

OH, PLAY THAT THING OR THE WISDOM OF THE FOOL

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ABSTRACT

Roddy Doyle is one of the writers who has best understood the regenerative power of laughter. Comedy has always been present in his novels, but whereas in the first three ones —*The Commitments* (1988), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991)— it is the dominant mode, in the last four ones —*Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), *A Star Called Henry* (1999) and *Oh Play That Thing* (2004)— it works as a necessary complement to tragedy. One of the greatest achievements of *A Star Called Henry* and *Oh Play That Thing* is the creation of a comic hero that demystifies the figure of the tragic one. In *Oh Play That Thing* Doyle goes deeper in this decrowning of the hero by presenting an Irish rebel who is as fallible, foolish and limited as any other human being. His gullibility makes him the easy victim of those who surround him, thus subverting the image of the hero as the incarnation of perfection. Doyle wants to show that we all, including those who according to history and society have carried out the most portentous actions and are therefore praised for their courage and strength, are made of clay.

KEY WORDS: humour; comedy; tragedy; hero; subversion; foolishness; fallibility; woman.

RESUMEN

Roddy Doyle es uno de los escritores que mejor han entendido el poder regenerativo de la risa. Lo cómico siempre ha estado presente en sus novelas, pero mientras que en las tres primeras —*The Commitments* (1988), *The Snapper* (1990) y *The Van* (1991)—

esto juega un papel predominante, en las cuatro últimas —*Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), *A Star Called Henry* (1999) y *Oh Play That Thing* (2004)— actúa como un complemento indispensable de lo trágico. Uno de los grandes logros de *A Star Called Henry* y *Oh Play That Thing* es la creación de un héroe cómico que desmitifica la figura del héroe trágico. En *Oh Play That Thing* Doyle ahonda en su destronamiento del héroe presentándonos a un rebelde irlandés que es igual de falible, necio y limitado que el resto de los seres humanos. Su credulidad le convierte en una víctima fácil para todos aquellos que le rodean, subvirtiéndose así la imagen del héroe como encarnación de la perfección. Doyle quiere demostrar como todos, incluidos aquellos que según la historia y la sociedad han realizado las mayores proezas y son, por tanto, aclamados por su coraje y fuerza, estamos hechos de barro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: humor; comedia; tragedia; héroe; subversión; necedad; falibilidad; mujer.

One of the great advancements in human knowledge in the last decades has been the vindication of the creative, regenerative, subversive and liberating character of laughter. Comedy is not considered any longer a trivial and superficial genre incapable of dealing with the great problems of man, but as wise and noble as other genres, especially tragedy. Roddy Doyle is a writer who has perfectly understood the profound meaning of comedy. In his first three novels —*The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*— the comic element plays a main role, whereas in the last four ones we find a harmonious blending of the tragic and the comic, since they describe hard and painful situations, such as the anguish of a child whose parents are about to separate (*Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*), the nightmare of a woman who is brutally beaten by her husband (*The Woman Who Walked into Doors*), or the unmasking of the contradictions of the whole process of independence in Ireland (*A Star Called Henry*). But although both the tragic and the comic elements are present in these three novels, laughter is used with a different aim in the first two. In *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* comedy fulfils one of its main functions, that of being a vehicle for coping with the hardships of life. In these two books humour works as a liberating force that allows the narrator and the reader to face and transcend a world of grief and frustration and face the future with optimism. Thus the victory of the spirit of life over death is celebrated.

In *A Star Called Henry*, on the other hand, humour not only plays the redeeming role of renewing courage, hope and the will to live in the midst of despair, but also a subversive one. *A Star Called Henry* demystifies the whole process of independence in Ireland, which started with the Easter Rising of 1916 and culminated in the War of Independence, as well as the figure of the tragic hero itself. The conventional hero of the historical novel is transformed into a comic one, or, more precisely, into a trickster¹, thus undermining the glory and magnificence of the tragic hero. *Oh, Play That Thing* follows the adventures of Henry Smart in America, where he is forced to flee in order to avoid

¹ See Aída Díaz Bild, «*A Star Called Henry* o la exaltación del héroe cómico.»

being captured and killed by the revolutionary forces. His fate resembles that of many others who witnessed how the ideals of the Easter Rising were destroyed by those in power, thus allowing Doyle to recreate the less splendid aspects of the process of independence. And one of the most interesting aspects of the novel is precisely how in spite of the tragic issues being portrayed Doyle insists not only on still presenting his main character as a comic hero, but on further debunking the figure of the tragic hero.

In order to fully understand to what extent Doyle is successful in his subversion of the idealistic vision of the tragic hero it is necessary to go first to one of the authors who has best understood the demystifying function of comedy: Conrad Hyers². His *The Spirituality of Comedy* begins with «To understand comedy is to understand humanity» (Hyers, 1996:1), which shows to which extent Hyers considers that humour plays a vital role in human existence. Hyers believes that seriousness without humour can be dangerous and dehumanising, «the crucifier of freedom and the human spirit.» (69) Humour makes us more human precisely because it allows us to play with our inner contradictions and recognize that we are creatures of diverse and opposite tendencies: reason and impulse, altruism and selfishness, sense and nonsense, mind and body.³ Humour thus fulfils an iconoclastic function by reminding us that we are fallible and limited: «The alternative to humor is the arrogance and idolatry of those who profess to see clearly, know absolutely, and prophesy inerrantly.» (74) The comic hero debunks all aspirations to human greatness and grandeur as well as all «heroic attempts at supernatural flying.» (4) Like the tramp created by Charles Chaplin, the comic hero represents the quintessence of humanity and therefore incarnates all of us in one way or another:

The comic vision possesses a greater appreciation for the muddiness of human nature—even in its noblest aspirations and righteous pretensions—and of the ambiguities of truth and goodness. Hence there is an immediate inclination to see truth and goodness in other perspectives, and acknowledge the limitations of one’s own. People and circumstances are not so neatly divisible into black and white, light and dark, right and wrong, or superior and inferior, as tragic heroism would suggest as a basis for its sterling commitment and inflexible stand. Comedy mixes and confounds all rigid categories and fixed identities - as Chaplin did for so many years with his tramp figure in ragged and ill-fitting but genteel clothing. (28-9).

² For further information the coping and subversive functions of laughter see: *Rabelais and His World* and *The Dialogic Imagination*, by Mikhail Bakhtin, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, by John Morreall, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, by Northrop Frye, *The Tragicomic Novel*, by Randall Craig, *Comedy*, by Wylie Sypher, *Laughing Matter*, by Marcel Gutwirth, *Playboys and Killjoys*, by Harry Levin, *The Catharsis of Comedy*, by Dana F. Sutton, *The Comic Vision in Literature*, by Edward L. Galligan, *Blind Men and Elephants*, by Arthur Asa Berger, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, by Sigmund Freud.

³ In *Comedy* Sypher argues that comedy can understand and reflect better than any other genre the absurdity of human existence and the tragic situation of the modern man. In an age of disorder, irrationalism and fragmentary lives comedy can represent the human plight better than tragedy: «For tragedy needs the ‘noble’, and nowadays we seldom can assign any usable meaning to ‘nobility’. The comic now is more relevant, or at least more accessible, than the tragic» (Sypher, 1980: 201). Sypher reminds us that the idea that comedy can portray better than tragedy the contradictions of our lives was already pointed out by Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. The former was aware of the important role that the irrational plays in human existence and of the power of comedy to reflect it, whereas the latter recognized that «the comical is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction the comical is present» (cit. in Sypher, 1980: 196).

Comedy derides the seriousness with which we take ourselves, our rights and principles, as well as our pride and visions of self-importance and dignity, and allows us to see the world in a more flexible and broader way. Whereas tragedy celebrates exceptional individuals and their exceptional acts, comedy denounces the folly of all human aspirations to godlikeness. Comedy reminds us that we are vulnerable, mortal, limited and frequently foolish, no matter what grandiose vision of ourselves we may entertain: «Even when our heads are in the clouds, our feet walk on the ground and are made of clay.⁴» (61) The comic hero points at our pretensions and self-deceptions, our inconsistencies and incongruities and makes it clear that we are compounded of opposite elements. Comedy is not interested in lofty ambitions or glorious marvels but in celebrating and enjoying life as it is. Comedy pays attention to all those particulars of everyday life related to food, sex and body waste that have been omitted as ignoble by tragedy because they might sully the heroic and elevated vision of the hero: «There are no lavatories in tragic palaces; but from its very dawn, comedy had use for chamber pots.» (George Steiner, cit. in Hyers, 1996: 95) In tragedy the body is conceived as a burden to the spirit and therefore should be avoided unless it is represented in its most ideal, virile and heroic form. For comedy, on the other hand, everything that is natural is essentially good⁵: «What is natural is that we should think. And it is equally natural that we should think about eating, sleeping and sex.⁶» (97) Comedy reminds us of our dustiness, muddiness and human limitations⁷: «The comedian is not generally an aviator; he does not journey away from this familiar world of earth; he refuses the experiment of angelism; he will not forget that we are made out of dust.» (Nathan Scott, cit. in Hyers, 1996: 102) Tragedy emerges precisely when we refuse to accept reality as perishable and imperfect and look for alternative idealized worlds⁸. In many trickster tales, for example, humour derives from the hero trying to transcend his human condition by acquiring the

⁴ Interestingly enough, in *The Tragicomic Novel* Randall Craig affirms that the characters of tragicomedy «can see into the heavens but remain firmly rooted in the provinciality of terra firma» (Craig, 1989: 31).

⁵ In *Laughing Matter* Marcel Gutwirth affirms that the paradigm of comic reversal is the presentation of a being that aspires to sublimity but is made of flesh and bone. What makes us laugh is «a joyous, a bellowing surrender to the physical, to the mark of our finitude» (Gutwirth, 1993: 120). Gutwirth explains that whereas the tragic poet idealises his characters by giving priority to the spiritual element, the comic author presents the animal as the governing power: «That the shortest road of making a fool of oneself is to yield to the temptation of angelism, to take on a sublimity that is not suitable to a being who sweats and on occasion breaks wind, is comedy enough when boldly stated.» (119).

In a similar line in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin explains that the images of the material bodily principle, that is to say the images of good, drink, defecation and sexual life, that are so predominant in the work of Rabelais, Cervantes and other writers of the Renaissance, are the heritage of the culture of folk humour. Bakhtin uses the term grotesque realism to refer to this particular type of imagery and explains how in it the bodily element is perceived as positive, festive, utopian and fundamentally universal. The essential principle of grotesque realism is the degradation of everything that is high, spiritual, ideal or abstract: «it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity» (Bakhtin, 1984: 19-20).

⁶ Hyers points out that the scatological practices among some of the clown societies of the Pueblo Indians—mud and excrement are smeared on the body, urine is drunk and poured on one another, etc.—are a reaffirmation of the total human condition and an acceptance of our muddiness as essentially good.

⁷ Hyers explains that since comedy wants us to realize that we cannot separate the body from the spirit, it would also parody all attempts to reduce humanity and human relationships to the physical level.

⁸ John Morreall summarizes it perfectly well when he says that humour celebrates the incongruities of life, right down to the basic one «between the eager fret of our life and our final nothingness.» (Morreall, 1983: 128).

special powers that certain animals have. Obviously he fails, thus having to accept his own limitations. In this sense, for Hyers the trickster with his combination of wisdom and folly, cunning and ignorance, offers us a more realistic, frank and accurate representation of the human condition which allows us to identify with him more totally than with the superheroes who are beyond our reach.

Like the jester who made the king see that he was not a sacred ruler but a mortal human being and therefore not different from his subjects in his frailties and follies, humour qualifies all human thoughts, dreams and enterprises and reminds us of our mortality, fallibility and foolishness.⁹ For Hyers the clown is the comic figure who incarnates the acceptance and celebration of the human condition as something delightful and wonderful and not as a heavy burden that we have to carry all our lives. Of course, the proud and pretentious will not appreciate the richness of the clown, but «for those who are not pretenders to thrones that are not theirs or to a divinity they have not attained, or even to some superior form of humanity, the clown enables us to embrace ourselves and each other as the luminous lumps that we are.» (147).

Although the trickster, the clown or the fool will not allow us to forget that we are limited human beings, the comic figure who has best demystified all heroic values and virtues and all human attempts to transcend reality is the simpleton, the true anti-hero. Hyers retells the classic story of the bull Ferdinand who, unlike his friends, was not interested in being brought to Madrid and experiencing the thrill of competition, the cheering of the crowd or playing the role of the tragic hero in his fight to death with the bullfighter. He preferred to sit under his favourite oak tree and smell the flowers. Even when he was taken to the ring he just sat down and enjoys the beautiful flowers in the hair of all the beautiful ladies. Ferdinand subverts the dominant ideology of competition and advancement by preferring to relish the simple pleasures of life:

Ferdinand is no hero, but he is a very remarkable bull. He has none of those dramatic qualities that would attract the attention of pioneering, competitive, and conquering temperaments, and he performs none of those marvelous feats that might give him a name and turn him into a stirring legend. He climbs no mountains, plunges into no watery abysses, slays no dragons, rescues no maidens, outwits no gods or demons, and engages in no tragic confrontations. Yet one suspects that in a peculiar manner all his own he is already where the hero is trying so valiantly to get. (200).

Whereas the tragic hero thinks that the wonderful and the marvellous is beyond everyday life, which is considered to be dull, trivial and boring, the simpleton enjoys the here and now. He does not need high towers that will lead him to heaven or travel to exotic and distant countries looking for his Holy Grail¹⁰. The tragic hero is incapable of relishing the immediate

⁹ Marcel Gutwirth emphasises how laughter's euphoric recognition of man's limitations and humour's acceptance of our contradictions make us wiser. As a matter of fact to be capable of laughing at our own follies and absurdities requires a certain amount of courage: «to laugh in the face of folly (our own) and lostness (our own), however wisely, is to reach for the prize of wisdom, inglorious perhaps, unlikely to win us the crown of a saint or mantle of a guru but secure in the unfazed recognition of the little we are - so much wind, as Montaigne reminds us, but for all that content to make a noise in the world, glad simply to be.» (Gutwirth, 1993:187).

¹⁰ Hyers points out that the word comedy derives probably from the Greek God Comus, whose province was that of the basic concerns of life. His was the kingdom of nothing special where the most profound values were the ordinary ones.

circumstances of life because he thinks that happiness, satisfaction and truth are to be found somewhere else, beyond the perimeter of his own existence. Hyers admits that we need our moments of ecstasy, of dreams, of visions, in other words, of escape, but their function is to give us the necessary perspective to revalue the simple basics of life and thus achieve a sense of freedom that nothing else can give us: «Even heroes must spend most of their time, like the rest of us, in that valley that lies between mountain heights and ocean depths. The essential human problem is to come to terms with that valley, its own marvels and miracles, not just to invent more and more ingenious methods of escape.» (212).

Comedy does not despise or look down on any aspect of human experience, but aims to represent the world in its fullness. The tragic hero, on the other hand, is so concerned with nobility, honour, prestige, rectitude and fulfilling his dreams of grandeur that he cannot appreciate the real value of ordinary people and ordinary life. In this sense, the tragic hero lacks the wisdom of the comic hero who is aware of the worth of the basic, common concerns of everyday life¹¹: «Ordinary values are not superficial but basic; ordinary people are not ignoble, but he salt of the earth.» (44) For the comic spirit common life must be enjoyed and celebrated: not to do so would be a sacrilege. In this sense, the comic spirit by focusing on ordinary reality and people achieves a very special kind of transubstantiation: «Comedy takes the most common table items of our lives, like bread and wine— items that may also be surrounded by real anguish and suffering —and transforms them into the body and blood of our salvation.» (101-2) Comedy reaffirms the unconditional value of life by celebrating, enjoying and delighting in it.

Oh, Play That Thing is a novel that does not build castles in the air or creates a superhero that is capable of defeating all those forces that are against him. On the contrary, Henry Smart, the Irish rebel who has been forced to emigrate to America to save his skin, is presented as fallible, foolish and limited as any other human being. Doyle demystifies the notion of the hero as a godlike figure by creating a character whose gullibility makes him the easy victim of those who surround him. He is not only deceived by others, but deceives himself as well, thus subverting the image of the hero as the incarnation of perfection. Doyle wants to show that nobody, not even those who according to history and society have carried out the most portentous actions and are therefore praised for their courage and strength, can escape from their own muddiness. In this sense *Oh, Play That Thing* does not want to idealize the story of the Irish rebel who is struggling for survival, but to show that all heroes, all human beings, are merely made of clay. And the best way in which Doyle can fulfil this process of decrowning is by focusing on his protagonist's foolishness, which whether we like it or not, is an essential part of human condition.

¹¹ Hyers reminds us that the notion of tragedy being more profound and wiser than comedy derives from Aristotle's distinction between the two genres. For the Greek theorist tragedy portrays noble and superior people, whereas comedy concentrates on common, inferior ones: «Comedy is (as we have said) an imitation of inferior people - not, however, with respect to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful. The laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain... Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.» (Aristotle, 1996: 9-10).

Unlike the traditional hero who seems to know the whole truth, has the clairvoyance of a prophet and is capable of the most extraordinary acts, Smart not only makes the same mistakes again and again, but does not seem to learn from them. This is his «prophecy» when he leaves Europe: «I'd been the expendable fool for years, the man who'd hopped when his betters called. No more. I was going to get away from that, even if I had to be buried. And I'd do the fuckin' burying, not them.» (6) And when he arrives at America he is very proud of himself because he is «the only man not afraid of what was growing up in front of us.» (1) Smart really believes that he can escape from his past and start a new life, but he will very soon realize that it is impossible. As a matter fact, the Immigration Bureau officer who allows him to enter the country does not hesitate to tease him on his believing that he has deceived him by showing him an English passport and pretending to come from London:

Welcome to America, he said

...

He handed me the passport and registration card, then held them back.

But you'd want to work on your accent, sir. *Slán leat.* (4).

But in spite of everything Smart thinks that he can start a new life in America and like a «real» hero has his dreams of grandeur which he is sure of fulfilling:

The city of the good time, the Big Noise. I was there three months and I felt at home. And I felt that way because it was not man's home. It was too big, too fast; nothing stayed fixed. I knew the blocks, the corners, but that wasn't enough. This was the city that fell and rose every day, the city that was colonising the sky. A man with ambition just had to look up to meet his possibilities. I did it all the time. And I listened. To the clock that hung higher above Manhattan than the men on the girders. I could hear it clearly. I could feel its beat.

...

I listened to the clock. The city that dished out the time. It could be bought and spent, borrowed, stolen, wasted, fucked and killed. Time was money. Time was life. It was up to me.

....

I listened. I could hear the clock...It was up to me. Time was life. Time was money. My time had come. (16-7).

His dreams become castles of sand because he is incapable of seeing what is in front of him, of realizing that, as in Dublin, here in New York there are people you cannot deceive or defeat. Smart conceives this great plan of starting his own business by stealing Johnny No's boards and employing his own boys. For a moment his instinct tells him that Johnny No is another Jack Dalton, the man who sentenced him to death back in Ireland, but he rejects the idea: «Johnny No was Johnny No, a small-talking man with a small-time head. And Jack Dalton was dead.» (20). He is so gullible that he believes not only that there are big prospects for him —«The coming man in advertising, the new man in the new, new thing.» (19)— but that a man like Johnny No who does not know the meaning of the word compassion will allow him to win and get his prize. Like the fooliest of fools he thinks that there is something special about him, that nothing will stop him. Again, like the fooliest of fools he is convinced of his ability to outwit others: «I was

Henry Glick these days. *Glic*, clever, cunning, smart. An American name, invented to be remembered, and easily thrown away.» (28). He does not hesitate to describe himself as an intelligent, handsome man, whose business is expanding, but this epitome of cleverness is incapable of seeing the clues that will lead to his fall. Thus, for instance, when two of his boys are beaten, he does not realize that this is a warning from Johnny No. Smart thinks that he can slay the dragon or defeat the giant, but this only happens in the wondrous world of tragedy. In real life we must come to terms with our own limitations and our own reality if we want to survive. And this is what Johnny No, who is on the point of killing Smart, teaches him. He tells him that he who thinks is the smartest person on earth, has been acting as the stupidest. He did not see, like Fast Eddie, when it was the right time to fly, he has not understood that there is no chance of improvement for people like him or Johnny No himself, that there will always be masters and servants. As a matter of fact Johnny No has not finished with Henry earlier, because he wanted to see «if there was a limit to a blockhead's fucking stoopidity. And guess what?... There ain't. You'd've kept on being stoopid for fucking ever.» (89).

And there really seems to be no limit to Smart's foolishness because when he escapes from Johnny No and settles down in Chicago he again has the feeling that something extraordinary will happen to him and his life will change for better: «And I felt the freedom I'd really never known before. Because there was no past now waiting to jump. I had to be careful but there was nothing behind my back; it was all ahead. The place was wild, and as new as I was.» (133) One of the first persons he meets in Chicago is Louis Armstrong and is immediately struck by the force and originality of his music. He is introduced to him by his girlfriend Dora and his first intuition, wrong as usual, is that Louis is impressed by the man he has in front of him: «He'd held my hand; he'd seen the man I used to be. A man who carried a good suit through checkpoints and locked doors. Louis Armstrong had looked at me and seen someone he wanted, a man he needed to know, a man who'd stroll right on with him. He'd seen Henry Smart.» (142-3) He becomes his shadow, his bodyguard, his trustworthy person who goes with him everywhere¹² and looks after him, or so he thinks. He believes that he is doing a great job for Louis, that he is protecting him from those who want to exploit him and giving him the power he needs. So, for example, when they go to see Joe Glaser, closely connected with the mafia, Henry is totally convinced that he and Armstrong control the situation just because he, the brave and threatening man, is there: «Louis was in command, and always had been - because I was with him.» (178) Before him even men like Glaser,

¹² As in *A Star Called Henry*, in *Oh, Play That Thing* Doyle tries to convince the reader of the veracity of the story by drawing attention to the hero's friendship with real people and his participation in some relevant events in the life of this very same people. Here is a clear example:

IT TIGHT LIKE THIS, LOUIS.

It was me who supplied the voice of the girl. Earl Hines tried it, Don Redman tried; they all tried, but it was me who found the voice that stopped Louis.

He the one make me hard.

It annoyed the others; I wasn't a player - but that's me on the record. The 12th of December, 1928. (216) As Lodge has explained, this is just a literary game, since the more a writer insists on his characters belonging to real history the more he reminds us of their fictionality: «He thus makes explicit what is, according to Roland Barthes, always implicit in the realistic novel: 'giving to the imaginary the formal guarantee of the real, but while preserving in the sign the ambiguity of a double object, at once believable and false» (Lodge 1989: 34-35).

capable of the worst and most degrading atrocities, are completely lost: «I undermined the fucker. I stood on his fuckin' shells and shot the hard eyes back at him, the blue eyes that had killed and could again. And then he was ready for Louis, on a platter.» (178-9) He thinks that his relationship with Louis is based on equal terms, that none of them is above the other, but it is obvious that Armstrong is the one that gives the instructions and knows much better than our hero what they have to do in each circumstance. Nothing has changed: Smart is still the «eejit» who executes other people's orders:

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

We stop and talk, Henry.

Yeah. (206).

It is true that Armstrong is not like Jack Dalton or the other Irish revolutionaries who just took advantage of Smart and when he was of no use any more tried to get rid of him. Louis really appreciates Henry and, as a matter of fact, saves his skin when his New York enemies are about to kill him, but it is also evident that the one who is in control all the time is Louis, who is much wiser than our hero. Smart never fully understands what he is there for, what his job really is. Armstrong explains it to him very clearly, but he still does not seem to get the gist of it:

Who am I then, Louis?

You the white man that puts his hand on that white man's shoulder and say, No, man, this is *my* nigger.

He looked at me.

You my white man, he said.

And you're my black man.

That right, Smoked, he said. - That about the size of it. But not really. Between you me, I'm nobody's black man. That seem fair to you?

I don't know.

...

You understand me, Henry?

I think so.

I think so too. (212).

Even when after this profound conversation with Louis Miss O'Shea asks him why he has to look after the trumpeter, he really does not know what to answer. He mumbles something about exploitation, which results totally unconvincing and reveals once again how difficult it is for him to understand the world that surrounds him. But slowly, very slowly, he assimilates why Louis has chosen him. He realizes that it is not because he is a «star», a hero, a courageous and strong man, but just because he is white: «It was only starting to seep in: my purpose was my whiteness, and my willingness to walk it beside Louis.» (245) He knows that Armstrong is different from all those others who have exploited him, that he has not fooled him with promises of castles in the air, but

understands that his friend never saw in him the exceptional man he considers himself to be: «But I hadn't joined anything. I was in because of what I wasn't. I wasn't black, I wasn't a player or an agent or a manager or a shark or a friend of Al Capone's. I wasn't the things that the dangerous white men were. So I was useful - just as long as I wasn't anything. Just Louis Armstrong's white man.» (245) If there is a true star, it is Louis and not him: «For the first time in my life, I was ordinary.» (257) There are a lot of kings in Harlem, but he is not one of them. His having fought for Irish freedom does not make him a hero either in his country or in America: «Being Irish here just made me a cop's cousin.» (252) He has to admit that he is only Armstrong's boy, the one who pulls the doors and steps back for him and that his dreams of fulfilling a more important role were merely fictions of his own invention: «I didn't want to be a bodyguard, I said - I wanted, I don't know, fuckin' more.» (316) He realizes that he has not been of much help to Louis and that he, the king, does not need him any more.

It is precisely when Smart sees that he is of no use to Louis that he decides to go back to Dublin. This time he will not go disguised as someone else as he has done in the past, but as Henry Smart, the Yank:

I could see myself with Saoirse; I could feel her hand in mine. I could hear the tram bells, and I could hear the shouts, the accent that she'd know was mine. I could hear our feet, good Yank leather on cobbles. I'd stroll through Dublin for the first time in my life. No more running or chasing. I'd stroll through Dublin with my daughter, and my wife. (264)

Once again Henry is walking in the clouds, forgetting the harsh reality of his own country and the impossibility for people like him who did the dirty work for those now in power to return safely to Ireland. He and many others are the unpleasant reminders of a past the new leaders want to erase. The character who confronts Henry with this painful reality is Kellet, a man without scruples who has adapted himself to the different political changes in Ireland and who has left behind him a trail of dead bodies. He has never been interested, as Henry was, in saving his country and contributing to its welfare, but in surviving and ascending by being close to those in power at each particular moment. Kellet not only makes it clear to Henry that he will never be welcomed in Ireland, especially by those who have become respectable and have great political ambitions, but throws him off his pedestal by reminding him of a reality he seems to have forgotten: that he never was a legend, a chosen man, but an instrument of very low value in the hands of cleverer men. Thus when Kellet tells him that after the Civil War they sent him to America and Henry thinks that it was because of him, Kellet destroys his pretension of self-importance: «You're a vain little cunt, Henry. I could see that back then too. We weren't after you. Why the fuck would we have been? You're shite.» (327) Henry is just a nuisance, a loose end it would be convenient to finish with in case he decides to go back to Ireland, but not the great figure he thinks he is. He has even been so foolish as to give them the clues to find him: «It was the Glick thing. When we heard the name, Glick. Smart. Very fuckin' clever. More of your fuckin' vanity.» (327).

But the interesting thing about Henry Smart, that which transforms him into a truly comic hero, is that he is capable of admitting his own mistakes. To accept one's foolishness and fallibility requires not only great courage, but a special kind of wisdom

that only the comic hero has. He is not ashamed of «confessing» that he was lazy and underestimated Johnny No; that he never understood the real aim of what he and the half-sister did together as partners; that he should have known that the people who were bringing the liquor to Norris were the same who were after him; that he should have seen that Norris in revenge for having taken out his healthy tooth was going to give him over to them; that he should have listened to the half-sister when she warned him of the coming danger, «but I was too thick to hear» (121); that he never grasped what it really meant to be a Negro in a place like Chicago or why he was with Louis Armstrong; that he realized too late what a great mistake it was to introduce the half-sister to Louis; etc. Henry is even ready to «flatter» himself with epithets such as «fucking eejit» or «stupid, stupid, stupid». And near the end of the novel when he reflects that nothing will change with Roosevelt's election, that nothing will improve the painful situation of the runaways, the unwanted, the homeless, he admits that «The wise ones expected nothing. I was never wise. I kept looking, even when the stories stopped. First Rifle, then Saoirse.» (365)

Most revealing about Smart is that he is even capable of laughing at his own shortcomings. So when he starts interrogating one of his boys who has apparently been jumped by five or six boys:

And they didn't say anything? Warn you or anything?
 He looked at Joe before he spoke.
 No, Mister Glick.
 But I didn't see it.
 No, Mister Glick.
 Until months later. (46)

Interestingly enough, Henry is not only admitting how fool he was not to see he was being sent messages by Johnny No, but how slow he was in making any connection between the incident and his executioner. As we will see, even the women with whom he gets involved outwit him. Thus, for example, he laughs at the way in which the half-sister was always one step ahead of him: «She was right, a long time before I understood it: we were a team. (And long before I knew it, we weren't.)» (104) But when he becomes more ironic about himself is when he narrates his experiences with Louis Armstrong. He makes fun of his constant failure not only to understand the unwritten norms that regulate the relationships between black and white, but to comprehend how to do business with the men who want to control Louis, by constantly repeating «but I was learning». Obviously he is not learning anything and making the same mistakes again and again. Thus the narrator, who is remembering his past, is capable of distancing himself from what has happened to him and realize with good humour how blind he was.

Smart's playful attitude towards himself is very significant because it reveals that he has achieved the highest and most mature level of laughter. According to Hyers there are three levels of laughter. The first one is the laughter of childhood, of paradise. Here humour is just a game that is played for pure enjoyment. There are no special rules, aims or purposes: «One is enjoying being nonsensical for the sake of being nonsensical in a refusal to make sense or progress or money all the time.» (86) The frustrations, tensions and doubts of everyday life are set aside: one is simply enjoying playing for the sake of playing. In this world of laughter that reproduces the innocence of children before they

learn the difference between good and evil, taboos do not exist and the dicotomies trivial/serious, holy/unholy, important/trivial have faded away.

The second level of laughter is that of adolescence or paradise lost. Innocence disappears and humour reflects the tensions and ambiguities of our existence. Here humour fulfils two important functions: an iconoclastic one, reminding us of our own awkwardness, of our being made of opposite elements, and a cathartic one, allowing us to accept and cope with our inner contradictions. Humour thus proves to have a great therapeutic value, since very often the non-acceptance of our ambiguities can lead to physical or mental illness, violence or suicide¹³: «Instead of these energies bursting forth in anger or hostility or agony, they burst forth in laughter and enjoyment.» (88) Thus the laughter of paradise lost allows us to come to terms with the fallibility of human condition:

Through humor we acknowledge the infinite human capacity for getting it wrong, sometimes intentionally, often unintentionally. While our pride and official poses present a different picture, we are beset by all manner of faults and foibles. In humor we confess, as it were, our foolishness, or at least other people's foolishness, and perhaps foolishness as a general human problem of which we are an occasional example. (88).

The humorist and those who possess the common spirit will not be destroyed or controlled by the forces that oppress and threaten them. They will contemplate the dark and harsh side of life, accept it and at the same time transcend it to celebrate life and the gift of life: «Where there is humor there is still hope.» (91).

Finally, we have the laughter of maturity, of paradise regained, which is the most difficult to achieve. It is the laughter that is beyond good and evil and that is generated not by inner tensions but by inner harmony. The doubts, anxieties, animosities of everyday life are replaced by a deep sense of security and the acceptance of the others with their faults virtues and vices. The element of judgment or, in other words, the iconoclastic function of humour disappears, giving way to mercy and compassion: «It is therefore capable of becoming, in the purest sense, the humor of love.» (92) The

¹³ In the last decades psychologists and psychiatrists have been particularly interested in the way humour is used by individuals to cope with life. In 1983 Martin and Lefcourt developed the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) to measure the extent to which people employ humour to deal with problems in general and in 1984 they created the Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ) to analyse how often humour is used in specific situations. The efficacy of these tests has been extensively validated and they have provided scholars with interesting data on the role that humour plays in man's life. Thus people with a sense of humour tend to be more self-confident, extraverted, optimist, realist, flexible and capable of distancing themselves from their problems, thus being better prepared to face stressful situations.

Since humour is so beneficial to mental health some psychotherapists have developed techniques to teach their patients a humorous attitude toward life. They believe that people can better cope with their problems if they are capable of perceiving their ironic dimension and enjoy existential paradoxes. They also defend that humour can help patients increase their self-esteem by making them recognize their own absurdity. For further information see: *Humor and Laughter. Theory, Research and Applications*, ed. by Antony J. Chapman & Hugh C. Foot, «Coping with Stress, Self-Concept, and Psychological Well-Being», by Rod A. Martin, Nicholas A. Kuiper, L. Joan Olinger & Kathryn A. Dance, «Humor and Chaos», by William F. Fry, «Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Magic of Humour» and «Laughter: Is It the Best Medicine?», by William F. Fry Jr., *Laughter and Liberation*, by Harvey Mindess.

distances between people are reduced and softened and our only desire is to share our laughter with others. The elements of malice, aggression or denigration have faded away: «Instead of a discharge of tensions and thwarted energies, what is discharged is good will.» (93) We recover the children's capacity to forgive and forget what would be unforgivable and unforgettable in the adult world. Children can have the worst quarrels but after a few hours or even minutes are playing together again as if nothing had happened.

The laughter of paradise regained is also the laughter of humility, because here the humorist not only laughs at others but is also willing to laugh at himself. He is aware of the fact that he has the same desires and temptations as anyone else and shares in a common nature. Unlike the satirical, ironic or witty creator, the humorist will not elevate himself at the expense of others and thus will be able to fulfil a redemptive function.

It is obvious from Hyers's classification of laughter that Henry possesses the highest level. He is humble enough to laugh at himself. Like a child, he is capable of forgetting and forgive those who have tried to harm or kill him. Thus, for example, when he comes back to New York, he asks after Mildred, although she had deceived him by making him believe that she was working for him, when in fact she was on Johnny No's side and therefore paved the way for his attempt to kill Henry. Admiringly enough he does not hold a grudge against her: «Mildred had tried to kill me but that seemed like a long time ago, and I wasn't dead.» (255) This explains how incomprehensible it is for him that someone like Kellet may be looking for him after all those years in order to execute him. He cannot understand how people can get stuck in their own past and be incapable of overcoming it. Most importantly, Henry never loses hope, never allows the dark episodes of his life to crush him down. Like the humorist he never loses the will to live and the determination to struggle. He knows, in other words, that where there is humour there is hope, which explains why when someone asks him if he believes in free speech, he answers: «It's a good idea, I said. — But I don't believe in anything...I can hope and wish, I told him. — But I never believe.» (83) And it is precisely this refusal to be destroyed by the most tragic circumstances that keeps him alive and sane. This becomes more obvious at the end of the novel when completely alone, having lost his two dear children and not knowing where the woman he loves is, is still capable of looking forward into the future with optimism:

I was going. Home? I doubted that. But I was ready to get right up and go there. I'd walk, old man, back from the dead, broken old man, with a leg of cheap wood; I'd walk right out of the desert. I'd walk across America, east, back the way I'd come. I'd walk on the ocean. Back. And I was going to tell my story. I was alive, still fighting.
I was alive. I was forty-five. I was Henry Smart. (374).

Henry Smart shows his magnanimity and humility not only in his willingness to laugh at himself, but also in his recognition that his whole life has been controlled and guided by women. They have always make him aware of his reality, or, in other words, reminded him that he is made of clay, and told him what is best for him. Thus the traditional roles of the hero and the heroine are reversed and instead of having a hero who saves the delicate princess from all the dangers that threaten her, we find a heroine who is always in charge of

the situation and takes her lover out of all his troubles. The tragic paradigm of the wise and courageous male versus the weak female who is in need of constant guidance is fully deconstructed. Henry admits that his real friends have been always women and that they have known him much better than anyone else, including himself: «My only real friends had been women; I could always talk to women. I missed Piano Annie. I missed old Missis O'Shea. I even missed the old witch, Granny Nash. She'd always known what I was up to; she probably still did. And, Christ, I missed Miss O'Shea.» (138-9).

The first woman he has a relationship with in America is the half-sister, a woman sure of herself and with very clear ideas about what she wants to do with her life. She has ambition «in spades» and nothing will prevent her from getting what she wants:

Her strength was her unshakeability. She believed, absolutely, in nothing. But herself. Her head, her body. Her temple. Her tits, her face, her mind, breath, cunt, eyes, future, legs, her teeth, her choices, her wrists. The world was what she saw and came to her, and what she could make come to her. *Every day, in ev-ery way.* She believed in the power of her arse. She slapped it and got me to slap it. She loved the smack and sting, the proof that it was hers. She knew what it could do. One well-aimed swing could bring you fortune, fame, a bed for the night. She believed. (119).

And she really achieves her aims. She finds the Divine Church of the Here and Now of which she is the high priestess. Whole crowds come to her celebrations on Sunday to listen to a woman who tells them to «Eat, drink, fuck. God loves it, you know.» (279) Unlike other religions, hers does not promise an alterlife where everything will be great and wonderful, but encourages people to enjoy the present moment, the here and now¹⁴. And the important thing is that, unlike Henry Smart, who is always restless but never really knows where he is aiming his steps, she knows all the time what she is doing. This explains why their relationship is based not on egalitarian principles, but on the dominance of the half-sister over Henry. Even in sexual matters she decides when yes and when no. Thus, for instance, when they become partners and Henry Smart suggests that they should «celebrate» it, she answers: «I don't think so, daddy, she said...Cos I'm the partner who's been doing all the partnering.» (101).

Very often Henry is like a child who is lost and needs someone to give him a basic lesson on life. The half-sister willingly fulfils this didactic function and she herself uses expressions such as «lesson over» or «So, back to school» (42) Sometimes during this «training» Henry behaves like a spoilt child merely obsessed with getting what he wants and not really listening to what the half-sister is explaining to him:

Lesson over.
...
I was disappointed with the ending.
How come? she said. - Expect it to end in a fuck?
That would've been nice.

¹⁴ The half-sister's celebration of the simple aspects of life is very revealing, because it links her with the true comic spirit who is not looking for ideal worlds but accepts reality as it is and enjoys the common pleasures of everyday life.

Oh, come on, daddio. You know me better than that. You wanted education, and you got it. In spades. Better than the book. You want me, it's a different proposition. You knew that. I know you did. I prey on weakness. You know that. I'm being straight with you. Always. (44).

Unlike the tragic hero who incarnates perfection specially in the field of reason, Henry Smart proves to be a slow student to whom everything has to be explained and who very often does not get the true meaning of what he is being told, like when the half-sister tries to make it clear to him why there are not any priests in her church and he seems to be missing the point all the time. When they become partners, which of course is her decision and not his, she is the one who controls the situation. She is the «barker», the own who tells people what they lack and want and who gets form them whatever she wishes, while at the same time paves the way for Henry so that the same people she has «robbed» will open their doors to him to let him sort out their teeth and water. And all the time she is ahead of him. He never really gets the point of what they are doing together and misses everything she does behind his back in order to consolidate her power in Sweet Afton, like going to bed with Norris. As he himself recognizes: «I'd never catch up.» (125) She is the one who always leads the way and he the poor «eejit» who, without being aware of it, just follows her orders. So, for instance, when they meet again in New York in Rockwell's office it is the half-sister who leaves the place first and forces Henry to pursue her through the streets of the big city till he finds her in a cafeteria, calmly waiting for him: «I hit the glass hard and the woman in the window took my collision like she'd been expecting me. She didn't blink and the small smile didn't shift or quiver.» (275).

But the interesting thing is that Henry does not resent the half-sister's intellectual superiority, her wit, her instinct, but really admires her for possessing these qualities: «She was back, herself again. Hard as fuckin' nails, soft as she needed to be; familiar and fuckin' magnificent.» (286) It really takes a great deal of courage and magnanimity in the late twenties and early thirties for a man to celebrate a woman's excellence and accept one's limitations and foolishness. Thus once again Smart is incarnating the wisdom of the comic hero who is aware of the fact that we are made of opposites and that the notion of the perfect warrior is just an impossible ideal.

But Henry's relationship with the half-sister not only subverts the notion of the tragic hero by creating a male character who is subordinated to the heroine, but also by transforming her in his saviour and not the other way round as it usually happens in the epic or historical tales. When Johnny No is about to kill him, she takes control of the situation, giving orders to Johnny No, Mildred, the other lads and Henry himself, and makes it possible for her and Henry to escape safe and alive: «She looked at me, barked an order I couldn't hear but understood.» (94) They settle down in Sweet Afton and start again but his happiness does not last long. Norris who is resentful with Henry for taking out his healthy tooth with a pair of pliers stolen from his store, proposes to hand him over to the people who are after him in New York. As usual, Henry does not realize what is going on and it is the half-sister who warns him that Norris is up to something: «She just knew it was coming; she'd seen Norris face. She warned me, but I was too thick to hear.» (121) She finds out what his plan really is and tells Henry that he has to leave the village immediately if he wants to save his skin. He carries out all her orders, including how he should escape:

The engine passed. I waited, ran. Got down on my gut at the track, and waited. A clacking wheel went past my face. I rolled. My back hit the track; I was under, and grabbed.

...I watched the tracks fall apart and come together, fall apart and come together. I held on for hours. I slept - and woke. Still there, still crawling. Blood in my mouth, my hands were gone. I held on.

Because she'd told me to. (126).

When after a time they meet again in New York, it is again the half-sister who helps him out of his trouble. The night they go together to listen to Armstrong's music in Connie's Inn Henry finds himself unexpectedly surrounded by all his enemies, both the American and the Irish. He feels trapped and does not know what to do, but realizes that «My only hope was the half-sister.» (304) And, as a matter of fact, she is the one who makes it possible for him to escape from a sure death by exploiting her power of seduction as Sister Florence to disarm Henry's persecutors. With great irony the narrator affirms: «She was filling the corridor of Connie's Inn, saving me from the bad guys.» (310) Even his friend Armstrong laughs at our hero's limitations in situations of danger, like the one he is experiencing right now. Thus when Henry says that he will be alright, that he can control the enemies who are blocking his way, Armstrong cannot help smiling and exclaims «Sure you will», knowing perfectly well that without his help and the half-sister's he will be a dead body.

If the relationship between the half-sister and Henry subverts the traditional male/female roles so does his marriage to Miss O'Shea. Instead of a submissive wife and an authoritarian husband we find a dutiful and obedient man and a dominant, aggressive woman. Miss O'Shea has been Henry's first and only teacher at school and their union is founded precisely on a tutor/child basis. As a matter of fact, he never uses her Christian name when addressing her. It is true that he does not know it, but he prefers to go on ignoring it in order not to destroy the spell of their marriage. When they meet again after six years their conversation resembles that of an adult scolding a child:

Where were you?
I held her waist. She slapped.
Answer me!
Yes, Miss.
Answer me!
She dropped her weight down on me, pushed. Her hair washed over me, out of the bun; her teeth and tongue.
Piddling on my clean windows, yeh pup.
Sorry, Miss. (193).

Even when she saves him from Kellet, she acts like a mother who is telling her child what to do and who does not miss the opportunity to rebuke him for his behaviour, thus transforming a melodramatic scene into a totally comic one:

She kicked me again.
Get up like I told you. The state of you; you're a disgrace.
...

Get your clothes on.
 ...
 I'll need help with the laces, I told her.
 ...
 What age are you?
 Nearly thirty, I said.
 She slapped my shin.
 And you can't tie your own laces? (336-7).

The irony of the whole situation is that while Henry is having what is supposed to be his last conversation with Kellet, he believes all the time that he will find a way to free himself from his captor, something the reader and the narrator know is impossible: «It was up to me; something would have to happen. I stepped, barefoot, to the nearest wall, and I still believed. It would happen. This wasn't the ending at all.» (335) Once again the narrator, that is to say, the older Henry Smart, is laughing at himself and this dreams of playing a heroic role in a dramatic situation, when it is obvious that he has no chance.

Like the half-sister, Miss O'Shea has her feet on the ground and tries to drag Henry down to the real world and make him face his real situation. Thus when Henry says that he has to go away with Louis Armstrong because the trumpeter is not safe in Chicago and it is his job to look after him, Miss O'Shea tries to destroy the mystifying way in which Henry contemplates his relationship with Louis by drawing his attention to the fact that the musician does not really need him, that he is not fulfilling any heroic role:

The poor suffering eejit, that he can't look after himself.
 It's complicated.
 I'm sure it's complicated.
 Okay.
 Looking after a black man, instead of your own family. (228).

She even makes fun of his «extraordinary» deeds as an Irish rebel by explaining to him that she has told their daughter he killed many people in Ireland «So she'd be proud of you. You were dead.» (227) Like the half-sister Miss O'Shea is always ahead of him and he knows and accepts it without resentment. When he comes back to Chicago with the intention of returning to Ireland with his wife and daughter he discovers that they have left the day before and immediately realizes that it will be impossible for him to find them unless Miss O'Shea decides so: «She was doing the hiding, and she'd be better at it than I'd been. I'd never find her.» (319) In contrast to our hero, Miss O'Shea is an extraordinary human being: «She was beautiful, still beautiful; her profile there was what I'd always loved. The way she stared, examined what she saw. The look of a woman who believed in things. A woman who expected good to come at her. Who, for the time being, didn't have to look at me.» (203) She is a woman of great courage who has spent the last six years looking for her husband, following him all around the place, defending herself from those men who did not believe her when she told them that she was married and having to leave her little daughter for a while with her grandmother. She is resentful of Henry, the great Irish hero, who has not even made the effort to find her: «She stared at me, with a hardness I hadn't seen before, or couldn't remember.» (198) She does not

mind him having had affairs with other women throughout this long period, because she is aware of his limitations —«But I know the kind you are.» (205)— but scolds him for his lack of devotion for her, for his apparent indifference in these six years, during which he has sent no letters or telegrams or made a phone call. Henry expects her to fall apart, to be overwhelmed by emotion, but she is strong enough to confront the situation without becoming trapped in the role of the weak, delicate female: «I wished she'd cry now, and it would be over. We'd hug and more than likely ride again; we'd be back on our way, and happy. But she didn't cry and she wasn't going to.» (200) Instead she gets up, goes for him and nearly kills him. And when the lady Miss O'Shea's works for enters the house with Saoirse and interrupts the fight, she is the first one to regain control: «Hair on the floor, blood on her hands - she looked like she'd been doing the cleaning, just a bit put out because there was more to it than she'd expected. But not like a woman who'd been murdering her husband when the boss walked in.» (206) Our hero can only «straightened as much as I could manage.» (207).

In this unconventional marriage the protector, the one who infuses hope and confidence is Miss O'Shea and Henry Smart has the wisdom to accept this reality by affirming that when he is with her he is «ready again for anything.» (208) That is why when she saves Henry from Kellet and they are on the run again like in the old days, trying to survive by whatever means, be it deceit or theft, she is always the one who decides for both of them. He knows that she is the wisest of the couple and does not mind her taking all the decisions: she is the one who makes sure that they do not live in a house because she knows that the whole family will be happier living like vagabonds; she is the one who realizes that it is safer to stay out of California because there are too many cities and the «enemy» may be waiting for Henry; she is the one who maintains them alive and with a full belly:

We'd nothing and nowhere, but Miss O'Shea saved us before we knew we needed saving.
We took to theft; we went right back to crime.
There's them that can afford to be robbed, she said. - And it's no sin.
Yes, Miss. (351).

But above all, she is the one who saves Henry from sadness and depression when he starts comparing his present situation with his terrible childhood in Ireland. When she realizes that Henry's hope is extinguishing itself, she is the one who rekindles it by telling him that she has this great plan to free America: «I believed her.» (354) And although precisely when they start this wonderful adventure they get separated, Henry hears wherever he goes stories of this extraordinary woman who robs banks with the help of her children for the Oklahoma Republican Army and is capable by means of her defiant and unconventional behaviour to give hope, courage and comfort to the workers, the dispossessed and the desperadoes. Henry listens to all these stories about his wife, knowing that she is using them to tell him to catch up and hurry, but he knows that «I'd never find her, no more than I'd find Billy the Kid or the Croppy Boy.» (358) Even till the very end Miss O'Shea is the one who makes decisions and guides Henry's life.

At this stage it is important to point out that although Henry has his grand visions and schemes and is always thinking of building high towers to heaven, he is nevertheless

aware of the intrinsic power and mystery of the present moment and the world of the commonplace. In other words, although he tries to spend some time up in the mountains, he has learnt how to come to terms with that valley that represents everyday life. He knows that there is something special and enchanting in all the common things that surround him and thus possesses the simpleton's wisdom to take pleasure in the ordinary. In spite of his restless quest for improvement and success he firmly believes that the wondrous and the marvellous is to be found in the simple acts of everyday life: sexual companionship, begetting children, family welfare, food, etc.:

The real hero of our time is the common person...Our hero is the simple non-hero, like Ferdinand the bull, who is content to sit under his cork tree and sniff flowers. And although he may be stimulated to the most heroic displays and frenzied abandon by the sting of some bumblebee, he will return to the simple wonder of sniffing daisies under his marvelous tree. (Hyers, 1996: 211).

This explains why in the middle of the half-sister's lesson about how to succeed in life he is more worried about having sex with her than about listening carefully to her words in order to assimilate her instructions and thus become someone important; why when he thinks of his return to Ireland, the only image he can produce is that of him strolling with his wife and daughter through the streets of Dublin; why what he finds most exciting about his travelling with his family throughout America is not so much the adventures they experience, but the simple fact of enjoying family life; etc.

We have been analysing how unlike the traditional tragic hero, who incarnates both mental and physical perfection, Henry Smart loves being with women who are superior to him and open his eyes to reality. This explains why he enjoys so much having a liaison with Dora, a fine negress whom he defines as «My latest teacher, presenting me with nothing but the facts.» (139) Dora is always rebuking him for his folly, for his blindness, for not being able to understand or grasp the unwritten rules that govern the relationships between black and white people after three or four years in America. Like O'Shea and the half-sister, she has to explain everything to him and his lack of attention, his inability to focalise and see things as they are, very often exasperate her. Thus when she is trying to explain to him that the reason they can only meet on Monday is because this is the «coloured night»: «That right, she said. - Monday. Because I wouldn't be there Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday. And if you say, Why not, I'll tear your balls off and throw them down to the street.» (140) Dora spends most of the time stopping his daydreaming and bringing him down to earth. When he enthusiastically says that they are made for each other, she realistically answers: «No, she said. - We were not.» (147) When she tells Henry that she will not pretend to be white any more - her skin is whiter than that of other negroes - and therefore will have to do the jobs assigned to black women, such as cleaning houses, Henry romantically exclaims that now that she has accepted to be just Dora she will be happier, which of course infuriates Dora: «Don't be so dumb, Henry S.» (143).

But as with the half-sister and Miss O'Shea, the interesting thing is that Henry Smart loves being told off, enjoys being with women who are capable of confronting him and putting him in his place: «She was terrifying and marvellous.» (140) And of course

she, like the other women in Henry's life, has to use her wit and courage to save him from a certain death. When they go to a club to listen to Armstrong and Henry gets in trouble with a dangerous big guy, Dora is the one who rescues him:

I could tell: he'd nothing else to say. He was spent or he was building up to shoot me. But Dora was between us, tits on his gun arm. She was talking to him too, but I couldn't hear words - there was some kind of riot going on behind, around us. He had to take his hand from his pocket; he had to step back to get out from under Dora. He didn't want to - he was confused and delighted; she was a silver wall between us. (154).

Dora who has plucked all her courage to help Henry, since she is totally terrified and scared, becomes really furious with Henry when he disobeys her order to leave the club and put both of them in danger. Again it is someone else, in this case Louis Armstrong, who saves Henry, a hero who «incredibly» enough can never protect himself.

We have been analysing how one of the main roles of women in *Oh, Play That Thing* is to destroy Henry's delusions and make him come to terms with his own reality. And this is specially obvious in his obsession with getting rid of his Irish identity and becoming a true Yank. Of course his dream is ridiculous and impossible to fulfil, but he really believes that he will achieve his aim. He cannot understand that it is impossible to escape from your own past, specially a past like his, and this is why his women are always making fun of his desire to behave, think, feel and talk like an American. Thus when Dora asks him if he wants to meet Louis Armstrong, she cannot help being totally ironic:

You never know, she said. - Maybe he can cure you being Irish.
He already has, I said.
No, brother, she said. - Ain't that easy. (141).

Dora is obviously teasing him by treating the condition of being Irish as if it were a kind of illness, but the interesting thing is that Henry does not see it and answers very seriously that Armstrong has already cured him.

The half-sister's attitude towards Henry's dream of becoming a true American is also fully ironical. When she asks him if he is still Irish and he answers that he tries not to, her remark cannot be any sharper: «Try harder.» (279) Hettie, another woman with whom he becomes involved although in a platonic way, cannot help laughing when she sees Henry again after a long time. He is now working for Armstrong and she affirms that he walks and dresses like an African, which of course is totally ludicrous in a white man. But the «poor» Henry does not see it that way and does not get the real meaning of what Hettie is telling him. He just feels very proud of himself because he thinks that finally his wish has become true: «That was fine. I didn't walk like an Irishman. I was getting there, and I hadn't even noticed. The music had gotten right into me and I'd become a walking American.» (254).

Although the younger Smart does not perceive how foolish it is to desire to become American, the older one, that is to say, the narrator, is capable of acknowledging his mistakes: «I took care; I even noticed - but I still didn't get it. I'd spent three years trying not to be Irish, but I didn't understand. I thought I did, but I was never close enough.» (143) He even laughs at his obsession with talking like a Yank:

What's your own name, baby? I asked her.
I could say *baby*, now; I was American. (135).

In *The Spirituality of Comedy* Hyers affirms that whereas tragedies always end in darkness, comedies, even those which end ambiguously or in defeat, always rekindle our hope. The comic spirit does not ignore suffering and disappointment, but is capable of transcending it with its stubborn affirmation and celebration of life. The comic spirit takes even the darkest situations in more than one way and thus avoids being crushed down by disillusionment, by the failure to achieve all plans and objectives. The comic hero is capable of straightening up and rising above the ups and down of life. He is like «the child's toy that is weighted at the bottom and painted with the face of a clown or some humorous character which, however struck down or laid to rest, bobs straight up again.» (166) We may admire the tragic hero for his courage and tenacity, but no small courage and size of soul is required to celebrate life in spite of its defeats. And Henry proves to possess this exceptional courage when at the end of the novel and in spite of having lost his two children, not knowing what has happened to his wife and not having made any of his dreams come true, decides that life is still a game worth playing and looks forward into the future with optimism.

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