

The Guts as Illustration of the Importance of Humour in Life

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Dpto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana

Grado en estudios Ingleses

Curso 2015-2016

Convocatoria de Marzo de 2016

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Abstract:

This final degree work has the purpose of discussing the transcendence of humour in our lives. This topic is really underestimated since not everyone is able to understand comedy and its derivatives. However, many authors have discussed humour's relevance and how it is important not only individually but socially. Other authors have considered humour as a useful therapy to apply in psychoanalysis.

From the many comic books that exist nowadays, I have chosen *The Guts*, a novel written by the Irish author Roddy Doyle (1958). Published in 2013, *The Guts* aims to show not only the importance of laughing, but also its beneficial features in many aspects of our lives.

I use different theories from a variety of authors from different periods of history in order to illustrate the evolution and importance of humour. Thus, I emphasize the transcendence of the comic vision of life.

Throughout this dissertation we may explore the history of humour and its evolution, along with its presence and influence in society. Humour used as therapy will also be examined deeply.

The Guts may be used to exemplify the relevance that comedy has in our lives. This novel is hilariously funny and it is full of comic content, which is exploited in this work in order to demonstrate the important presence of comedy in our daily life.

Key words: Comedy, Comic vision of life, Humour, Laughter.

1. Introduction.

During my time in University I have faced many different situations. The first year I had to deal with a lot of new things. It was a difficult time for me since many changes had happened in my life. It was not only my first year of University but also the first year living on my own after leaving my father's house. I was alone, and I did not know how to cope with everything. After my mother's death, my life became dark. I did not know how to deal with it. For me, life changed and was not the same anymore. But I kept living. My first year of university was hard because I was overwhelmed by everything.

Over the years, I loved my degree each year a little more, because I learnt not only English grammar and literature, but also how to deal with many different situations of real life. I learnt that a positive attitude towards group or individual work will always be rewarded. I learnt that open minds are able to absorb more information than closed ones. I learnt that exams are nothing but a way to test your nerves. But, mainly, during my degree I learnt how to laugh. I learnt to laugh when I failed an exam, recovering energy to try it again. I learnt to laugh when I had disagreements with teachers or classmates, not taking it too seriously. I learnt to laugh when I was tired of living in the library, sleeping an hour or two.

I learnt to distinguish that the idea was not being the best of the class or pass all the exams with excellent marks. No. The idea was to learn as much as possible, not only from the subjects but also from teachers, classmates, experiences, etc. I learnt to appreciate how lucky I was having the possibility of studying something I really loved.

In my last year I chose an optional subject called "Literaturas Multiculturales", that was about the presence of humour in literatures of different cultures. I loved the subject and the topics present in it.

I decided to do my final degree dissertation in the importance of humour in our lives, since I had learnt it by myself and it had been a useful tool for me, in order to deal with tragic events in my life. I wanted to investigate more about the topic and literature is one of the best ways to learn about it.

This final year essay aims to show the relevance that humour and comedy have in life, and how we can use them to cope with dramatic events. For that aim, this work is structured in four parts in order to illustrate humour; its history, evolution and importance in the contemporary world. The first part is an approach to the history of comedy, how it has evolved from the Greek and Roman times, the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Romanticism until the

present day. The second part is an introduction to the comic hero and its role and importance in comic literature. It is relevant for the reader to understand the importance of this character in this kind of literature, since he lives according to the comic vision of life. The comic hero is an alive representation of comic presence in life. The third part explores the coping function of comedy. It examines humour's presence and importance in different aspects of our life, what does it mean to have a comic vision of life, its influence in society and even how humour is used in psychotherapy. In this part the idea of humour as a useful tool to cope with dramatic events in life is explored deeply.

The last part of the dissertation will be devoted to illustrate the previous sections. For a better understanding of the context, an introduction to *The Guts* and its author will be present. *The Guts* will serve as an example of the evolution of humour and its presence in daily life. It will exemplify how comedy may work when dealing with any problem in our lives. In *The Guts* we may see also the importance of a positive attitude towards life. Many characteristics of the comic hero will be exemplified and commented. I will stress mostly the positive aspects that comedy brings to our lives and how an optimistic attitude can make a difference in life.

2. Humour. An Approach to the History of Laughter:

To understand how laughter has become such a useful tool to cope with life as such we need to take a look at history. Mikhail Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais and His World* (1984), provides an interesting journey through the history of humour that will be helpful in order to understand the development of comedy. In ancient Greece, many festivities in honour of the Gods were celebrated and there existed different ways of praising the deities, among them we can find the tragedy and the satyr play. These kind of representations are supposed to be born from ancient spring rites related with fertility, in which the old season dies at the same time as the god of fertility (represented by tragedy) and a new season is born accompanied by the re-birth of this god (represented by comedy). The tragic part of this rite emphasized death, suffering and pain while the re-birth of the god stressed the erotic action and the celebration of life.

The tragic play emphasized the glorious character of the god or hero, whereas in the satyr play another point of view of the same character is shown. For example Hercules in the tragic play was characterised as the strongest and most courageous man, however in the satyr play he appeared also as a drunker and a womanizer. The aim of the satyr play was to show how reality is contradictory and subversive. From this period of history onwards, laughter plays an important role when dealing with reality and its many faces.

As said by Aristotle, tragedy walks by a single path, it does not admit improvisation since its content is based on a logic plot. It presents a classic structure in which destiny is the main protagonist, the fate of the hero is already written, ending in either sacrifice or death. Comedy does not follow a logical structure and improvisation appears everywhere. This makes comedy even more complex because we cannot establish any limits to define it. Tragedy evolved to its highest point and then stopped developing due to its closed character and its necessity of logic and destiny. On the contrary, comedy never stops growing and is unexpected and free.

Not all authors and philosophers believed in comedy as a release and a form of enjoyment. For example Plato had a very different idea about humour, since he considered that comedies were sacrileges that were full of obscenities. Like Plato, many other people believed that comedy was not a way to escape from the seriousness of everyday life, but a frivolous way to ridicule everything that was sacred.

During the Middle Ages religious fanaticism, feudalism, authoritarianism, etc. were the basis of society. Nevertheless, during this period laughter existed in the traditional festivities

and comic rituals that were outside these basis, as for example the carnival, comic spectacles, parodies, etc. These festivities allowed medieval people to ridicule and satirize everything, nothing was sacred. As a result, society found a way to “escape” from the dogmatism and impositions of medieval daily life. Laughter allowed them to be free and celebrate life without prohibitions. Carnival played an important role in medieval times, since it helped people to free themselves from their daily seriousness, opening their selves to new perspectives of their own personality and exploring the duplicity of their own existence. During this festivity, there was no hierarchy, all the participants in the carnival were equal, creating a secondary world besides the daily one. Carnival has had a big influence in the history of laughter, becoming one of the basis of humour as we know it: “Comedy is a release, a taking off the masks we have put on to deal with others who have put on decent masks to deal with us” (Sypher, 1956, p. 221).

Characters like the jesters and fools played an important role during medieval times, since they were in charge of the entertainment of the king and the rest of the court. The jesters were the only ones allowed to ridicule the king, reminding him that he was also a human being with imperfections. As Hyers points out, without jesters and fools the door is open for absolutism and despotism. These characters reminded the king that he was just like the rest of the people, that, after all, he was a human like everybody else.

The Renaissance was influenced by many aspects of medieval folk humour developing them and creating its own characteristics, as for example the use of grotesque imagery, the use of the human body and its functions in an explicit and exaggerated way, contrary to the classic aesthetics from the Middle Ages. Food, drink, defecation, fertility, conception and birth among others became recurring themes in Renaissance literature. This is called *grotesque realism*, a degradation in form of parody that maintains alive the medieval carnival spirit, which, as I said before, nothing is sacred.

One of the most important Renaissance authors was François Rabelais, whose works were influenced by the tradition of folk humour. Mikhail Bakhtin states in his book *Rabelais and His World* that Rabelais is the “least popular” and “least understood” writer in world literature, and that to understand him we need to revise many concepts of the tradition of folk humour. Rabelais is very much influenced by popular sayings and proverbs said by fools and clowns from the Middle Ages and the use of grotesque realism and abusive language in his works is remarkable. Many other authors felt repulsion towards Rabelais’ works due to their grotesque characteristics and many others just did not understand the author and his imagery, which was far from the classical canons of the time. Through the analysis of Rabelais work and

despite his difficult nature, we are able to understand a little more the evolution of medieval humour in the Renaissance.

During this period there was a change in the significance of laughter. Until this time laughter was just a way out of society and daily seriousness, but during Renaissance laughter started to have philosophical meaning, it was seen as a positive healer that regenerates our lives. Laughter has a universal character that all mankind shares.

In the eighteenth century the emergence of the Enlightenment left humour in the background. During this period serious knowledge, rationalism, authoritarianism and the rejection of the past were protagonists, leaving small room for laughter. The only traces of medieval humour that can be seen during this period in history is present in the rococo literature, in which the positive and rejoicing tone of laughter was maintained. The enlighteners considered the antique medieval humour and the carnival as undeveloped elements of the past.

In the Romantic period there was a reaction against the classicism present during the Enlightenment, a reaction against formalism and rationalism. The Romantic grotesque was born from this reaction. It differs from the Renaissance grotesque in various aspects, but the most important is the change in the main idea of laughter. Contrary to the medieval and Renaissance ideas about laughter, in the Romantic period humour lost its universal and public character to become private and individual. Laughter is not shared anymore. Furthermore, humour ceased to be a positive and regenerating element, now reduced to sarcasm and irony. Laughter is not anymore an object of joy.

The Romantic grotesque rejects images of the human body and its activities: eating, drinking, defecation and copulation are now vulgar, totally the opposite to Renaissance grotesque.

Another change in the Romantic period in relation to laughter was the idea of the mask. Until this point, the mask was related with carnival and it was a tool to escape from reality and seriousness. It is an element of metamorphosis, an element of joy. In the Romantic period the mask is a tool whose function is to hide, to keep secrets, it is not anymore a joyful object, now the mask turns into darkness.

Precisely darkness is another important characteristic of Romantic grotesque. Since Greek times, laughter has been related to light, birth and spring. The Romantics introduced darkness in their grotesque, using the night as principal element in their works. They used also

elements as fear, always defeated by laughter in other grotesques from the past. In this period, fear is not defeated but stressed, and transmitted to the reader.

This little overview through the history of humour gives us the clues to understand comedy as we know it today, since many ideas are still present in contemporary comedy. This will be demonstrated in the analytical part of this work.

3. Introduction to the Comic Hero. Tragic Hero vs. Comic Hero:

One of the most important elements in comedy is the comic hero. This character represents the spirit of comedy, whose purpose is to enjoy and celebrate life. To understand the complexity of the comic hero it is helpful to compare him with the tragic one.

As said before, tragedy always follows a logical pattern and emphasizes the idea of fate as an element which is already written and cannot be changed. The tragic hero functions under these patterns, always fighting for a goal even if it is impossible to achieve. The tragic hero will sacrifice himself for the sake of his purpose. This hero will sacrifice everything for the sake of his beliefs and values, showing the extremism and fanaticism that comedy rejects.

The comic hero concentrates his energy in enjoying life. Even when everything is wrong, the comic hero enjoys every little detail of life. For this hero eating, sleeping, drinking, having sex, etc. are the basis of life, nothing is more important than the basic necessities, and in a sense is true. We cannot live without fulfilling these needs and the comic hero knows it better than anyone. For this character being alive is the only thing that really matters. Contrary to the tragic hero, the comic hero accepts that life is contradictory and illogical, that it does not follow any pattern. The tragic hero will go against everything to fulfil his goal, whereas the comic one will just adapt to life.

Adaptability is one of the characteristics of the comic hero, who is able to adjust himself to the circumstances that life presents. The comic hero accepts life as it is, with the good and the bad. He does not try to change the unchangeable. The comic hero plays with life, accepting it with all its contradictions.

On the contrary, the tragic hero will try to fight even the battle that is already lost just for the sake of his honour and values. His destiny is written, he does not pay attention to the little details of life. The tragic hero never eats, drinks or sleeps, and of course he never has sex or defecates. This emphasize on human necessities reminds us the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, the spirit is a real influence to the comic hero.

As I said before, the most important thing for the comic hero is being alive. It does not matter if the end of the novel is not a happy one, the comic hero will appreciate that even when everything went wrong, he is still alive.

The comic hero is a very complex figure, since his goal in life is to live and enjoy but at the same time he still has obligations and concerns as everybody. The comic hero is able to appreciate the mere fact of being alive, giving priority to this fact even when everything is wrong.

As an example of a comic hero we have the classic *Sancho Panza* from Cervante's *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, who was the squire of the protagonist following him in his crazy adventures. Sancho Panza was very loyal to Don Quijote, but at the same time enjoyed every little detail of the journey. He enjoyed eating and sleeping whereas Don Quijote was obsessed with chivalry, trying to become a hero and achieve the love of a beautiful lady, Dulcinea del Toboso. Don Quijote was so obsessed with these ideas that his only goal in life was to achieve them, no matter what sacrifice he had to do. Sancho Panza, on the contrary, enjoyed the adventures celebrating and appreciating every little thing that was insignificant for Don Quijote. Many times Sancho is portrayed as foolish and ignorant, but at the very end of the book the squire's wisdom and his capacity to appreciate life is confirmed, whereas Don Quijote never achieved his goals and confessed his obsession and craziness in his deathbed.

The comic hero does not always achieve his goals in life, but he just keeps on living and celebrating that he is alive. We will explore the comic hero and his importance again in the analysis of the novel.

4. The Coping Function of Humour.

After our journey through the history of laughter, it is the moment to explore modern theories about laughter and how it influences our lives.

The twentieth century neurologist Sigmund Freud believed that all humans have sexual and aggressive instincts and thoughts that our contemporary society does not allow us to express freely.

Freud was very interested in humour, since he really believed that laughter was a way to escape from our strict society. Through comedy, everything that is sacred and respected can be ridiculed. As Freud exposes, humour helps us to cope with difficulties in life and with everything that society does not allow us to share; sex, death, bodily functions, etc. are easier to deal with if we face them through laughter and humour.

For Freud, laughter was also a way of returning to childhood, since when we laugh we recover the innocence of a child, we forget for a moment our adult life with its responsibilities, obligations and prejudices. Laughter brought us to a primitive state in which all problems of our contemporary life disappear for a moment and the pleasure that laughter produces in ourselves is the protagonist.

Walter E. O'Connell wrote in "Freudian Humour: The Eupsychia of Everyday Life" about Freud's ideas applied to daily life. The author starts the chapter by asking why we have to focus on imaginary situations, on external events that happen to us, instead of give importance to happiness and good things. Then, he starts describing the humourist reinforcing his description with Freudian ideas. For Freud, the humourist uses the comic sense in order to "escape" from real situations that cause pain, he does whatever he can in order to forget the suffering. The comedian is able to change from pain to pleasure, to see the good in the bad, he switches between realities when necessary in order to avoid pain and suffering. As the comic hero, he does not take life seriously, the humourist is imperfect and makes mistakes. This fact is not accepted in our society, which does not accept any kind of mistakes. We can say that the comedian is a contemporary hero: High self-esteem, no need to be ambitious, no need to be above others. This character does not follow the reality that has been imposed to us since our birth, he is just worried about being happy and alive.

The basic thinking of the humourist is applied when talking about the coping function of humour and how we use it to deal with tragic events in life. Peter L. Berger talks about this function of laughter in "The Comic as Consolation", a chapter of his book *Redeeming Laughter*

(1997), in which he describes different types of humour, focusing on tragicomedy, which he describes as “that which provokes laughter through tears”. Berger exposes that there are situations in life in which no laughter will serve as consolation, nevertheless laughter will always serve as a way to cope with bad moments in life. The author puts as an example one of the most dramatic events in life: Death. Berger recreates a funeral in which there are some children present. Their innocence makes them giggle sometimes, offending some people but amusing others also, since these giggles will make the situation less harmful. Not only death is faced in tragicomedy, Berger talks about the Jewish society as a fierce tragicomic example, with a great ability to transform a very difficult event as the Holocaust was into a celebration of life and joy. There are many popular Jewish comedians that employ irony in their humour, using it to, as said before, switch between realities, transforming suffering into laughter. How this difficult moment can be transformed into joy and celebration? First, recognizing the gift that life represents. Being alive is the most precious possession that the comic hero has. This vision of life has created another interesting study that proposes the relation existent between humour and wisdom, explored deeply by Marcel Gutwirth in his book *Laughing Matter* (1993). Gutwirth presents the capacity to laugh besides adversity as a demonstration of courage and wisdom: “Courage, then, is of the essence. It is the strength to laugh in the face of the abyss that swallowed up our absolutes. First of the cardinal virtues, it is the backbone of our wisdom as well as the premise of our ability to laugh.” (166)

The author emphasizes this idea of wisdom presenting the capacity to laugh at our own selves, recognizing that we are not perfect, appearing as foolish besides society, but demonstrating an interesting capacity to confront life and its issues. As Gutwirth says: “The challenge to laugh at ourselves may well be the utmost in wisdom that the comic does offer” (174).

In his book, *Comedy* (1980), Wylie Sypher introduces the topic of how humour influences our lives and what is its role in society. In fact, he reinforced his ideas in Freud’s idea of laughter as a tool to get pleasure and disconnect from reason, social standards, etc.

Comedy is subversive, it means that humour is rebellious, insurgent, and disobedient. Comedy does not follow any kind of social morals or laws. Humour is a tool that can change attitudes and ideas, its power is undervalued. Its presence in society may depend on the culture and way of life present in every different civilization.

Wylie Sypher exposes in “The Social Meanings of Comedy”, part of the book *Comedy*, that humour and laughter have been, from its early beginnings, a useful resistance to authority and a mechanism of pleasure. As an example of this resistance to authorities we recall again the Medieval Carnival, in which these festivities were totally against any kind of morals or laws present at the time, nothing was serious. Sypher appeals to Freud’s ideas to emphasize his thinking, since Freud believed that men were not able to live always under the pressure of reason, moral obligations and laws, and comedy was a way to escape from all that pressure present in daily life. Sypher continues presenting comedy as socially ambivalent, since it represents both “sympathy and persecution”. This ambivalence can be seen again in the Medieval Carnival. During the festivities humour and any kind of jokes about the king or the church were allowed, but when festivities came to an end no laughs were allowed anymore. Further, any kind of comic manifestation about the authorities, even the childish joke, would be persecuted and punished.

Society is an important factor to bear in mind when talking about comedy. Sypher establishes that depending in the social status humour will be present in a greater or lesser degree. For example, in the middle-class society the comedian usually will make fun of the upper-class and the oppressors, and will support the revolutionary side. Nevertheless, the comedian can also serve as a conflict resolver. By means of laughter the humourist reconcile standards that may seem incompatible. Whatever the purpose of laughing, it will always try to end with evil ridiculing and making fun of it.

In a difficult social environment, laughter may serve as a lifeguard, a salvation. Laughing at ourselves and others may dissolve our anxieties and fears. As a clear example we brought again the case of the Jewish society, using laugh as resistance from the horrors that they have lived throughout their history. As Sypher says: “To be able to laugh at evil and error means that we have surmounted them” (246).

Not only personally, but socially, comedy is a great influence. There are two different types of society stated by Bergson; one that is unchangeable, rigid and conservative, a “closed” society. On the contrary, there exists an “open” society, non-mechanical, full of self-awareness and open-minded. These two types of society react in a different way towards comedy: In the closed society we will not find a great presence of comedy. The more open the society, the more comic sense we will find. As said by Sypher, a healthy society is the one which is able to laugh at itself. Society must be able to reconsider its key pillars to see itself from another perspective.

The concept of moral rigidity is also important when dealing with comedy and society. Moral rigidity is a real threat to comedy, because its presence blocks completely any possibility of laugh about anything considered serious.

In the same line of the example mentioned before, we can say that there existed a big difference between Hitler's Germany and its society and the Jewish society at that time. Hitler would not permit any kind of jokes about himself or his ideology. However, he was supposed to laugh loudly at the expense of others, but never at himself. As we can see, Hitler had no capacity of self-criticism and no ability to laugh at himself and at his own mistakes, no other ideas that were not his own ones were valid. His thoughts were rigid and permanent, there was no flexibility in his mind. As the leader of the German society at that time, moral rigidity was spread with terrifying speed, since this doctrine was a moral obligation, there was no room for election and free will.

On the contrary, Jewish society presented a wide open mind and a great capacity to laugh at themselves and at everything serious and respectable. Laugh made everything easier when dealing with the horrors they were living. Despite the horrifying situation, the ability to laugh eased their suffering, making comedy a way of living that nowadays grows strong in their society. We can consider comedy as a "healing" tool to overcome our tragedies. Sypher reaffirms these ideas in this quote: "No society is in good health without laughing at itself quietly and privately; no character is sound without self-scrutiny, without turning inward to see where it may have overreached itself." (252)

Tragedy is easier to apply to real life than comedy. Tragedy just needs a simple vision, an only way of contemplate life. A humorous vision is more difficult to achieve than a tragic one, because it needs real courage to see what we are afraid to see: We are human beings that commit mistakes, we are not perfect. Both personally and socially, comedy does require a different kind of strength, the strength to accept life as it is, with the good and the bad, being able to enjoy both of them, since the most important fact in life is, actually, being alive.

Comedy can "heal" a society, because laughter can dissolve culpability, anxiety and fear, at least for a moment. We do not have to win always, we must be able to lose and laugh triumphantly besides it, while getting prepared to try again. In society, humour sends positive messages to others and provides a relaxed atmosphere in many situations.

William F. Fry, Jr. also coincide in this idea of comedy as a great social boost to resolve conflicts. In “Humour as a Creative Experience: The Development of a Hollywood Humorist”, the author wrote a very interesting quote about comedy in society:

Most observers would agree that humour has an immense impact in easing social conflicts, relieving tensions and promoting order. Humour proves invaluable to mankind in contributing to the sort of interpersonal rapport that accelerates resolution of social injustices, racial or sexual exploitation and political oppression. It is hardly an opium; humour exposes injustice, exploitation and oppression in such a way as to afford opportunities for relief which are not available when more passionate emotions, such as anger and hostility, are aroused. (248)

Humour is everywhere in society, in television, social networks, newspapers, magazines...etc. Comedy’s influence in society sets off many reactions in the population. These reactions will depend on the moral rigidity present not only in society but also in every single person. Closed minds that do not understand humour can lead to dramatic consequences, even reaching unthinkable limits.

In 2015, the famous French satiric journal *Charlie Hebdo* suffered an attack by Al Qaeda. Five people died and many others were injured. The magazine is known for its satirical vignettes criticizing many different topics, for example Catholicism, Judaism, Islam... etc. Months before the attack, *Charlie Hebdo* published some vignettes making fun of the Islamic state. These satiric critics were not well received by a certain group of islamics, reacting with terrifying violence. This case is just one of the many examples of what extremism and moral rigidity can provoke.

As we can see, not all people can understand comedy, not everybody is able to see its benefits. It is clear that closed minds, devoted to fanaticism, are far more dangerous than any kind of joke.

Coming back to Freud, his idea of laughter as a highway to freedom has served as an inspiration for many contemporary authors and psychologists, encouraging the use of humour as therapy. One of these therapists inspired by laughter is Harvey Mindess, who talks about his own use of humour as a therapy. For Mindess, we need to laugh at ourselves to be able to make others laugh. He also states that humour is an unexplored area of therapy before other techniques as for example, meditation.

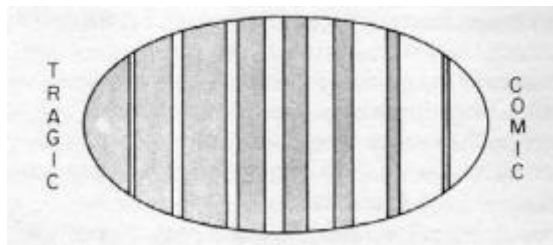
Not all therapists believe in humour as a helpful aid, Mindess exemplifies this with the case of Lawrence Kubie, who suggests that jokes can stop the patient’s flow of feelings and thoughts. It can make the patient doubt whether the therapist is being serious or not, and also the jokes can take out the therapist from his role and lose the established relationship between

psychologist and patient, losing all therapeutic sense. Anyway, Kubie does not deny that the correct use of humour in therapy could be positive for the patient. Mindess agrees with Kubie in that the abuse of humour in therapy will be worse than no use of humour at all, but he also says that the abuse of any other strategy will be also harmful.

Mindess asserts that there exists humour beyond the superficial joke, that humour can be really deep and can lead us to perceive our lives from another perspective, allowing us to laugh at ourselves and discover our own absurdities. Of course, the role of humour in this realization is so subtle that many times we cannot appreciate its presence.

This therapist claims that everything in our lives contains both tragedy and comedy, and in which of them we focus our energy is our own choice. So, depending on this there exist two types of patients: The one whose perception of irony, comedy and absurdity is developed, in which case the therapist may expect the patient's manifestation of his sense of humour before trying to use any technique related with laughter. When the patient uses any kind of humorous remark about his problem, the therapist must reinforce this reaction. When the patient does not demonstrate any sign of humour, the therapist may be very careful with the use of it, since the risk of creating an undesired misunderstanding increases.

In order to understand this idea, Mindess includes in this chapter a very interesting figure that helps us clarify his ideas:



It explains that in the majority of tragic cases we can find the same amount of comedy. In other words, in the same experience we can find both tragedy and comedy, the key is our view, how we see the events that in our life.

If the therapist decides to use humour even if the patient does not show any kind of humorous remarks, he must start by assuming that the comic view has been neglected by the patient, who has been using other ways to cope with problems. The therapist must show the patient the absence of humour in his life, and show the many positive aspects that it has. Of course, every humorous manifestation that the patient shows must be emphasized.

Mindess does not encourage the use of jokes in therapy, since he considers them superficial. He emphasizes the use of humorous remarks, for example irony, remarks that do not always expect a responsive laughter, but rather a reflection, a realization of our own absurdities. This is the purpose that the author emphasizes in his therapy, what we fiercely believe does not have to be totally true, we are not that rational and, in fact, we are more unreasonable than we think. Resting importance to our problems shows us an easier way to confront them.

Again, Mindess comes back to his very first idea. Therapists must be able to laugh themselves in order to help others by means of laughter. For him, his profession has all conditions to make fun of it, although many therapists consider their work as sacred. Being able to satirize psychotherapy is, for Mindess, the key to accomplish a successful therapy:

It is our awareness of this comedy, I think, that could best help us help our patients acquire a humorous perspective on their problems. If we keep it in the forefront of our consciousness, however, can we go on practising our trade and believing in its legitimacy? Of course we can. We can practise and believe in psychotherapy as a helpful and venal profession of the order of medicine or law. We can practise and believe in it as a useful social arrangement of the order of marriage or prostitution. We can practise and believe in it as a human enterprise, sharing with all other human enterprises its particular mixture of wisdom and folly, effectiveness and ineptitude. And then, if our belief should wane, if essentially reasonable people engaged in a thoroughly honourable profession, all we need to do is look around or, better yet, look into the mirror of ourselves, to let our sense of humour restore our piety. (341)

At the end of this chapter, Mindess makes clear that he is not “castigating” the profession, he just wants to defend the right to be foolish as the rest of the human race. Psychotherapists are not perfect, and accept this fact will make the relationship therapist-patient easier and more effective.

In Walter E. O’Connell’s “Freudian Humour: The Eupsychia of Everyday Life”, he tells that, in his experience, humour has been treated with a lot of prejudices. Many therapists think that the psychoanalyst that is interested in the history of humour and its development does not take psychology seriously enough. For O’Connell, society is not ready to live with comedy, therefore they are not ready to understand the use of humour in psychotherapy. Anyway, O’Connell really believes that any technique that helps the patient to enjoy his own absurdities, increase his self-esteem and to learn how to enjoy the paradoxes of life is teaching the patient at least the basis of the comic view of life.

O’Connell, as Mindess, encourages the use of irony in therapy. The author describes irony in therapy as a method in which the therapist does not assume that he has all the answers,

and escape this situation by means of ironic remarks. Irony also helps the therapist to teach that there are more than one reality, and that every person has a different one.

Some psychotherapists try to teach a humorous attitude through real life examples. This technique should be performed in a relaxed and playful atmosphere. If the patient is able to separate from reality and see other perspectives observing other's reality, he will understand and enjoy the therapist's method.

As I said before, the comedian is able to switch between realities, to see the good in the bad and to discover goodness in any difficult situation. As O'Connell says "everything-can-be something-else". This is another technique used by therapists, they increase tension and then reduce it by laughter, demonstrating that everything that seems to be bad can be good. O'Connell clarifies this technique in the following quote:

As in all such examples reported, the patient is approved for achieving the symptom ("as if" he created it) and it is put to use to benefit others (a healthy sign of sickness). There are the sudden ploys of the flexible therapist who does not believe in his public (curer) image: He does not limit himself to non-directive moves and the clichés of "How does that make you feel?" followed by "Why do you feel that way?" for years and years. (324)

All humorous methods present in psychotherapy have a common idea: Help the patient understand the presence of more than one reality, the acceptance of his contradictions and the capacity to live with them. In this way, the patient may be able to fight problems from another perspective.

Freud proposed two types of humour; type A, in which one person sees other with a humorous view, and then type B, in which the person regards himself from the humorous position. O'Connell explains that type B is the real humourist:

The initial moments of type B humour comes for anyone when he realizes *without regret or blame* that he has habitually lowered his self-esteem while at the same time demanded compensatory esteem (or "love") from others. This movement is the start of accepting the paradoxes of life and seeing oneself as an active agent rather than a passive victim: a potential humourist is born! (326)

O'Connell exposes that no psychotherapist can say that he is a "tutor" of humour if he has not experienced the previous paradox in his own life. He claims that therapists who believe that the patient is always "sick" and themselves are always perfectly well cannot deal with humour and its use. In this aspect he coincide with Mindess, who, as I said before, believes that the therapist must not be in a different stance than the patient.

O'Connell states that humour in therapy helps the patient not only to overcome their problems from a different perspective but also teaches the patient to be independent from the therapist and to grow personally. The therapist can change slightly his perception of the patient, but will never blame him for his problems. He must avoid over-involvement with the patient, in this way he may be able to be independent, learning how to face difficulties by himself. At the end of the therapy, the patient must be able to separate from his own reality and get enough courage to confront problems individually.

The humourist, O'Connell says, denies any activity that denote dependency or competition, he finds comfort staying in environments in which self-esteem and social interest is encouraged. As the author says explicitly: "The comedy results from stepping back to sense the unnecessary gamesmanship and its universal stupidity in relation to the evolving universe" (327). Comedy does not follow any social stereotype, in fact, it tries to demonstrate the absurdity of our society, making us see our problems from another point of view in which we are not victims anymore. Humour shows us that our real capacity is under social pressure, we are truly able to fight our problems in an independent way.

As a conclusion, O'Connell exposes that the humourist has trained himself in the "growth of self-esteem and social interest". This kind of person is independent enough to separate himself from the demands of actual society, seeing its absurdities and having the enough self-esteem to take a step back from his problems and assume them from another perspective. The author claims that the rise of humour will come when we are ready to give importance to what is truly vital. When we are able to give its true importance to all positive aspects in life (joy, self-esteem, love, humour) and make the effort to act and think humorously, then comedy will start its own era.

After this summary of the influence of comedy in our lives, we have seen not only its presence but also its importance in society and its beneficial uses in psychotherapy. Comedy is an underrated hero that performs in shades. Laughter unifies our feelings, makes us feel relieved from our burdens. Suffering and pain disappear for a moment and we get a shot of pleasure even if the situation that we are living is the most difficult one that we have faced. Comedy joins people together under the same emotion, reminding us that we are not so different from each other. Laughter is a gift that many authors had appreciated through history, emphasizing its positive aspects and describing it as a tool of pleasure. Many authors like Rabelais and Aristotle said that laughter is what makes us different from animals. Laughter is what makes us

human. Its universal character is shared by all mankind and the capacity of amusement is reflected in a common manifestation: laughter.

5. *The Guts* as Illustration of the Relevance of Humour in Life.

Roddy Doyle was born in 1958 in Dublin. He has been living in Ireland all his life. He was an English and Geography teacher before starting to write professionally.

Roddy Doyle is highly influenced by his roots. All his adult books share a common topic: Ireland. Whether in the present or in the past, the author's origin country is always present. Irish culture is emphasized in Doyle's works: Accent, dialect, costumes, food, drinks (especially the classic pint), historical events either from the past (Anglo-Irish war) and from the present (Celtic Tiger, euro crisis...), music, etc. He also collaborates in books of short stories with other authors and has written seven books for children, among them a book of short stories about magical tales of Ireland. He won the Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* in 1993.

Doyle is a versatile author since he does not only write books. He has written some plays, among them adaptations of his books, as *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *The Commitments*. The last one even reached the big screen in 1991. He also takes part in a TV series inspired in his *Barrytown* trilogy.

In Doyle's work humour is essential, and many resources from the folk humour and grotesque realism are present in his work. Human needs as eating, defecating and sexual activity are examples of the use of humour in Doyle's books. He always emphasizes the positive aspects of life even in the worst situation, and makes fun of everything that may seem serious.

As I said before, Doyle is highly influenced by Ireland and its history. He combines these historic narrations with large doses of humour, always looking on the bright side of life. An example of these narrations is the trilogy of Henry Smart, in which Doyle situates the story in the Anglo-Irish war.

Doyle's novel that I chose in order to exemplify the use of humour as a useful tool to cope with dramatic events in life is *The Guts*, one of the author's latest books. Published in 2013, *The Guts* is based on present Ireland and tells the story of Jimmy Rabbitte, the protagonist of Doyle's first book *The Commitments*. Twenty years later, Jimmy is married, with three kids and bowel cancer. After telling his new situation to his family and friends, Jimmy decides to live and enjoy life to the fullest. He contacts with his brother Les after twenty years without see each other. He starts a new project in his work and reunites with old friends. Suddenly, life turns out to be wonderful, despite of the illness. Jimmy learns that a positive and comic attitude towards life can change drastically even the toughest situation.

There are different ways to exploit the presence of humour in such a difficult event in life as an illness is. Absurdities and contradictions of life appear everywhere, demonstrating that our existence is not that serious.

In the first chapter of the book Jimmy decides to tell his father about his bowel cancer. He is the first person to know about Jimmy's illness:

- I was goin' to tell Ma but somethin' made me swerve towards you instead.
- It'll kill her.
- You always say tha'.
- Fuck off.
- It's true, yeh do. Even tha' time when I said the Beatles weren't as good as the Stones.
- But look it, your mother loves the Beatles.
- She couldn't give a shite about the Beatles.
- You're right, said Jimmy Sr.-Truth be fuckin' told, it was the Bee Gees tha' made your mother giddy. The early stuff, yeh know.
- Could be worse.
- It fuckin' could. So. (12)

This part of the conversation may seem serious at the beginning, they are talking about Jimmy's illness and how his mother will cope with it. Suddenly the conversation takes a different course, and they end talking about music groups and which one is Jimmy's mother's favourite. The situation is supposed to be dramatic and sad, but it turns out to be funny. This example shows us the contradictions that are present in life and how absurd it can become. From the very beginning we can see Jimmy as the comic hero, because he is able to emphasize positive aspects of life, in this case, joking with his father about his mother.

Jimmy and his father keep talking about cancer, its treatments and consequences,

- Maybe that too as well, yeah. But I'll tell yeh. There was a picture – on the Wikipedia page, like. A woman getting' her chemo. She had a scarf, yeh know – the baldness. Sittin' back in a big chair.
- Was she good lookin'?
- Park tha' for a minute. She was wearin' big mittens, on her hands, like, and these wine cooler yokes, padded tubes. On her feet. To reduce the harm to her nails.
- An' was tha' borin'?
- No, said Jimmy.-No. Tha' frightened the shite out o' me.
- Yeh don't want to damage your nails.
- Fuck off, Da. It's not – it's. If it can damage fingernails, what'll it do to the rest of me?
- Toenails are even harder.
- I know, said Jimmy.-I could cut meat with mine. (14-15)

Jimmy and his father are now talking about chemotherapy. As the talk goes on, it slowly moves away from dramatic to comic, from serious and logical to absurd and funny. Again, absurdities are present in Jimmy's father question about the woman with the scarf, and how Jimmy is frightened about the damage that chemotherapy can produce in his nails. Jimmy shows in this fragment a characteristic of the comic hero: He is able to laugh at himself. When he says that he could cut meat with his toenails he is demonstrating this capacity, making fun of himself.

As the story goes on, Jimmy realizes that his wife Aoife is more attracted to him than she was before. He notices that Aoife is sexually active now that he has cancer:

Maybe he was imagining it. But maybe there was some sort of a scent off him; the cancer was doing it. His wife wanted to ride him. He was sure of it. It was a biological thing, his body sending out the message; he had to reproduce before he died. There was sex in the air, in the car – definitely. He'd start the car, before anyone in the house noticed. He'd drive them up to Howth summit, or down to Dollymount. It was a miserable day; there'd be no one there. They'd do it like two kids half their age. Or to a hotel, one of the ones called the Airport this or the Airport that. The one beside Darndale was nearest. A room for the afternoon. And he wouldn't remind her about his vasectomy. (28)

In this excerpt we can see many humorous remarks. Jimmy feels that his wife's sexual appetite has been emphasized by his illness. Grotesque realism is present in this example since human necessities, in this case sex, are mentioned and emphasized. Jimmy believes that his wife's body is trying to reproduce now that he is going to die. The protagonist enjoys simple things in life, cancer make him appreciate every single detail of his existence. Absurdities of life are again present in this fragment, since Aoife wants to "reproduce", but Jimmy had a vasectomy some years ago. Nevertheless Jimmy would not remind her about that little detail. We can consider Jimmy a comic hero, because instead of focusing in the dramatic consequences of cancer, he prefers to pay attention to primary needs of the human body. Celebration of life succeeds besides adversity.

The story continues with Jimmy's bowel surgery. Just after the operation, he is overwhelmed by the effect of anaesthesia, telling Aoife how he felt:

-The drugs, though.
-You told me, she said.
-No, he said. – I didn't. I don't think so.
-You said they were amazing, said Aoife.
-They were fuckin' amazin'. (73)

Again, the comic hero living in Jimmy arises, since he is more interested in the effect of the anaesthesia than in the operation as such. He is amazed by the experience he lived under

the effect of the medication. This consideration again represents how absurd and contradictory life can be. Instead of being worried and painful, Jimmy is astonished by the effect of anaesthesia.

After his bowel operation, Jimmy does not feel very good. As he slowly recovers, little details of life became very important, and he appreciates them more than ever: “He was happy. There was no escaping it. Happy and starving. And the starving – it was great. Like his guts were moving, waking up, demanding to be filled. There was nothing wrong or missing. He wanted food.” (85)

As we can see, Jimmy enjoys every little aspect of his life. He is happy of being hungry, because that means that he is alive and that his body realizes its functions correctly. The simplest thing in life is, for Jimmy, a blessing.

Soon after surgery, Jimmy starts chemotherapy. This aggressive treatment provokes many reactions in Jimmy, but he always emphasises the positive ones:

He sipped.

-Jesus.

He tried it again. He'd never tasted anything like it. That was the chemo – he'd read about it before he'd stopped reading. How his taste might become heightened.

He sipped again. It exploded – it just exploded – upwards, straight into his brain. He shook. *Coffee tastes amazin*. X. He fired the text off to Aoife. She'd like that. (137)

In this fragment Jimmy is impressed by the taste of coffee. Chemotherapy emphasizes his taste and Jimmy is amazed by it. The protagonist, again, looks in the bright side of life, since chemotherapy is a very difficult treatment with many side effects. Despite of this, Jimmy focuses on the great taste of coffee and celebrates it. Again, the protagonist behaves as the comic hero, enjoying every single detail of being alive.

Jimmy enjoys being with his family more than ever, since he appreciates their company and the simple fact of being together:

The ads were on, so the sound was down. They were watching *The Apprentice*, the Irish one. Jimmy couldn't remember the last time they'd all watched telly at the same time. They were sticking it out, staying together for the night. He liked that; he appreciated it. The couch was all his, and the remote as well. He could have switched to *The Frontline*, to the union men with beards discussing the Croke Park Agreement, and they'd still have stayed with him. (81-82)

In this fragment we do not see any humorous remark, but it is important to stress Jimmy's attitude. He enjoys the simple idea of spending time with his family, all together. This

enjoyment shows how Jimmy appreciates little details in life. We can consider Jimmy a comic hero again, this time because of his humorous attitude. Comic vision of life does not only imply that we laugh at everything, comic attitude is also present in how do we deal with events in life and what we consider important in it. Jimmy's appreciation of sharing time with his family, just watching TV together, asserts his comic vision of life. There is also humour in the fact that Jimmy has the TV remote all for himself, he enjoys it since it is difficult to be honoured to have it living with four kids. Again, Jimmy enjoys every single detail of his life.

Before Jimmy's surgery, he has to tell the kids that he is going to be hospitalised, he told them during dinner:

They all looked at him. They were worried, even scared. He hated this – doing this.

-I'm goin' into the hospital.

They stared at him.

-And I'll be gone for a few days, said Jimmy. – That's all.

That wasn't all; they knew it.

-So, said Marvin. – Like – this isn't the last supper, no?

-Marvin Rabbitte!

God – fuck – he loved him. He loved them.

They looked at him and saw that they were allowed to laugh. (69-70)

This excerpt starts with a general sense of sadness in the family, since they are worried about Jimmy's surgery. As the talk goes on, the situation changes and all of them end up laughing. We can see that Jimmy's son, Marvin, eases the conversation joking about his father's illness, making the whole family laugh despite the difficult situation that they are living. Jimmy is delighted with his son's joke and the atmosphere turns from sad and depressive to happy and funny. The simple fact of being together is enough for Jimmy to be happy.

As said before, Jimmy reunites with old friends throughout the story. One of them is Outspan, an old member of Jimmy's band "The Commitments", who has lung cancer. In the following fragment Aoife calls Outspan to "cheer up" Jimmy, since he is not feeling very good.

Jimmy rubbed his face with both hands. Outspan was still there.

-So, well. How're yeh doin'?

-Not too bad, said Outspan.

-How's the health?

-Same as ever, said Outspan.

He didn't look too bad – no worse anyway.

-Gas, isn't it? Said Outspan.

-What's gas?

-Eve downstairs thinks yeh need cheerin' up. You're a bit depressed. So she phones me. An unemployed man with terminal cancer, who has to live with his ma.

-Brilliant. (223-224)

Outspan's attitude towards cancer is totally different from Jimmy's. Outspan is really depressed, and he does not enjoy life. As we can see in this fragment, he uses irony in a negative way, emphasizing his difficult situation. This example shows the importance of our attitude towards dramatic events. Jimmy is positive and emphasizes every little detail of his life, enjoying the fact of being alive. Outspan, on the contrary, is just able to see the negative aspects of his situation, making it even worse.

Outspan is a really negative person, nothing is good for him. There is a point in the story in which Jimmy is planning to attend a music festival, and he invites Outspan. His friend, of course, starts talking negatively about music festivals and how they are not intended to enjoy music anymore:

-Are yeh still into the music? He asked.

-A bit, yeah.

-D'you want to come to the Electric Picnic with me?

-No way.

-Why not?

-Hippy shite.

-Ah, for fuck sake.

-This was more like it; now they could talk.

-Grow up, man, said Jimmy.-You're talkin' shite.

-How am I? said Outspan.-I went to an outside gig once. Brought me daughter – the older one, Grace. She likes Coldplay. Don't fuckin' ask. Annyway, it was crap.

-Coldplay won't be at the Picnic, he said.

-Not Coldplay, said Outspan.-They weren't too bad. It was the whole thing. Fuckin' eejits hoppin' around. No one listened to the music. The Coldplay fella – he seemed like a nice enough head. Yeh can kind o' see wha' your woman, Gwyneth Paltrow sees in him. Annyway, he says, We're goin' to play "Yellow" or somethin'. An' the young ones around us go mad. Oh I love this one!

His Southside girl impression was brilliant, but eerie. Several Southside girls stood up and went to a free table outside. Inhaling the taxi fumes was preferable to witnessing Outspan's performance.

-An' then they'd just start chattin' to each other again. There's no way! Fuck right awf! He's the fucking bomb!

-The Picnic's different, said Jimmy.-It's for people who know their music.

-You've been there yourself, have yeh?

-No, said Jimmy.

He hated outdoor festivals. Outspan was bang-on.
-But I'm goin' this year, he said.-Will yeh come?
-No.
-Go on, yeh cunt.
-Okay. (243-244)

As we can see, Outspan has a negative impression of music festivals. He criticizes them and their assistants, stating that festivals are “hippy shite”. His opinion is inflexible and unchangeable, contrary to Jimmy’s, which is always trying to be positive during the conversation. As commented before, closed minds and rigid thoughts are incompatible with a comic vision of life, and Outspan is a clear example of this. Jimmy’s positive attitude emphasizes Outspan’s negativity, since Jimmy tries to convince him with optimistic remarks about the festival. Finally, Jimmy manages to convince Outspan to attend the festival, although he does not seem very happy about it.

During this part of the dissertation we have seen the presence of humour in different situations, verifying its relevance in life and its power when dealing with tragic facts. Jimmy Rabbitte shows us the results of living with a positive and comic state of mind. We have learn that even the most difficult situation can be defeated with the right attitude.

6. Conclusion:

Throughout this dissertation we have analysed many different aspects related to comedy. First, we explored its history in order to understand its development. Then, we examined its presence in individuals and how our attitude can be crucial when dealing with any event in life. Hereafter, how to cope with tragic circumstances is studied throughout different authors and psychotherapists, emphasizing humour's therapeutic features. Then we saw examples of the comic vision of life present in *The Guts*.

As a conclusion I must say that humour creates an important impact in our lives and in society. Its power is silent and invisible many times but it is still there. Its presence has worked as a salvation for many people, and it serves not only as a distraction but also as a way of joining people together under the same language: Laughter.

I consider any kind of positive attitude towards life as part of the comic vision of life. It does not only imply that we laugh at everything, but also to deal with life optimistically, enjoying the fact of being alive.

Nowadays, life may seem complicated due to the demands that society imposes along with the demands we impose to our own selves. We must be able to be the comic hero of our own story. We must be able to enjoy every little detail of our existence and we will, for sure, live happier.

This dissertation has meant a challenging process for me, since this topic contains many abstract aspects that were difficult to understand and engage. Nevertheless I really enjoyed the process of writing this work, since the content is really exciting and interesting for me.

In the novel *The Guts* we saw how Jimmy Rabbitte faces cancer from a positive perspective. The protagonist always appreciates the good things in life, even the smallest detail is, for him, a reason to celebrate life. Jimmy taught us that there are many ways to cope with tragic events, but that an optimistic and comic vision of them will always improve our mood. In the novel it is clear that a positive state of mind benefits not only our lives but our environment. Laughter joined Jimmy's family together. Laughter helped Jimmy to defeat illness and death. Laughter is, throughout the novel, the basis to achieve happiness.

The aim of this work was to show the positive influence of humour in our lifestyle. Humour allows us to be who we truly are, without masks, moral laws or social pressure. Humour frees us from the invisible cages in which we are trapped. Laughter is a magic medicine that combines both physical and psychological pleasure.

To conclude, I want to emphasize not only the importance of laughter, but also the relevance of our attitude towards life. An optimistic attitude will open our minds and will emphasize positive aspects of our life. A comic vision of life shows us to look on the bright side of life. We must allow ourselves to be Jimmy Rabbitte just for one day. We can be (comic) heroes, just for one day.

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