

**THE COMIC HERO AND HIS ATTITUDE TOWARDS
WOMEN IN *A STAR CALLED HENRY* AND *OH, PLAY THAT
THING***

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1. ABSTRACT

This work pretends to analyse the behaviour of the main character of the novels *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh, Play That Thing*, two novels of the same author, in order to show that their protagonist's attitude as a comic hero can be perceived in his relationship with three female characters. The main character's name is Henry Smart, who is the same protagonist in the two novels, and the three female characters I focus on are Annie, Granny Nash and Miss O'Shea. Henry's behaviour towards them is also examined to show his attitude as a comic hero, since it can be perceived in his relationship with them. In order to do so I divide the main body of the work into three parts: in the first one I explain what comedy is, how it has been considered and its most important features. This part also contains who the comic hero is, focusing on the comic virtues that characterise him based on the theory of Hyers about comedy, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, complementing it with the ones by Morreall, Bakhtin, Bergson and Gutwirth. Here I focus on the comic virtue of flexibility as one of the most important characteristics of the comic hero. At the end of this section I introduce an overview of the novels; the second part contains a brief analysis of Henry Smart with examples from the novels with the purpose of demonstrating that he is a comic hero according to his description in the previous part, with the comic virtues that characterise him, paying especial attention to his flexibility; finally, the third and last part consists on the analysis of these three female characters in the novels, in which I include a general overview of their different attitudes and features, and then I proceed to examine each of them separately with examples taken from both novels. As a conclusion, I make a brief summary of the different parts of the work to show the results of the analysis.

Key Words: **comedy, comic hero, flexibility, women.**

2. INTRODUCTION

Comedy has been considered a literary genre that cannot deal with serious matters without trivialising them, but the first two novels of the trilogy *The Last Roundup* by the Irish writer Roddy Doyle show the contrary, that comedy has the capacity to do it. These novels are *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh, Play That Thing*, which are set at the beginning of the twentieth century and follow the adventures of Henry Smart, the main character.

A Star Called Henry portrays the situation of Irish society before the Anglo-Irish war and the years that followed, while *Oh, Play That Thing* represents the Irish emigration to the United States. Both novels are narrated from the point of view of their protagonist, Henry Smart, when he is remembering his adventures and looking back in time.

Henry is a young man who is considered to be a comic hero based on his attitude towards life and the way he approaches difficulties, but who the comic hero is and what characterises him will be explained in the first part of the work.

This work pretends to analyse the characteristics of the protagonist as a comic hero following his attitude towards the most relevant female characters in the novels, who play a significant role in the novels. These women are Annie, Granny Nash and Miss O'Shea.

In order to reach this objective, the work will be divided into four parts:

The first one will consist on showing how comedy has been considered through time and why it is an important literary genre in contrast to what has been thought about it. I will also present the most important features that characterise comedy, such as the use of ordinary characters and situations in contrast with tragedy. This part will also introduce the comic hero, a character who gathers a series of comic virtues that characterise him and make him different from the tragic hero, paying special attention to the virtue of flexibility. To do so I will use the theory of Hyers about comedy that appears in *The Spirituality of Comedy*, complementing it with the ones by Morreall, Bakhtin, Bergson and Gutwirth. This flexibility is considered one of the most important features of the comic hero.

The second part will be a very concise one in which I will include an overview of the novels and a small summary of them.

The third part will contain a brief analysis of the main character, Henry Smart. This section of the work will have the purpose of demonstrating that Henry is a comic hero through the use

of examples taken from the novels and relating them to the ones from the previous part of the work explaining the characteristic of the comic hero. Here I will mainly pay attention to Henry's flexibility, as it is one of his most significant features that characterise him. This comic virtue is the one that allows Henry to survive, to adapt to different situations, to accept his mistakes and limitations and to keep enjoying the small pleasures of life.

Finally, the fourth and last part will consist on the analysis of three female characters in the novels. Before examining each of them separately, I will make a general overview of their different attitudes and features, and then I will proceed to analyse each of them individually with examples taken from the novels, starting with Annie, followed by Granny Nash and ending with Miss O'Shea. In this section I will also explain their relation with Henry, for his reaction to different situations concerning them is essential to understand his attitude as a comic hero, paying especial attention to Miss O'Shea and his relation with her, as she is Henry's wife and the only female character appearing in both novels.

Therefore, the aim of this work will be to show the protagonist's features as a comic hero through his attitude towards these women, since these characteristics as a comic hero can be perceived in the relationship he has with them, paying special attention to the already mentioned virtue of flexibility.

3. COMEDY AND THE COMIC HERO

Throughout history, the Western world has been belittling comedy, considering it a superficial and unimportant literary genre in comparison to tragedy. This conception of comedy started with Aristotle, who considered the tragic heroes superior to the comic characters, and the latter were seen of a lower kind.

This underestimation of comedy continued all through the seventeenth century onwards, when laughter in literature was considered to belong “only to the low genres, showing the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels” (Bakhtin, 67).

Gutwirth continues to present this line of thought about comedy by showing that comedy has been seen as the one art that “depreciates or caricatures the human race” with those comic characters already mentioned that are considered “morally inferior because they *are* socially inferior” (30).

Nevertheless, this use of ordinary characters who have been perceived as inferior and less important ones than those of tragedy is one of the main characteristics of comedy, because comedy has to make “use of the whole human spectrum” (Hyers, 100) by the gathering of both high-minded and ridiculous characters to represent reality with all its contradictions and faults, since “ordinary people are not ignoble, but the salt of the earth” (Hyers, 43). Hyers continues commenting on the contradictions of human beings saying that by using of ordinary characters, the comic vision accepts human beings as individuals full of contradictions and that it accepting this fact is necessary to be aware of our own limitations:

The comic vision possesses a greater appreciation for the muddiness of human nature—even in its noblest aspirations and righteous pretensions—and of the ambiguities of truth and goodness. Hence there is an immediate inclination to see truth and goodness in other perspectives, and acknowledge the limitations of one’s own. (27-28)

In this sense, the characters appearing in comedies are the ones in charge of reminding us the importance of the most natural things in life in order to represent reality. As Hyers puts it, comedy pays especial attention

to the many particulars of everyday life which a more heroic sophistication seems determined to dress up, cover up, forget, ignore, or otherwise treat as polite unmentionables. The archaic staples of comedy are thus the earthen trinity of sex, food, and body wastes. Added to this are the basic requirements of clothing, shelter, and sleep . . . Mixed in are all those troublesome inevitabilities of burping, itching, scratching, sniffing, twitching, yawning, dozing, stretching, hiccuping, nose-wiping, ear-picking, sneezing, snorting, coughing, choking, spitting, belching, farting—ad infinitum and ad nauseam. (95)

The same way in which comedy has been thought to deal with less important and inferior characters because they were ordinary ones, this literary genre has also been supposed to deal with superficial issues, as it has been thought of focusing strictly on the most ordinary aspects of life. Quite the contrary, comedy has the capacity of approaching serious matters without trivialising them, and comedy is necessary in life to help us cope with suffering because “sanity and humanity . . . are impossible without humor” (Hyers, 71), and this humanity can only be understood once we have understood comedy. By this representation of reality, comedy wants to make us aware of what is natural in life, and “what is natural is what we should think. And it is equally natural that we should think about eating, sleeping and sex” (Hyers, 97).

Related to comedy’s willingness to represent reality and of what is natural in life, there is the need to make us acquainted with what is really important in life, and those are considered to be the “earthy matters that life is mostly about: food, fun, sex, love, family, friends, and a good night’s sleep” (Hyers, 43), in other words, the simple pleasures of life.

In comedies, the character who presents the comic vision of life receives the name of comic hero, a term used mainly by Hyers. He also describes this character as being neither exclusively concerned with the afflictions of the soul nor disengaged from the events that take place at the moment, a specimen “of a special human freedom and flexibility” (51):

The comic hero playfully incarnates the essential contradictions of our natures, and the awkwardnesses and bewilderments of being human . . . it has always been the task of comic heroes to identify our pretensions and self-deceptions, our inconsistencies and incongruities . . . we are . . . fallible, mortal, and frequently foolish creatures of the earth. Even when our heads are in the clouds, our feet walk on the ground and are made of clay. For the comic protagonist, life is never so simple, so sensible, so logical, or so organised as our inspirational visions, our

theatrical plots, our historical reconstructions, or our great works of art might wish to suggest. (60-61)

The comic hero has a set of comic virtues to counterbalance those of the tragic hero. Hyers enumerates these virtues as being: “flexibility, freedom, compromise, playfulness, lightheartedness, childlikeness, celebration of life, survivability” (65). The virtue Hyers pays most attention to is flexibility, considering it “the characteristic of life” (55), and this flexibility is the virtue that allows the comic characters to be able to laugh at themselves, to adapt to any situation and therefore to survive.

This flexibility allows the comic characters to be able to laugh at themselves, among other characteristics, and Hyers explains that “if one laughs at others, one is also willing to laugh at oneself” (78); and we laugh because

we are capable of taking even the darkest and most painful situations in more than one way. We are not limited to one-possibility responses. We are not eternally confined to taking things straight and univocally. In laughter we transcend not only the animals but also ourselves and our circumstances. We transcend disappointment and suffering. We transcend the jumbled contradictions of our lives. We transcend even the self-imposed requirement that life always makes sense, conform to a plan, work out, give us our due, or be equitable and just. (133)

Apart from laughing at oneself, Hyers continues with another aspect of this flexibility in the comic attitude by declaring that the comic hero is committed to life and to people, not to principles or ideals, since he “is far more concerned with saving skin” (66), this means with surviving and therefore enjoying the simple pleasures of life. This enjoyment is another important element in comedies, and Hyers also talks about it by saying that:

In the comic vision existence is to be seen more in terms of play and game than work or war. Whether sumptuous or not, life is a feast and festival, not a series of battles and barroom brawls. The enjoyment and celebration of life, in its simplest and most fleeting moments, are of greater importance than the abstract principles and judgements to which they so often get sacrificed. (27)

Therefore, following this statement by Hyers, laughter can be understood “as a universal philosophical principle that heals and regenerates” (Bakhtin, 70), and the comic hero makes use of laughter to perceive his own limitations and be able to move forward, since “Laughter

does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete” (Bakhtin, 123).

Moreover, we can appreciate the relevance of flexibility in comedy when Morreall says in *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* that

comedy offered a non-emotional, playful approach to life, portraying it not as a series of battles, but as a series of adventures in which we play as well as work . . . It promoted mental flexibility while tragedy promoted mental rigidity. By celebrating a narrow range of emotional responses to problems, tragedy fostered formulaic patterns of thought and action. By celebrating disengaged, spontaneous responses to problems, comedy fostered adaptive, more rational thought and action. (78-79)

Morreall coincides with Hyers in the fact that flexibility is one of the most important comic virtues, concerning the possibility to see a situation from different points of view. Furthermore, Morreall adds to this relevance for flexibility in the attitude of the comic hero the term distance. This term has been used by many scholars in their works about comedy, but among them Morreall has been the one who emphasises its importance.

Distance is provided by humour in order to allow the comic characters to distance themselves from the events that are taking place and therefore have different perspectives. Thus, Morreall explains that by distancing themselves from a situation either of failure or success, they can perceive different ways and possibilities of solving or coping with that situation, which can help them to be aware of their own limitations and mistakes and to accept them. Therefore, by adding distance to flexibility, comic characters have the capacity to transcend painful situations, not focusing strictly on one singular straight possibility, but perceiving the situation from many different points of view (*Taking Laughter Seriously*).

Surviving is another characteristic of the comic hero that is related with flexibility, as we saw with Hyers, because when the comic characters are flexible and they distance themselves from certain situations, they are able to choose the best option to escape from a conflict alive as well as to adapt to any situation they may face, since the comic hero only wants to enjoy life. Morreall also comments on that characteristic of flexibility:

What is valuable in comedy is . . . adapting thought and behavior to what’s happening. Like tragic heroes, comic protagonists face big problems, but they think rather than feel their way through them.

Instead of chaining themselves to a principle or a tradition and dying in the process, they find a new way to look at things, wriggle out of the difficulty, and live to tell the tale. (*Comic Relief*, 80)

Also, in another work about comedy Morreall says that “seeing oneself objectively is also important in being honest with one-self, rather than rationalizing one’s shortcomings, and so humor can contribute to self-knowledge and integrity” (*Humor*, 19).

Continuing with Morreall, he explains that in relation “to life’s problems, what comedy recommends is not emotions but thinking – and rethinking. In this way, comedy is like Buddhism, with its insistence that the way we look at things is more important than things-in-themselves, if there even are such things . . . comedy rejects the self-centeredness that attends emotional attachment” (*Comic Relief*, 82). This means that in order to be able to distance from a situation it is important not to be dragged by our emotions, as it happens in tragedy, but to think things rationally in order to find a better solution.

In addition to what Morreall mentions in his works about comedy not attending to the emotions, Bergson coincides with him in the sense that comedy relates more to the reason than to the emotions, another characteristics of the difference between tragedy and comedy. Bergson describes this as the “ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and has no greater foe than emotion” (62-63).

Likewise, Bergson mentions this flexibility in relation with the comic hero in the sense that he displays a more flexible attitude in contrast with the tragic hero, which is essential to maintain the humanity that characterises us, providing open-mindedness and a wider range of possibilities to solve situations (*Laughter*). Therefore, we can appreciate that Bergson also coincides in that flexibility is essential in comedy, and he says that this comic virtue is seen when a character has to change and adjust to meet the needs of the moment. According to him, we laugh when we see a person acting in an automatic and mechanical way, something that can be compared with the rigidity of the tragic hero. Humour undermines all these automatic and mechanical responses, and it forces us to be flexible, not stiff and mechanical:

We have seen that the more society improves, the more plastic is the adaptability it obtains from its members; while the greater the tendency towards increasing stability below, the more does it force to the

surface the disturbing elements inseparable from so vast a bulk; and thus laughter performs a useful function by emphasising the form of these significant undulations. (189)

Furthermore, for Bergson this flexibility, or plasticity as he calls it, has the function “to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with” because the function of laughter “is to convert rigidity into plasticity” (174). In other words, flexibility is what allows human beings to adapt to different situations and therefore to survive.

4. THE NOVELS

Under the initial assumption that comedy is considered a superficial literary genre, the Irish writer Roddy Doyle has defended several times the importance of this genre to deal with serious affairs without trivialising them, and this pronouncement can be seen in his novels. The ones I will focus on are *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh, Play That Thing*, and they portray respectively the situation of Irish society during the previous years that led to the Anglo-Irish war and its course, and the Irish emigration to the United States from the point of view of their main character.

Doyle uses a comic tone during the novels, and he is able to do it without trivialising the events that take place; on the contrary, comedy here is used as a tool to cope with the tragedies of life.

To do so, Doyle decides to choose an ordinary person as the protagonist of the novels, Henry Smart, a character that breaks with the paradigm of the tragic hero.

In the first novel, *A Star Called Henry*, his family has been abandoned by the father, a hired killer, forcing Henry and his little brother Victor to live in the streets; unfortunately, Victor soon dies as a result of hunger and cold. Henry is a poor boy coming from the slums, uneducated and with no future; people like him were exactly what the IRA looked for, as they were easily duped to fight for them, justifying their acts as the only way to shape a better Ireland. Notwithstanding this suffering so early in life, he is capable of laughing at himself and enjoying the simple pleasures, celebrating life and admitting his mistakes and his own limitations.

Later, in the second novel, *Oh, Play that Thing*, he moves to the United States, where he shifts from job to job and moves constantly to escape and survive, as he does not feel as comfortable as he did in Dublin. He meets Louis Armstrong, with whom he becomes a burglar, and this occupation leads him to a house where Miss O'Shea is working as a housekeeper. Miss O'Shea is Henry's wife, whom he married in the first novel when they were still in Ireland. She moved to the United States with their daughter.

Both novels are narrated from Henry's point of view, who shows he is aware of the mistakes he has made in the past and recognises them, portraying that important comic virtue I have been mentioning throughout the previous pages: flexibility.

This comic virtue is also relevant in Henry's attitude towards the three main female characters: Annie, Granny Nash and Miss O'Shea, and his behaviour as a comic hero can be perceived in his relationship with them. A representation of this flexibility of the comic hero is seen in the way Henry describes these women to be intellectually superior to him, accepting and admitting this fact. It is essential to bear in mind this comic virtue while examining them, because it will help to understand Henry's behaviour in the novels as well as the love these women feel for him and their willingness to help him.

5. HENRY AS A COMIC HERO

Henry Smart is the hero whose adventures are narrated in these two novels, but as a consequence of his attitude towards life and his capacity to adapt, to survive and to accept his own mistakes, he is what Hyers would call a comic hero. As it has been mentioned before, the comic hero has many virtues that contrast those of the tragic hero, and in the case of Henry, the most significant one is flexibility.

Flexibility is the comic virtue that allows Henry to adapt to the situations and therefore to survive. “I was eight and surviving. I’d lived three years in the streets and under boxes, in hallways and on wasteland. I’d slept in the weeds and under snow. I had Victor, my father’s leg and nothing else And I was surviving” (*A Star Called Henry*, 70). This willingness to live and to survive can be perceived in another part of the novel, when Henry says “I was being held by three men—maybe they thought I was deserting, and maybe I was . . .” (*A Star Called Henry*, 104), as Hyers explains, comic heroes “exhibit honest fear, cowardice, squeamishness, bewilderment . . . and a special talent for running and hiding” (65).

This flexibility of the comic hero appears in the novels as Henry’s most relevant attitude towards life, and that is the acceptance of his mistakes.

In *A Star Called Henry* he is persuaded to commit crimes and murders as the only way that would lead to a better Ireland, and he gladly participates, because he wants to protect and give a better life to the people he cares about. After a while, when he realises he has been used, he rectifies and moves forward, he admits he was blind and believed in the Rebellion, and the leaders took advantage of him, but he does not want to punish them or to take revenge, he simply laughs at himself: “They knew what they were doing when they chose me; I was quick and ruthless, outspoken and loyal – and such an eejit it took me years to realise what was going on” (*A Star Called Henry*, 240). The way he deals with the situation coincides with Gutwirth’s vision of comic attitude, “a playfulness that lifts the weight of the world off our shoulders and gives us the last word when it rages at us ineffectually” (81), and “The challenge to laugh at ourselves may well be the utmost in wisdom that the comic does offer” (174). Another example of Henry accepting his mistakes takes place in *Oh, Play That Thing* when he is telling Louis Armstrong what he did back in Ireland during the war:

–There was a time, Louis, when a fella, every now and again, a fella would give me a bit of paper and there'd be a name on the bit of paper. And my job was to kill the unfortunate cunt whose name was written on the paper. And I did it, every fuckin' time, no question asked. Obeying orders. My duty. For my fuckin' country, Louis. I did what I was told. Every time. But I don't do that any more. (206)

In his work, Hyers classifies the different comic characters according to their most important features, and if we pay attention to this distinction, the one that is most similar to Henry is the one he names as the trickster, considering him an earlier version of what we know today as the comic hero. The trickster

loves life, lives it with a passion, as if life itself is the “point” and goal of life . . . In his way, too, he defines the human condition, along with a comic means of coming to terms with our aspirations and limitations . . . The trickster is a more frank and accurate, if not well-manicure and altogether flattering, representation of the human condition. (Hyers, 185-86)

He is eschatological, obsessed with sex and full of life and energy; he does not feel pity for his situation or his place on life, he simply does not think about how terrible his life is, because he is “determined to make the best of it” (180). This is a description of Henry's attitude as a comic hero and of his way of living, looking at the future and not complaining about the past or even the present, living life as it comes.

6. WOMEN

During the first part of the twentieth century in Ireland, the time when *A Star Called Henry* has been set, women were considered second class citizens and they were oppressed in all aspects of private and public life as a result of the great conservative influence of the Catholic Church. Notwithstanding this situation of women in Ireland at that time of history, it can be contrasted with the portrayal of the main female characters in Doyle's novel.

Morreall says in his work that those female characters appearing in comedies usually "are more varied and interesting" (*Comic Relief*, 81) in contrast to those women appearing in tragedies, and this characteristic of comedy concerning women can be perceived in these two novels, *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh, Play That Thing*, in which the three main female characters are described as witty and intelligent women.

Although the main female characters that appear in these novels are very different from each other, with different features that characterise them individually, it is significant they all have in common that they love Henry and they are aware of his limitations; therefore, they want to help him the best they can so he can understand that he makes mistakes and be aware of reality.

The three most influential female characters in these two novels by Roddy Doyle are: Annie, Granny Nash and Miss O'Shea. They are described as characters with both a physical and mental strength, who have an independent spirit; and because of this they play a very relevant role in relation to Henry in the sense that when he is with them we see how he acts as a comic hero. In terms of strength, Miss O'Shea is the most relevant one, because she appears several times in the novel subverting the role of the man by saving Henry from these problematic and risky situations he gets involved in.

Furthermore, if we continue with the contrast between the historical situation of women in Ireland and the way these female characters are presented in the novels, it is important to mention Henry's contribution to that contrast by showing a very respectful attitude towards them, as he neither mistreats nor patronises them. On the contrary, he admits they are more witted and astute than himself, and even more mature in the case of Annie, who is more or less his same age. He also accepts their criticism at him and that they are usually right about him committing mistakes.

As I have already mentioned, Henry's flexibility is mostly appreciated in his relation with these three female characters, especially in their awareness of his limitations and willingness to help him understand reality; besides, each of them helps him in their own particular way. Henry understands this and he accepts that they are superior to him, because he knows that they love him.

As it has been explained above, in the first novel, *A Star Called Henry*, Henry is being manipulated by the leaders of the Rebellion for their own profit, making him murder people considered to be a menace for the fight. He is capable of admitting that, at the beginning, he does not realise he is being used, but when he is telling the story he understands he needed the help of women at the time to be aware of what was actually happening, especially Annie's, since she is the first person who perceives he is being manipulated. Granny is also relevant in the novels because she has a relation with Henry in which use each other for their own interest, but she loves him, and as she is aware of his limitations she tries to help him, and he is aware of that.

From these three female characters in the novels, Miss O'Shea is the only one who appears in both *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh, Play That Thing*. She is probably the one female character who helps him the most, since she shows a very independent and strong attitude and she saves Henry several times when he finds himself hurt or in the middle of a difficult situation, breaking with the paradigm of the traditional woman.

6. 1. ANNIE

Annie only appears in the first novel, *A Star Called Henry*, but she is mentioned and remembered in *Oh, Play That Thing*. She is a young woman whom Henry meets right before the Easter Uprising of 1916, and describes her with his own words as being “only young, not much older than myself, and gorgeous now that her mouth was shut and hiding the butts of her teeth. Her eyes were starving, greedy and dark, and darker as I got nearer to them” (*A Star Called Henry*, 104). However, Henry perceives Annie in a different way the last time they see each other before Henry decides to join the fight for Ireland once more:

She was old and young at the same time, Annie. Young thighs, old neck. Young wrists, old hands. Young hair, old teeth. Young eyes—gorgeous, brave things drilling into me—and an old voice made filthy by a life of Dublin air, a thing made of smoke and sex. (205-06)

She is also a very strong woman, who does not allow herself to be weak. She cannot afford it, at least in front of others, especially Henry. An example of this takes place at the time Henry and Annie are saying goodbye to each other and he decides to get involved in the rebellion once again:

—Are you crying, Annie?

—No, she said.

She was turned to the wall.

—Poor Annie.

—Poor nothing, she said. —There’s nothing poor about me. (206)

Annie’s strength can be recognised too in the sense that she sees the world realistically. Her vision of life can be perceived when she once admits to Henry that life for people like them is hard, people who come from the slums and have to survive day by day the best they can. Nevertheless, she also admits that there is a time when they can enjoy life when she says that even though she does not know much, she knows that “the times never get better for the likes of us . . . —Still and all, she said. —There’s a short while as well when they get no worse” (206). This perspective of life can be compared to that of the comic hero, who shows a

flexible attitude by accepting and enjoying life as it comes with its small pleasures, surviving and adapting.

Once Miss O'Shea disappears during a crossfire before the Easter Uprising, Henry goes looking for Annie, and he stays with her. Even though he knows Annie is a married woman, they start a love affair, because she thinks her husband was killed in the war, for he had not returned.

He stays with Annie "after the last of the executions" (151) by the British of those who participated in the insurrection. During this time of his life, at the age of fourteen, he begins to settle with Annie. She is the one who brings food for both of them at the beginning, subverting the traditional role of the man, because Henry "did nothing at first," until one day he "got work. Annie came home with bread under her shawl and a job for me" (151).

Henry considers Annie to be a very mature woman, and he admired her, for she "knew more about living than anyone I ever knew" (158). In contrast with the usual thinking at that time, his attitude towards Annie, and women in general, is of considering them to be superior to him, not diminishing them, and this is a result of his attitude as a comic hero in relation to women.

However, when Henry begins to feel at home when he is with Annie, enjoying each other's company, her husband arrives. In this situation, Henry shows his virtues as comic hero, because when he encounters him, instead of challenging him, he pretends to be someone else in order to spare Annie the problems she may encounter for being unfaithful to her husband. Henry shows that he wants to protect the people he loves even if that results to be detrimental for him and putting other people's security in front of his own, because he takes care of the people he loves, and she trusted him, since he places people before ideals, and he decides to help Annie:

She didn't look worried or scared. She knew me: I wasn't going to let her down . . . He'd been away for three years; back from France, back from the dead, he needed to be in charge. And here was me, proof of his wife's infidelity . . . I could have killed him. I was armed for it. But I stayed on the ground and gave him the chance to reject the proof between his feet. I did the decent thing; I acted the ejjit. I saved Annie and her husband. (*A Star Called Henry*, 161)

Apart from their sexual relation, Henry and Annie also have several conversations that are significant to understand his situation and also they are very important for him once he looks back, to admit his mistakes. It is in these conversations when Annie notices Henry's blindness regarding the Rebellion and its leaders, who are using him for their own profit and benefit, and as soon as she apprehends it, she tries to make Henry understand he is being manipulated for the sake of others:

- What about another song? she said. -It's early yet.
- Sorry, Annie. I'm a busy man.
- I knew it, she said. -Dying for Ireland. (*A Star Called Henry*, 173-74)

She is the first one to realise it, but he only admits she is right once he looks backwards to that moment in time; he is not aware of what those leaders were actually doing with him.

Annie understands that he is once again willing to fight for Ireland:

- Go 'way, yeh pup. The last time you rode me like that you were crying for all your dead friends. You're a soldier boy again. All ready to die for the dear little shamrock. Remember that letter you said you'd write to me before they shot you?
- I do, I said. -But don't worry. There's no reason for me to be writing last letters.
- Just don't forget it. Because you're up to something. (174)

It has been said that these three women have different features, but the one characteristic that they all share is that they are aware of his limitations. In relation with Annie's realisation of Henry's blindness towards the Rebellion, she uses irony because of his stubbornness and foolishness in order to make him understand he is being manipulated.

He considers himself an actual hero of the fight against the British, but he is actually just being used as a puppet: “-There'll be no stopping you now, said Annie. -The country'll be needing new heroes now that the English are after shooting all the old ones. They'll need new men to shoot and love” (147). Annie's use of irony shows that she is aware of Henry's limitations, and she wants to help him to realise he is making a mistake, and by narrating the irony in their conversations, Henry laughs at himself and at his foolishness, admitting she was right.

6. 2. GRANNY NASH

Granny Nash appears exclusively in *A Star Called Henry*. She is Henry's grandmother by his mother's side, described as an old woman who only cares about her books and who holds a really deep hatred towards Henry's father, the man who abandoned his family and, according to Granny Nash, was the one who is guilty of bringing all the miseries to their family.

Granny appears for the first time in *A Star Called Henry* before Annie does, previously to the Easter Uprising of 1916 in Dublin. Both her obsession with books and her heartless personality can be seen from the very first moment she appears in the novel during a crossfire:

And there she came, . . . out of the darkest of the flames, the loveless old hooor herself, Granny Nash. She was carrying a wall made of books; she had two of them open on top of the pile, reading them already, on eye for each, as she strolled up Sackville Street. She looked singed and half-destroyed but she moved like a dreaming child on her way to school. (117)

After this description Granny does not appear again until Henry leaves Annie as a result of the arrival of her 'dead husband'. He wanders around without purpose, and he "even visited Granny Nash . . . Head in the book. Nose sliding down the valley between the pages" (162). Again, she is presented here as a compulsive reader and through this obsession with books that she has they both get to an understanding in which he gives her books and she agrees to provide him with information depending on the book he brings her, "a clue for a book, that was the deal. I handed over a book; she handed over the information" (164). Nevertheless, Henry notices that not only is she interested in books in general, but "she got excited when the books were by women. . . She was repaying me now with better and more information" (165).

This information she agrees to provide him helps Henry understand who Alfie Gandon is after she once told him he is the source of all their problems, the man his father used to work for: "–He's a landlord and a killer, said Granny Nash" (165). Alfie Gandon is a man who rewrites his own history in order to become a leader of the Rebellion. The next fragment of the *A Star Called Henry* shows an example of that agreement they have of Henry bringing her different books in order to get information about that man called Alfie Gandon:

–Alfie Gandon says Hello, said Granny Nash.

–What does that mean, Granny?

The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole, in Many Lands. I put it on the table in front of her.

–Alfie Gandon says Goodbye.

–And what does that bloody mean?

–Alfie Gandon says Hello, she said. –And you mind your mouth in front of your poor granny.

I was patient. I stored up and waited for it to fall together. I'd enough stolen books hidden away in the Tobacco Store to keep the old witch fed and talkative for another couple of months. (166)

Granny is a very intelligent woman who uses Henry to get new books and who uses irony with him any time they have a conversation. She does so because she becomes aware of Henry's limitations and she wants to help him understand reality, because she loves him. He understands that and he accept she is superior to him, showing a very important characteristic of the comic hero:

–I'm married now, Granny, I told her.

–Does she own both legs? she asked.

...

–She does, yeah, I said.

–Then you'll be very happy, she said.

She was still looking at me.

–Are you not very young to be getting yourself wedded?

–I'm twenty-two, I told her.

She lifted her finger, brought it to the top of the page and dropped it under the date.

–So I've been reading news that's four years old, she said.

–Tell me more about Gandon, I said.

–Gandon in 1919 or Gandon in 1923?

–1919.

–It's hard to remember, she said. –It's such a long, long time ago.

–I'm seventeen, I told her.

–Ah, she said.

She took her finger off the date. (238-39)

The beginning of the conversation makes reference to Henry's father, who only had one leg, and Granny relates that with the fact that his father brought all misfortunes his family suffered, especially by working for Alfie Gandon. She has so much hatred towards Henry's father that she even said to him once: “–You're just like your father. And that's no compliment” (289).

Throughout the rest of the previous dialogue, we can see how Granny Nash is laughing at Henry in a very subtle way, showing that she may be an old woman, but she is witty enough to perceive that Henry is lying to her, and this is expressed in her use of irony in their conversations. She loves him, although she does not show it much, and she wants to help him, make him aware of reality.

Henry's acceptance of Granny's use of irony is another characteristic of the flexibility of the comic hero, and it can be recognised in the way Henry remembers and narrates how Granny Nash makes use of this irony when she talks to him. The fact that he portrays her being ironic means that he is aware of that and he accepts she is superior to him, therefore admitting his own limitations and weaknesses. Most important, he is accepting that Granny Nash is right, as well as his foolishness at that time.

Therefore, Henry is not recalling his encounters with Granny in a painful or resentful way; on the contrary, he is "capable of taking even the darkest and most painful situations in more than one way" (Hyers, 133).

6. 3. MISS O'SHEA

Miss O'Shea, in contrast with the previous women, appears in both *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh, Play That Thing*, and she is probably the most relevant female character in both novels. In *A Star Called Henry*, she appears at first as a teacher and then as his wife. Furthermore, Henry's flexibility can be appreciated in relation to this particular female character.

When Henry is a little boy, he takes his brother Victor to the school so they learn how to read and write; there, they meet Miss O'Shea for the first time. At this point of the first novel, Doyle foreshadows what is going to happen between Miss O'Shea and Henry a few years later, with passages such as: "I liked her . . . and Miss O'Shea had fallen in love with me" (72) when they meet for the first time, being Henry just a child. Besides, at that time, Victor asks him if he is going to marry Miss O'Shea, and Henry answers "–Don't know, I said. –I might" (74). Since he is a little boy he thinks he is in control of the situation, but by showing this passages he is letting the reader know that he is laughing at himself, and therefore admitting his limitations.

They meet another time during the eve of the Easter Uprising of 1916, and it is here when we can appreciate the power Miss O'Shea has over Henry, when his very first sexual encounter takes place in the basement while his comrades are fighting outside:

–Now they're taking us seriously! he shouted at the dome. –They are rattled!

–They're not the only ones, said Paddy.

What did I say back to Paddy? Nothing at all. Too scared? Too busy? No. I just wasn't there when he said it. I was downstairs, in the basement, in a hot little room with much more dust than air. Did I hear the shell hitting the Loop Line? Did I hear the clang? I did, but I thought the noise was coming from me. I was falling onto my back when it happened. I'd been pushed on top of a high bed made of blocks of stamps, sheets and sheets of the things, columns of them, sticky side up. I was stuck there with my britches nuzzling my ankles as Miss O'Shea grabbed my knees and climbed on top of me. (*A Star Called Henry*, 119)

In the previous fragment of the *A Star Called Henry*, Miss O'Shea is the one who has control of everything related with Henry; she is on top, dominating, subverting the role of man, and Henry does nothing to avoid it, because he is enjoying the moment and, most importantly, because he does not care if she takes control of the situation. At this point, moreover, she con-

fesses him that she wants to fight for her rights as an Irish citizen, just like men do, but since Miss O'Shea is a woman she is only allowed to be among the soldiers if she was to cook for them, and she wants to make that clear to Henry:

–I didn't come here to make stew, Henry, she said.

She sighed. She sounded angry.

–I never asked you for stew, I said.

She sighed again.

–I'm here for my freedom. Just like you and the men upstairs.

–Yeah, I said.

–I want my freedom too, she said.

–Yeah.

–To do what I want. (*A Star Called Henry*, 122)

Henry is given to enjoying the simple pleasures of life, and as it can be seen in the previous fragments of the first novel, the one single pleasure he enjoys the most is sex, and the other person who enjoys sex even more than Henry is Miss O'Shea “–Is everything sex with you, woman?” (260).

Miss O'Shea is a very capable woman, independent, strong and self-sufficient. In some parts of the novel she even subverts the role of the hero, and an example of this can be perceived during a gunfire while they are running from the Blacks and Tans and a “. . .bullet slid in and I was falling hard and I couldn't see anything, didn't know anything, and when I was able to see again and think, when I looked and saw the ground jumping below me, she was carrying me . . . I'd been saved by Miss O'Shea” (*A Star Called Henry*, 264-266).

There is also another example of Miss O'Shea subverting the role of the hero almost at the end of *Oh, Play That Thing*, when she saves Henry one more time after he is taken to a solitary place to be shot as a consequence of his past in Ireland. There he receives a shot and falls to the ground:

I fell . . . and the air was full of bullets and feet and brick and cordite and glass and shells and sunlight and shattering glass and running feet . . . And I was alive and it made no sense and I was delighted with the pain, thrilled, fuckin' agony, and I was still alive. The pain in my shoulder was unbearable, fuckin' wonderful, and there was the blood too, but I thought I could get myself up. I put my weight into the good arm, the right.

And I was kicked.
 I looked at brown boots.
 –Get up out of that, Henry Smart.
 I looked up, and saw brown eyes and some slivers of grey hair, brownish-grey, that had escaped
 from a bun that shone like a lamp behind—
 She kicked me again.
 –Get up like I told you. The state of you; you're a disgrace.
 . . .
 I looked as she turned past me. Her face was calm and furious, but the eyes were laughing at me.
 (336-37)

She later admits she is the one who shot him at that warehouse, so he lied down and didn't get hurt, “–It was nothing personal . . . –I had to drop you, she said. –Before the other bullets got you” (337).

At this moment, Miss O'Shea subverts the role of the hero, the same that happened in *A Star Called Henry*, and she does not mind to hurt Henry if by doing that she is able to save him.

She is not portrayed as a traditional woman either: she fights for Ireland as well as Henry does, she is both physically and psychologically strong, and she is able to take care of herself without the help of a man; these characteristics are not the usual ones for a woman at that time, in the early 20th century, when they were seen as inferior to men. While being nursed by his wife, Henry describes her as his:

. . . short-haired wife who fed him griddle cake soaked in warm milk, his bones knitted, his bruises faded. Nursed by his beautiful, older wife when she wasn't off ambushing troop lorries and robbing banks, he was becoming, once again, a fine figure of a man. Nursed by his beautiful, pregnant wife when she wasn't off winning the war and defying the local warlord's edict that an Irishwoman's place was in the home, when she wasn't under the local warlord. (*A Star Called Henry*, 311)

The same happens after the Easter Uprising, when Miss O'Shea keeps being the one in control of the situations. She also has their marriage under control, and Henry does nothing to avoid it, he really does not care, he loves her and wants her to be happy. Henry understands and accepts the fact that she is superior to him. Again, Henry describes her in *Oh, Play That Thing*, when they meet again after six years:

She looked away. Out of the window I'd come through the night before. At the snow that was back, in fits, and the morning sunshine lighting it. She was beautiful, still beautiful; her profile there was what I'd always loved. The way she stared, examined what she saw. The look of a woman who believed in things. A woman who expected good to come at her. Who, for the time being, didn't have to look at me. (*Oh, Play That Thing*, 203)

Almost at the end of *A Star Called Henry*, Ivan turns up in their house when Henry is alone in order to ask him to control his wife, because she is complicating the procedures for Ireland to become a Republic:

–My wife keeps killing them.
–Spot on, boy.
–She's making life complicated.
–She's costing me a fortune, Captain. She's interfering with free trade and I can't have that.
...
–I'll talk to her, I said. –That's all I can do. She's her own woman.
–She's your wife.
–I'm her husband. (*A Star Called Henry*, 317)

Here, Henry makes both Ivan and the reader understand that he has no power, and neither does he want to have any power, over his wife, that she is the one who controls their marriage, since she is as free as him, and she is the one who owns her own life, not him. This statement expresses an idea and a way of thinking that at that time was not the rule, and this is also a characteristic of Henry's comic spirit and the view he has of life, for his flexibility has provided him with an open-mindedness that allows him to accept different situations. Besides, he shows the importance of enjoying the small pleasures of life.

The situation changes in *Oh! Play That Thing*, when Henry leaves Miss O'Shea and their daughter in Ireland and goes to America, escaping from the oppression in Ireland. In the United States he spends years after he finally meets his wife again, and with her there is their daughter, a six-year-old girl. When Miss O'Shea and Henry see each other again, he seems more affected at the encounter than she is, and she asks him whether there were more women apart from her when they were separated:

–Were there others?
–Women?

–Henry.
 –Yeah.
 I looked straight at her.
 –A few.
 She was looking at the window.
 –But, I said.
 She wouldn't look at me.
 –It was always you.
 –Was it now?
 –Yeah. (204)
 . . .
 –I am very angry. And not about the others, mind. Although that too. But I know the kind you are.
 She slapped her chest.
 –There's been no one here, Henry. No one at all. Not one man.
 –I wouldn't have minded.
 –Fuck off, Henry! (204-05)

Here Henry shows his attitude as comic hero in the way he would have accepted his wife having affairs during the six years they were separated, just like the ones he had with numerous women. This situation reveals the importance Henry gives to the simple pleasures of life. Through this tolerant attitude, Henry shows an open-minded and tolerant posture, exemplifying also Hyers insistence on flexibility as an essential characteristic of the comic hero as well as the enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life.

This situation between Henry and Miss O'Shea can be better understood if compared to that of Annie with her 'dead' husband in *A Star Called Henry*, when he appears and Henry has to "act the eejit" (161). In this situation of the first novel, Annie's husband wouldn't have accepted Annie to have an affair when he was away, because he is rigid in life and he does not adapt to the different situations, like a tragic hero, whereas in *Oh, Play That Thing* it is evident that Henry finds it natural to enjoy the simple pleasures of life when they were separated, such as sex. After this conversation, she explodes and begins to kick and punch him, grabbing his hair, while he waits "hoping she'd soon have enough and she'd get here on the floor and fuck me, fuck me, fuck and forgive" (205), but she does not; instead, she keeps attacking him, showing her control of the situation and her superiority.

Another very significant characteristic of Miss O'Shea is her use of irony, especially in the second novel, *Oh! Play That Thing*, when she encounters Henry after six years without know-

ing anything about him. An example of this irony could be the moment when Miss O'Shea is seeking an explanation from Henry:

–You never even wrote a blessed letter.

She was right.

–Have you never heard of the telephone, Henry?

She was right.

–A great invention altogether. Even in Ireland. Or telegrams? (200)

Also, when they reunite again in the United States, Miss O'Shea takes their daughter Saoirse with her. When Henry sees her for the second time in his life, Saoirse assures him he is not her father, because he died for Ireland, and when he wants Miss O'Shea to explain herself about that, she attacks him with irony:

–You told her I was dead so you wouldn't disappoint her?

–Well, now, she said. –You weren't around to suggest anything different. (208)

This irony shows that Henry is accepting his own limitations and mistakes, and he admits she is right in what she claims. She loves him, as well as Annie and Granny Nash, and she tries to help him by making him aware of his mistakes and his limitations, which he accepts. Through this irony by Miss O'Shea, Henry is able to transcend “even the self-imposed requirement that life always makes sense, conform to a plan, work out, give us our due, or be equitable and just” (Hyers, 133).

7. CONCLUSION

This work has shown the way in which Henry's attitude as a comic hero can be perceived in his relation with these three female characters, taking into account mainly the comic virtue of flexibility. It is important to remember that Hyers considered flexibility to be "the characteristic of life" (55), and it allows oneself to be aware of one's own limitations and mistakes.

The first part of this work has shown that even though comedy is about the ordinary aspects of life, it has the capacity of dealing with serious matters without trivialising them, since comedy is necessary to cope with painful situations and suffering, and according to this, Hyers says that "sanity and humanity . . . are impossible without humor" (71).

It is important to remember once again that all these female characters love Henry and that they become aware of his limitations. Therefore, they want to help him understand reality and to understand that he is committing mistakes. It can be seen mainly in the part of Granny Nash in *A Star Called Henry* and with the use of irony by Miss O'Shea in *Oh, Play That Thing*. When he narrates these women being ironic when they talk to him, he is laughing at himself, accepting they were right and he was mistaken, acknowledging his own limitations.

Apart from this characteristic they share, they all have their own unique characteristics and this way they help Henry to be aware of reality, and also to accept his foolishness and limitations in order to stop him making mistakes.

In this sense, Annie is the first one who realises he is being manipulated and she wants to show him that he is making a mistake by trusting these leaders of the Rebellion, who only want to make profit at his cost. With her Henry understands that women are more realistic and that they are strong and independent. In his relationship with Annie he is aware that she is more mature than he is, and he admits it, since she "knew more about living than anyone I ever knew" (*A Star Called Henry*, 158). Furthermore, she is the one who offers him a job and a home after the uprising, something that helps him to develop his respect for women, considering them equal to him and even superior.

In the case of Granny Nash, she is constantly using irony in the conversations she has with Henry, because she is aware of his limitations. In his relationship with his grandmother, Henry understands that she is intellectually superior to him, and that even though she is using him to get books as a trade for information, he knows that she loves him and that she wants to help

him. She even wants to guide him into the right way by saying to him that he is becoming like his father “–You’re just like your father. And that’s no compliment” (*A Star Called Henry*, 289).

And finally, Miss O’Shea, the only woman who appears in both novels, she is also the one of the three female characters who helps Henry the most, showing that women can fight for their rights and that they are even more dangerous than men, if we remember Ivan’s concern with Miss O’Shea when Henry says that “She’s her own woman” (*A Star Called Henry*, 317). Miss O’Shea subverts the role of the hero several times, saving Henry in more than one occasion in both novels, and she is not described as a traditional women, since she fights for what she wants and she is the one in control; as an example of this, she is the one of the two who controls their marriage. In the second novel, we know that she tried to find him after she left Kilmainham and even follows him to the United States, carrying their daughter.

To conclude, what Roddy Doyle’s novels teach us is that the attitude of the comic hero is what allows him to enjoy life and its small pleasures no matter the circumstances. He also shows that human beings are not perfect, that we commit mistakes and contradict ourselves. We need the help of others to be able to continue with life and to accept we make mistakes, and that is the purpose of Annie, Granny Nash and Miss O’Shea, to perceive Henry’s attitude as a comic hero through his relation with them.

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