

# THE DISCURSIVE USE OF HUMOUR IN THE DESCRIPTION OF BRITISH PREMIERSHIP PERCEPTION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SUE TOWNSEND

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## ABSTRACT

Humour, and particularly the (fine?) art of mocking politicians, holds a multifaceted discursive character and has proved to be very valuable for the formation of politicians' public image, reflecting, at the same time, people's perceptions of their leaders. Sue Townsend, one of the most popular and loved English writers, author of the worldwide famous series of *Adrian Mole* diaries, supplied her readers with an extended list of hilarious descriptions and witty comments on two paramount figures of British politics in the 20th century: Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Townsend's mocking criticism contributed to the literary discursive construction of their premiership from the perspective of the average citizen which provides the reader with an invaluable tool to analyse the British life of their time.

**KEYWORDS:** Discursive humour, public opinion, perception, premiership, Sue Townsend.

## RESUMEN

El humor posee un indudable carácter discursivo y se constituye como un elemento clave en la construcción de la imagen pública de la clase política de un país, reflejando al mismo tiempo la percepción que los ciudadanos tienen de sus líderes. Sue Townsend, una de las autoras inglesas más populares y queridas, autora de la famosa serie de diarios de *Adrian Mole*, presenta a sus lectores una larga lista de cómicas descripciones y agudos comentarios sobre dos figuras clave de la política británica del siglo xx: Margaret Thatcher y Tony Blair contribuyendo así a la construcción discursiva de la percepción de ambos líderes desde la perspectiva del ciudadano común, lo que proporciona al lector un valioso instrumento de análisis de la vida Británica del momento.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** humor discursivo, imagen pública, percepción, líderes, Sue Townsend.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There has most likely existed a close connection between humour and politics in different ways from the very establishment of leadership; and once writing developed, literature turned into one of the most fertile fields to cul-

tivate the art of mockery, especially targeting the political leaders of a society. Reflecting on political satire, Popa insists on the rare value of humour as a “corrective for poor political behaviour” (Tsakona and Popa 19) for it seems to operate as a way of protest and not as an instigator of change. However, the mere function of pressure release provides humour with a valuable quality from the social point of view, as it lets off steam, which otherwise would cause the “social pot” to explode.

British literature has produced admirable samples of political satire throughout history from Chaucer and Swift to Byron and Orwell, and it continues manifested in books and plays as its source proves to be endless. Tsakona and Popa distinguish between two modalities of political humor, the one practiced on politicians and the one practiced by politicians for their own purposes, namely, to generate successful connections with their alleged electorate (Tsakona and Popa 7). Referring mainly to the first type we cannot fail to acknowledge the extraordinary value of Sue Townsend’s works when analysing her personal contribution to the discursive construction of Margaret Thatcher’s and Tony Blair’s premierships mainly developed through her *Adrian Mole* diaries series<sup>1</sup> and the novel *Number Ten*.

The British premiership’s image and its perception on the part of British public changed forever after 1979. In the introduction to his exceptional volume on post-war Europe, the late historian Tony Judt describes the period between 1945 and 1979 as an “interim age: a post-war parenthesis, the unfinished business of a conflict that ended in 1945 but whose epilogue had lasted for another half century” (2). As far as Great Britain is concerned, World War II implied the end of an era and the following years up to Margaret Thatcher’s premiership were characterized by external repositioning and internal reconstruction. This mainly relied on the extension and full development of the welfare state, supported by Tories and Whigs alike in the spirit of the so-called “post-war consensus.” The 1980s put an end to all this. With Margaret Thatcher in power, Great Britain underwent major economic and cultural changes which persisted well after her resignation throughout Blair’s term of office (cf. Jenkins 2-12). Both leaders were subjected to praise and, of course, severe criticism and political satire flourished and manifested in all possible formats. Sue Townsend, was not alien to this trend and played her part in helping construct the public image of the premiers by using the tool of humour with mastery.

<sup>1</sup> Especially valuable for this task are *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole 13 and ¾*, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, *Adrian Mole. The Cappuccino Years* and *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*.

## 2. FORGING THE IRON: THE MOCKING DISCOURSE ON MARGARET THATCHER

Sue Townsend developed her acute criticism of Margaret Thatcher mainly through *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* and *The Secret Diary of Margaret Hilda Roberts 14 and 1/4*, with occasional hints in *Adrian Mole*, *The Cappuccino Years*. In all these three she used the productive technique of fictive diary which owes much of its effectiveness to the constant work on the part of the reader to interpret the characters' remarks and stances while trying at the same time to close "the gap between writing and living" (Abbot 51) experienced by the characters as writers of their diaries in a manifold metafictional game.

Much has been said about the reader-response theory and the so-called interpretive communities and it is not my intention to delve into that. Suffice to say that the role of the reader is paramount as far as political satire is concerned, particularly in the works under consideration here as reader response operates in a double way: passive, with the reader's agreement or rejection of the comic effect displayed by Townsend in the case of the Mole diaries which, in turn, would allow humour to perform two of its most prominent functions according to Tsakona and Popa,<sup>2</sup> (4) and active, by acting "with the benefit of hindsight" in the case of *The Secret Diary of Margaret Hilda Roberts 14 and 1/4* as the full meaning of the diary entries is only disclosed when contrasted with actual facts. As Tony E. Jackson points out, "almost all the novel's success depends on just how the audience responds to the narrator as a "speaking" person" (24). In this case, the response to the literary mockery depends on the different degrees of knowledge of both, the situations portrayed or the real facts the writing anticipates.

Satire is served. In Sue Townsend, the mocking discourse on Margaret Thatcher articulates mainly around two categories: gender and morality. Thatcher's gender was one of the favourite topics for her satirists and to question it was a popular way of mocking her:

The problem is that very few people [...] could put up with Bert for more than a couple of days.

I asked him if there was any chance of him turning Catholic, he said, 'about as much chance as there is of Mrs. Thatcher turning into a woman!' (Townsend, *Adrian Mole from Minor to Major* 357) Naturally I asked her what the 'Grand Plan was'. She said 'I'm to be the first Woman Prime Minister in Britain'.

I said, 'And Mrs. Thatcher? She never existed?'

'Mrs. Thatcher is a man in drag, everybody knows that' she said contemptuously. (Townsend, *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years* 246)

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<sup>2</sup> Tsakona and Popa reflect on the functions of humour referring to "inclusive function" when interlocutors agree on the content and targets of humour, and "exclusive function" when they do not, thus widening the social gap between humorous critique and the receptors (Tsakona and Popa 4).

However, Thatcher played “the gender game” masterfully presenting herself as a common housewife and mother while conveying, at the same time, images of force, domination and assertiveness. Thus, she created a public image with a plurality of readings, easily prone to angry criticism which, although obscured by subsequent historical circumstances, was revived bitterly at the time of her death in 2013. She was the first woman to become Prime Minister in the still male-dominated world of British politics and she certainly used this to her own benefit:

I could end up as Prime Minister. Is it so inconceivable? Not, in my opinion. Mrs. Thatcher was once a humble housewife and mother. So, if she can do it, why can't I? (Townsend, *True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole* 24)

Being a woman seemed to position Thatcher closer to the alleged gender stereotypes that female politicians portray. According to Huddy and Terkildsen, female candidates seem to be better able to deal with “compassion issues” (121) such as poverty, education and children and health policies whereas male candidates are generally linked to big business and military and defense issues. Thatcher broke the mould. She started the dismantling of the welfare state with neoliberal measures, trying to impose her personal beliefs on the market economy and the individual (meaning “family” in most cases) effort, sweeping aside opposition and vanquishing the toughest men in the country; the miners of the NUM. She presented herself as a woman in the widest sense of the term but spoke and reacted as a strong male leader, performing her leadership in a confounding way for public opinion who responded in many cases with extreme mockery, most of the times targeted at her “gender-switch”<sup>3</sup>:

I am not sure how I will vote. Sometimes I think Mrs. Thatcher is a nice kind sort of woman. Then the next day I see her on television and she frightens me rigid. She has got eyes like a psychotic killer, but a voice like a gentle person. It is a bit confusing. (Townsend, *Adrian Mole from Minor to Major* 163) School dinners are complete crap now. [...] I am considering making a protest to Mrs. Thatcher. It won't be our fault if we grow up apathetic and lacking moral fibre. Perhaps Mrs. Thatcher wants us to be too weak to demonstrate in years to come. (Townsend, *Adrian Mole from Minor to Major* 113)<sup>4</sup>

Thus, as far as the construction of public opinion is concerned, it is of capital importance Thatcher's performance of her own gender. She used to display her femininity in the most traditional way, defining herself at the same time as the “best man for the job,” and using a discourse of conflict and battle ill-suited to her slightly

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<sup>3</sup> The most visible example would be her *Spitting Image* puppet which shows her with male suit and tie speaking with a deep male voice. See, for example <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1jY5fYjV-U>> or <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOFvgiCyChA&list=RD\\_AzlkjO3G0&index=16](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOFvgiCyChA&list=RD_AzlkjO3G0&index=16)>.

<sup>4</sup> This was precisely one of the arguments put forward by the opposition when Thatcher removed free milk in schools for students over seven. The whole thing gained her the rhyming soubriquet of “Thatcher, the milk snatcher.”

old-fashion image.<sup>5</sup> In this public performance she was well aware of the media presence and started to control her appearances recurring on some occasions to public displays of her privacy, always carefully engineered, so as to convey the image of a nice and elegant wife and mother who, by chance, was Prime Minister as well.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Thatcher was a sort of “feminist nightmare” as she exemplified a contradiction, a woman who had succeeded in such a closed and male dominated realm working shoulder-to-shoulder with men and, at the same time, representing conservative family values and offering a model of female behavior that feminists rejected (cf. Nunn 17).

However, as if imbued with the contradictions of the character, Townsend's contribution to the mocking discourse on Margaret Thatcher in terms of gender represents a general current of criticism which does not aim at radical political change through humour (cf. Tsakona and Popa 2). On the contrary, rather than celebrating the access to power of a woman the humoristic discourse displayed rejoices in making fun of Thatcher's gender operating this way with quite closed and traditional categories which is, in turn, a surprising contrast with part of Townsend's narrative with a clear feminist tinge.

Sue Townsend's satire on Thatcher has another facet. This is displayed in *The Secret Diary of Margaret Hilda Roberts 14 and 1/4*, which becomes the alleged diary of a young Margaret (not Thatcher yet) but Roberts where the most important characteristics of her future leadership feature as essential components of her personality from a very early age. This time Townsend plays with a key element of Thatcher's personality: her religious upbringing.

Thatcher's discourse toyed with morality and religion as the source of social values and insisted on the fact that economic recovery was impossible without moral regeneration (cf. Grimley 78-94). This moral regeneration owed most of its content to Christian values which, in the words of Thatcher showed a particular trait, very useful for her political convictions: “Christian contribution to political thinking, however, is that the individual is an end in himself, a responsible moral being endowed with the ability to choose between good and evil.” Thus, the Methodist free will belief turns into the justification of political measures. However, Townsend contradicts this alleged morality by placing young Margaret as her father's assistant in fooling their shop customers by grinding chalk to mix it with flour or adding water to drinks. The family sense of morality consists of an opportunistic bending of religious norms to their own benefit:

Help father to water down the dandelion and burdock. Out of two dozen original bottles we managed to eke out one dozen more. Father, *who is a good Methodist*,

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent study on Margaret Thatcher's performance of genre and the creation of public opinion, see Nunn's full volume.

<sup>6</sup> Opening the way to further Labour's wide use of media coverage of Tony Blair's personal matters and, conversely, the extended use of media with political purposes on the part of the PM. On the clash between politicians' private and public spheres, see Corner and Pels 69-75.

explained that our actions were perfectly moral, and that Jesus's trick with the loaves and fishes was an honourable precedent [my emphasis]. (Townsend, *True* 146)

In a strict Methodist environment, the teenage Margaret displays an almost inhuman self-discipline:

Woke up at 4 am, refreshed after an hour and a half's sleep. Just for fun read *Intermediate Chemistry* and committed to memory the more difficult formulae. However, life cannot and should not, be one endless round of pleasure, so at 5am rose and went downstairs" (Townsend, *True* 146)

And places herself as the best positioned to be chosen for eternal salvation through hard work, although gaining enemies everywhere:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Roberts,

Margaret's behavior has been giving me a great cause for concern. At all times she is neat, clean and controlled. She is top of every subject [...] but Margaret is wearing out my staff with the constant requests for more work [...] This morning I came to school early and found her mopping the lavatories. All very laudable, you may think, but her mania for work is making her very unpopular with the other girls" (Townsend, *True* 143)

Her future contempt for permissiveness is already present in her adolescence but at all times, her criticism seems to be all for naught:

School dinner [...] was unnecessarily extravagant. I counted two sultanas per square inch in the spotted dick. I complained to the school cook but she rudely told me to 'move along' claiming that I was holding up the second helpings queue. (Townsend, *True* 149).

Well aware of the factual circumstances of Thatcher's premiership, the reader cannot fail to notice the comic effect of the written entries of Townsend's literary character in her diary:

A traveler from London [...] passed on a rumour he had heard that a future socialist government would introduce free milk to schools. Father went the colour of barley and had to sit down. [...] If the filthy socialists ever do take power, I shall refuse to drink free school milk". (Townsend, *True* 137)  
Glancing through the accounts I noticed a new entry: 'Mrs. Roberts, wages. Sixpence a week'. [Her mother had declared herself on strike unless paid for her services]  
So, Father has capitulated to industrial action, has he? How despicable! That is something I would never *ever* do. (Townsend, *True* 159).

Controversial as it was, Margaret Thatcher's public image displayed different aspects of gender and religion, which were the object of contradictory discourses of praise and mockery. So strong a character (as she was) could leave no one indifferent. For better or worse she laid the foundations of modern-day

Britain and turned into a major figure of reference for writers like Sue Townsend, who portrayed her presence and personality in the most comic terms, and Hilary Mantel's last work *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher and Other Stories*.

### 3. BLAIR'S PITCH PROJECT: SPEECH AND REALITY UNDER NEW LABOUR

On May 2, 1997, Tony Blair entered the doors of 10 Downing Street as the successor to the conservative PM John Major, after a landslide victory. The milestones in his career prior to this day demonstrated perfectly the codes and modes in which his premiership would develop. Among them, language, and speech would turn into the key elements in helping to (de)construct his public image.

For a significant number of Britons, Blair personified the hope of a better future they envisaged free from the constraints of Thatcher's restrictive policy. In order to raise these hopes and channel the discontent of public opinion towards the Conservative Party, Blair played the public image card masterfully. Through his chief press secretary, Alistair Campbell, he was able to use the media as had never been done before, allowed his private life to interfere with his public sphere in order to project an idea of proximity to the average (especially middle class) citizen and controlled his public appearances and speeches managing to create a sort of convincing discourse only questioned during the build-up to the Iraqi war.

Sue Townsend's socialist leanings did not impede her from condemning Blair's policy and his failure to fulfil British citizens' hopes (Townsend, "Diary"). Her criticism is displayed mainly in *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction* and in the superb *Number Ten*. The comic effect combines, in the first case, speech and satire. Blair's speeches are referred to in an indirect way as samples of the official discourse on the Iraqi war. The entries written by Adrian in his diary clearly showed disdain for those who dared to question the truth of Blair's statements in that time. Nevertheless, Adrian's efforts in showing the PM as a truthful leader do obtain precisely the opposite results:

Mr. Blair was speaking about the danger to the world if tyrants like Saddam Hussein were not challenged. How anybody could doubt Mr. Blair's word is a mystery to me. The man radiates honesty and sincerity. (Townsend, *Adrian Mole and the Weapons* 154).

Once again, Adrian fails to see what is most evident to the majority of the British population and the reader "joins the dots" in order to understand Townsend's narrative trick. On knowing perfectly well the development of the facts, the reader fully grasps the criticism and laughs at Adrian's lack of insight when facing reality, something that Townsend masterfully links to his character's surname as a defining attribute.

Mr. Blair looks at the camera lens with such a knowing expression, as if to say, I am privy to top-secret information. I know more than I can say. That is why the British people must trust Mr. Blair." (Townsend, *Adrian Mole and the Weapons* 259)

On this and other occasions, Blair's well known aptitudes for theatre –he took part in some plays in his youth– are highlighted so as to reinforce the fact that he is lying, just playing speech games devised to cheat the British public<sup>7</sup>:

So Mr. Blair and Mr. Bush stand alone against tyranny. Our Prime Minister has been making the speeches of his life. His nostrils flare, his chin sets in a determined way and his eyes blaze with passion. (...) what an actor Mr. Blair would have made. The National Theatre's loss is the British public's gain. (Townsend, *Adrian Mole and the Weapons* 268).

Therefore, Townsend stresses the longtime connection between politicians and lies, which in this case is more striking due to the allegedly social awareness of Labour governments (Swift).

Townsend also targets word games and political correctness so as to highlight the striking results of the Blair government's policy on renaming the most usual components of everyday life as if a name change implied an improvement of their condition. This makeover started with the name of the Labour Party being turned into New Labour and reached climax precisely with the outbreak of the Iraqi war and the infamous weapons of mass destruction:

David outlined his plans. 'We take 'Labour' out of the party's name. The word Labour has totally negative connotations; it's associated with sweat and hard work, trade unionism and protracted and painful childbirth' [...] Alexander said drily 'If we drop the 'Labour' from 'New Labour' We're left with one word, 'New'. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 16)

*Number Ten* is a witty satire on Tony Blair developed through his literary persona, Edward Clare (note the phonetic similitude between both last names). The novel starts with a hilarious comic depiction of Blair's entourage at 10 Downing Street, including his wife and children –particularly Morgan, his eldest– and his closest collaborators. Nobody is spared from Townsend's mockery:

'Anyroadup', says Alexander McPherson<sup>8</sup> can we sort out a few things Ed? We've got an arse of a week. there are half a dozen reports out, crime's up [...] and the mortuary workers are striking on Monday unless they get a ten per cent pay rise and a thirty -five hour week'.

Edward said 'In Africa a little kid dies every ten seconds from a water-borne disease'.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Page points out: "In October 2000, 46% of the populace rated Blair trustworthy. In September 2006 the figure was 29%" (436).

<sup>8</sup> The name chosen for Alistair Campbell—the Scottish echoes of both surnames are evident.

Alex replied, 'Yeah, my heart bleeds at the thought, but we'll be knee-deep in fuckin' corpses if we don't sort the body-washers out'. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 13) Adele's nose<sup>9</sup> was extraordinarily large. Her father Guy Floret had remarked on seeing her for the first time, only moments after she had been born '*Mon dieu, ma pauvre enfant. Elle est Pinocchio*'. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 18)

The starting point of the plot is a terrible experience on live television during which Edward is asked about all kinds of matters and he spectacularly fails to know the answer to a simple question: the price of a pint of milk, which makes him realize he has lost contact with the country and its citizens.<sup>10</sup> In order to solve this, he embarks on an incognito trip accompanied by only one of the guards from the door of Number Ten, Jack Sprat. And, as if the situation were not funny enough, Townsend twists the knife further: Edward will be travelling disguised as a woman.

The middle and low class reader, amused by Townsend's proposal of a Prime Minister in drag is, at the same time, confronted with the different episodes and incidents of the story and unmistakably identifies with the misadventures of Edward and Jack, particularly as they try to utilize public services. Townsend, in order to create the comic effect and (mainly) to display her sharp criticism, operates with three elements which appear at the same time within the same plot:

### 3.1. THE SEQUENTIAL NARRATIVE OF THE JOURNEY AROUND ENGLAND AND THE SHEER CONTRAST BETWEEN THE REAL COUNTRY AND THE ONE PORTRAYED BY OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

Reality appears in front of Edward's eyes as a series of events which make him experience in flesh and blood what the average citizen must face every day: deterioration of neighbourhood life, decay of the National Health Service, mounting crime, and others.

The journey of both protagonists refers to previous narratives of the kind, among them *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain in which the main plot line turns around the same idea of a ruler who, feeling estranged from his subjects, decides to travel around his country in disguise:

We were dressed and barbecued alike, and could pass for small farmers, or farm bailiffs, or shepherds, [...] yes, or for village artisans, if we chose, our costume being in effect universal among the poor [...] We slipped away an hour before dawn, and by broad sun-up had made eight or ten miles, and were in the midst of a sparsely settled country. (Twain)

<sup>9</sup> Adele Floret stands for Cherrie Blair-note both French first names.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Page states: "In October 1997, just 6% thought Blair was out of touch with ordinary people; by the time he announced his resignation, 51% thought so" (436).

In fact, both stories belong to the extended folk tradition of the hero's journey,<sup>11</sup> which starts with a disruption of the ordinary world and proceeds in several stages, representing both an outer journey of realization and effective contact with factual reality and an inner journey of self-discovery and personal repositioning towards the original issue which initially launch the hero into the world (Vogler 5). Therefore it turns into a quest-narrative, in which the aim of the quest is not the finding of a magical object but of an answer to unsolved issues of personal nature.

The plot progresses as in a *road movie* for it "provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced" (Cohan and Hark 2). Precisely this encounter with truth at the "historical moment" presents Edward with the vision of the other side of the coin of his own reality, through some situations in which he feels overwhelmed as he is unable to deal with the disparity between the facts and the previous image he had forged of them:

Jack said, 'During the war there was a day nursery on every corner so that the women could go to work'.

The Prime Minister replied irritably, 'There are innumerable measures in place to facilitate single parents going back to work, Jack.' [...]

When he got back inside the car he said savagely to the Prime Minister, 'It was twelve-fifteen on a Wednesday afternoon, so why wasn't the library open?' The Prime Minister said nothing but he felt vaguely ashamed. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 150 )

However, the irony pervading all these episodes does not lack humour:

While Jack waited to request a trolley he read a scrawled notice [...]

*Welcome to the Casualty Department: waiting times*

*Children: 2 hours / Minor injuries: 2 hours / Major injuries: 2 hours'*

(Townsend, *Number Ten* 159 )

'Volume of traffic, innit', said Ali. 'It's always like this at Walsall. Last time I done this journey I got stuck for three and a half hours'. [...] By the time traffic was moving again the three men had memorized the words of 'Knock on Wood' and had even perfected an in-car dance routine which included synchronized knocking on each other's heads'. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 214)

Along the road and throughout the plot, Townsend is confronting the real country with the fairy-tale one portrayed by politicians and, as is usual in her narrative, she takes sides with the unprotected citizens whose perception of their Prime Minister has shifted dramatically since the hopeful times of his first election.

<sup>11</sup> For a complete study of the trope of the hero's journey, see Hobby, of course in debt to Vladimir Propp's previous analysis on the folk tales.

### 3.2. THE ALTERITY OF THE CONSTITUENT DIMENSIONS OF BOTH MAIN CHARACTERS

Edward Clare and Jack Spratt cannot be more dissimilar, and the contrast provokes quite a comic effect: Jack is a lower working class, righteous, matter-of-fact, self-made man, confirmed bachelor and highly cultivated despite his humble origins:

He was the black sheep of a large extended family. None of whom had ever bought a video recorder from a shop. [...] Once, at Sunday dinner, seated at the kitchen table [...] Jack had tried to explain to his family that with exams he would be able to get ahead in the world and get a good job.

‘Such as what?’ Said his stepfather [...].

‘I want to be a policeman’ [...] There was silence, and then a huge burst of laughter. His sister Yvonne spluttered on a half-chewed piece of lamb and mint sauce. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 28)

Edward is a high-middle class man, university graduate, passionate husband, declared Christian and supporter of a “middle-way” socialism far from the extremes of previous Labour leaders:

Edward was pleased that his prayers had been answered. He glanced at the vividly coloured picture of Jesus that hung above his bed. [...] Edward’s father had sometimes grumbled about the picture, saying, ‘Eddy, your bloody Jesus looks like Errol Flynn in drag. But Mummy must have liked Edward’s Jesus picture, because once a week she cleaned the picture glass with pink Windowlene and made it sparkle’. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 3)

Despite the antithesis represented by the two protagonists, and precisely because of it, Jack becomes the experienced “mentor,” a key element in the travel narratives, (Vogler) which provides the hero with the necessary insight and guidance into the “Special World”:

During the Prime Minister’s absence, Jack took the opportunity to talk to Mick [a man who had been making a pass at Edward –dressed like a woman– in the train to Edinburgh] ‘You say one more word to my sister and I’ll tear your head off your shoulders and sell it to the lion house at the zoo’. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 86)

However, Townsend spares us any possible Quixote-Sancho-like grandiloquence with her irrepressible humour:

Jack had pointed out that the Prime Minister would be displaying rather a lot of hairy flesh, [...] an hour later, when Jack was smearing the depilatory cream behind the Prime Minister’s knees with a little spatula, he thought to himself ‘this is beyond surreal’. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 97)

In addition, this plot line follows the typical steps of a “buddy movie” (cf. Fuchs 194-210) as, eventually, the paradox represented by both protagonists’ opposed natures and their conflict, in unison, against the world is resolved:

James [a crack addict living with Jack’s mother] seem to be under the impression that they were government agents [...] when he saw that the tobacco tin was missing he accused Norma of using all of the crack herself [...] Yvonne [Jack’s sister] went and stood behind her mother and put her arms protectively around Norma’s shoulders.

Jack saw that the Prime Minister was also afraid and did the same for him. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 304).

### 3.3. GENDER ASSUMPTION AND PERFORMANCE

The fact that Edward Clare tours the Midlands dressed like a woman provides the journey narrative with a third interesting dimension. Cross-dressing is a common comic device in a number of books and films.<sup>12</sup> It implies the assumption of the conceptual frameworks in which gender is displayed (cf. Suthrell 5), based on belief systems difficult to rule out as they pervade all areas of life, albeit unconsciously on some occasions. Thus, Edward’s female alter ego, Edwina, features some of the most strikingly conventional characteristics of the “femme fatale” which provokes surprising feelings in Edward himself and the ‘expected’ reactions in the men around:

He had to get away to somewhere quiet where he could think, not only about the landfill tax and its ugly repercussions but also about the alarming fact that he felt more comfortable wearing his wife’s clothes than he did wearing his own. He sat down on the toilet-seat cover and looked through his shoulder bag for lipstick and Pan Stik. [...] then carefully drew around his mouth with the lipstick. He practiced a few womanly expressions in the mirror. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 85)

Consequently, this journey narrative turns into a “female” journey narrative as soon as Edwina takes the floor, for the plot follows the conventions of women’s road narratives as far as the possibility of escape from physical confinement is concerned (cf. Ganser, 13-14). Either for Edward or Edwina, the longing for freedom is, eventually, what impels them to start the journey. The metaphor of Pete, the budgie belonging to Jack’s mother, flying free from its cage at the end of the story is quite symbolic in this sense.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the display of cross-dressing in some Mark Twain’s stories or the main narrative line in the film *Some Like It Hot*.

However, all these theoretical considerations, deep as they may seem, do not fail to give way to humour. Townsend's narration of the transformation process of Edward into Edwina is, once more, an opportunity for comedy:

It took only thirty-five minutes (including a close shave and eyebrow tidy) to transform Edward into Edwina, and it would have taken less had Edward not insisted initially on wearing a suspender belt and stockings. (Townsend, *Number Ten* 68)

Townsend's narration also becomes a mockery of Tony Blair's perceived gender, which she had already performed in *The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole 1999-2001*:

In fact, Tony has undergone a feminization: his hair has turned fluffy, his voice has softened, his expression is girly, his hands move as gracefully as a geisha's. Is he on a course of hormones that will eventually transmogrify him into Toni-the first woman Labour Prime Minister? (Townsend, *The Lost Diaries* 99).

Therefore, the public perception of Toni Blair is also reinforced by the same gender stereotypes as in the case of Margaret Thatcher. In addition, not only does Townsend play with that perception and turns his character Edward into Edwina but she also makes him face the truth through the vision of his alter ego: the political discourse of New Labour is as disappointing as its leader.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair transformed the British society of their time through their strong leadership, and offered a vast amount of "material" either to criticize or praise them when trying to model the public's perception of their premierships. Possessing strong personalities, both searched to fashion the citizens' course of action in the case of Thatcher, and the vision of the government's course of action in the case of Blair (cf. Curtice and Fisher 233), which implied setting up a game of persuasion carried out through different means according to their personalities. Margaret Thatcher played with her gender and personal religious values, somewhat disconcerting in a way, as none of these elements seemed to fit into the usual traditionally established frameworks. Tony Blair employed words to construct speeches which, in turn, modeled the official discourse of his terms of office in a clear attempt to make public opinion come to terms with policies which were, in the best possible scenario, disappointing for the Labour voter. Being the highest representatives of the political system, both leaders were subjected to close scrutiny the public whose views responded to the different discourses or counter discourses simultaneously operating.

Sue Townsend's contribution to the shaping of public opinion of Thatcher's and Blair's premierships is, undoubtedly manifest in her sharp criticism but laced with brilliant humour. The mocking discourse on Margaret Thatcher was

generally defined in terms of gender and Townsend follows the path but adds the alleged moral dimension of the character, thus playing with the most significant traits of Thatcher as acknowledged by herself. Tony Blair, once the great white hope of the country, becomes an object of the same mockery through gender parameters—although with different dimensions as Thatcher played with her femininity and the assumptions connected to it either to fulfill or confront them. In the case of Blair's fictive counterpart, Edward Clare, gender is (mostly), not questioned; cross-dressing is used by Townsend as a literary device to introduce comedy. Deceptive as he was, Blair is mocked mainly due to his inability to confront reality which he perceives disguised as Edward Clare while travelling around a country already unrecognizable to its own citizens.

Reviews sent to author: 8 February 2015. Revised paper accepted for publication: 15 April 2015.

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