his humorous depiction surely helped the readers to immerse in the peculiarity of the Eastern European cultural experience. Further in the description of the stand-up toilets, Novakovich adds: "Muslim students walked to the bathroom with bottles" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 44). Although the depiction of Muslims in the novel could be a critically discussed, this glimpse into the everyday life of the multicultural society of Yugoslavia surely provides a humorous effect.

Another cultural issue that unsurprisingly found its place in Novakovich's humoristic novel is turbo-folk music. While probably originating in Serbia during the 1990s (the term itself was coined by the accomplished Montenegrin singer Rambo Amadeus[53]), turbo-folk music has rapidly spread throughout the Balkans. Turbo-folk has become mainstream popular music in Croatia as well, in spite of it being usually associ-

52 The term Tunguzia (Tunguzija) is based on the name of an existing river Tunguska in Siberia. The Tunguska River became known world wide thanks to the Tunguska event in 1908. The event was about a huge explosion, later attributed to a meteor. In ex-Yugoslavia, the ending –ija was added to the word, suggesting that Tunguzija was a far away country situated in the middle of nowhere.

53 Rambo Amadeus is attested as the author of the term in numerous academic sources, one of them being the article by Rory Archer: "Assessing Turbofolk Controversies: Popular Music between the Nation and the Balkans." Southeastern Europe, vol. 36, no. 2, 2012, pp. 178–207.

ated with the lower social classes, shady music clubs, violence, crime, and ludicrous lyrics. Novakovich has dealt with that phenomenon by providing the readers with two absurd and funny turbo-folk lyrics, of which I will mention only two excerpts: "My life's already, alas, half over, and I don't have a // Land Rover" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 96), and "Oh my first love, are you a bushy Slav? // Whoever you rub and mate, don't forget your gun to // lubricate" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 101). These lyrics, through the description of superficial materialism and simplified notions of love, successfully mock the state of culture during the last years of Yugoslavia, and the Croatian post-war period.

In one of the last surreal chapters, Ivan's ghost ponders on the development of Nizograd (Ivan's fictional home; the name comes from the words meaning *low* and *city*, which adds to the comical effect), and, in order to prove that the town has developed in the Croatian post-war period, he argues: "And who's to say that Nizograd is provincial? Look at the condoms and syringes. Now it's a part of the global village" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 201). This again is an example of an ironical remark on the misgivings of the Croatian post-socialist transition.

In the end of this chapter, I would like to explain an instance of literary humour in *April Fool's Day* that encompasses all three notions on which Novakovich bases his humour. In one of the numerous passages about Tito, Yugoslav president for life, Novakovich writes: "[...] the president was on a long tour, drinking two-centuries old wines, hunting for extinct tigers, shaking hands with the king of Sweden – in short, advancing the interests of the world's working class" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 81). Again from the position of a seemingly naïve narrator, Novakovich plays with historical facts (Tito was indeed a very welcome guest in most parts of the world) intertwined with cultural realities (Tito's trips were well presented to the people, forming an impression that all Yugoslavs were welcome around the world as well), and features of mentality (which is presented in humour typical of the Balkans, with the source of irony in the fact that Tito's trips probably did very little for the working class, and that a significant part of the working class could not pay for trips to exotic places).

3.4. Actual Jokes Retold or Mentioned in the Novel

Although jokes could also be seen as a part of a culture, I have decided to address this issue separately. In the novel *April Fool's Day*, there are at least five instances of reference to jokes/joking, being one of the cornerstones of the Balkan mentality. Furthermore, three popular jokes are retold in the novel in their entirety.

An illustrative example of the position and social impact of jokes and joking is hinted when Ivan, who, as mentioned before, at one point finds himself in Goli Otok prison because he made a joke that he would assassinate Tito. In one of Ivan's dreams, Tito himself comments on that: "I don't approve of that kind of humor, however" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 55). This is a subtle but brisk comment on the complexity of joking with authority in Yugoslavia. While jokes were usually widely tolerated (there was a popular belief that even Tito enjoyed jokes about himself and that he full-heartedly laughed at them), joking was highly dependent on the social and political context, that is, dependent on who told them, when, where, and who was listening. In some cases, people would get away with jokes that could be otherwise viewed as quite offensive by the regime, while in other cases, people would get into trouble for innocent puns. This only shows that humour itself was instrumentalized by the organs of power, and Novakovich describes that well in the novel.

As far as the jokes retold in entirety are concerned, it is interesting to note that there are two historically correlated jokes in contrapuntal unity mentioned in the novel. The first joke is introduced in the narration after the death of Josip Broz Tito, while the other is retold just before the death of the first Croatian president Franjo Tuđman. Both jokes existed in their respective times, and were quite popular between the people. The first joke is as follows: "Tito's left leg was amputated; soon afterward a cablegram from hell read: 'The leg arrived alright, please, send the rest urgently'" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 82). The joke provides the reference to the popular belief that one of Tito's legs had been amputated in the hospital just before his death in a desperate attempt to prolong the leader's life. The other part of the message concerns Tito's atheism, which is opposed

by the notion of a 'message from Hell'. The overall meaning of the joke can easily be seen as deep dissatisfaction with Tito's rule, and an anticipation of the end of that rule.

The second joke reads: "Why does Tudjman[54] so often put his right hand over his heart? So you wouldn't see Tito on his shirts." Right after the joke, Novakovich adds: "The immortal Tito lived only in jokes" (Novakovich, 2004, p. 150). This joke refers to a fact that the new government of Croatia, just before and after the proclamation of county's independence, introduced the gesture of a palm on the left side of the chest as a sign of utmost patriotism. However, the second part of the joke refers to the quite widespread attitude between the public that Tuđman had enviously admired Tito (or at least Titoism as a governing style, after all, Tuđman himself was once one of Tito's closest associates). Also, the idea of Tuđman trying to overshadow Tito but remaining in Tito's shadow is implied here, especially with Novakovich's ironical remark on 'immortal Tito'.

The two juxtaposed jokes cannot be separated semantically as they mutually provide a message important for the understanding the history and the mentality of Croatia: It seems that in reality both Tito and Tuđman, and their ruling systems, did not enjoy the level of support and respect that could otherwise be suggested based on the public adoration of Tito's persona and on Tuđman's election results. It seems that, while most people were inclined to respect the raw power, they kept the right to mock and despise those who represented it. The ability to show such complex socio-cultural processes within a society, and through the application of literary humour, surely is one of the strong sides of Novakovich's novel.

4. Conclusion

In her seminal work *Imagining the Balkans*, M. Todorova writes: "[…] the Balkans became, in time, the object of a number of externalized political, ideological and cultural frustrations and have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory

54 Both spellings of the name, Tuđman and Tudjman, are widely used.

image of the 'European' and 'the West' has been constructed" (Todorova, 1997, p. 453). When creating literary world based on a set of cultural generalisations, stereotypes, and clichés about an Eastern culture, and especially when that culture is presented (entirely or partially) through a scope of another Western culture, every author will risk the danger of not finding the cultural and artistic balance that would make the literary creation successful. From a culture-sensitive approach, to present the public with exactly what they expect to hear about a certain culture, and to simply confirm their previous presumptions about that culture, is in itself a defeat.

When explaining Croatian literature that resonates the post-Yugoslav, and the post-war traumatic situation, Andrea Zlatar-Violić mentions the works of Ante Tomić, Miljenko Jergović, Zoran Ferić, Slavenka Drakulić, Julijana Matanović, Dubravka Ugrešić, Ivana Sajko and others, and notes that many of these authors endeavoured to create stories which explain what was before, and what came after independence. Often, these are family stories that depict traumatic and post-traumatic features of existence, some using irony and cynicism, also humour. However, she notes that the works by these authors

> [...] exhibit an intention to deconstruct existing stereotypes and to dismantle the key collective images which have dominated our fiction, nonfiction, and the media scene. [...] different narrative devices are used to create individual worlds seen from the perspective of individual characters and not by employing ready-made cultural and historic perceptions. (Zlatar-Violić, 2013, p. 239)

Based on these two (and similar) academic standpoints, it seems that Novakovich's novel *April Fool's Day* could easily be seen as a dangerously stereotypical from the point of view of culture studies, and quite uncontemporary from the point of view of literary theory/history. What makes this novel successful (to the point that it was translated and published in Croatian in 2009)? In my opinion, the answer is exactly in Novakovich's use of literary humour.

Novakovich creates characters which constantly give a lot and conceal very little. They do not fear to show their weaknesses, and are willing and ready to continue with their often bizarrely funny existences. Mentioning fear, words by J. Farber come to mind: “I’ve sometimes wondered if it may be that we don’t want to understand humor, either because we’re afraid that this understanding will spoil the game or, just possibly, because we sense that, as a consequence of it, we may discover things about ourselves that we would prefer not to know” (Farber, 2007, p. 67). Disregarding fear of a possible wrong cultural presentation and accepting the wry humour is the key to appreciation of Novakovich’s novel.

Novakovich’s narrator seldom claims absolute accuracy and rarely implies seriousness. The narrator is blessed with naivety, which allows him and the characters never to lose hope for a positive resolution of existential problems and dilemmas, in spite of their fatalism. Most characters are basically toys of destiny trying to make ends meet and to preserve at least the basic human dignity. Although some characters and events can seem overly stereotypical, the narration provides constant dynamics of change which allows for the existence of round characters and trustable literary worlds. All these internal features of narration are framed by humour, that is, Novakovich’s novel is simply immensely entertaining and funny, especially for the less demanding readership. The humour used in the novel is never ‘laughing *at* someone’ but always ‘laughing *with* someone’ due to Novakovich’s emphatic writing style. Instead of being a set of stereotypes about the 20th-century Balkans, the novel is rather a vast and miscellaneous collection of shared cultural memories. In that sense, *April Fool’s Day* is a comical encyclopedia of one period of the history of the Balkans.

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