



Humor and Identity in Elie Wiesel's *Day* and Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

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Abstract

Drawing on various theories regarding humor such as Freud's analysis and the incongruity theory of humor, this essay will explore the humor in Elie Wiesel's *Day* and Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, along with the conundrum of identity involved in this type of treatment. It analyzes the deployment of humor that appears in *Day* such as the "incongruity theory of humor", the logic of the illogical, the "return of the physical into the metaphysical", and the unique type of humor that Gyula represents, the implication of that humor and the consequent dungeon of the self that Eliezer is sentenced into. The essay then argues that Duddy, in his restless chasing of his goal, represents to some extent an escape from the humors of self-deprecation and self-punishment that characterizes the Jewish literature, and the dungeon of the self in which Eliezer in *Day* is caught, but is still portrayed as entangled in the Canadian-Jewish-Quebecois set of codes.

Keywords

Humor; *Day*; *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

1. Introduction

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and other articles, Freud links humor to the dynamics among id, ego, and superego, theorizing that jokes happen when the conscious allows the expression of thoughts that society usually suppresses or forbids (Rottenberg, 2020). It is generated by the ego at the permission of the superego, and the degrees of agreeability vary with the levels of benevolence of the superego. An amiable superego allows for a light and comforting type of humor, while the harshest superego suppresses humor altogether (Matte, 2001). Moreover, Freud defines "tendentious jokes" as those that frequently involve "rebellious criticism...directed against the subject himself, or...against someone in whom the subject has a share...(the subject's own nation, for instance)" and proceed to speculate that this "occurrence of self-criticism...may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes...have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life", finally expressing doubt over "whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character" (Freud, 1990), proposing connection between the self-critical humor and deep-seated sense of being a Jew.

Written by Jewish writers and dealing with the experience of being a Jew at a certain time, *Day* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* are both particular in their humorous attempts and their exploration of the issue of identity. Therefore, this essay will examine the humor in both novels, along with the conundrum of identity involved in this type of treatment, and argue that in its restless chasing of his goal, Duddy represents an escape from the humors of self-pity and self-punishment, and the dungeon of the self in which Eliezer in *Day* is caught, but is still portrayed as entangled in the Canadian-Jewish-Quebecois set of codes.

2. Humor and the Dungeon of the Self in *Day*

Day is a story that explores the possibility of personally healing and of collectively bearing witness and sharing the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. Consequently, Eliezer is set opposite various characters in different circumstances. Kathleen to some extent represents those who are lured by the knowledge of suffering and the unfortunate, whose conscience could not rest assured if her comforting could not help dissolve the gloom of those around. She would even do that at the price of her own life and happiness, as shown in the destruction of her marriage and her change after the accident, where she “who believed in defiance, in fighting, in hatred, had now chosen to submit” (Wiesel, 2006). Dr. Paul Russel represents those who are devoted to the code of living and therefore remain oblivious, consciously or unconsciously, to victims like Eliezer who are torn between life and death. The encounter of Eliezer with the man on the boat or the prostitute who shares the experience in the concentration camp, read along with each other, discusses the inability that is barely avoidable at witnessing. Looming large also is the presence of Eliezer’s grandmother, who represents the past, which is also the source of his inability to start afresh, for to move on is to do injustice to the past, and he is therefore torn between life and death. Moreover, the characters in the story “laugh” constantly, including the gallows humor of Eliezer that amuses in the midst of a catastrophe, and this humor acts as a central clue that weaves the whole story.

Originating in the eighteenth century and elaborated in the writings of Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard, the “incongruity theory of humor” remains a pervasive account of what makes one laugh (Urban, 2007). This kind of humor is rooted in the theorization of defamiliarization, that is, their magic emerges from the disparity between hearers’ pre-existent expectations and understanding of the world, and what the joke imagines or considers the world to be (Kianbakht, 2020). Wiesel employs that constantly with his treatment of words, for example, when Kathleen insists on seeing Brothers Karamazov, Eliezer asks, “You really care that much?”, and “You’re really that anxious to see the good brothers Karamazov *mistreated?*” (Italics is my own) Then, “Apparently she was. It was Yul Brynner or our love” and the following “In that case, let’s go” with his dislocating the words from their usual context and serious tone works successfully to amuse (Wiesel, 2006). Then there is the logic of the illogical (Oring, 2019), that is, thrown into extreme circumstances such as the characters in *Day* are in, what appears to be a choice is not a choice at all, and what appears to be common sense is in actuality nonsensical. When hit by the car, lying unable to move, and surrounded by medical staff, Eliezer contemplates “I would have liked to tell them not to talk, because I couldn’t hear them”, whose oddly funny effect lies in its candidness about its extreme situation, which is similar to his thoughts when visited by his friends and told how lucky he is and the possible compensations he could obtain “I hurt everywhere. I couldn’t move. I was practically paralyzed. But I was very lucky. I was going to be rich. I’d be able to travel, go to nightclubs, keep mistresses, be on top of the world: what luck!” (Wiesel, 2006).

However, some of the most potent and profound humor in *Day* brings about the “return of the physical into the metaphysical”, namely, while metaphysics offers an escape from the material world, comedy refutes that possibility and reiterates the inherently physical quality of being, and finally reminds one that “the body that dreams of Spirit is really the body that shits” (Urban, 2007). This wisdom comes mostly from characters who have had direct contact with death. For example, when hit by the car Eliezer reconsiders the line “rage, rage, against the dying of the light” and thinks, “They don’t scream against the dying of the light. They *can’t*: their mouths are full of blood” (Italics is my own). This also lies at the center of the laughs of the prostitute he met in Paris. Her hysteria lashes at the theory of themselves being saints because of suffering, and the story she tells abounds in physical details that stress the essentially physical being of humans that pales metaphysical theorizations. Put together, the aforementioned types of humor all carry a vulnerability in itself, a recognition of the absurdity of fate. However, there is still a kind of humor that refuses to be determined by fate.

Standing on its own there is another laugh that comes at the end of the novel, that of Gyula. Unlike those who pour sympathy and coaxing, trying to convert Eliezer, Gyula offers laughs of contempt and derision, sneering at his mortality and trauma, declaring instead “She says you are seriously ill. That you’re dying! Aren’t you ashamed to be dying?” and commands condescendingly “Don’t die before I’ve finished your portrait, do you hear? Afterward, I don’t give a darn! But not before! Understood?” (Wiesel, 2006). However, taking Gyula’s own experience with death into consideration, that is arguably not a laugh of ignorance. It is a laugh that laughs at the life’s futility and the revelation of life’s finitude, at laughing itself. It is an affirmation of nothingness and meaninglessness, and also the affirmation that the only response left is to go on, and the panacea, he suggests, is to be God yourself. Throughout the novel, Eliezer consistently questions the silence of God in the face of the suffering of His people, and his presence in Jewish imagination, and Gyula, in asking him to forget the past and to confront death in the eye as he himself did

in the water suggests that Eliezer stands in the place of God, and be invincible henceforth.

Gyula, unlike others, met with masochistic indifference by Eliezer, is treated with a strange familiarity, as if long known, for perhaps this road is seen long before. The hint of this tendency could already be found in Eliezer's inability to form close or long-term relationships with people around him. In *Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Roland Barthes compares a lover's situation to a victim in a concentration camp,

“The amorous catastrophe may be close to what has been called, in the psychotic domain, an extreme situation, ‘a situation experienced by the subject as irremediably bound to destroy him’; the image is drawn from what occurred at Dachau. Is it not indecent to compare the situation of the love-sick subject to that of an inmate of Dachau? Can one of the most unimaginable insults of History be compared with a trivial, childish, sophisticated, obscure incident occurring to a comfortable subject who is merely the victim of his own Image-repertoire? Yet these two situations have this in common: they are, literally, panic situations: situations without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.” (Barthes, 2001).

That links love closely with savagery and violence, for to love means a loss of self, and when one loses their self and that love is not reciprocated, they have no place to fall back on, and they are stuck in the middle. Just as for Eliezer, “love or death” (Wiesel, 2006). On one level it suggests the fact that haunted by the past one can never love for it would be a betrayal for the suffering of those who died in the Holocaust, which results in a stagnancy and impotence that is not dissimilar to the insensitivity of death, but also on another that in this vulnerability towards others, the fort of intact self breaks down, and life can no longer hold together (Han, 2019). Therefore, ultimately what Eliezer chooses is barely different from his previous state, invulnerable at the price of true interhuman connections and love, and correspondingly real healing. This is at once a rite of coronation and sentence to the dungeon of the self.

3. Humor and the Confine of Canadian-Jewish-Quebecois Set of Codes in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

Duddy, however, is rarely prey to this kind of self-deprecation or self-punishment. Led by his grandfather's creed “A man without a land is nobody”, Duddy Kravitz is driven, restless, and relentless as Duddy's French Canadian girlfriend, Yvette, observes, with a mixture of annoyance and fondness, that he is “always running or jumping or scratching” (Richler, 2001). With his eyes always focused on his goal and possible chances that might come along, Duddy is ready to strike combatively or retreat defensively at a moment's notice, even scrambling to get ahead, lurching from one dubious enterprise to another. This style of living his life is more distinctly demonstrated in the fact that even when unconscious, he is still on guard and alert: “At ten the next morning Duddy came charging out of a bottomless sleep, unsure of his surroundings but prepared for instant struggle, the alibi for a crime unremembered already half-born, panting, scratching, and ready to bolt if necessary” (Richler, 2001).

This goal drives Duddy to seek a job from Uncle Benjy, start a company to produce bar mitzvah films, then a new movie distribution business, and pushes him also, to steal from his paralyzed friend Virgil. In all, it pulls Duddy out of endless inner struggles and conflict, that is, his confinement of “interiority” (Colangelo, 2022) by which the “I” in *Day* is plagued, and injects him with a dynamism that is unselfconscious and unashamed, which makes Duddy to some extent a rarity in the lists of tortured and compulsively self-analyzing and self-demeaning post-Holocaust Jewish protagonists (Brauner, 2010). The humor of Duddy, then, is not entirely a case of bringing the physical into the spiritual, that is, bringing a touch of the concrete and certainty into what is metaphysical and ambiguous, but one of bringing the emotional and vulnerability into the calculating, the concrete world of money and power. When found reading *U.S.A.* by Dos Passos and failing with getting away with the rebuttal “Look, I'm not the kind of a shmo who has to get his sex secondhand”, he cries to the teasing Jane Cox, “Oh, will you leave me alone? Will you please leave me alone?” (Richler, 2001), a humorous reaction which, following Duddy's conversation with his brother and his unreciprocated affection, nonetheless reveals the inadequacy of emotional sustenance that Duddy is able to abstain from his immediate family, and that as a result, Duddy is afraid to be open with the rest of the world. Moreover, at the end when Duddy talks to Yvette and, angered by her attitude, says “I have to do everything alone. I can see that now. I can trust nobody”, and Yvette replies, “We betrayed you, I suppose”, to which Duddy claims, “Yes. You did”. “He had spoken with such quiet conviction and certainty that she began to doubt herself” (Richler, 2001). Though

amused by Duddy's reply, the reader may be moved by his unselfconsciousness, and candidness, and begin also to see the truth in his statement, for if a goal redeems him out of self-pity, it also overturns this perspective, and Duddy is seen still trapped by the Canadian-Jewish-Quebécois set of codes represented by his grandfather's one-sentence counsel.

Earlier in the story, this code is represented by the figure of Boy Wonder. In his paying profession as a taxi driver, Duddy's father Max plays an important role in transmitting and perpetuating the myth of Boy Wonder through St. Urbain Street. Duddy is furthermore affected by his heroes who are firmly rooted in the American success story, congealed in his imagined brother Bradley, who "had run away to the States at fifteen, lied about his age, joined the air force, and sunk three Jap battleships in the Pacific" (Richler, 2001), which reflects another source of influence which is the shadow that weighs on Canada of her illustrious neighbor. The ambition to get ahead turns finally Jerry Dingelman into an adversary, but in the end, the ambition in itself loses meaning: To begin with, it is depicted with strong stroke that blood ties are extremely significant to Duddy. From his funny comments "No one gets away with insulting my old man" (Richler, 2001), and Duddy acts as the savior of his family on more than one occasion: it is he, for example, who rescues his brother, Lennie, when he is persuaded by his WASP college friends to perform an illegal abortion and has to flee from college. However, later the Boy Wonder tells Duddy that Simcha never wanted any land, that he only wanted to dream about having it, Dingleman's words hurt Duddy and for a moment, he sees his credo as the platitude it really is. It could be argued that Duddy is also betrayed by Simcha.

This betrayal by the Canadian-Jewish-Quebécois set of codes and the sense of emptiness and meaninglessness is made manifest by Duddy himself in his speech to Uncle Benjy:

"Why didn't you ever have time for me?"

"Because you're a pusherke. A little Jew-boy on the make. Guys like you make me sick and ashamed."

"You lousy, intelligent people. You lying sons of bitches with your books and your socialism and your sneers. You give me one long pain in the ass...Pusherkes. What a bunch you are! What a pack of crap-artists! Writing and reading books that make fun of people like me. Guys who want to get somewhere. If you're so concerned, how come in real life you never had time for me? It's easy for you to sit here and ridicule and make superior little jokes because you know more than me, but what about a helping hand? When did you ever put yourself out one inch for me? Never. It's the same with all you intelligent people...You never take your hands out of your pockets to a guy like me except when it's got a knife in it. You think I should be running after something else besides money? Good. Tell me what. Tell me you bastard. I want some land, Uncle Benjy. I'm going to own my own place one day. King of the castle, that's me. And there won't be any superior drecks there to laugh at me or run me off. That's just about the size of it." (Richler, 2001).

Duddy lashes at a world that has formed and cheated him, that has given him his crass values, and an attempt at escaping the inertia and actually accomplishing some deeds are thus cut painfully short by concerns of the "intelligent people".

Uncle Benjy realizes finally with surprise that,

"You're such a nervy kid. My God, Duddel, you're even touchier than Lennie...You don't want anything from me. Come to think of it, you're the only one in the family who never came here to ask for something. My God, it never occurred to me before. You're the only one, Duddel. I've been unfair to you." (Richler, 2001).

Duddy is led by his goals and to some extent, he is his goals, those that he chooses to believe in and to strive for, which is ultimately revealed to be hollow and opens an inner void in Duddy. Just as Richler himself said in an interview two years before the release of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, he was "looking for...the values with which a man can live with honor" (Nobel, 2010), and Duddy's case reveals a still persistent and deep-seated doubt on that matter.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Day* sees Wiesel's use of the "incongruity theory of humor", the logic of the illogical, and the "return of the physical into the metaphysical" which in its core carries a vulnerability in itself, a recognition of the absurdity of fate. However, the laughs of Gyula affirm and laugh at life's nothingness and meaninglessness, and suggest to

Eliezer his own standing in the place of God as the solution, but in doing that Eliezer is also sentenced to the dungeon of the self that the abnegates the possibility of truly forming interpersonal connections and thus truly healing. Duddy Kravitz, on the other hand, is rarely prey to this kind of self-deprecation or self-punishment. His grandfather's creed drives him out of that confinement and makes him to some extent a rarity in the list of tortured and compulsively self-analyzing and self-demeaning post-Holocaust Jewish protagonists. Nonetheless, he still finds himself lost in the end, which points to issues with the Canadian-Jewish-Quebecois set of codes and ghosts of the Holocaust that still haunt the center of Jewish identity.

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