Border-crossing Laughter: Humor in the Short Fiction of Mark Twain, Mikhail Naimy, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emile Habiby

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature

Chapel Hill
2010

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ABSTRACT

RANIA CHELALA: Border-crossing Laughter: Humor in the Short Fiction of Mark Twain, Mikhail Naimy, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emile Habiby

(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

This comparative literature project traces humor strategies in the short fiction of two American writers: Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), and two Arab writers: Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988) and Emile Habiby (1922-1996). The humor in the selected stories transcends the limitations of time, literary traditions, and culturally-grounded notions of what is funny. I examine key elements of humor that are structural and translatable. The four writers use comparable humor strategies such as incongruities, multiple or third person deadpan narrators, humorous repetition, reciprocal interference, metanarrative disruptions and diffuse disjunctions. Humor in these literary texts is not only about the presence of lighthearted jokes; serious texts that deal with incongruities causing laughter are also humorous. The reader’s reactions to these stories vary from laughter to a placid smile or laughter through tears. These physical reactions to humor are one criterion for humor in the stories, and their variety challenges the reader’s notion of the funny. This inductive close reading of the stories is supported by mini-theories drawn from humor and translation studies to better understand the stories. The first chapter introduces the comparative and humor grounds of this dissertation and the choice of writers. In the second chapter, I reread five short stories from the canon of Mark Twain and discuss the humor strategies that he shares with the other three writers as well as the unique humor methods that Twain uses and that are relevant to the discussion of the stories. In the third chapter, I uncover the humor in four short stories written by Lebanese writer Mikhail Naimy, and in discussing the humor strategies I also focus on questions of translatability in humor. The fourth chapter focuses on three humorous stories by Edgar Allan Poe. Taking into consideration Poe’s horror writing, I argue that his humor strategies transcend limits of time and culture. In the fifth chapter, I study four stories by the Palestinian writer, Emile Habiby from his last tale drawing on comparable and unique humor strategies. The final chapter focuses on the broader implications and recommendations for this new approach to a comparative humor study.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The challenges I faced from researching to polishing this dissertation did not stop me from completing this task because I have been lucky to have the amazing support of professors, friends, and family. Thank you all for giving me strength and energy.

The reason I came to UNC in 2003 was to work with you Prof. Wagner-Martin. In the midst of very busy years, your faith in my academic abilities and your advices shaped me as an academic and a human being. With your help, I learned to find my voice and to communicate complex ideas in simple sentences. Thank you.

I also owe thanks to the rest of my committee, your support, questions, and suggestions made this dissertation a better work.

To my friends Carrie, Margaret, and Kara, you helped me succeed because you cared. You supported me over the span of many years and especially when my world was in jeopardy. Your friendship made the ‘laughter heard round the world.’ Thank you.

To all my friends and relatives who came over, called or emailed, especially Nadine, Katy, Ania, Marina, and to my great cousins Paul, Fida, and Tammy. You all said the right words at the right times and supported me through my graduate years. You rock!

I also dedicate this dissertation to my mother Antoinette, and my sisters Roula, Jocelyne, Josephine, and my nieces Grace and Joyce. Your faith, love, and strength made me the person I am today, thank you tons. I know ‘Lattouf,’ my father, is watching over me too. This success is ours, it is time we celebrate. I love you all very much.

To Georges, we went through a very tough first year of marriage, but your remarkable strength, unconditional love, and incredible optimism kept me going towards realizing this dream. Ti amo tantissimo.
Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

  Literary Humor ....................................................................................................................... 3
  Choice of authors .................................................................................................................. 5
  The status of laughter in humor studies ............................................................................. 6
  Humor studies: theory and method .................................................................................. 10
  Comparative humor studies: theory and method .......................................................... 15
  Chapter summaries ........................................................................................................... 16
  Notes: Introduction ............................................................................................................. 23

Chapter II. Rereading Mark Twain, the Great American Humorist ......................... 26

  Mark Twain: American Humorist ..................................................................................... 28
  The humor strategies .......................................................................................................... 33
  “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” ................................................................................ 34
  “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story” ............................................................... 41
  The good boy and the bad boy stories ............................................................................ 46
  “The Stolen White Elephant” .......................................................................................... 53
  Twain: performance and persona ................................................................................... 60
  Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 64
  Notes: Twain ....................................................................................................................... 66

Chapter III. Uncovering the Humor in Selected Short Fiction of Mikhail Naimy .......... 67

  Mikhail Naimy: the writer .................................................................................................. 69
  Plan of the chapter ............................................................................................................. 74
“Her Finest Hour”.................................................................76

“Um Ya’qub’s Chickens”.......................................................86

“The Present”.........................................................................92

“Bancarolia”...........................................................................97

The concept of laughter through tears..............................100

Conclusion.............................................................................103

Notes: Naimy.........................................................................104

IV. The Horror of Humor: Pushing the Limits of the Comic in the Stories
    of Edgar Allan Poe.............................................................105

    Edgar Allan Poe: a horror and humor writer..................106

    “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether”........114

    “Lionizing”.........................................................................120

    “Why the Frenchman Wears his Arm in a Sling”...........127

    Notes: Poe........................................................................132

V. Framing Humor in Selected Tales of Emile Habiby..........133

    Emile Habiby: the writer...................................................134

    Who is Saraya?.................................................................138

    Who is Abdallah?............................................................142

    “The Oration”.................................................................145

    “The Museum Story”.......................................................148

    “The Story of Inas’s Haircut”..........................................152

    “The Son’s Letter”..........................................................155

    Language, translation, and humor..................................157

    Notes: Habiby.................................................................164
VI. Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 169

Summary of stories in relation to humor strategies ........ 169

Implications and recommendations for future research ... 172

Works Consulted ....................................................................................................... 177
This comparative literature project traces humor strategies in the short fiction of two American writers: Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), and two Arab writers: Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988) and Emile Habiby (1922-1996). Their stories transcend the limitations of time, literary traditions, and culturally-grounded notions of what is funny. Regardless of their origin, texts by these writers demonstrate similar means of constructing humor. The stories I examine use comparable multiple narrators or deadpan third person narration, along with humorous descriptions, repetition, incongruities, and concepts from gallows humor. Furthermore, these texts share reciprocal interference; that is, they juxtapose two separate narrative strands that can be understood two different ways at the same time. An additional humor strategy these stories have in common is metanarrative disruptions, or when “the narrator’s comments effectively ‘sabotage’ the narrative” (Attardo 96). Diffuse disjunctions (or ironies) are other humor techniques that occur in these stories. The various forms of laughter that these stories generate are part of their humor. In this study, contextualizing the stories is important, but moving these stories from one culture to another does not undermine these authors' humor strategies. These stories are humorous regardless of the language and the cultures they belong to. While
some of the humor is lost (especially verbal humor) when a story is translated into a new literary tradition, in the case of Mark Twain, Mikhail Naimy, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emile Habiby, my argument is that the richness of their stories allows multiple interpretations. This reading of their humor strategies underscores qualities of the stories that move them beyond American and Arabic literary traditions. These stories are humorous whether we read them in English, Arabic, French, or any other language. In comparing them, I am placing them in the context of world literature. In addition, this dissertation reveals their qualities with respect to humor that make these texts exceptional.

As the humor in the Twain, Naimy, Poe, and Habiby stories travels across broader linguistic, cultural and temporal boundaries, it changes but does not fall flat. When these stories are read outside their original literary traditions in translated versions, readers can find humor in them even if the readers lack background knowledge of the culture and of the literary traditions of the stories. The success of the translated versions of the stories—the laughter they occasion—constitutes evidence of humor strategies that are not dependent on any one cultural context. For instance, an Arabic version of Poe’s “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” still retains some of its humor for Lebanese or Egyptian readers due to the strategies Poe employed in writing the story. Even if the readers of the translation don’t know about Poe’s historical, linguistic, and literary contexts, the humor is not completely lost.

Although humor is often culturally based, in the case of these four writers, the humor can be translatable because it frequently lies in the way the story is
told rather than in the content. So while the content is sometimes lost in translation (verbal humor, including idioms, is usually lost), the manner of the telling, including, for example, incongruities and dramatic ironies, is still accessible to all readers. Translation helps us discover that key elements of humor are structural. Comparing translations with original texts is one of the ways to determine the qualities that allow these texts to travel across borders with much of their humor intact. What is it about the texts of Twain, Naimy, Poe, and Habiby that enables their humor to transcend the boundaries of time, literary traditions, and culturally grounded notions of what is funny? What, ultimately, is humorous about these stories and leads readers to laugh or cry? What is the value of studying humor strategies across times and places? This dissertation provides answers to these questions and is among the first in humor studies to illustrate a universal language of humor that crosses cultural and historical boundaries. A further goal of this study is to juxtapose writers that are prominent within their respective literary traditions, but who have never been studied together. The result is a better understanding of all the writers’ stories in relation to each other.

LITERARY HUMOR

In general, humor literature has struggled with the stigma of being a source of laughter and therefore being considered not a serious work of literature. But, these four writers are serious even when they work with frivolous topics. In fact, Poe and Twain both struggled with this stigma in their lifetimes. Poe frequently developed his horror stories by first writing them as humorous
pieces, only to discard the humorous ones because publishers would take only horror stories. Primarily interested in the economic benefit he could get for his writing, Poe knew the horror pieces would bring in the money, not the humor. Twain also gravitated towards the humorous, and as a consequence, his writing was at first devalued by critics. However, he was slowly able to overcome this stigma and today his carefully crafted stories are considered great examples of American literature.

In contrast to the American writers, one of the Arabic writers, Habiby, was and is currently well known for the humorous aspects of his writing, particularly his irony and sarcasm. While Naimy never called himself a humorist, a reading of his selected stories uncovers certain humor strategies that he shares with the other three writers. My reading of the Naimy stories does not undermine him as a serious writer, but it adds to the reader’s awareness of a layer of humor in his stories.

The early stigma against humorous writing that Poe and Twain experienced was also apparent in critical circles. Many scholars over the years have assumed that the subject matter of humorous writing is not a serious topic for academia. It followed that all studies of humor in literary texts formerly started with an apology (Paul Lewis, Michael Cart, and Gerard Matte). However, some ground has been gained recently in awareness of humor as an academic topic. Critics have recently established that humor in a literary text is not only about the presence of jokes and lighthearted topics. They argue that a text is humorous because it shows the reader incongruities, which seldom cause laughter, but are
humorous anyway. This distinction between what is serious and what is humorous has been a long debated issue in the circles of humor literature and theory studies.

The comparison of the humor techniques of these writers both helps us understand the stories themselves and start a conversation about what constitutes humor literature across cultural and historical boundaries. Twain’s, Naimy’s, Poe’s and Habiby’s writing add to the ongoing debate between what is serious and what is humorous, because these writers share universal qualities of humor strategies, while also maintaining their own unique approaches to their humor. These writers’ unique uses of fun and funny topics do not undermine their contribution to a universal notion of humor because their writing also emphasizes that humor is revealed in the manner of telling rather than in the content. I study the implications and purposes of humor to uncover the major underlying messages in these stories. But the focus of this dissertation is on the writers’ techniques, not the messages in and of themselves. Their shared universal qualities of humor strategies, viewed together, reveal the important role humor plays in literature that, until recently, has been largely ignored by critics.

CHOICE OF AUTHORS:

This dissertation compares four writers who are major figures in their respective literary traditions and who can also be understood as humor writers. Most of their stories here have been studied in the context of humor. In the case of Mark Twain, whose humor has been exhaustively studied, I provide a new reading. Both his canonical and minor stories merit a new close reading
emphasizing his humor strategies. Through his writing, Twain laid the groundwork for humor as a respected American literary genre. Like Twain, Poe is recognized as a major writer in American literature. Although he is best known as a horror writer, half his literary output is humor. In the Arabic literary context, Mikhail Naimy is a prominent Lebanese writer whose contributions to Modern Arabic literature are significant. An author of poetry, prose, and literary criticism, his work has stood the test of time in Lebanese and Arabic literary traditions. Although Naimy is an acclaimed writer of serious works, I argue that reading his stories through humor theory reveals him to be a humor writer. In contrast to Naimy, however, Emile Habiby is known for his satire and sarcasm, and his work reflects humor strategies similar to that of Poe, Naimy, and Twain.

I chose these four writers because their stories share so many of the same humor strategies. Other writers share some of these similarities, but for the purpose of this study, Twain, Naimy, Poe, and Habiby display an exemplary use of humor strategies. These stories defy the limitations of cultural contexts and prove that not all humor falls flat when the stories belong to different time periods, when the cultural context is missing, or when they are translated into new literary traditions.

THE STATUS OF LAUGHTER IN HUMOR STUDIES

At best, humor can be seen as an epistemological view of the world rather than a literary genre (Collins). Although a single definition of humor does not exist, most critics seem to agree that humor in a written text causes laughter, a physical reaction to the incongruities that readers grasp. This explanation usually
comes with an additional warning that any change in the temporal or cultural
context changes the level of laughter generated by the text. Despite these
limitations, I argue that the humor strategies studied here, such as incongruities
and ironies, keep the stories humorous.

Laughter has been considered the common cultural notion of the reader's
reaction to what is funny in humor. Nevertheless, laughter depends on the ability
of the reader to capture and understand the humor. Many humor critics have
been concerned with "the problem of distinguishing both conceptually and
operationally between humor and laughter" (Lewis, Comic 1). Because these
humor critics have been unable to separate humor from laughter, they tend to
conflate the two. This conflation is problematic because humorous stories can
generate responses other than laughter. The theorist James F. English resolved
this problem by characterizing laughter as "a response to some humorous and
some non-humorous stimuli" (Lewis, Comic 8). Because laughter is only a
physiological reaction to humor, and because it varies greatly among readers, it
cannot be the only element for judging humor in a literary text.

In addition, laughter can take many forms and cannot be solely attributed
to humor. As Katrina Triezenberg affirms:

a person may read a story that he/she finds extremely funny and never
manifest anything greater than a placid Mona Lisa smile —indeed, may
have no outward reaction at all. Conversely, smiling and laughter may be
connected to a great many things different and, perhaps, less pleasant
than humor, such as compatriotism, delight, mirth, desperation, greed,
embarrassment, and triumph. (412)
Humor does not always result in laughter, according to Triezenberg; moreover, laughter may arise for reasons other than humor. Consequently, a total reliance on laughter while discussing humor is a flawed argument. While laughter is a main reaction to most of the stories, mixed reactions such as laughing through tears, whether caused by authorial intentions, reader response, and translation effects, are also valid. This study focuses on the way humor is used in these stories.

Until 2001, most humor theories were solely concerned with analyzing jokes and the effect of laughter on the readers in humorous texts. But in his research into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)², Salvatore Attardo advocates focusing instead on humor in texts that have been so far considered serious. His ideas are most relevant because GTVH provides a formal approach to literary texts in order to locate the humor in them. Attardo defends his theory against “traditional literary criticism,” confirming that “the GTVH provides a formal (non-intuitive) basis to ground the analysis (the semantic analysis of the text and of its humorous properties). Thus, we can say that objectively such and such a stretch of text is humorous, because of such and such factors” (34-5). By providing clear sets of instructions to locate humor and analyze it, Attardo and the proponents of GTVH have increased the number of literary texts that can be called humorous. Following Attardo, I use GTVH to locate humor in the Naimy stories, thereby demonstrating their humorous qualities.

More important to our study is Attardo’s confirmation that humor can be found in serious narratives because humor can be “superimposed on an
essentially serious fabula,” or story (99). In narratology, “the fabula are the events narrated in the text in their chronological order, the plot are the events in the order they are presented in the text” (Attardo 92). This distinction of plot and fabula is important because it explains the structure of a literary text based on a joke. This is the case for Poe’s “System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.” Attardo lists six ways a serious fabula can become humorous: punch lines, central narrative complication, metanarrative disruption, coincidences, hyperdetermined humor, and diffuse disjunction (99). Of the six, the two that impact my study the most include “metanarrative disruption,” when the narrator states something that conflicts with the plot. The second strategy is the “diffuse disjunction,” when the context and the text are incompatible, such as in irony.

Attardo’s formalist approach justifies the inclusion of a vast range of literary texts that have not yet been considered humorous. Triezenberg concurs with Attardo by applying the GTVH theory “to longer humorous texts, those that are not simply jokes, but literature” (411). It follows that humor can result from a single line, a narrator’s comment, or irony. In addition to literary texts based on jokes, humor literature can also take the form of a short story, a play, or a novel. The GTVH formalist, almost scientific, approach to literary texts has tried to restore some academic credibility to humor studies by moving it beyond the mere analysis of jokes and into the realm of a serious study of literature. Although applying a GTVH approach proves the existence of humor in the stories, it is a purely semantic method. GTVH is relevant in explaining the humor in the stories.
In this dissertation, the humor strategies help understand the stories rather than enhance or support a theory like GTVH.

HUMOR STUDIES: THEORY AND METHOD

A brief overview of the trends in humor studies is valuable in order to situate my theoretical framework. Though many major critical studies have been published since Henri Bergson’s *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911), this work remains crucial to all humor studies in understanding the comic, humorous characters, and genre. Bergson is interested in “the way the comic ‘oscillates between life and art,’ [and] he follows ‘the thread that leads from the horseplay of a clown up to the most refined effects of comedy’” (Lewis, *Comic* 2). Relevant to this study are Bergson’s definitions of the comic and the role of an audience. Bergson explains the laughter in humor as “corrective” (8), and his definition is relevant to many of the stories in this study. His definition of the comic requires the “absence of feelings [that] usually accompanies laughter” (4). Furthermore, he claims “the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple,” a view of humor as intellectual rather than emotional (4). According to Bergson, humor happens when audiences see characters as mechanical, or abstractions, rather than as individuals. Therefore, Bergson believes that “our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (4). This definition of the comic as a human intellectual action requiring an audience is complemented by the idea of the mechanical character of humor.
Although life and humor are intertwined, Bergson claims, “the three methods that make the living into the mechanical [creating humor] are repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series” (26; 29). In the process of understanding how inversion and reciprocal inference contribute to the construction of humor, we “proceed from [an] erroneous judgment to the correct one, we waver between the possible meaning and the real, and it is this mental seesaw between two contrary interpretations which is at first apparent in the enjoyment we derive from an equivocal situation” (Bergson 28). In this context of contemplating two contrary situations and enjoying their disparity, Bergson defines inversion as “pictur[ing] to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene” (Bergson 27). While inversion overturns a situation, the reciprocal interference has distinct plot events that can have two different interpretations simultaneously (28). He describes them as “two altogether independent series of events [that are] capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (28). This last strategy, reciprocal interference, is a comparable humor strategy in the four writers’ stories.

Bergson’s ideas on repetition are applicable to the study of Twain, Naimy, Poe, and Habiby stories. According to Bergson, two kinds of repetition turn the living character into an automatic type, thus creating humor. The first is the repetition of a word or sentence. However, since neither of these is “laughable in itself,” Bergson explains, “in a comic repetition of words we generally find two [reactions]: a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring, and an idea that
delights in repressing the feeling anew” (22). In this theory, the function of repetition is in engendering reactions only to control them. The second type of repetition is that of “a situation, that is, a combination of circumstances, which recurs several times in its original form and thus contrasts with the changing stream of life” (Bergson 26). This divergence between the changing events in one’s life and the repetition of a situation in writing creates humor. This use of repetition as a crucial element of humor recurs in the analysis of humor strategies.

This study also uses Katrina Triezenberg’s ideas on repetition. In humorous repetition, that “the same thing is happening over and over defies reality,” and the repetition “may be funnier than the original because the audience knows what is coming. The text can then pretend to hold the audience in suspense, it can glorify and embellish, it can defeat expectations, and any number of other devices” (416). In other words, the repetition creates the reader’s anticipation, building tension between the reader and the text, thus creating humor. Furthermore, “each repetition can be repeated in an artistic and clever way,” as repetition must be used strategically in order to be humorous (416). If repetition is not well crafted, it causes boredom, which challenges the efficacy of the humor. When we laugh because of repetition, “we’re laughing in sheer admiration for the construction of the text” (417).

Humor studies have been divided into three fields: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruities Theory (Shouse 34). Rhetorical and political humor studies have relied on the Superiority Theory because of its clear
objective of seeing humor as abusive and combative. According to this theory, strong persons use humor to weaken others, and conversely weak individuals use mockery and ridicule to bring down the strong. Furthermore, humor studies in psychology usually adopt the Relief Theory, with its central belief that humor has healing potential because it increases and then suddenly eliminates tension. According to Relief Theory, “we laugh at situations that might otherwise cause us pain” (Shouse 38). This practical application of humor has frequently informed writers of humor. However, traditionally, the field of literary studies has relied on the Incongruities Theory to investigate how readers find humor and interact with it. This theory depends mostly on the element of surprise and considers the physical reactions (laughter, smiling) as the result of a mental interaction, with the humor happening in the minds of individuals. I contend that Incongruities Theory is too limited because it focuses on jokes, on the effect of laughter, and on individuals. I suggest it be extended to literary texts, reactions to humor other than laughter, and to groups. In my study, I draw on Bergson’s emphasis on laughter as a group function.

In humor studies, incongruities are frequently the main focus. Many critics agree with Kierkegaard that “the relevant incongruity” is in the “contradiction” (Carroll 154). In addition, Noel Carroll distinguishes five structures that create incongruity, namely:

- presenting things that stand at extreme opposite ends of a scale to one another, mixing categories, presenting a border-line case as a paradigmatic case, breaches of norms of propriety where, for example, an inappropriate, rather than an illogical, behavior is adopted, [and] the incongruity may be rooted in mistaking contraries. (154)
Incongruous humor becomes obvious when two elements within a story contradict each other, or when those elements challenge accepted values. Moreover, readers of incongruities constantly compare opposite images that create the common ground for humorous laughter. In this dissertation, humorous incongruities are the primary humor strategy that the four writers share.

In 2005, drawing on translation theory, Patrick Zabalbeascoa offers a practical guide to translators of humorous texts, which is also relevant to the field of humor studies. His approach involves two procedures: mapping and prioritizing. Mapping entails “locating and analyzing textual items (e.g., instances of humor) according to relevant classifications (e.g., humor typologies)” (187). On the other hand, prioritizing “establish[es] what is important for each case… and how important each item and aspect is, in order to have a clear set of criteria for shaping the translation in one way rather than another” (187). By articulating the process that translators go through in mapping and prioritizing the central elements of humor, Zabalbeascoa’s approach also helps to distinguish between the elements of humor in a text that are context-based and those that transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries, such as incongruities and ironies. The elements that survive the mapping and prioritizing process are consequently aspects of the writer’s humor methodology that are capable of crossing these boundaries. I examine both original texts and their translations in order to access which parts of the writer’s humor strategies can be applied more universally and in relation to the other writers examined in this study.
It is the humor that can be translated that is the focus of this study. Henri Bergson discusses translatable humor when he explains that:

one must make a distinction, however, between the comic expressed and the comic created by language. The former could, if necessary, be translated from one language into another, though at the cost of losing the greater portion of its significance when introduced into a fresh society different in manners, in literature, and above all in association of ideas. But it is generally impossible to translate the latter. It owes its entire being to the structure of the sentence or to the choice of the words. (emphasis added 30)

Therefore, all good translations focus on the comic expressed, or the humor in the writer’s ideas, with the caveat that the translation of humor necessarily loses some of the original meaning. For example, Bergson acknowledges that the humor created in the original language, such as puns, is impossible to translate.  

COMPARATIVE HUMOR STUDIES: THEORY AND METHOD

This project takes humor studies into a new direction. I am relying on the American comparative literary tradition that allows an approach not determined by the question of historical influence. For instance, whether Mark Twain influenced Emile Habiby is not crucial to this comparison. Instead, my comparative approach focuses the discussion on the humor strategies that these stories have in common.

This dissertation provides a reading of Twain’s, Naimy’s, Poe’s, and Habiby’s fiction using mini-theories based on humor and translation strategies, to offer a new reading of the stories. When analyzing humor, Suzanne Reichl and Mark Stein, editors of Cheeky Fiction, advocate “restricting oneself to ‘mini-theories’ and being content with addressing rather specific cases” (6). Mini-
theories are defined by John Parkins in his *Humor Theorists of the Twentieth Century* as theories “where individual contributions are solving individual problems without there being a macro-theory to which they can all in the end be referred” (Reichl 6). The “mini-theories” are informed by the literary text under investigation. For instance, Harry Levin in *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (1987) “observes that no ‘single generalization… can be applied with equal relevance’ to such diverse humor sources as Chaucer, Kundera, cartoons, hyenas and tickling” (Lewis, *Comic* 3). This judgment suggests the need to readjust the theories with each work to let the humor in the text dictate the relevant theory rather than imposing the same reading on different texts. In this dissertation, I am not imposing one theory, but I let the stories determine the manner of reading them. The mini-theories create a theoretical framework to serve the stories because this dissertation is concerned with the ways these stories are read in light of the theories, and not how reading these stories can advance the theories.

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES**

**Rereading Mark Twain, the Great American Humorist**

I study five humorous Mark Twain stories in the first chapter as a way to establish the criteria of comparison to the other three writers. I also draw on the strategies that characterize Twain’s unique approach to humor. In Twain’s stories, humorous incongruities, repetition, descriptions, reciprocal interference, the use of double deadpan narrators, the metanarrative disruption, dramatic
ironies, and questions of laughter help the reader better understand the function of humor in these stories.

For instance, in “Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog,” the two deadpan narrators—Mark Twain and Simon Wheeler—tell stories about bets that are not as boring as Twain, the narrator, claims. I relate this incongruity between the narrator and the reader’s reactions to Twain’s performance theory in order to show how it sets up an aspect of humor. I examine how humorous descriptions, especially the incongruities and the narrator’s comments, create disruptions to help explain the comic in this story. Although Twain’s contemporary, the French critic Madame Blanc, who translated the story, was unable to value its humor because of her own biased views towards American humor in general, she could not deny that it was humorous. Moreover, evidence from other translations of Twain’s story shows that the power of making audiences laugh was not completely lost in translation.

Twain reuses older humorous plots to create new stories employing humorous repetition not solely based on the individual stories but also in juxtaposing them to each other. For example, in the “Private History of ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” Twain incorporates the earlier narrative in a story-within-a-story framework. The frog story is told three times with slight variations of the plot including a purportedly Greek version of the story, Twain’s first story, and a retranslation of the Madame Blanc’s translation. Twain’s masterful use of repetition moves beyond the repetition of mere words to include a full plot.
Twain not only uses incongruities, humorous descriptions, and repetition in “The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn’t Come to Grief,” about Jim Blake, and “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper,” about Jacob Blivens, but he also uses parody. The parody results from Twain’s comparison of the two boys to each other and in relation to the Sunday school literature tradition. This comparison of the two boys is an example of opposite responses to the same parodied literature. Even the horrible death of Jacob becomes humorous because the description is exaggerated and unreal. Generally, parodies rely on the readers’ knowledge of what is being poked fun at; however, in the two boy stories Twain provides enough information within the text for his readers to understand the parody even if they lack knowledge of Sunday school literature.

Furthermore, Twain’s long narration in “The Stolen White Elephant” reveals a darker humor that is a predecessor to gallows humor, formerly known as Black humor. In gallows humor, an instance of laughter is followed directly by a tragic event. For example, he provides bleak scenes of destruction and death followed by funny scenes of parodies focused on multiple modes of writings. The reader’s reaction is twofold: both sadness and laughter. This aspect of gallows humor is a method Twain shares with the other three writers. Twain also uses additional humor strategies such as two deadpan narrators and long lists of detailed descriptions that create humorous incongruities in the elephant story. The joke seems to be at the expense of the narrator, but I argue that in fact it’s the reader who is the ultimate victim.
To better understand the humor in Twain’s narratives, it is also useful to read the stories with his theory of performance (described in “How to Write a Story”) in mind. In his theory, American humor is set against the witty and comic in other national literatures. The narrator is a serious artist with a carefully plotted script, who can also be a stage performer. The audience participates actively. In addition, the framing technique of juxtaposing multiple narratives distances the reader, the author, the narrators and the characters from each other to create humor.

**Uncovering the Humor in Selected Short Fiction of Mikhail Naimy**

From the canon of Mikhail Naimy, I chose four exemplary pieces of his short fiction. Naimy is not usually read as a humor writer; nevertheless, he uses humor strategies similar to those of Twain, Poe, and Habiby. A comparison of the original Arabic and the English translations suggests that some humor strategies are translatable and transcend linguistic, temporal, and literary boundaries. The second chapter addresses J.R. Perry’s translations of Naimy’s “al-Haddya” (“The Present”), “Massra’ Sattout” (“Her Finest Hour”), and “al-Bancarolia” (“The Bancarolia”). In addition, I analyze Admer Goutyeh and Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Um Ya’qub’s Chickens,” a translation of Naimy’s “Dajajat Um Ya’qub.” These original and translated versions show the humor strategies that transcend the boundaries of time and literary traditions and give the stories their humorous qualities.

These stories reveal how Mikhail Naimy uses dramatic irony and humorous narrative structures to make these realist stories humorous. Naimy uses a third-person perspective to present detailed descriptions, humorous
repetition, and trivial topics for conversation (such as an obsession with a chicken). While the humorous dramatic irony defines “The Present,” which echoes the “Overcoat” by Russian humorist Nikolai Gogol, the gallows humor strategy of juxtaposing contradictory sad and happy endings characterizes the conclusion of “Her Finest Hour” with Sattout’s sad death and the neighbor’s happy return. In addition, this technique also characterizes “Um Ya’qub’s Chickens,” which juxtaposes the female protagonist’s sad death to her chickens’ happy return. In another example of gallows humor, the bittersweet revenge of the father in “the Bancarolia” is contrasted with his son’s miserable situation. The reactions to all these stories are laughter through tears, following Gogol’s model.

Naimy’s humor strategies also include the use of punch lines, plot reversals, and comic types. His characters, such as Sattout and Um Ya’qub, can be read in the context of Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic. These characters lose their individuality and become comic types, distancing the reader and allowing for laughter even when at their death.

The Horror of Humor: Pushing the Limits of the Comic in the Stories of Edgar Allan Poe

In “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” “Lionizing,” and “Why the Frenchman Wears his Right Arm in a Sling,” Poe shares the strategies of humorous incongruities, repetition and descriptions with the other three writers in this dissertation. Like Twain, Naimy, and Habiby, he also uses reciprocal interference, a third-person deadpan narrator, and metanarrative disruptions, along with ironies. In studying incongruities, the element of fear becomes central
to understanding the humor in Poe, because his humor stories were practice pieces for his horror stories. Horror writing, like humor writing, relies on incongruities; the main difference between the two is that horror generates fear in the audience, whereas humor usually generates laughter.

Poe’s stories utilize various techniques of humor ranging from elaborate sarcasm based on a joke, to the overuse of allusions, to comic misspellings. The unnamed narrator is duped by a crazy man in “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether;” “Lionizing” ends with a punch line, and the comically misspelled third story depicts the narrator Barronitt as he enters into a violent love triangle with a woman and a Frenchman. Poe also uses humorous names, situations, repetition, and satire. Poe’s humor always involves an intended target of satire, such as Charles Dickens in “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.” The audience’s reaction to Poe’s humor is uneasy laughter.

**Framing Humor in Selected Tales of Emile Habiby**

Though reading the Palestinian humor writer Emile Habiby in the context of politics and war is valuable, this final chapter focuses on his humor in the context of world literature. Habiby’s humor is not meant to explain his messages but to cause laughter at the absurdities of life. Putting his humor strategies in the context of Twain, Naimy and Poe, this chapter also sheds new light on the intricacies and nuances of Habiby’s techniques.

This chapter explores “The Oration,” “The Museum Story,” “The Story of Inas’s Haircut,” and “The Son’s Letter,” four stories from Peter Theroux’s translation of Habiby’s *Saraya Bint el-Ghoul: Khurrafiyya* (Saraya, the Ogre’s
Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale). Although Habiby describes this work as “Khuraffiya” (Arabic word for tale), the genre of this book is still under debate. Critics label it as a post-modern tale that is fragmented but inclusive of various genres of writing. I interpret this tale as a series of stories following the pattern of The Arabian Nights because it includes a framing character like Scheherazade who connects the diverse narratives, which can also be read individually.

Habiby employs humorous incongruities, multiple narrators, and ironies in these four stories. Moreover, the punch lines and incongruous details, along with the trivial topics (haircut problem), create sarcastic laughter that is challenged by many allusions and by Habiby’s complicated writing style. In this tale, laughter is also a central humor strategy and leitmotif. However, it is a laughter mixed with sorrow because the trivial and lighthearted topics satirize gloomy realities. I juxtapose the English translation to its original Arabic tale in order to emphasize the humor strategies Theroux prioritizes. These humor strategies transcend the boundaries of time, literary traditions, and culturally grounded notions of what is funny.

In my conclusion, I summarize the ways these stories problematize, but also extend, humor studies, by proving that these techniques are not limited to one particular national literature. This comparative dissertation proves that some humor strategies do transcend boundaries of time, literary tradition, and notions of the funny in humor literature. These humor strategies carry the laughter and tears across the world.
NOTES: INTRODUCTION

1 In his book on Mark Twain, James Cox explains, “By calling a work of art or an artist serious, one can, without making a single conceptual effort, shift completely from aesthetic to moral grounds. Given the full secularization of art after the seventeenth century, the term ‘serious’ comes to serve as a neat replacement of the term ‘religious,’ and can be applied with the utmost complacency to tragedy, epic, and novel. But when comedy, burlesque, and humor are under discussion, the value-giving term comes to be at odds with the identity of the object and each effort at praise has the unfortunate consequence of denying the reality of the form. The problem is intensified by the fact that comic forms are considered to be ‘lower’ in the genre hierarchy and therefore need transfusions of value if they are to be elevated into the realm of the more ‘serious’ forms” (footnote, 61). Luckily in 2010, humor critics have done extensive studies on the role of humor in shaping identities (Rourke, Lewis) and the growth of the characters (Lewis, Sloane) so that the question of seriousness is no longer a subject for debate.

2 Currently, the General Theory of Verbal Humor is the most prominent in literary humor studies. GTVH started in “1985, [when] Victor Raskin introduced the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) and in 1991, Attardo and Raskin extended it into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) [when they] added to the original idea of semantic script opposition five other dimensions, collectively called the six Knowledge Resources” (Trizenberg 411). The “six knowledge resources (KRs) [are] ordered hierarchically: script opposition (SO), logical mechanism (LM), situation (SI), target (TA), narrative strategy (NS), and language (LA)” (Attardo “Script Opposition” 4). Critics espousing GTVH—such as Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo, and Patrick Zabalbeascoa—have recently proven that humor has very distinguishable elements that can be studied on semantic and verbal levels. This formalist approach though valuable focuses on the elements of humor creating graphs and analyzing words with a lesser focus on the themes that humor addresses.

Salvatore Attardo is currently the editor in chief of Humor, the main scholarly publication of the International Society for Humor Studies (http://www.hnu.edu/ishs/). Since 1988, this organization has attempted to create an international body of scholarly works on Humor in various disciplines, including literatures. A quick look at the profile of the scholars in this society reveals an international and interdisciplinary approach to humor.

3 Triezenberg lists five types of humor enhancers: diction, stereotypes, cultural factors, familiarity, repetition and variation (414-17). Triezenberg affirms that these five elements boost our awareness of humor because they: serve to please us and make us feel generally well disposed toward the text, to the author’s mastery of his/her subject, to please our sense of aesthetics, to make us feel that we are possessed of particularly good
understanding and knowledge, that we are part of the author’s intellectual
crowd, and generally to put us in a good mood, to make us feel good
about ourselves and the text, and especially to lower our defenses so that
we take nothing too seriously. (413)
This complex process to understand humor focuses on the audience’s reception
shaped by the authorial intentions. The manifestation of such a process is in the
distinct humor enhancers. Basing her view on “the GTVH six Knowledge
Resources,” Triezenberg also echoes Bergson and elaborates that “in order to
laugh, belief must be suspended and sensitivities dulled”(415). The active role of
the audience to catch the incongruity between the written words and the intended
thought becomes crucial in studying humor. Triezenberg’s five humor enhancers
inform the humor strategies because they focus on clearly defined elements of
humor.

4 Translators make four decisions to convey their messages: “translation
means communicating the foreign text by cooperating with the target reader
according to four conversational ‘maxims’: ‘quantity’ of information, ‘quality’ or
truthfulness, ‘relevance’ or consistency of context, and ‘manner’ or clarity”
(Venutti 334). All the while, the “differences in translation can generally be
accounted for by three basic factors in translating: (1) the nature of the message,
(2) the purpose or purposes of the author and, by proxy, of the translator, and (3)
the type of audience” (Nida 127). Though every translation has an agenda, the
humor strategies in the original and the translated versions of the four writers’
stories transcend the linguistic and cultural barriers. It is the humor that gets
translated that is the focus of my study.
Other translation theories have shaped the humor strategies I am using in
this dissertation. For example, In Translating Literature, Lefevere insists
“translators would be wise to ascertain how important register is as an
illocutionary feature of the source text and to try to keep the incidence of register-
based illocutionary items roughly identical in source and target texts” (58). This
definition seems to follow the definition of a transparent translation given by
Walter Benjamin. A transparent translation “does not cover the original, does not
black its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own
medium to shine upon the original all the more fully” (Benjamin 21). Furthermore,
“the task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [intention] on the
language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original”
(Benjamin 19-20). I also assume that the reactions to translations are defined by
the meaning that exists in the text as Shoshana Blum-Kulka advocates, and in
situations and other variables outside of it as Kirsten Malmkjæer believes (Baker
221).
In addition, “analyzing or judging the translation of humor should involve
understanding to the best of one’s ability what the translator’s motivations,
criteria and circumstances were in dealing with each item of the text”
(Zabalbeascoa 206). Translators make choices and when “a certain feature is
perceived as a top priority it must be achieved at all costs” (Zabalbeascoa 201).
Therefore, sometimes additions appear in the translated version to explain the
feature that the translator considers important. In addition, when translators fail to find a counterpart of the ideas in the host culture, critics argue that some humor is lost. Because intentionality plays a major role in translating humor, a humor scholar must be careful and know "whether or not the humor is part of the author's intention or is caused by something else; e.g. text user seeing things in the text that the author did not or did not intend to—say, funny mistakes, like translators' errors" (Zabalbeascoa 191). Therefore, acknowledging and differentiating between the writer's and the translator's intentions reinforces the argument that some of the humor is translatable and translators sometimes create additional humor. In addition, there are other reasons to create humor in a translated text such as "the specific circumstances in which the source—or the target—text is received, i.e. situational factors, happy or unfortunate coincidences. Unintended humor by punning and other means may be a by-product of either the source text or its translation, though by no means necessarily for the same reason" (Zabalbeascoa 191). Pointing to those restrictions on the translation of humor serves to strengthen the argument that humor strategies are similar in both the original and the translated versions of the stories rather than to consider those additions or omissions as signs of weaknesses when the stories are moved into new literary traditions.

All the translated words in this dissertation, in particular the Arabic proper names in the Naimy and Habiby chapters, are mostly used in their English versions.
CHAPTER II
Rereading Mark Twain, the Great American Humorist

When “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” appeared in 1865 in a New York newspaper, Mark Twain was catapulted into fame. But even more significantly, this story brought humor writing as a subject and a method to the attention of millions around the world. Critic Archibald Henderson writes that this story “fired the laugh round the world; it initiated Mark Twain’s international fame” (421). Twain’s stories, such as “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog,” became some of the first humor fiction to break down boundaries between nations, and between readers and critics alike.

But unlike other humorists of the day, it was Twain’s attention to manner rather than subject matter, his use of asides, and his careful planning that most impressed his critics and captured the attention of those abroad. Critic Larzer Ziff remarks that many humorous stories fall “flat when carried abroad, but Twain’s crossed borders, in the original or in translation, with remarkable ease—the Maharajah of Bikanir as well as the Oxford caterer sought his acquaintance—and for all the self-evident talk of the quintessentially American nature of his work, beyond any other American author Mark Twain become the possession of the world” (Ziff 29). It is this richness of his stories—a richness that allows for multiple and even contradictory readings—that made Twain’s humor techniques both universal and unique at the same time. Because of Twain’s importance in
the history of American humor, and in the field of humor writing in general, any study of humor strategies must begin with him.

The five Twain stories I have chosen for this chapter are from *The Best Short Stories of Mark Twain* edited by Lawrence Berkove, in 2004. This selection encompasses the famous “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” published in 1865 (3) and the “Private History of ‘Jumping Frog’ Story” published almost thirty years later, 1894 (331). I also choose to discuss the less famous stories such as the two stories about the good and the bad boy entitled “The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn’t Come to Grief” in 1866 (10) and “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” in 1872 (29), along with “The Stolen White Elephant” (77). The short essay “How to Tell a Story” (339) is also valuable because it sums up Mark Twain’s ideas on American humor.

This chapter starts with a brief introduction to Mark Twain and his role as an American humorist. The next section of the chapter provides close readings of the Twain stories in relation to the humor strategies that Twain shares with the other three writers in this dissertation. These strategies are humorous incongruities and exaggerations, the use of double deadpan narrators or a third person narrator, humorous repetitions, metanarrative disruption, reciprocal interference, aspects of gallows humor and Twain’s border-crossing laughter. The close readings also highlight some of the techniques in the stories that make Twain unique, including the use of performance, parody, and persona. The concluding section discusses in more detail the two characteristics of Twain’s humor, American humor as performance and the Mark Twain persona, that make
him different from the other writers of this study and unique as an American humorist.

MARK TWAIN: AMERICAN HUMORIST

Mark Twain (1835-1910), born Samuel Clemens, is the most famous of all American humorists and the one who defined American humor more than any other writer. Thomas Inge goes so far as to claim “neither the nation's literature nor humor would be the same after Clemens, and the image of Mark Twain, dressed in a white suit, puffing on a cigar, and delivering common sense wisecracks on the failures of mankind and civilization, has come to represent everything quintessentially American” (9). Prior to Twain, American humorists used comic misspellings in tall tales, the mixing of formal and illiterate dialects, and narrators’ ironic undertones to make serious topics humorous. In addition, humorists as far back as Edgar Allan Poe manipulated a wide range of humorous techniques in American fiction, including humor, irony, and satire. In many cases, writers created fictional personae to voice their humor and to distance themselves from the stories. But Mark Twain contributed to moving humor from a subject fit only for stage and performance to a subject worthy of scholarly investigation: Mark Twain made writing humor serious.

Initially Twain shared the disdain critics held for humor writing, but later he developed humor writing into a serious subject and a career. The main source of Mark Twain’s worries about writing humor was that humor “could never be equal in importance to books with a graver manner - even mediocre ones” (Ziff 21). Twain even thought “that the critics had valid reasons to regard his achievement
as sub-literary” (Ziff 25). During his life, Mark Twain’s books “were not published by trade publishers and sold in bookstores as were the works of the most respected authors but were published by subscription and sold by door to door canvassers” (Ziff 25-26). Though this biographical detail confirms the author’s uncertainty about the genre in which he was writing, George Ade declares that Mark Twain’s books made “the subscription book something to be read and not merely looked at” (191). Ade first explains that Twain’s “books looked, at a distance, just like the other distended, diluted, and altogether tasteless volumes that had been used for several decades to balance the ends of the center table” (190). In retrospect, Mark Twain’s main challenge was that he was starting the tradition of a serious literature of humor by giving it some literary credibility rather than relying on a popular tradition.

Although Mark Twain succeeded brilliantly, he remained ambivalent about his role as a humorist. He believed that being a humorist made him a lesser writer. In a letter to his brother Orion (October 19, 1865) Twain explained “I have had a ‘call’ to literature, of a low order- i.e. humorous. It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit… to excite the laughter of God’s creatures. Poor, pitiful business!” (qtd. in Cox 33). This confession was the beginning of a haunting unease in Mark Twain’s writing. He tried to console himself by describing the link between humor and seriousness. Addressing an interviewer in 1895, long after he had become famous, he declared “trust me, he was never yet properly funny who was not capable at times of being very serious. And more: the two are as often as not simultaneous” (qtd. in Mandia 17). Mark Twain believed that being a
humorist didn’t stop him from being serious. At other times, he poked fun at his work as a humorist proclaiming “humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years” (qtd. in Baldanza 24). Taking his humor seriously was a dream for Mark Twain who was excellent at making the serious look humorous rather than the other way around.

Throughout his career, the praise of Mark Twain as a humorist was diluted by many negative reviews. For instance, an article from Blackwood Magazine, “Musings without Methods” in August 1907, accuses Mark Twain “the humorist [for being] a bull in the china-shop of ideas” (183). This unflattering decision to label Twain stemmed from the magazine’s belief that “humour, which should be a relief, and nothing more, is now an end in itself” (187), and that makes it “a foolish travesty of life” (181). This magazine’s attitude reflected many of its readers’ points of view, that humor should not have serious underlying themes.

Another attack on Twain’s humor was Constance Rourke’s influential view in her 1931 American Humor. At best, in Rourke’s view, Twain was “primarily a raconteur with ‘an unequaled dramatic authority’ as Howells called it,” and she explains “the whole American comic tradition had been that of social criticism but this had been instinctive and incomplete, and so it proved to be in Mark Twain” (168). This unflattering reductive view of his works made them look like unplanned, fragmented, and low literary works. These negative critical receptions were a main source for Mark Twain’s constant doubts about his career as a humorist.
These negative contemporary reviews of Mark Twain were offset by later critics who objectively evaluated his relationship to American humor. For instance, Thomas Inge summarizes Mark Twain’s contribution stating “Samuel L. Clemens would emulate, draw together, and build upon all the major strands of American humor up to his time and improve upon them. He cut his journalistic teeth on the boisterous humor of the frontier, contributed his first literary efforts as comic letters and sketches to the newspapers of his day, and turned to the lecture platform and book publishing as lucrative sources of income‖ (9). Mark Twain’s literary career thus became a model of the great writer who would inscribe himself in the literary traditions of his day only to improve upon them and to make literature a business rather than a hobby. In addition, in his definition of Mark Twain as a humorist, Frank Baldanza admits that “Clemens shared [a method] with the earlier funnymen,” but he excelled at the contrast between illusion and reality that is “ludicrously extreme as to be laughable” (22). This limited reliance on previous generations of humorists explains the complicated task that Mark Twain undertook in writing humor. Yet when Mark Twain wrote his first well-circulated story, “The Jumping Frog” in 1865, he had few influences outside Artemus Ward. Before Mark Twain and his stories and public speeches, American humor had no regularized definition: it was neither a well studied performance nor a carefully plotted story.

In general, Mark Twain made his audiences laugh to the extent that his critics saw humor in everything he said and wrote. In September 1882, William Dean Howells refused to label Twain as a satirist or a moralist because Twain
“has made [his audiences] laugh too long; they will not believe him serious; they think some joke is always intended” (161). Howells was the first to give credit to the excellence of Twain’s humor, simultaneously contributing to the debate as to the value of this humor. He proclaimed, “Mark Twain was the first to make humor all humorous. He has not only added more in bulk to the sum of harmless pleasures than any other humorist; but more in spirit that is easily and wholly enjoyable” (Howells 159). Despite all the controversies about the humor in Mark Twain’s stories, laughter remains the main physical reaction from his audiences.

The distinction between Mark Twain’s laughter being satirical or humorous is relevant to the reading of the five stories. When he analyzed Mark Twain’s The Mysterious Stranger—published posthumously in 1916—James Cox affirmed, the laughter “is not humorous, but satiric laughter” (emphasis added 285). The main character in this narrative is Satan who understands humor only in relation to laughter, and he declares that humans have “one really effective weapon - laughter” (Cox 286). This analysis focuses the attention on satire, but Cox fails to see that ‘humorous and satiric laughter’ in the context of Mark Twain are both relevant in reading his five stories. According to Cox, the satiric laughter is “a joke on the ‘other’ which establishes a distinction between the audience who is judged and the narrator who exposes” (286). The narrator is separated from his audience for the satiric laughter to happen. On the other hand, a humorous joke is “a joke on the self converting past humiliations or shame into a totally pleasurable form which brings an audience to a helpless laughter of affection and self-approval” (Cox 286). In Mark Twain’s stories both types of laughter are valid
because Mark Twain writes himself as a narrator in the stories. In making fun of Twain, the author is making himself, subject to laughter the same as his audience.

THE HUMOR STRATEGIES

To achieve humor without having lengthy, oral, and boring stories, Mark Twain developed certain strategies that not only helped his stories transcend the boundaries of time and literary traditions, but also distinguished him as a master of humor writing. The humor of Twain’s stories is multi-layered and complex, each part of the humor depending on the other. Therefore, it is difficult to discuss just one humor technique in isolation from the others without unraveling their overall humorous effect. The following section will address each of Twain’s humorous stories separately: first the “Jumping Frog” stories, then the two boys stories, and finally “The Stolen White Elephant.” In the close reading of each story, I begin with highlighting the humor strategies that Twain uses that connect him to the other writers of this study and that make up the more universal aspects of his humor. I also identify those that make him different from the other writers. In the close readings themselves, I demonstrate how the humor evolves from the stories themselves, and address how they connect to these strategies.

Twain’s humor strategies in the five stories that link him to the other writers include the use of incongruities and exaggerations, the recurring presence of double deadpan narrators or a distant third person narration, humorous repetitions in the descriptions, and metanarrative disruptions causing contradictions and oppositions. The juxtaposition of the horrific and the humorous
is a concept Twain used before gallows humor was invented, and it is a common humor strategy that he shares with Naimy, Poe, and Habiby. Reciprocal interference and border-crossing laughter add to the list of common strategies that Twain has in common with those writers. The unique techniques of Twain that I will address in my close readings of the stories include his use of persona and performance.

“JIM SMILEY AND HIS JUMPING FROG”

The first story is the one that brought its author “national fame” (Baldanza 32): “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” written in 1865.¹ The humorous narrative structure in this frog story accounts for its continuous success. The main plot is the narrative of Jim Smiley told by Simon Wheeler. Jim is a gambler, and his frog, Daniel Webster, loses a jumping competition after the competing stranger sends Jim away to fetch him a frog fills Daniel Webster’s belly with shot. The overall story includes more details about Jim, his frog, his other animals and bets. In the Frog story, ‘it is the telling, not the tale that counts; or rather, the telling is the tale” (Ziff 20). Most critics agree that the humor of this story is based on its structure rather than its content.

To achieve humor without having a lengthy and boring story, Mark Twain uses several humor strategies that transcend his cultural and literary context. These include a sequence of incongruous events and double deadpan narrators who are not simply tellers, but are part of the story. He also uses double framing narratives, incongruities between the boredom of the narrator and the laughter of the audience, and metanarrative disruption. The characteristics of his humor that
make him different from the other three writers of this study include his use of his own American humor theory, performance, use of himself as persona, and the cycle of verbal jokes that make the audience the butt of the joke.

A major humor strategy in this story is in its reliance on Mark Twain’s theory of American humor as performance. This frog story is successful because “it retained the performing essence of an essentially oral, storytelling tradition while transmuting it into carefully crafted prose fiction: cleansing it of its crudeness but not of its vocabulary; simulating its long windedness without itself being long-winded” (Ziff 17). When narrator Mark Twain asks Simon Wheeler about a Reverend Leonidas Smiley, instead he gets the story of Jim Smiley, which he faithfully reproduces in his letter to Artemus Ward. The most important part of the story is about Daniel Webster, Jim’s Frog known in Calaveras County for his extraordinary jumping skills.

One aspect of humor is in the juxtaposition of the Standard English with the transcribed oral dialect of the double deadpan narrators. The narrator Mark Twain “uses literary or written language in the frame around the story,” while the oral quality of the story is retained in the other narrator, Simon Wheeler, who “counters with the nonliterary or spoken language, the dialect” (Cox 26). This double quality of the language enhances the differences between the narrators and distinguishes the Smiley story from the letter form. Though the language of Wheeler is rural and oral, the narration of the story is framed by the learned and bored listener, Mark Twain.
The incongruous sequence of events is also humorous. The story starts with the letter to Ward about the encounter between Twain and Wheeler, but Wheeler’s story soon takes over. In his narrative, Wheeler lists Smiley’s bets and achievements including bets on a pup named Andrew Jackson, “a dog that hadn’t no hind legs” but could win any race, and bets on “rat-terriers and chicken cocks, and tomcats” (6). The long list of Jim Smiley’s successful bets is set off by his loss in the frog competition against a stranger. The rigged contest becomes the hallmark story about Smiley because it shatters the illusion of his “uncommon” luck, and it calls attention to the fact that his character is made up of exaggerations and implausible details (Twain 5). These short stories about Smiley’s various bets add to the humor within the main story.

The incongruous quality of these stories is established in the first paragraph when the narrator, Mark Twain, receives an irrelevant answer to his question about Reverend Smiley. The main narrative is the letter and the second is Wheeler’s story reported in his voice concerning Jim Smiley and his most famous bet on a frog. After listening to Wheeler’s story and reporting it carefully, Mark Twain writes to Ward, “I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond Jim Smiley would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, and so I started away” (8). This framing of the Jim Smiley story allows Wheeler to describe funny yet unrealistic instances when bets become absurd, such as Jim’s winning bet on a crippled dog that outruns healthy dogs.
In this frog story, the author plays a joke not only on the characters, but also on the reader. Wheeler deceives Mark Twain by telling him an irrelevant story. Mark Twain plays a joke on Artemus Ward by writing the story in a letter. In the frog story, the stranger tricks Jim Smiley by rigging the frog competition. The reader of this story laughs at all these jokes before realizing that he or she is also the victim of this chain of pranks. If we think of Mark Twain as a persona for Samuel Clemens, then in reading/ listening to the stories, the reader or audience becomes, like Twain and Ward, the ultimate target of this story/ joke.

The boredom of Mark Twain, the narrator, is important in “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog.” The humor in the story depends on Wheeler and Twain hiding their own reactions to the story. The main context is the “self-effacement” of all the narrators (Venturino 378). For the joke to succeed, Simon Wheeler needs to be a harmless yet boring old man. The result is a Wheeler who “never smiled, he never frowned. He never changed his voice from the quiet, gently-flowing key to which he tuned the initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm” (4). The second narrator, Mark Twain, confesses in his letter to Ward that Wheeler’s story “bore[s] me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me” (4). Both narrators echo Mark Twain’s definition of the American humorist, in his essay “How to tell a Story,” in which he states that the best strategy for performing a humorous story is for it to be “told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it” (339).
Simon Wheeler and Mark Twain become prime examples of American humor performers, who appear on the written page as two deadpan narrators.

The first narrator, Mark Twain, also separates himself from the reader because he is part of the story and pretends to be bored by it. Mark Twain “deceptively begins within the conventions of the genteel narrator,” but Larzer Ziff explains that he is “a comic constituent of the story rather than the sober guide to it that he assumes himself to be” (Ziff 20). The discrepancy between the pretense and the reality of the narrator distance him from the humor content and the reader. Echoing his theory that the performer of humor must look serious and indifferent to the fun in his story, this first narrator creates the illusion that “what will delight us will bore him” (Ziff 9). This distancing between the narrator and his story is further reemphasized with the second narrator, Simon Wheeler.

As a second narrator, Simon Wheeler has a clear motive: The verbal joke on Mark Twain. For every deadpan narrator there must be an audience. In Wheeler’s story, Mark Twain discovers that he is that audience, which makes him “the butt of an undeniably excellent joke “(Rodgers 277). James Cox elaborates that even if Wheeler feels the “condescension” in his audience, he manages to play the deadpan narrator, and he forces Mark Twain to be a listener (28-9). But the frog story is more complicated because it uses a bored Mark Twain as a second deadpan narrator and the butt of his joke is the recipient of the letter, Artemus Ward (Rodgers 277). By extension, this story manipulates the readers by making them the audience of the two deadpan narrators.
In the story “Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog,” Artemus Ward is the intended recipient of the narrator’s (Mark Twain’s) letter. The idea behind the jumping frog story owes a lot to Artemus Ward’s humor technique, encouragement, and his offer to include the story of the Jumping Frog in one of his books. In elucidating the relationship between Twain and Ward, Rodgers agrees “as a lecturer, writes Paul Fatout, Twain obviously was ‘a close student of Ward,’ to whose example he ‘owed’ his own lecture technique” (Rodgers 278). This student-teacher relationship continued between Mark Twain and Artemus Ward as the latter kept encouraging his colleague to publish with him. The Frog story was supposed to be included in a book of stories by Ward, but Twain did not manage to finish it on time. However, many critics see that the epistolary framing story is a technique created by Ward. In addition “Ward’s ‘Babes in the Woods’ was a series of digressions: anecdotes and pronouncements given coherence by Ward’s platform presence” (Branch 597). These ideas are reflected in Mark Twain’s own humor theory and stories.

At the time he was writing “The Jumping Frog,” Mark Twain “believed in his talent for humor, but still it was ‘nothing to be proud of’” (Branch 599). However, after publishing the story, “On 20 January 1866, in a letter to his mother, Twain contemptuously referred to the Jumping Frog story as a “villainous backwoods sketch” (qtd in Baldanza 33; qtd in Ziff 16; qtd in Rodgers 286). The author realized that Mark Twain, the second deadpan narrator, had not completely succeeded in distancing himself from the Wheeler story. The press accused Mark Twain of a connection “with purveyors of ‘low’ frontier humor”
(Rodgers footnote 40, 286). Despite this one weakness, Mark Twain failed to anticipate the fame that his humorous story was due.

The multiple uncertainties created by these two narrators make the whole story similar to a joke that is being repeatedly played at the expense of the reader with every new reading. The humor in this story—what James Cox calls “the comic force”—emphasizes “the unwitting collaboration between the two narrators, and the impossibility of being sure of Wheeler's deadpan” (Cox 30). In retrospect, the “stranger’s secret act of ‘fixing’ the jumping contest corresponds to the artist’s ‘secret’ structure which becomes apparent to the reader only after he has been taken in” (Cox 29). The jokes being played on the reader can only be grasped at a second reading. The ending of the story also preserves “the illusion that Wheeler was long-winded and endlessly digressive when in reality the tale he tells is a masterpiece of compression and economy” (Cox 32). The humor is in the discrepancy between the boredom of the narrator and the laughter of the reader, and between the illusion of a lengthy plot and the inclusion of a carefully chosen list of incongruous events.

If we were to believe Mark Twain’s American humor theory that the nub of the stories is the details, then his frog story criticizes real people in the dog and the frog or Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster. Branch sees that “The tale is, in fact, a number of things: a blown-up frontier anecdote, a teasing fable that suggests various social and political meanings” (601). Mark Twain drew from contemporary events to create some elements of this frog story. For instance, the name Daniel Webster that he gave to Wheeler’s frog is a reference to the “Daniel
Webster Mining Company" that Twain praised “for daring to make records public” when the assets in the company were drained (Branch 596). In this story, the “winner is not frontier democracy or eastern gentility but the reader, not Wheeler or the narrator but ourselves” (Baender 196). The story is also timeless humor because the characters are carefully depicted and the probability of the events is delicately balanced with the humorous exaggerations.

In analyzing the “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” story, Paul C Rodgers explains a main reason for laughter. He praises Twain for the frame story, but he also insists that the whole narrative and the characters are humorous. Smiley, Wheeler, and Twain are “purely and simply funny… In fact, the tale was funny from beginning to end and very easy to understand” (Rodgers 276). This fun generating laughter is not lost even when the readers suspect that Mark Twain has been playing a joke at their expense. Twain uses double deadpan narrators, multiple narratives, incongruous plots to maintain the reader’s laughter. His theory on American humor explains that laughter happens when the American humorist pauses. These pauses in the written stories are in the continuous move among non-sequitur details in the “Jumping Frog.” Twain as a narrator pretended to be bored, thus reflecting the attitude of the serious performer who consciously pretends that the laughter is not his reaction. This intentional seriousness creates laughter in the audience who faces these incongruities.

“PRIVATE HISTORY OF ‘THE JUMPING FROG’ STORY”

Twenty nine years later, Mark Twain reused the 1865 frog story in the 1894 “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story.” The narrative structure of the
second story is a series of three frog stories, translations, and commentaries. Mark Twain relies on humorous repetition of plot, third person narration, humorous incongruities and descriptions, metanarrative disruptions, and irony. These humor strategies are ones that he shares in common with the other writers of this study and that help his humor transcend historical and cultural boundaries.

The fictional historiography of the frog story claiming an earlier version in a Boccaccio story (331) and a Greek story (332) is followed by the one-paragraph translation of the Greek story under the title of “The Athenian and the Frog” (333). This first frog story, in translation ostensibly from Greek to English, is juxtaposed with an excerpt from Mark Twain’s “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog,” when Smiley is duped by the stranger. The excerpt is quickly followed by the claim that “the resemblances are deliciously exact. There you have the wily Boetian and the wily Jim Smiley waiting” (335). This pseudo-historical comparison between the American and the Greek characters is humorous because it repeats the same story with modifications in the context and characters but not of the actions in the plot.

Mark Twain continues his story with a work of sarcasm addressed to one of his translators, Madame Blanc, the French critic who introduced him to his European readers when she translated the Jumping Frog story into French. The narrator believes that in “French the story is too confused, and chaotic, and unreposeful, and ungrammatical, and insane” (336). What follows is a word-for-word retranslation of the French version back into English including some of the French words. Twain purposefully ignores the different sentence structures
between English and French. The result is a third frog story which is a funny, incomprehensible English version of the story based on the conscious decision to write a bad translation justified by incoherent meta-commentaries.

The metanarrative disruptions in this story are numerous. For instance, instead of talking about teaching the frog to jump, the narrator says “to him apprehend to jump (apprendre a sauter)” (336). In this example, Mark Twain humorously replaced the French verb with a false English cognate, ‘apprehend.’ In another instance the narrator writes, “‘Eh bien! I no saw not that that frog had nothing of better than each frog.’ (Je ne vois pas que cette grenouille ait rien de mieux qu’aucune grenouille)” (337). These French and English sentences come with a bracketed note in the story “[if that isn’t grammar gone to seed, then I count myself no judge. - MT]” (337). The incongruities between the excellent grammatical rules of the French sentence compared to the incoherent word-for-word translation into English are humorous. Mark Twain’s metanarrative disruption makes the reader aware of the intentional joke that the author is fully aware that the French translation is good; however, he still wants to make fun of himself, Madame Blanc and the reader. Unlike the original Jumping Frog story in which Mark Twain leaves the reader to his or her own interpretations by not commenting on the story, in the “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” the narrator ends on a more serious note affirming that every time this story is told it is “original” (338).

The humorous repetition in the narrative structure of the “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story” focuses on multiple versions of the same frog story.
Repetition is a humor enhancer because the audience knows what comes next and anticipates the laughter. The other main reason according to Katrina Triezenberg in discussing repetition and variation as humor enhancers is the juxtaposition of two scripts. The fulfillment of expectations through the familiarity of repetition and the pairing of incongruous details creates the humor effect. The narrator uses three different versions of the same story, and manages to frame them differently so the reader can actively participate in the fun of anticipating a familiar topic.

The danger of repetition is dullness. In this case, the entertainment in the “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story” is maintained by the manner of framing the succession of the various short versions of the same frog story. Mark Twain adds elements to the original plot. First, the assumption that the story has a longer history creates an interest in the other versions. Second, the narrator supposedly translates the Greek story into English, thus giving himself credibility as a translator. It is interesting but it is not important that the original story may not exist and that Mark Twain also made it up. However, in retranslating the French version of his own story, the author creates humor out of the many incongruities and implausible meanings in the bad translation.

Mark Twain’s re-translation of Madame Blanc’s French version of the “Jumping Frog” was a direct criticism fueled by his anger at her as a critic and not as a translator. Mark Twain knew she did a good translation, and he was aware of her contributions: “Mme Blanc rendered a genuine service to Mark Twain, introducing him to the literary world of France and Europe” (Henderson 413).
However, he chose to call attention to her identity because she had criticized his humor. Madame Blanc identified Twain as a humorist “but unfortunately the French woman’s ability to recognize humor did not equip her to appreciate it as well” (Wilson 545). Her limited knowledge of American humor shaped her view. But, Madam Blanc’s attitude to American humor is no longer a valid argument to use in discussing Twain’s humor, because since then critics have been able to compare and contrast his works and get a better understanding of his humor strategies.

The comparison with French wit, and debasing of American humor was a widespread conversation among literary circles in Twain’s day. To Madame Blanc, a contemporary of Twain, the American humor “is alien to French sensibility, which is likely to be shocked rather than amused by its somewhat ‘barbaric’ dissonances. In her view, humor is ‘a sort of malady suited to fogbound latitudes.’” (Wilson 545). Her degrading view of humor as an illness and an uncivilized literary pursuit made Mark Twain determined to poke fun at her. Furthermore, she repeatedly voiced her opinion “that French wit, dependent on the quick, sharp play of the mind, was on a distinctly higher plane than Anglo-Saxon humor, with its basic appeal to temperament rather than to the intellect as such” (Wilson 545). This debate over the value of wit and humor explains the reason Twain was so adamant in his 1895 essay on “How to Tell a Story” to create a clear distinction among American humor, French wit and British comedy. In his rebuttal, Mark Twain also gave superiority to American humor because it required more artistic talents than the writing of French wit.
For a long time, Mark Twain thought she was a man, but Madame Blanc, “born Marie-Therese de Solms in 1840” was of French aristocracy and “the antithesis of everything” that was Twain (Wilson 539). When he wrote “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” he knew her real name, since she used to sign her translations with the ambiguous pen name of “Th. Bentson.” (Wilson 552). By the time Twain wrote the “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” Madame Blanc “had written a second [equally unappreciative] article on his work three years after her first, and he had encountered her personally during his miserable four and a half months in Paris in 1879” (Wilson 551). The unflattering essays and her aristocratic manners made Mark Twain less appreciative of her character and works. In 1882, she described Mark Twain “as a rough-and-ready frontiersman with a note indicating that upon meeting him in 1879 she has been impressed by his ‘correct manners.’” (Wilson 554). Despite the praise, Madame Blanc’s refusal to understand American humor shaped her views of Mark Twain. However, after reading the “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” she finally admitted “the ‘witty revenge’ taken by the writer in retranslating his story from the French” (Wilson 554).

THE GOOD BOY AND THE BAD BOY STORIES

James Cox confirms that after “The Jumping Frog” story, Mark Twain “made a few interesting attempts as sketches in Bret Harte’s Californian, particularly in ‘The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Did Not Come to Grief’ “(24). This bad boy story was published in 1866, and reading it in connection with “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” published five years later
emphasizes Twain’s humor. In these stories, Twain’s humor strategies that link him with the other writers of this study and that contribute to a humor that transcends Twain’s time and place are his incongruous exaggerations in his humorous descriptions of both stories. He also uses the third person narrator, metanarrative disruptions, repetition, and reciprocal interference. Twain makes use of parody in these stories, however, that makes him different from Naimy, Poe, and Habiby.

In “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” (29), as in the bad boy story, the unnamed narrator takes the Sunday school lessons as a frame of reference to parody. Parody is a humor form, but it is “parasitic in a way that epic and tragedy are not, because its reality depends upon a double vision, half of which imitated the parent form, the other half which mocks it” (Cox 44). The stories of Jim and Jacob mock the messages in the Sunday school stories, and Twain includes all the information that his reader needs. Knowing the subject of the parody is not implicit in the two boys’ story; therefore, Twain readers around the world can understand it. In comparing the two parodies, Mark Twain’s complete vision of what happens if a boy either challenges or blindly follows these lessons is also developed. Unfortunately, the critical reception of the good and bad boy stories has simplified their function as examples of humor in Mark Twain’s canon. James Cox is representative of Twain’s critics when he declared that Twain’s “publications are acts by a comedian intent on fulfilling expectations he imagines his audience to have” (24). While the reading of the two boys’
stories as parodies is valid, undermining them as a simple realization of audiences' expectations is not accurate.

Mark Twain uses incongruous exaggerations to ensure that his reader doesn’t take the stories seriously. These two stories are a parody of the Sunday school lessons through “the humor of exaggeration” (Berkove 347), and “Twain’s use of exaggeration is so patent and hilarious that no reader is likely to take them seriously” (Hamill xxii). The parody results from the bad actions of Jim Blake and the virtuous ones of Jacob Blivens. Their actions focus attention on the failure of the lessons they learned from Sunday school stories. For instance, Jim contradicts the Sunday school lessons all his life and he “grew up, and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an ax one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality, and now he is the infernalest wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature” (13). The incongruous exaggerations in this description, and the rapid pace of the action creates an unbelievable story that is humorous because the victim of the humor is not only Jim but the many references in this story, such as politicians and people who believe in doing good deeds. However, the overstatements make it impossible for the readers to accept this story as realistic.

Mark Twain’s humor in these stories has a serious underlying message. Twain “plays with the familiar problem of the experiential contradictions of the pretty theory of reward and punishment” (Baldanza 99). These two short fictions contradict the written rules of the good being rewarded and the bad, punished:
Jim Blake is rewarded despite his complete disregard of the messages in the Sunday school stories, and Jacob Blivens dies horribly after blindly copying the good actions that lead him into a series of misfortunes. Although Jacob "always obeyed his parents, no matter how absurd and unreasonable their demands were; and he always learned his book, and never was late at Sabbath school" (29), he always ran into trouble.

Despite the fact that the narrator does not identify with the boys, his insistence on Jacob’s inability to understand the bad consequences of his action is humorous. The narrator’s comments describe Jacob as “so honest that he was simply ridiculous” (29), and he “examined his authorities, but he could not understand” that a stray dog can be ungrateful (31). Jacob found a "lame dog" and “brought him home and fed him,” but when he tried to pet him, “the dog flew at him and tore all the clothes off him except those that were in front, and made a spectacle of him that was astonishing” (31). The horrible reaction of the dog is set off by Jacob’s shock that what he read in the books did not turn out to be true for him because he could not fathom that good is punished. In the story, the bad boy Jim Blake “fell on him, and broke his arm, and Jim wasn’t hurt at all” (31), and Jacob received the punishment that was supposed to be Jim’s, if the stories from the Sunday school were right. The reality is that Jim “stole as many apples as he wanted, and came down all right; and he was all ready for the dog, too and knocked him endways with a brick when he came to tear him” (11). This emphasis on the well being of Jim is highlighted throughout both stories.
Mark Twain’s sympathy for the bad boy is revealed in the depiction of the mother figure. Jim’s mother is a chief reason for his bad actions. She does not correspond to the image of mothers in the Sunday school stories, as she is not religious, she beats him repeatedly, and she does not care if he dies. The first evil deed that Jim does is to replace his mother’s jam with tar. She beats him even when he lies and denies his involvement. Jim is punished for his theft of jam, but the narrator glosses over the fact that Jim is “whipped…severely, and he did the crying himself” (Twain 11). The violence of the punishment and the mother’s personality allow Jim the license to break the rules. His continuous breaches of the good boys’ code in Sunday school lessons are a smart way of adapting to his very cruel circumstances. Though the narrator does not defend Jim, the underlying message of the story is to create empathy between Jim and the reader. In comparison, Jacob’s mother in “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” (29) is never mentioned. The whole story centers on the boy’s commitment to abide by all the rules for behaving as a good boy. His actions, though well intentioned, are not well planned, and they are at best ill-timed interferences in the business of others.

The reciprocal interference in these stories draws the readers’ attention to the earlier story about Jim. A section is saved for the bad boy in the narration about the good boy, Jacob Blivens. Jim had a story, but he had no family name until Mark Twain wrote the story of Jacob, five years later. This juxtaposition of the two separate narrative strands of Jacob and Jim can be understood in two different ways at the same time. The same events lead to different actions and
results. For instance, the premise that boys get punished if they go sailing instead of going to Sunday school is contradicted when Jim returns safely after happily fishing on a Sunday (12) while Jacob nearly drowns in his desperate attempt to save the bad boys who contradicted the book and went fishing on a Sunday (31). Jacob was "sick for nine weeks" (31) because he believed in "the book" (31; 13). The humor in the fishing stories is to move between two interpretations simultaneously.

The humorous contradiction between the boys creates the most fun. The reader is left with the impression that Jim is normal by social standards and his actions stem from his love of food (stealing the apples) and from pleasures like sailing (even if it is a Sunday), from being in a community (Jim is always in a group) while Jacob is always alone. Instead of doing good deeds, Jacob often pursues bad boys to teach them how to be good. His actions set him on a high pedestal of morality that is obnoxious, and this position gets him constantly punished. Jacob sets himself as an authority and that action deprives him of empathy from an audience. He consciously sets himself apart. His goal in life is not to live but to be like models from the Sunday school lessons, and that is his mistake.

Therefore, the lesson in Mark Twain’s stories is simply to prove wrong all these lessons about being good or bad. In these two narratives incongruous exaggerations, mostly contradictions and oppositions, become humor strategies. Twain lists the exaggerated results of the actions of both boys, concentrating on similar events, like going fishing and helping others. All the while, Mark Twain
lists the different repercussions on the boys. For Jim, life is prosperous though he continuously breaks all the rules written in the Sunday school stories. Cox sees “in the idea of the Bad Boy, Mark Twain is pointing toward the figure of Tom Sawyer” (128). Despite his best efforts, Jacob always gets punished for his good actions and ends up wondering why Sunday school stories are so unrealistic. Working with stereotypes drawn from Sunday school lessons, Mark Twain uses repetition, variations, and familiarity as humor elements. The humor highlights the individuality, the evil vs. good struggle advocated in the Sunday school lessons. These parodies are also valuable because they reveal Mark Twain’s mastery of listing incongruous details to create unbelievable stories.

In reading the boys’ stories, Pete Hamill draws a biographical link between Jim, Jacob and Samuel Clemens. Twain was “a boy named Sam Clemens, living in a two-room shack in Hannibal, Missouri, forced by his father’s death to go to work at twelve, he knew more about the real world than the authors of the pamphlets he was satirizing” (xiv). Sunday school could not prepare Mark Twain to successfully face the harsh realities. Although Mark Twain’s own beliefs might be read in these stories, the important aspect that Pete Hamill ignores is that Twain’s parody targets the lessons propagated by Sunday school, and not the institution. In addition, in parodies, reformations are a central issue, but they do not necessarily have “a moral motive” because “by the necessities of art, the burlesque personality is a reformer” (Cox 44). In this context, Mark Twain was shaped by his experiences at Sunday school, but he knew that he could only
criticize what he knew best: the fiction and not the beliefs. His focus was on the literature and not on organized religious practices.

While the object of the parody is under debate in the good boy story and the bad boy story, these parodies rely heavily on laughter. The audiences laugh because they assess the gap between the intended ideas and their actual realities. If the parody does not “amuse,” it fails “no matter how brilliantly it has criticized” (Cox 44). In the two stories, laughter is maintained while the literature of the Sunday school lessons is parodied. In addition, laughter occurs in juxtaposing the discrepancies among the actions of the good boy as well as those of the bad boy. The bad boy, Jim Blake, is always rewarded because he survives his daily life events by shunning a system of ideas that is unhelpful. The proof is in the story of the good boy, Jacob Blivens, who is constantly punished because he acts like the good boys in the stories. His incompetence at interacting with people around him in a real way leads to his continuous punishment and final death. He was “shot out through the roof and soared away toward the sun, with the fragments of those fifteen dogs stringing after him like the tail of a kite” (32). He literally blew up and this incredible death is extremely exaggerated it becomes unreal and funny.

“The Stolen White Elephant”

In the fifth story, “The Stolen White Elephant” written in 1882, Mark Twain uses a similar technique to his earlier stories of long incongruous actions. He also reuses the humor strategy from his 1865 frog story: the double deadpan narrators. Both of these techniques are part of his universal humor strategies.
The story’s use of humorous exaggerations, repetition, an aspect of gallows humor, and laughter and tears also are part of his humor strategies that he shares with the other writers of this study. Twain’s unique humor strategies in this story are use of a cycle of verbal jokes, where the joke is on the reader, and use of parodies.

“The Stolen White Elephant” is the story told by a “seventy year [old] gentleman” who is “a chance railway acquaintance” of the first narrator (77). Though the first narrator, presumably Mark Twain, frames the story, he quickly becomes the silent listener, and his detailed report of the gentleman’s story has an open ending because it is the gentleman who concludes the story. Mark Twain realized that critics associated him with frontier humor in “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” because he did not create a clear distinction between Mark Twain and Simon Wheeler as different narrators telling the same story. In the “Stolen White Elephant,” Mark Twain follows a similar pattern of double deadpan narrators, but this narrative structure of an open-ended reported story told by a stranger who has first-hand involvement with the actions gives it credibility, while allowing the frame narrator to distance himself from the follies and humorous actions in the story.

The elephant story reflects a fascination with incongruous details that create the humor with their sheer repetitiveness and absurdity. The plot can be told in only few sentences: The narrator is a special envoy in charge of delivering a huge white elephant, a gift from the King of Siam, to the queen of England. When this narrator loses the elephant, he assumes it was stolen in New York and
enlists the help of the chief of police, Inspector Blunt. However, instead of capturing the elephant, the inspector has many conversations with the narrator and shares with him reports from journalists and detectives. The reports all focus on the horrifying details of the devastation and the high death toll caused by the huge elephant on the loose. Once the narrator pays him the $100,000 reward, Inspector Blunt then guides the narrator to the dying elephant inside the basement of the police headquarters.

The narrative structure of Mark Twain’s humor in “The Stolen White Elephant” exemplifies what gallows humorists later advocated: “to juxtapose tragic scenes with humorous ones. In this way, sorrow immediately follows or precedes laughter” (Mandia 4). The gallows humor lies in the inspector’s ostensibly extreme incompetence highlighted by the sad ending inflicted on the narrator and on the victims of the hungry and scared stray elephant. The gruesome details of the destruction caused by the huge elephant looking for shelter and food are contrasted by the ridiculous reports detailing all the absurd reasons why the detectives cannot capture the elephant. Furthermore, gallows humor “treats grotesque or tragic material comically,” and sometimes “it is difficult to discern the difference between dream and reality” (Mandia 3). The dream-like quality, the tragic death of hundreds of people, and the devastation of the land caused by the elephant prefigures qualities of gallows humor before its time.

In “The Stolen White Elephant,” Twain’s humor is in the humorous incongruous details, and in discrepancies in the plot. The old man, the second narrator, confirms that the King of Siam wants to make retributions for an offense
done to the British King and therefore sends a white elephant to the queen. However, the gift is sent to New York. The major incongruous details occur in the various descriptions, from the elephant that can eat anything from a “bible” to “five ordinary men” (80) and the fact that the elephant needs to eat between “a quarter to half a ton” of food per day (81), to the description of burned and deserted towns damaged by the elephant in newspaper clippings (90). The inspector even sends telegrams to famous thieves, only to discover that they are dead. In one example, the inspector’s incompetence is highlighted when he receives a one-line answer from the widow of a thief stating, “YE OWLD FOOL: brick McDuffys bin ded 2 yere” (92). This reply is humorous because of its incongruity. The second silent narrator does not comment; he leaves it to the reader to assume the thoughtlessness of the inspector.

Throughout the plot, the narrator in this story is humorous because he looks naïve. The main bulk of the story is a list of proof that the narrator is mistaken in his appreciation of the inspector. For instance, despite his resources and his position as an influential person, this narrator fails as a special envoy from the Siamese government to safely deliver the elephant. He also relinquishes all power and becomes only an audience to the Inspector, instead of actively working to change the course of action. His excuse is his blind faith in Inspector Blunt. This narrator ends up an old man on a train with no money, no job, no title, and no honors, telling his life story to Mark Twain. In his own words, his only reward is that “my admiration for that man, whom I believe to be the greatest detective the world has ever produced, remains undimmed to this day, and will
so remain unto the end" (94). The reader’s initial reaction is to read the incongruities between this statement and the fact that the inspector has failed to capture the elephant before the latter’s death. In addition, since no final remarks are made by the frame narrator, the reader is left to his/her own conclusions.

Most of the humor in the story is not in the plotline but in the details of Inspector Blunt’s relationship with the narrator. The ending of the story proves that the Inspector who at many points looks incompetent was only toying with the narrator to get the full amount of the reward money and to justify the importance of his job. After he receives the reward from the narrator, “an almost intolerable hour dragged to a close” before the Inspector returns and guides him to the basement, proclaiming, “Here is your elephant!” (93). The exaggerated details for this one hour are humorous after three weeks of reports that the elephant had been seen but could not be captured. The long narration sets incongruities together to create an unbelievable script, while most of the humor in the action of the stories centers on anticipating the apparently absurd next move of Inspector Blunt. In his zealous depiction of the great inspector who is always right, the narrator tricks the reader into taking a misguided position.

In this respect, Mark Twain keeps playing verbal jokes on his readers by supposing that the gullible narrator should not have full faith in the incompetent inspector. However, the joke is played on the reader. The real narrative in this story is not about the elephant but about the clever business deal wherein the inspector gets paid in full because he delays capturing the stray elephant. The elephant becomes a victim because he is injured and starved to death, but in his
search for food and shelter he causes enough damage for his captor to deserve the reward money (93). To avoid being the target of this verbal joke, the reader and the narrator have to take similar stances and see the shrewdness of the Inspector that goes beyond the gruesome reports and the delayed actions.

The “Stolen White Elephant” also includes a criticism of various forms of communication. The story parodies telegrams (85-88), letters (92), and many conversations with police investigators. The humor makes fun of these forms of communication because they all become the means to deliver reports about incompetent people. However, the real fun is at the expense of the reader and the narrator, who are bombarded with details and various forms of reporting and left no time to ask questions. The reader is slowly deprived of the ability to see beyond the details and the intentions of the characters involved. In delaying an already slow series of actions, the repetition of the absurd words and actions create the humor.

“The Stolen White Elephant” elicits sad laughter and proves that Mark Twain is a predecessor of gallows humor which “originated in the 1960’s,” and it “may be defined as a literary mode containing stylistic, structural, and thematic elements that may elicit laughter and tears simultaneously from the reader by presenting events or situations that are at once humorous, absurd, and horrible” (Mandia 1-2). Despite the humorous exaggerations and the incongruous premises, the atrocities of the damage reported in the story make the reader sad and laughing. The listing of the horrific events is too improbable to be realistic, though the death of the elephant becomes pathetic because it was hungry in a
strange country. The sad laughter is in the juxtaposition of horrific descriptions with fun parodies. In the elephant story, Mark Twain parodies the works of police inspectors, detectives and reporters. The ultimate joke is made at the expense of the reader who avoids trusting the second narrator but ends up realizing that Inspector Blunt was not incompetent.

The belated realization in the “Stolen White Elephant” is also a belated laughter at the expense of the narrator and the reader. To build his credibility, the narrator juxtaposes real events with weird explanations, and in making lists and focusing on details, the reader is slowly distracted from reaching the logical conclusion of what is happening. In the first reading, the readers are led to believe that only the narrator does not know about the inspector’s incompetence. However, the ending of the story reveals an underlying theme that the narrator was not the only adoring fan of the inspector, and the readers have been played by Mark Twain.

These five stories showcase examples of various forms of laughter that Twain’s humorous stories provoke in the reader. In the frog stories and the good boy and the bad boy stories, the readers’ physical reaction to humor in Mark Twain is mostly achieved either with laughter, a chuckle, or a smile. Taking into consideration Mark Twain’s various audiences, this merriment can change from laughter to a calm smile to an inability to grasp this humor. However, the fifth story, “The Stolen White Elephant,” with its horrific and humorous details echoes other aspects of Mark Twain’s humor. Critics Pete Hamill and Lawrence Berkove have long since identified Twain’s deep satirical and even pessimistic voice. The
death accounts in the elephant story create an underlying sad tone which makes the reaction to the humor a mixture of laughter and sadness. Mark Twain believed that through humor he “is capable of treating serious and practical subjects in a serious and practical way” (Baldanza 24). Therefore, even when readers don’t take his writings seriously, the importance of the subject Mark Twain is poking fun at remains clear.

TWAIN: PERFORMANCE AND PERSONA

In order to understand fully how the humor of Twain’s five stories emerges from the text, we must also examine some of the unique characteristics of his humor strategies that situate it within his American context. The two primary strategies of humor that Twain advocated and that were unique to him included seeing the performance qualities of humor and incorporating his own persona into the stories.

According to Mark Twain’s philosophy of humor writing, humor is an American art. In his 1895 essay on “How to Tell a Story,” Mark Twain asserts “the humorous story is strictly a work of art -high and delicate art- and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it” (339). The differences between what Mark Twain sees as American humor fiction and the inferior English comic and French witty stories call attention to what Twain sees as the unique identity of the humor writer.

Twain believed that American humor is a performance by an artist who has consciously planned and crafted his plot and characters. This humorous plot can be read as a written text, or it can be performed on a stage. Both the writer
and the performer should faithfully reproduce the plot that might look as if it were a loosely joined series of non-sequitur events. To Mark Twain, “the humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular” (339). Therefore, a humorous story is in fact a long scripted theatrical performance of non-sequitur actions. The conclusion of a humorous story can be logical and “very often, of course, the rambling and disjointed humorous story finishes with a nub, point, snapper, or whatever you like to call it” (340). However, this last rule can be broken because the main purpose is the actual manner of telling rather than the content of the story.

Mark Twain’s humor calls for active participation from his audience. He theorized in his “How to Write a Story” that he wanted “to string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, [that is] the basis of the American art, if my position is correct” (emphasis added 341). His humor is about the ways readers interact with the text rather than what is literally on the page. Therefore, the omissions and filling in the blanks of unstated ideas yield to flexibility in interpretations and convey varying levels of understanding. The basis of American humor according to Mark Twain is the very clever narrator, sometimes even two narrators, a performer who manipulates these incongruities and creates laughter with serious meanings. Consequently, the surface level of incongruities becomes a medium for reaching serious themes in the stories.
Audiences - like readers - laugh because of the incongruity among random events. To maintain the laughter, the performer with his serious attitude pretends to be indifferent to both his laughing audience and the humorous content of his story. The performer should use silent pauses, and slur the main point as if it were unimportant, “dropping it in a carefully casual and indifferent way, with the pretense that he does not know it is a nub” (340), and letting the audience catch up with the laughter belatedly. This theory of writing and performing humor is displayed in many Twain stories, as well as in his essays and his lectures.

Although Mark Twain declared that he ‘strung incongruities,’ his stories are not absurd. Though appearing trivial, the stories are mostly parodies and critiques, examples of art trying to understand life and to fight absurdities through laughter. Mark Twain’s incongruities can also be understood as “verbal practical jokes” in stories (Ziff 96). The author was accused of building his fame around using “a string of plausibly worded sentences that didn’t mean anything under the sun” (qtd. in Ziff 96), but his main contribution was his ability to “spin speaker and listener out from any perceptible reality and into the comic realm of nonsense” (Ziff 97). While Larzer Ziff is correct about Twain’s masterful ability to play his audiences and make them laugh, it seems evident that the content of his humorous stories was not nonsensical.

Mark Twain’s idea of performance can also be linked to the irony of manners using Frank Baldanza’s critical reading. The implications are to conjoin the non-verbal actions in humor to a written stylistic strategy: irony. Baldanza affirms that in Twain’s stories, “the speaker says something different from what
he actually means- either by understatement, by overstatement, or by any other conceivable degree of indirection” (23). This indirection, which this critic sees as a main attribute of irony, is then divided into the irony of statement and the irony of manner. Baldanza explains that the former irony is “the audience’s discovery of the degree of difference between what was actually said and what was meant,” while the latter, irony of manner, is “Clemens [who] presents his amusement with a poker face, so that the reader’s discovery of the discrepancy is accompanied by the explosion of laughter” (23). The laughter happens when the audience realizes the discrepancy in the words, along with “Clemens’ mock-serious presentation” which he learned from his mother (Baldanza 23). These two types of irony that create humor are valuable to explain the five stories of Mark Twain.

The author uses his persona pseudonym Mark Twain as a narrator and a unique humor strategy. Samuel Clemens chose this pen name because, he “was following the convention of the comic journalists, but instead of casting himself as a character, parodying a particular form or personality, or indulging in hoaxes, Mark Twain was left free to perform all these assignments” (Cox19). Mark Twain was not simply an additional character; he also became a second narrator, and he had the opportunity to fulfill the writer’s desires without being limited by Samuel Clemens’s identity. This persona of the Mark Twain pen name associated with a man in a white suit puffing on his cigar while performing humorous stories “was so masterfully brought to public attention through expert manipulation of the media that he was the best known personality of his time”
Mark Twain became the performer of Samuel Clemens’s major literary works.

The freedom of creating Mark Twain was also Samuel Clemens’s best humor achievement, because the public investigations cared about Mark Twain and not Samuel Clemens. This pseudonym allowed the author the space to learn about “a style as well as a structure by means of which he could express as well as expose himself” (Cox 13). In addition, in taking this persona seriously, Mark Twain became a “form” (Cox 60), while the readers buying into this impersonation are often suspicious that they are being an integral part of the humor: jokes are made at their own expense, too. In several of his humorous stories, Samuel Clemens pokes fun at Mark Twain. This humorous strategy not only distances the author from the humor, but the reader becomes the butt of the joke/humorous story because every deadpan narrator needs an audience.

CONCLUSION

Samuel Clemens impersonated the character of Mark Twain, and he avoided the trap of a one-sided character and created a complex persona. In using a second narrator, the author also allowed Mark Twain a freedom that only authors usually have. As both a narrator and a character in the stories, Mark Twain combined “the irreverence and the sadness” into “the face of innocence” (Cox 51). Using this innocent face makes it hard to distrust this narrator. To reinforce the humor effects, Samuel Clemens adds to the double deadpan narrators, humorous incongruities, repetitions, along with reciprocal interference and metanarrative disruptions. These humor strategies are intrinsic to the stories
because they define the manner in which it’s narrated. It follows that translators prioritize these humor strategies and this is a main reason Twain’s humor is border-crossing.
Among the stories of Mark Twain, “Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog” have been carefully studied over many decades. Edgar M. Branch lists thirteen works of criticism on the “Jumping Frog” story. These books and essays were written by Paul Baender, Walter Blair, Hennig Cohen, Rufus A. Coleman, Pascal Covici, Jr., James M. Cox, Roger Penn Cuff, John C. Gerber, J. Krause, Kenneth S. Lynn, Paul Schmidt, Henry Nash Smith, and Golden Taylor (footnote 591). Despite this vast array of criticism on one story, the most recent studies build on the argument that a lot has been left unsaid about the story, and about Twain’s work with humor.

In the Arabic context, critic Ibrahim Muhawi and Twain seem to agree on the idea that the subject matter and its delivery (that is, its performance) are not only interrelated but are key issues to convey humor. In his 2002 article, “Performance and Translation in the Arabic Metalinguistic Joke,” Muhawi analyzes performance and reflexivity. He describes the “mimetic aspects of performance: if the subject of the joke, which itself is a performance, is the performance within it, then its reflexivity acts (metaphorically) as a mirror that invites the audience to evaluate the ‘skill and effectiveness’ of the performance within it” (343). In other words, when analyzing humor the audience is asked to interact with the performance since it is also the subject of the joke. The joke itself becomes a reflection of the act of producing humor.
CHAPTER III

Uncovering the Humor in Selected Short Fiction of Mikhail Naimy

Mikhail Naimy has not been read as a humor writer before. I look at four exemplary stories and in the humor strategies that emerge from them. Using the humor strategies that are comparable to those of Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe and Emile Habiby, I argue that Naimy’s stories are in fact humorous. In the English translations, these stories retain their humor, evidence of the translatable humor elements that transcend temporal, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. In examining the translations, several challenges for translating humor surface, but the decisions that J.R. Perry, in particular makes, solve those challenges and confirm that humor is translatable in these stories. Naimy’s stories also challenge our notion of what is funny. His humor provokes laughter through tears, a humor concept he learned from studying the stories of Russian humorist, Nikolai Gogol.

I compare both the Arabic and English versions of the four stories by Naimy. I study J.R. Perry’s translations of Naimy’s “al-Haddya” (“The Present”), “Massra’ Sattout” (“Her Finest Hour”), and “al-Bancarolia” (“The Bancarolia”). In addition, I analyze Admer Goutyeh and Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Um Ya’qub’s Chickens,” a translation of Naimy’s “Dajajat Um Ya’qub.” A close reading of these original and translated versions shows the humor strategies that give the stories their humorous qualities regardless of language, time, and place.
Mikhail Naimy uses humorous incongruities, reciprocal interference, diffuse disjunction such as dramatic irony and ironic tones, and several humorous narrative structures to make his four realist stories humorous. Naimy’s use of a third-person narrator distances him from the stories as he presents comic dialogues, dramatic irony, and detailed and humorous descriptions of characters (even animals). The humorous dramatic irony defines “The Present,” which echoes “The Overcoat” by Gogol. The gallows humor strategy of presenting a succession of contradictory sad and happy events characterizes the endings of these stories. Naimy’s humor strategies also include plot reversals and comic types. The characters, such as Sattout and Um Ya’qub, cease to be individuals and become comic types, reflecting Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic. This comic quality distances the reader, allowing for laughter even when the characters die.

The rest of this chapter introduces Naimy the writer with a special focus on the contribution of this study: to prove that being a humor writer does not contradict the common labeling of Naimy as a realist with a serious agenda. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the humor in his stories, the close reading of each story address the humor strategies that Naimy shares with the other three writers as well as the ones that are unique to his stories. Reading these stories reveals the mini-theories that support the idea of their humorous nature. Before concluding, I explain the concept of laughter through tears to illustrate and complicate how these humorous stories challenge our concept of
what is funny in humor. Laughter is not necessarily the only reaction we readers have when we read a rich humorous story.

MIKHAIL NAİMY: THE WRİTER

Mikhail Naimy, also known as Mikha’il Nu’ayma, (1889-1988), is a famous Lebanese writer of fiction, criticism, biography, essays, and poetry. Because his oeuvre includes more than ninety works, no one study could possibly do his work justice. Born in Baskinta, Mount Lebanon, in 1889, Naimy studied in Palestine, Ukraine, France and the United States. Two of his brothers had previously immigrated to America, and in 1911, Naimy followed them to the U.S. and entered the University of Washington in Seattle. Five years later, he graduated with bachelor’s degrees in Arts and Law. After graduation, Naimy moved to New York and voluntarily joined the American army in order to fight in the First World War. Upon his return from France in 1918, he became an active member of the “Mahjar School, referring to the literary movement which evolved in the US among emigrant Syrian-Lebanese poets and writers, who operated through a literary gathering in New York by the name al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya” (el-Enany 208). This literary group of Arab writers, also called the Pen Association or the Pen League, was active until 1931.

As an undergraduate in Seattle, Naimy subscribed to an Arabic literary magazine, Al-Funun (The Arts) published in New York by Nasib Aridah. Until its cessation in 1914, this periodical published innovative Arabic stories and poems by contemporary Arab writers living in the US that appealed to their Arab American audiences of peddlers and merchants and entrepreneurs (Popp 5).
This journal “seemed to be a new phenomenon in the field of modern Arabic literature” mostly because the writers started to focus their stories on social issues rather than idealistic topics (Dabbagh 21). When Naimy moved to New York, the contributors to al-Funun became his literary colleagues. Eventually, the main writers in the League - Mikhail Naimy, Kahlil Gibran, and Ameen Rihani- started publishing in a new Arabic periodical out of New York called Al-Sayih (The Wanderer or The Tourist) When their writings were republished in local Arab newspapers such as the Egyptian newspaper “al-Hilal” (The Crescent Moon) they reached a wider audience (N. Naimy 122). Furthermore, Naimy distinguished himself because he was “the only active literary critic” among the Arab writers in America (N. Naimy 123). He repeatedly voiced his satire of all the “writers who view Arabic as a sacred heritage” and he maintained “that creative experimentation with the language must replace the empty exercises in imitation prevalent among the Arab writers of the day” (Ludescher 96). Consequently, Naimy’s critical essays, poems, and fiction helped shape the literature of the Arabs in America and the Arab world.

Although living in America gave Naimy access to literary publications, his New York connections promoted his future as an influential Arab writer. His famous novel The Book of Mirdad: The Strange Story of a Monastery Which Was Once Called the Ark, was first published in its English translation in Beirut in 1948, but he made sure to publish his Arabic version soon after, in 1952 (el-Enany 220). Writing in English was not Naimy’s concern, and he wrote most of his oeuvre in Arabic, and only “translated three of his Arabic works into English:

In Naimy’s view, Lebanon and the Arab world is the East, while Europe and the US are the Western world. Naimy’s critics - Nadeem Naimy, Rashed El-Enany, Issa J. Boullata, Nabil I. Matar and Sergei A. Shuiskii - have commented on some of his works, focusing their debates on his observations on the relationships between the East and the West. These critics give a general overview of Naimy’s works and his philosophy of writing along with biographical elements before analyzing one or two of his themes. For instance, el-Enany analyses the short story “The Cuckoo Clock,” set in New York, mainly in reference to Naimy’s hatred of the materialism of this American city. In fact, Naimy saw New York as the epitome of modern inventions and financial anxieties that kill the soul of the individuals. We now know that in New York, Naimy never held a steady job and he always feared poverty. This financial need
coupled with his personal view translated into Naimy’s opinion of New York as a material world that is intrinsically corrupt, and that meditations and non-materialistic pursuits are worthy endeavors. After twenty years of being in the States, Naimy relocated to Al-Shakrub- a small area in Baskinta, Mount Lebanon- and lived there farming the land and writing for over forty years.

In all his works, Naimy firmly advocated urgently for the need to reform the West through Eastern mystical and transcendentalist thoughts. These philosophical and religious concepts – such as the transmigration of souls and the direct human connection with the oversoul, ironically originating from Emerson, a westerner, made him look at everything with a dreamy lens, and he focused his reform on the soul rather than on the body. Being a transcendentalist, Naimy believed in a “cosmic order,” which is a recurrent theme in all his writings. His upbringing in a Protestant environment had shaped his religious views, but the cosmic order became his definition of God. For Naimy, man’s purpose in life was to learn about this cosmic order (Dabbagh 61).

Nadeem Naimy sees the concept of “universal law” a continuation of Naimy’s ideas on the cosmic order (254). Naimy also calls this law “God or Divine providence” (N. Naimy 260).

Naimy was good at hiding his philosophical ideas to the extent that the universal law elaborated in his writings was “overlooked by the communist translators” when they selected a few of his stories— such as “The Present” and “Her Finest Hour” – in both the Russian and Ukrainian selections (N. Naimy 255). Naimy believed that it is the universal law that controls all lives; therefore, his
stories are about this law rather than about the individual characters. The Soviet
Union took a big interest in Naimy’s short stories, and translated some of them to
Ukrainian language as “Znanti” (Highbrows) which includes two of the stories
analyzed in this chapter “The Present,” and “Her Finest Hour,” published in Kiev
1958, and into Russian language as Livanskie Novelli (Lebanese Stories),
published in Moscow in 1959 (N. Naimy 252-53). Nadeem Naimy theorizes that
this interest is mainly due to Mikhail Naimy’s focus on the depiction of characters
as “what man ought not to be” (253). This depiction allows a reading of
characters as types rather than individuals. I read some of the main characters in
the four stories discussed in this chapter as comic types.

Naimy’s prolific writings span many decades (he died at the age of 99),
but critics have not yet produced a comprehensive study of his lifetime work.
However, his short fiction has not often been studied in depth. The dearth of
criticism in Naimy has not covered most of his canon. Nevertheless, his comic
characters and the pervasive ironies in his humorous stories uncover the
complexity of his realist approach to literature. The Arab Critic Ahmad Yasin Faur
confirms that Naimy was a humor writer. Faur declared that Lebanese poets and
writers like Maroun Abboud and Mikhail Naimy “launched bitter sarcasm depicted
in strange images” (my translation 53). I study Naimy as a humorist whose
realism in characters and plots does not contradict but complements his humor.

Similar to Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Naimy tried to control all his tendencies to
write humor. R. W. Hallett affirms that “throughout his life, indeed, Gogol
remained a comic writer in spite of himself. A reluctance to recognize his true
vocation sets up an ever-present current of tension in his creative work” (374). This description perfectly defines the short stories of Naimy chosen for this chapter. Mikhail Naimy and Nikolai Gogol saw their literature as serious because they wanted to reach the lofty goals of reforming their societies. To them, the simple fact of writing humor meant that they were not serious. While Gogol “was haunted by the desire to do something nobler, something of benefit to the Russian people, it was his desire which destroyed him as an artist and as a man” (Hallett 377), Naimy did manage to reach fame in the field of Arabic literature, and to live happily off his publications and farming in Al-Shakrub. Like Gogol, in the instances when Naimy’s humor surfaces, he produces some of his best writings. Although Mikhail Naimy himself would never admit to being a humorist, the manner in which he told these stories reveals their humor. The descriptions, the dialogues, and the actual plots reveal a heightened sense of irony that Naimy embedded in his realism. In talking about these humor elements and focusing on the funny moments, the reader is given a chance to read more into these rich stories.

PLAN OF THE CHAPTER

The four stories analyzed in this chapter were first published in an Arabic magazine, but Naimy later collected them in his two famous short story collections. These stories are great examples because Naimy spent twenty years, after his first short story collection Once Upon a Time, criticizing other Arab writers and learning how to avoid his earlier mistakes. “The Present” and “Her Finest Hour” are from Akabir, (Highbrows), published in Beirut in 1956. “Um
Ya’qub’s Chickens” and “Bancaloria” are from Abu Battah (the Man with the Fat Calf) published in 1959. Both collections of short stories are now available in the original Arabic in Mikha’il Nu’ayma, al-Majmu’a al-Kamila, volume 2, first published in Beirut in 1970. The Arabic versions of these stories are mentioned here only when the translator’s decisions interfere with the elements of humor. The available English translations of these four stories are J.R. Perry’s translation of “The Present” (“al-Haddya”), “Her Finest Hour” (“Massra’ Sattout”), and “The Bancarolia” (“al-Bancarolia”), from his book Mikhail Naimy, A New Year: Stories, Autobiography and Poems, published in 1974. The translation by Admer Gouryeh and Naomi Shihab Nye of “Um Ya’qub’s Chickens” (“Dajajat Um Ya’qub”) is included in the 2005 Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology. As I compared the English and original Arabic versions, insights into humor in translation were uncovered: the translators’ decisions have emphasized the humor strategies that are translatable and that make these stories humorous in any target language.

Naimy uses humorous incongruities and descriptions in humorous situations. His characters fit Henri Bergson’s description of comic types. Although the four main protagonists in the stories, Sattout, Um Ya’qub, Massoud, and Abu Shahin, are studied as types, they are also obsessed individuals whose differences make them more of an exaggerated representation of real individuals. Using a concept from the General Theory of Verbal Humor, I also reveal Naimy’s use of dramatic irony, referred to as “diffuse disjunction.” It is one main superimposition on a serious fabula which makes the story humorous (Attardo
110). The humor in these stories is also in the concept of reciprocal interference. But instead of Naimy’s voice interfering with his own philosophical agenda to educate his readers, “the characters, as well as the settings, are carefully picked from real life, the everyday and the common and are meticulously as well as vividly painted by one who can be judged as a master realist” (N. Naimy 244). This third person narrator is also the humorous Mikhail Naimy’s authorial voice. Although realism characterizes the Naimy stories, the characters, the method of telling, the plot reversals and oppositions make them humorous, too.

“HER FINEST HOUR”

The main protagonist in “Her Finest Hour” is Sattout. Her name is a diminutive of the Arabic word meaning lady. She is a miserly seventy-year-old, fat, and an ugly widower who limps and uses a walking stick to walk around her hometown. She takes her chatter as seriously as if it were a profession. In her perfect small world of tall tales and rumors, she has one problem. Her rich neighbor next door is the only one living outside her gossiping circle. The neighbor’s house belongs to a rich young man who, shortly after his marriage, leaves for Australia to collect a fortune he inherited from a dead uncle there. His wife, an educated and rich young bride, keeps to herself. Unlike the other women, she forbids Sattout from visiting with her. Twice, Sattout is kicked out of her neighbor’s house, and twice she sees a young man visiting the young bride at night. After the first nocturnal visit, Sattout is bitterly defeated because her rumors of a lover were proven wrong: the man turns out to be the wife’s brother. The second time, after midnight, she takes her walking stick and in the moon
light she ventures across the dangerous path to her neighbor’s house.

Eavesdropping, she hears the woman moaning “Darling” (92). Thinking that it was her “finest hour,” Sattout congratulates herself before she accidentally slips into a dangerous pit that separates the two houses. She dies not knowing that the lover was the husband. The story ends with two juxtaposed images of Sattout’s burial and the villagers going to congratulate the neighbor for his safe return home.

“Her Finest Hour” and “Um Yaq’ub’s Chickens” have female protagonists and this feminine focus was one of Mikhail Naimy’s contributions to modern Arabic literature. Roger Allen affirms that “Khalil Jubran and Mikha’il Nu’aymah (d1988) addressed themselves in their earliest stories composed in the first two decades of this century to one of the most hotly debated topics of the period: the position of women in society” (180). In Mikhail Naimy’s stories, these real and flawed women become comic types. For instance, in J.R. Perry’s translation of “Masra’ Sattout,” entitled “Her Finest Hour,” Naimy presents what Bergson calls “a type” of woman. Bergson states “every comic character is a type. Inversely, every resemblance to a type has something comic in it” (41). Although Naimy was praised because, unlike his predecessors, he took interest in female characters, Sattout is a peculiar character and funny largely because she fits into the stereotype of a gossiper.

The comparison of the Arabic title of the story with its English translation is one instance of a diffuse disjunction, in this case, dramatic irony. The title “Her Finest Hour” is a translation of “Masra’ Sattout.” In this case, as Patrick
Zabalbeascoa declares, in the translation of humor, “if a certain feature is perceived as a top priority it must be achieved at all costs” (201). This maxim explains Perry’s choice of a less literal and a more creative title for the English translation. The translator must be aware of the writer’s intentions, but the readers must also account for the translator’s intentions, too. The readers must know “whether or not the humor is part of the author’s intention or is caused by something else; e.g. text user seeing things in the text that the author did not—or did not intend to” (Zabalbeascoa 191). The humor is enhanced when Perry avoids a literal translation in his choice of the English title. In this case, although, Naimy did not intend to reveal irony in the title, it is, however, written in the story.

Perry’s ironic title “Her Finest Hour” offers readers early guidance into reading the humor in this story. In this respect, this is Sattout’s “finest hour” only if the reader understands the humor. The literal translation of the Arabic title “Massra3 Sattout” would be “the death of Sattout,” a plain descriptive title drawing attention to the death of this woman named Sattout. But the main advantage for Perry’s choice of “Her Finest Hour” is to impose his own comic reading, and to clarify the dramatic irony in the story. By omitting her name from the title, Perry made Sattout a type of woman while ironically her death becomes the ‘finest hour’ of her life. Sattout died while eavesdropping on her neighbor, thinking she had figured out the marital infidelity of the latter. The twist ending is that the neighbor was sleeping with her own husband who returned home unexpectedly after a long absence. To enhance the irony, Sattout cannot even tell her unfounded gossip because she dies on her way back home. The Arabic
title does not have this ironic undertone, but the English title, “Her Finest Hour,” is not wrong or totally inaccurate. It is in fact Perry’s take on the story and the two versions of this story cannot be linked to this concept of her “finest hour” unless we read the irony. This element of irony, a main humor strategy, proves that even when the translator modifies the original, irony transcends the boundaries of languages and cultural backgrounds.

In this story, the character of Sattout is the object of comedy because she has a generality: she can be the comic type of a great gossiper. In Bergson’s words, “comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes notes of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes. It even creates new types, if necessary” (45). Naimy’s Sattout is an individual representative of this new comic type of an old miserly woman whose life is focused on her gossip. She causes laughter through tears with her overall image that is pushed into a humorous extreme.

Most of the story is a detailed description of her physical appearance and the events leading to her death. The narrator lists the exaggerated and unique elements that make up her character, and the humor builds as the list progresses. Sattout is not a common character; she is different than the other characters around her. She resembles the caricature of a big, old, ugly woman who married a madman. She is also a reject who constantly connects with people around her via gossip. Sattout as a gossip is sociable, but it is her ugliness, marriage to a mad man, and her tightfisted attributes that make her stand-out among the villagers. These exaggerated qualities separate her from
others and make her comedic rather than tragic because she is an extreme. Sattout “had such an unlovely face and fat, repulsive form that no one could be expected to marry her unless he were blind or mad. Her late husband had been mad” (Perry 88). In the Arabic version, the term for mad is “Makhboul” (402). This pairing of an ugly gossiper with a mad man produces an image of Sattout as a comic type.

Furthermore, the rest of her humorous description is a source of laughter. In the beginning of the story, Sattout falls sick, but when she recovers, “the village was again regaled with the sight of her corpulent frame and shabby dress, the threadbare black headscarf over unkempt hair, the clumsy front-doorkey dangling by a cord from her waistband, and the swaying gait that came from her lameness after the fall” (88). The image described in these few lines vividly describes Sattout as a comedic rather than a serious character. In addition, the narrator personifies the village into a character who is happy to see Sattout with her limp and her unhealthy look. The village’s pleasure anticipates the reader’s enjoyment with the story itself.

Looking at Sattout with Bergson’s theory of the comic type in mind we see a humor strategy that is unique for Naimy. Bergson affirms that good and bad characters become comic regardless of whether the plot is “serious or trifling, [the plot] is still capable of making us laugh, provided that care be taken not to arouse our emotions” (41). It is the readers’ interaction with the characters that makes them comic. There are, however, three central qualities that Naimy must observe to achieve the comic or the humorous. Bergson describes the
“unsociability in the performer, and insensibility in the spectator” which are “the two essential conditions. [And] the third condition is automatism” (Bergson 41). In other words, the subject of the comic is a character that must be a social misfit, whereas the audience must not have any identification or emotional reaction to the characters. To ensure laughter, the whole action must look automatic— that is, as if a machine can do the actions described in the plot. If the comic character can be replaced by a machine that can be programmed to do those actions, then the audience stops seeing the characters as individuals and can start laughing at their miseries. This description of what makes a comic character is further summarized with Bergson’s statement that “Rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in the character” (41). In this context, Naimy’s characters become stereotypes of an obsessed person or the closest idea of a strict, mechanical, oblivious and unsociable being.

The careful description of Sattout’s gossiping is sarcastic and creates an incongruous image of a very serious rumor-monger. The narrator describes that Sattout’s gossip is in “her extraordinary capacity for picking up items of local news and broadcasting them with lightning speed to all and sundry, embellishing them with unparalleled skill and bolstering her version with such solemn oaths as to render her veracity totally unassailable” (87). Here, the serious tone of the narrator conflicts with his description of her actions. He recasts her menial tale-telling into a behavior that has incomparable talent, and creates a juxtaposition that creates humor for the reader. Sattout is serious about her profession. While
recovering from a bad injury, she “thanked the Lord that her affliction was nowhere near severe enough for her to have to give up plying her ‘vocation,’ which she held more sacred than the rites of the Church” (88). Here, the humor lies in the narrator’s description of Sattout’s excessive dedication to her job. It is important to note, though, that Naimy carefully chooses a word meaning profession, not vocation in the original. In the Arabic, the narrator refers to “mehnataha,” (403) which literally means “her job or profession.” Perry translates it as a ‘vocation.’ But though the translated word creates a comic incongruity between the reality and the esteem of the job in Sattout’s view, this translation is off the mark. This is an example that reveals one of the instances of the tough choices the translator’s have to make. In Perry’s case, this is the humorous strategy that is “prioritized,” according to Patrick Zabalbeascoa, at the expense of other elements from the literary tradition in which Naimy is writing.

The problem with using the word “vocation” is the religious tone of the word. In the Arabic literary context, Naimy worked hard to avoid any religious undertone in his writing. This was part because Naimy’s Arabic critics put him in a tough position because of his unconventional religious viewpoints. He knew that his beliefs in reincarnation and transmigration of souls did not conform to those of the protestant church in which he was raised. In addition, if he were to use the word ‘vocation’ in Arabic, his readers would have been distracted with the heresy of equating gossiping with a religious vocation, and they would have missed his sarcasm that Sattout holds gossip in high esteem. It must be noted that because of the different audiences, in English, the word ‘vocation’ rings true
though it misses Naimy’s awareness of his audience and his careful mastering of Arabic.

Another of the humorous incongruities that cause laughter is in the physical description of a seventy-year-old woman waving her stick at dogs and ungrateful people. The character of Sattout is not benevolent, but in describing it, Naimy presents another instance of humor with the disconnect between her physical descriptions and her actions. When Sattout goes on her daily visits with her walking stick, she is seen “shaking it menacingly at the dogs and” (88) “wa ‘ala Jahidi fadlaha,” (403) which is translated as “at the dogs and anyone who refused to accord her right of way” (88). While Naimy distances his narrator from his character by using this third person, he also creates humor by making the whole – the stick, dogs and ungrateful people - parts of her own point of view.

The Arabic words “wa ‘ala Jahidi fadlaha” (403) are more elusive than the translation shows. They describe not only those people who refuse to give her the right of way, but broadly speaking, “everyone who is thankless to all the good things Sattout has to offer” (my translation). This example elucidates another challenge in translating humor. In this case, “the task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [intention] on the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (Benjamin 19-20). To achieve that purpose, Perry focuses on creating this humorous image with consideration of his English speaking audiences and their expectations.

The humor of the story lies also in the metaphorical allusion that creates laughter because of the reversal of meanings when Sattout attacks her
neighbor's house. Since the neighbor is one “thankless person to all the good things Sattout has to offer,” she had to be threatened (88). In this section, the imagery is that of a war front. Sattout is depicted fighting the house. She “has laid siege to it, she has launched frontal assaults, but to no avail; she had tried as it were to tunnel underneath it, only to have her entrenching tools shatter against the rock of its foundations” (89). This description creates enjoyment because it forces the readers to alternate sets of images and move between seeing the stones as the servants and “that House” as its owner (89). She is as a Don Quixote who fights windmills, but since her quest is not justified, she fails. There are no scandals in that house, and she is imposing herself where she is rejected. The most humorous aspect of the story is in this climax of the plot.

On this war front, Naimy depicts humorous opposites. A major attack occurs when Sattout tries to visit her neighbor a second time while being “overjoyed” (90) that the husband was deemed lost in Australia. The repetition of the action of visiting the neighbor is humorous, because repetitions are humor enhancers. In this respect, the readers can anticipate the action and enjoy the unfolding comedy of anticipating and seeing Sattout fail again. The ironic tone is again apparent. Before her visit, Sattout has an internal monologue: “Go to that supercilious young madam and pretend you’ve forgotten the past and have come to console her in her misfortune. Offer to help her in any way you can, rub your eyes with onion-juice to bring on the tears- she’ll never doubt your sincerity; then we’ll see what happens” (90). The neighbor quickly sees through Sattout’s false pretension. This is exactly the opposite to what she had anticipated and is
dramatically ironic because the readers by then know Sattout and expect this result.

Naimy’s final description of Sattout and her actions is ironic. Sattout, on the fateful night, resembles an ugly witch ready to gobble her victims on a Halloween comedy show: “Her stomach fluttered, her skin crawled as if ants were running over it from head to foot, and she grated her teeth horribly. Moments later she found herself heading, stick in hand, towards the big house, muttering aloud, ‘if this ‘brother’ trick can fool simpletons, it won’t fool me, not Sattout!’” (91) Sattout’s eavesdropping proves to be deadly. The irony is that she does hear what she had desperately wanted: the young bride making love to her lover. But Sattout falls into, and dies in, the “jibb” (a sewer), which is less accurately translated as a “pool” (92), though it could be a “pit” (91). Sattout’s finest hour is finding the perfect gossip about her neighbor, but it is undercut by her death.

The ending of the story presents another ironic twist. The reader realized at the end that Sattout never ends up knowing that the lover is the husband who had returned home. The dramatic irony is enhanced by the reciprocal interference of the happy ending for the good neighbor and Sattout’s death. In Bergson’s theory, since Sattout becomes a comic character, she is more of a machine and a type. This mechanization prevents the readers from empathizing with her doom, and they can laugh even if she dies. Humor is also in setting up these opposite endings and creating laughter by the comparison. In “Her Finest Hour,” Sattout draws laughter through tears from the readers because the final
reciprocal interference is her death and the happy return of her neighbor. This juxtaposition coupled with the fact that she is a comic type desensitizes the readers from her doom and allows for laughter to happen.

“UM YA’QUB’S CHICKENS”

Sattout might seem a peculiar case, but comparing her to Um Ya’qub proves that both women share the same Bergson comic type. Salma Khadra Jayyusi chose this story to model Naimy’s writing in her anthology of Arabic fiction in the last two decades. This story could shape the reception of Naimy in American literary circles, as a representation of his best short fiction. Laurence Venutti affirms, in his chapter on “The Bestseller” in *In Scandals of Translation*, “translations that reward investment, especially those that become bestsellers, risk the stigma of scholars and critics who possess the cultural authority to shape taste and affect long-term sales” (124). Translators Gouryeh and Nye have accurately revisited this story and in their translation they contextualized it for English-speaking audiences. Moreover, it is another good example of the humor strategies that get translated and get successfully carried through the languages.

“Um Ya’qub’s Chickens” is a comic story about a female protagonist whose life revolves around mothering her one hen, Seniora. The plot rises to a climax with the disappearance of the hen, and closes with the happy return of Seniora with her “nine baby chickens” (115). Unfortunately, the hen’s three-week absence has killed Um Ya’qub: she died of a broken heart, fearing the permanent loss of Seniora. Resembling Sattout, she is a comic character because of her obsession. Um Ya’qub’s deadpan character becomes the teller of a funny joke.
The humorous description of Um Ya’qub is defined by many incongruities. For instance, the description of her extreme miserliness is humorous. Um Ya’qub “ate only one meal a day, consisting solely of bread. The sharp eye of the most talented tailor could not have discerned the original material or pattern of her clothes, so mended and patched were they” (113). The description of her physical traits is equally humorous. In Gouryeh and Nye’s English translation of the story, “Um Ya’qub was past ninety. In the eyes of villagers she was a widow, but in her own she was still a woman with a husband” (112). These opening lines describe Um Ya’qub as an old woman who defies the norm because her husband disappeared a long time ago, but she still considers herself married. Though her husband’s long absence proves his death, she denies that fact. Her worldview is based on her own desires, completely disregarding the people around her.

The physical description of Um Ya’qub is a source of humorous incongruities based on opposites that culminate in an irony: “Um Ya’qub had a face that stiffened against smiles, a tongue foreign to pleasantries and a hand opposed to giving. Besides all this, she was barren” (112). This non sequitur description of Um Ya’qub based on opposition focuses on what is missing in her life. It starts with the simple physical signs of happiness represented by cheerful grins that she refuses to wear and moves to the lack of any good-natured remark she can share with people around her. She also has a character defect, her lack of generosity. It must be noted that although Um Ya’qub has no children, her name itself means “the mother of a boy named Ya’qub” (Arabic version of the
name Jacob). She can never have a child, but the villagers gave her the name “out of courtesy and wishful thinking” (112). The discrepancy between the facts that she is called a mother when she is a lonely childless woman is not an uncommon social phenomenon in the Arab rural societies in early 20th century. This historical and social background complicates the notion of a humorous incongruity in this case. Nevertheless, what is important for this humorous character is the amount of details that make her into a comic type based on the peculiarities in her description.

In the midst of all these negative qualities, Um Ya’qub becomes a likeable character because she is sincere. In elaborating on her one good quality, honesty, the narrator creates a carefully adjusted personal philosophy to make some sense of the whole character. Naimy’s attitude to his female protagonists have been seen as somewhat misogynistic, but in the case of Um Ya’qub and Sattout, the focus of this study is to read them as comic characters rather than representations of Arab women. They don’t reflect Naimy’s own attitude to women in general, but they are literary creations that are important in the context of the stories.

In the story, Um Ya’qub’s sayings are defined by what Bergson calls “the reciprocal interference” and inversion. The sayings are based on two independent series of ideas that are connected, but they have different interpretations at the same time. The humor is in the reader’s understanding of these contradictory interpretations. Um Ya’qub creates a personal philosophy by modifying folk sayings and providing a new interesting interpretation. The humor
here centers on Um Ya’qub’s adapting famous sayings and then twisting them into unforeseen elucidations to fit her intentions. In the process of analyzing this humor, the readers follow Bergson’s definition of inversion: when readers move between two opposite meanings, the humorous reaction results from this mental move between the two implications (Bergson 28). Um Ya’qub’s philosophical ideas have this quality of reciprocal interference that makes readers laugh because they cannot possibly anticipate the ending of each saying.

Two examples of her philosophical ideas are about the character of a successful person, and money. To Um Ya’qub, smiling and being soft spoken are two abhorrent qualities because they make her look weak. For instance, “someone with a quiet voice loses respect, becomes the butt of others’ jokes, and fails to find his daily bread” (112). The listing in this saying is funny because it looks like a non-sequitur. On the surface, a quiet voice is hardly a relevant topic for a good joke and finding one’s bread is related to work rather than shouting. However, these incomplete and fragmented sayings explain and rationalize the peculiar character of Um Ya’qub. She sets herself in opposition to common maxims, because usually people who use a quiet voice gain respect since shouting does not leave a good impression on others. Another quality Um Ya’qub discusses is the equation between spending and starving. To this character, “If your pocket is full, your belly knows no hunger. Squandering is eating more than you need to stay alive, and wearing more than you need to cover your nakedness” (112). Having money does not mean having food or clothes, though it can buy both. Ironically, saving money means purchasing something.
Using Attardo’s terminology, Naimy narrator’s metanarrative disruption sabotages the seriousness of Um Ya’qub with a philosophical comment. The opposition between saving money and buying food or clothes is comically set off with the philosophical saying, “Saving is collecting the drops that spill over the cup of survival” (112). The Naimy voice can be understood as interfering with the narration of this story, hence the critics look at realism in Naimy’s stories find this instance to be one of Naimy’s weakest moments. However, it is in these metanarrative disruptions that humor is created.

Though his objectivity in the depiction of Um Ya’qub, Sattout, and other characters allow his critics such as Nadeem Naimy and Roger Allan to label him as a realist, this is one instance where Naimy’s voice seems less realistic, as he creates a layer of humorous incongruity. Furthermore, it is in this metanarrative disruption that Naimy creates humor and prevents his character from becoming a completely realistic depiction of an Arab woman. Roger Allen confirms, “Mikha’il Nu’aymah’s early stories show a greater sense of subtlety and detachment, something that stems in no small part from his extensive readings in the Russian masters of the short story such as Chekhov and Gogol; their influence is clearly visible in the themes and techniques of stories such as ‘Sanatuha al-jadidah’ (‘Her New Year’) and ‘Masra’ Sattut’ (Sattut’s Death’)” (180). This objectivity is not evident in earlier Arabic short stories, and Naimy is considered one of its pioneers. A humor effect in the story of Um Ya’qub is in contrasting the authorial ideas with those of the miserly old woman who makes sense of her actions by revisiting life sayings and modifying them in her own way. Comically, she could
have written the philosophy of every miserly person around town. However, unless one reads the absurdity of her claims made clear with this contradiction, it is out of character for Um Ya’qub to use this sophisticated imagery.

Moreover, the humorous description of Um Ya’qub’s hen is incongruous and hilarious. The narrator ironically affirms that this relationship shapes Um Ya’qub because it makes her object of obsession worthy of her time and affection. This hen is almost perfect: “nature had not deprived Seniora of any of the fine accoutrements of chickens save for her tail. The missing tail was replaced by an upright feather, hooked on the end, which looked like an insignia of nobility” (114). The physical beauty and nobility of the hen is reinforced by the narrator’s statement that “in addition, nature had given Seniora a unique brain-hence the possibility for mutual understanding between woman and hen” (114). The hen’s unique physical and mental gifts complement each other. She has a feather for a tail and a brain worthy of human beings and not of hens. However, laughter happens in positing a humanized hen with an obsessed old woman.

In the story “Um Ya’qub’s Chickens,” laughter through tears is manifested in the raison d’être of the protagonist. A woman in her nineties proclaims that she is alive because she has a hen to care for, she hates death, and she hates her next door neighbor whom she has named “Mother of Warts” (113). While the reader laughs at the absurdity of Um Ya’qub’s claims, the main action in this story is the failure of communication between the old woman and her hen. When the hen and ten of her eggs disappear, Um Ya’qub cannot be comforted, and she dies after three weeks of waiting. The reciprocal interference is in the return of
Seniora with her nine chicks on the very day of her owner’s funeral. This ending is comical because it juxtaposes death with birth and a happy ending with a sad one. The narrator and the readers know the cause of Um Ya’qub’s death, but that reason is, after all, a chicken.

“THE PRESENT”

The third story analyzed in this chapter, “The Present,” was translated by J. R. Perry based on Naimy’s “Al–Haddya” from Akabir, a collection of thirteen short stories first published in Beirut in 1963. The humor in this story is in its dramatic irony and laughter through tears, since Naimy’s “The Present” relies heavily on “The Overcoat” (1842) by Nikolai Gogol.

Naimy’s ideas on universal law elucidate the concept of diffuse disjunction or irony in this humorous story. The concept of a power controlling humans is hidden in the plot. Seen from this perspective, the downfall of the main male protagonist, Massoud, is inescapable. He is bound to fall, not due to his own actions, but because of something bigger than himself. The dramatic irony in this story becomes more significant because it is not only Massoud who does not realize what is going to happen, but it is also the readers who believe in the need to compensate Massoud for all his hard labor and genuine love and care.

In “The Present,” Naimy tells the story of the twenty-seven-year-old Massoud, a laborer who carries stones to masons. His only source of income is his work and his health, and he is very proud to be a hard worker who can carry heavy stones for long hours. He also prides himself on never asking anyone for help or money. When the story opens, Massoud has been married for two weeks,
and his thoughts are focused on buying his bride the perfect gift. After much thought, Massoud decides to go into town and buy her a fancy wall mirror. In the evening, misinterpreting his pensive looks, his wife thinks he is in pain and urges him to go to the dentist. This trip to the dentist gives him the perfect excuse to leave the village. Once in the big town, Massoud is overwhelmed and is duped by a stranger who guides him to the mirror shop but turns out to be a pickpocket who steals Massoud’s money. After this climax, the action unravels quickly. In few sentences, Massoud buys the mirror with the fifteen liras he borrows from a neighbor who happens to be in town. He returns home and decides not to let his wife know about the debt. Before he can enjoy the gift with his happy wife, the mirror falls off the wall and shatters. At that same moment, Massoud collapses and falls terribly sick. Despite all the bad incidents that happen to Massoud, the story is humorous since it has dramatic irony and a degree of absurdity that makes plot twists so exaggerated as to be laughable.

Perry’s title “The Present” is an accurate translation of the Arabic one, but it is also ironic, since the ending of the story is in fact a burden, not a gift, to the wife. Dramatic irony is defined as the irony inherent in speeches or a situation, and while the audience understands this irony, it is not grasped by the characters. The dramatic irony in “The Present” is highlighted with the complete reversal of the couple’s situation. Massoud’s quick downfall is seen through the perspective of his new bride, who depends completely on her husband. They are poor yet happy, and Naimy describes their house as “the shack he had built with his own hands” (52). She never asks for a gift and even encourages Massoud to
take care of his health. She ends up with a sick husband, no money for the
doctor, and a shattered mirror that is no better than the fragment she had been
previously using, which "he had once picked up on a refuse-tip behind the house
of the wealthy man for whom they were building a new mansion" (52). The
couple ends up with no prospect of getting money and a big debt of which she is
not even aware because "he thought it best not to tell her about his misadventure
with the pickpocket" (56). Massoud’s intentions are to make his bride happy, but
he ends up leaving her in a bad situation. The real gift that could ensure their
continuous happiness, his health, is clear to the reader, because the narrator
keeps referring to the early signs of Massoud’s poor health. In addition, the
narrator spends a long time explaining the importance of good health for
maintaining a household; therefore it is clear spending the money on a useless
fancy mirror is a bad choice. Massoud’s perfect gift is in fact the perfect
nightmare. The ending of the story sets up a reciprocal interference with the two
parallel images of the fancy mirror falling off the wall and Massoud falling sick.
Naimy’s emphasis on the intention of Massoud and his complete disregard for his
own well-being (the rotten tooth, the heart pains, the ill-fitting shoes) are
highlighted by his insistence on buying a mirror. Even the walls of the house
cannot hold this fancy object. The irony is the fact that a mirror can cause a
tragedy.

As a critique of materialism, this story prompts bittersweet laughter at
dreams and realities. Naimy along with "both Nabokov and Gogol often depict
sudden, perspective-wrenching reflections (in puddles, mirrors, lakes, and so on)
which all seem part of a larger and stranger preoccupation with reversing the real and the unreal” (William Rowe 118). In Massoud’s desire to bring the perfect gold-framed mirror to his wife is an attempt to see their reality through the lens of a fancy material object that does not correspond to their poverty. In this context, Naimy’s story also echoes “La Parure” (1884) by the French writer Guy de Maupassant (in English, “The Diamond Necklace”), wherein the dramatic irony lies in the couple’s lifelong sacrifice to buy their friend a diamond necklace to replace the one of hers they lost, before learning belatedly that the original necklace was actually only worthless costume jewelry.¹

In Naimy’s story, the diffuse disjunctions with the reciprocal interference draw laughter through tears, a concept of humor following the model of Nikolai Gogol, who many Naimy critics see as a major influence on the Lebanese writer. A comparison of the similarities and differences in the plots of “The Present” (1963) and “The Overcoat” (1842) reveals that although both stories do not cause happy laughter in the readers, they are humorous and they draw a tearful smile at the fates of both Massoud and Akaky. In both humorous stories laughter through tears is drawn from the dramatic irony. Humor in this case does not cause readers to rejoice at the men’s downfall, but it becomes a means of highlighting serious issues of fate and desire. Humor is in the strategies both authors use, mostly ironies and metanarrative disruptions. Though both stories are serious texts, their seriousness is not incompatible with their elements of humor.
Naimy’s protagonist Massoud has much in common with Akaky from Gogol’s “the Overcoat”. They are poor but work with their hands, respectively carrying stones to masons or copying documents, and their only resource is their work. Both men create a need for something: Massoud needs a gift for his new bride and Akaky needs a new coat because his is too worn out. Despite their meager incomes, both men save money to buy the thing they desire. In the process, buying the object becomes an obsession and they miss out on other important things in life: Massoud disregards all the signs of his poor health and his need for good shoes, and Akaky slacks on his day job while dreaming of his new coat. Both characters aim at something out of their reach: a fancy mirror with a gold frame for a poor laborer who cannot even afford to buy all the necessary food and a fancy coat for an almost starving copyist.

Both men end up bitterly disappointed even after they reach their goals. Massoud is robbed by a pickpocket and borrows money to buy the mirror, breaking his own pride. Unfortunately, the wall in his house cannot hold the new mirror which shatters. Akaky gets mugged on his way home from an evening party and loses his new coat. Both men’s health is also compromised, as the reader leaves Massoud in poor shape, in a faint, and Akaky actually dies. Both stories end with a worse situation than the starting point. The protagonists do not deserve their awful ending, but they reach it because of their obsession with a desire: a present!

Massoud bestows the gift on his wife, while Akaky keeps his for himself. While this is one point of difference between the two stories, there is a longer list.
In Naimy’s story, there is no follow-up scene of ghosts, revenge, and justice. In the case of Gogol’s protagonist, Akaky dies after getting no help from a prominent man to find his lost coat. After death, the ghost of Akaky haunts the city, steals coats, and frightens the nameless VIP who refused to help him. The ending fits Gogol’s story, because revenge provides a happy ending to the story. In contrast to Gogol, despite Naimy’s belief in reincarnation, he is careful not to include any of his personal philosophies in his stories, and he leaves his readers free to choose the interpretation they desire.

In spite of Naimy’s reliance on Gogol’s story, he manages to make Massoud a type of a laborer who can transcend national boundaries, even though he lives in a small village. All signs limiting Massoud, his village, and the city to the Lebanese setting are carefully omitted, and though Lebanese readers and Arab critics can assume this link, Naimy never identifies his locations with one geographical area. Furthermore, Naimy’s humor strategies transcend his own attempts at hiding his humor. In fact, the exact points at which Naimy’s critics have found his realism lacking (such as the metanarrative disruptions and exaggerated descriptions for comic types) are in fact prime examples of his humor strategies.

“BANCAROLIA”

As in “The Present,” Naimy also uses dramatic irony and a male protagonist in “The Bancarolia.” The story concerns the farmer Abu Shahin, who sells his animals and his land to put his son through high school. After graduation, the son does not find a job suitable for his big ego and his high
school degree, so he travels abroad. Following a series of failures, the son sends a letter asking for more money, but the father sends him a reply—but no money.

The main diffuse disjunction in the story, in this case a verbal irony, is the parents’ inability to correctly pronounce the name of their son’s degree. The father calls it “bacanora” (81), but his wife corrects him with “bancarolia” (82). She says “Bancarolia, stupid. Ban-ca-ro-li-a, you illiterate! How many times have I taught you to pronounce it, and you haven’t learned yet! You’ll never learn” (82). This reply is worthy of a comedic show. In fact, both words are incorrect pronunciations of the word “baccalaureate.” The dramatic irony is that the father is ready to sell everything for the sake of a degree that he knows in advance will cause the downfall of the family.

Another instance of irony is in the dialogue between husband and wife when Abu Shahin throws his wife money after selling the goats. She asks him about the source, and he answers, “Stole it” (82). When further probed, his answer is “from my own heart’s blood. I stole it to please you and your son Umm Shahin” (82). This example uses the imagery of stealing that is incongruous with the idea of selling. The father’s exaggerated statement linking his own body to his belongings is emotional, but it is in the exaggeration that humor is created. This imagery does not belong in a conversation between characters such as these.

The conversation between the couple is filled with sarcasm and hurtful words because both parents refuse to live according to their own standards and means. In blaming his wife and his son for their ambition, and in selling his
animals and land, Abu Shahin also loses his credibility with the reader. In fact, Abu Shahin had gotten caught up in the dream of social mobility that his wife thought would occur if her son got his baccalaureate. The ending is ironic: the son is penniless and trapped in a foreign country, the parents live poorly after having lost animals and land, and the father is still in denial. Abu Shahin’s compliance with his wife and son’s desires make him guilty by association for their bankruptcy.

Naimy makes Abu Shahin a father type. Although Naimy never directly acknowledged the influences of the Lebanese countryside and the people he interacted with, in this story, he depicts a common social phenomenon in his Lebanese rural society. In fact, the story of Abu Shahin selling his land to educate his son was a common problem in the rural Lebanese society in Naimy’s day. In this context, the father is a farmer and he is good at his work, but he sells his goats and land. He sells them because the son needs the money and because Abu Shahin’s wife convinces him that his work does not suit his new social position as the father of a son famous in the village for getting his degree. Naimy’s critique of any character who makes bad choices concerning his land and the source of his income is a recurrent theme in “Bancarolia” as well as in “The Present.” This authorial disdain for people who live beyond their means and sell their land and livestock for the sake of upward mobility is emphasized by the sarcastic but humorous tone of the narrator.

In “Bancarolia,” the laughter through tears develops through a rather bleak plotline that is set off by instances of humorous descriptions. At the end of the
story, though the father does not admit his guilt, he becomes the center of the irony by doing what looks like a funny action. After reading the son’s letter asking him for more money, Abu Shahin runs to remove and then cover the framed Baccalaureate diploma with dung. He then hangs it back on the wall, writes a reply to his son and adds to it “two strands of goat hair and two flattened goat droppings” (84). In his note, the penniless father explains that the envelope contains what the “Bancarolia have left” the family (84). After putting the letter in the mail, the father feels that he revenged himself because his predictions have come true. He even tells his dog, “We’ve got our revenge, you and I, on the ‘Bancarolia’” (84). The father’s reaction to his son’s letter asking him for money to buy a return ticket from America causes a smile from the reader. This sweet revenge, an almost-happy ending for the father, is laughable, but also causes tears for the desperate situation of the family. In the plot, the father acts three ways: he sells his belongings, he broods, and he sends the reply letter. In all three dealings, he fails to be a good father. He knows his son is too conceited and ignorant to earn money, attain high social status, and a dream job. However, it is the father who voluntarily sells the family’s sources of income, and his only justification at the end is that he has taught his son a life lesson.

THE CONCEPT OF LAUGHTER THROUGH TEARS

In the four stories, the reactions generated in the reader are a mix between humorous enjoyment and sadness. Nadeem Naimy confirms that this Lebanese writer “comes most close [sic] to the nineteenth century Russian short story, and particularly that famous Gogolian quality of drawing out tears through
smiles” (152). Although Naimy studied American and British literature in Seattle during his five years as a university student, his humor was mostly shaped by his longer and earlier education in Russian literary tradition. This concept of humor developed when Pushkin defined Gogol’s humor by the phrase “Laughter through tears.” Naimy’s humor is best understood in this context, as a humor that is superseded by sadness. It does not carry the satire of Swift but the bitterness of a tear, while at the same time making the reader laugh. While “Gogol balances laughter with tears by creating a kind of diptych” (Hallet 376), Naimy’s stories rely on similar separations and parallel imageries. Um Ya’qub dies, but her hen has nine chicks. Sattout dies, but the neighbor returns safely to his wife. Massoud falls sick, and the mirror he bought shatters. Abu Shahin is penniless, and his son gets a very interesting package in the mail. The smiles and tears emerge in the telling of these stories about failures.

In addition to sad laughter, Naimy uses reciprocal interference and gallows humor strategy of juxtaposing tragic and humorous scenes. While, these humor strategies have been analyzed under different names (diptychs and reversals) as humorous stylistic elements in the stories of Russian authors: Gogol and Nabokov, they still apply to Naimy. William Rowe explains that both Russians “favor unique digressions that abruptly but subtly reverse their own descriptive direction. The result is a haunting return to the point of departure even while narrational focus seems to keep moving away. Such reversals often add a tang of uneasy humor” (113). Similarly, the reversal in Naimy’s “Her Finest Hour” is the happy return of the husband coupled with the death of Sattout. In
“Um Ya’qub’s Chickens,” it is the happy return of Seniora, the hen, with her nine chicks, which coincides with the burial of Um Ya’qub. In “The Present,” it is the breaking of the expensive mirror, coupled with the fatal fall of Massoud.

Moreover, Naimy uses digressions and “diptychs” modeled on Gogol (Hallet 376). In this literary context, the diptych contains two matching parts that balance the seriousness and humor in the stories. The reader’s reaction is a mixture of laughter and sadness, a concept Naimy mastered while studying Gogol. On the one hand, Massoud’s story ends on a bitter note, which is worse than the demise of Sattout and Um Ya’qub. Massoud’s illness is more hopeful than the death of Sattout and Um Ya’qub, because it allows room for his recovery, but his downfall deprives the readers from the final diptych found in the other two stories. There is nothing offsetting his fall except the diptych image of the broken mirror. In Sattout’s case, the happy return of the neighbor’s husband, and in Um Ya’qub’s case, the happy return of Seniora with her nine chicks, provide a release of tension. The simultaneous but incongruous happy and sad endings cause laughter. In “The Present,” there is no release creating laughter, because Massoud is left in a state of unresolved tension. On the other hand, in “Bancarolia,” the dark undercurrent is Abu Shahin’s complicity with the downfall of his family. Abu Shahin’s final actions of sending the envelope with goat hair instead of money, and covering the diploma with animal dung and goat hair, however, are his own sweet revenge.
CONCLUSION

It is important to make one final note about Naimy’s style and Perry’s translation. In Sattout’s story, an example of Naimy’s mastery of the Arabic language is when Sattout suspects the young woman of adultery and she screams in one gasp: “‘Al qidissa’- Innaha la ‘ahira” (405). The literal translation would be “the saint- she is a whore” (my translation). Keeping his English-speaking audiences in mind, J. R. Perry adds further explanation when he translates this sentence. He writes: “the saint was exposed- she was a common whore!” (89). In this context, J.R. Perry’s translation mode seems to answer critic Douglas Robinson’s call for translation to be worked out through the “somatic approach [defined as] the ways in which our body ‘signals’ to us what we know and how we should act on it” though ‘intuitions’ or ‘gut reactions’” (x). This physiological approach to translating through feeling and understanding a text, to integrate body and mind through the use of intuition and systemization, explains some of the choices Perry makes. But Gouryeh and Nye (other Naimy translators) follow a more literal approach to translating. No matter which translation approach is used, however, the humor cannot be lost. Even when the translators don’t interpret the humor and they focus on faithfully reproducing the original ideas, the humor strategies of incongruities, reciprocal interference, diffuse disjunctions, and humorous comic types transcend the linguistic and cultural boundaries and retain Naimy’s humor.
NOTES: NAIMY

1 “The Present” can also be compared to O’Henry’s “Gift of the Magi” which many critics read in conjunction with Maupassant’s stories, such as “La Parure.” In the three stories, the dramatic irony remains a central strategy.
CHAPTER IV

The Horror of Humor:
Pushing the Limits of the Comic in the Stories of Edgar Allan Poe

The humor strategies Edgar Allan Poe shares with the other three writers in this dissertation are exemplified in three of his stories, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” “Lionizing,” and “Why the Frenchman Wears his Right Arm in a Sling.” Poe relies on humorous incongruities, repetition and descriptions to convey his humor. His third-person narrator sometimes becomes the object of satire. In studying the humorous incongruities in Poe’s stories, the element of fear becomes important to understand the difference between his horror and humor writings. While horror produces fear in the reader, humor causes laughter. Poe’s stories range from elaborate sarcasm based on a joke, to the overuse of allusions, to comic misspellings. He also uses humorous names and situations. The humor in Poe’s stories usually involves an intended target of satire such as Charles Dickens in “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.” The rest of this chapter introduces Poe as both a horror and humor writer before going into details about the stories and uncovering the humor strategies that make Poe’s humor worthy of being studied for its own value rather than for it being seen as imperfect practice pieces for his horror stories.
EDGAR ALLAN POE: A HORROR AND HUMOR WRITER

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is an American writer famous for his horror and detective tales, but he has also been re-read for the humor in some of his short stories. One main critical reason for disregarding Poe’s humorous stories within his oeuvre is the unenthusiastic reception he received while trying to publish them. He had a hard time selling his comic stories, a marketing problem which might explain their low recurrence in anthologies: we do not know many of Poe’s humorous tales. For instance, his poem “The Raven,” and his fiction “The Fall of the House of Usher” have had far more critical attention than his humorous stories “Loss of Breath” and “The Man that was Used Up.” John Bryant contends “Poe’s humor: the rubric seems to deny reality. To be sure, the writer knew how to use laughter throughout all of the varied genres of his canon” (16). Despite the somewhat negative reception of Poe’s humorous stories, Poe turned the gothic into slapstick, finding comedy and laughter to be a useful weapon.

Critics argue that throughout his career and starting with The Tales of the Folio Club (1883), Poe used comedies as practice pieces for his art of fiction. By parodying the literature of his times, Poe found key themes that made him famous in his detective and psychological horror stories. Taking pre-existing patterns borrowed from a contemporary periodical, he would use comic inversions to make the models his own. Poe would repeat the stories to master not only the plots but also his tone. David Galloway confirms “the comic mode was not merely a phase in Poe’s exuberant apprenticeship: comedies, satires and hoaxes account for more than half his total output of short stories, and the
last of them, ‘X-ing a paragrab’, appeared only a few months” (8) before he died. It seems as if Poe’s standard technique was to take individual stories, rework them, re-title them, and alter their tone. For instance, Poe’s famous 1842 story “The Pit and the Pendulum” is a rewriting of the same plot from his earlier lesser known 1840 humor story “A Predicament,” and “King Pest” is the predecessor to “Masque of the Red Death.”

This study of Poe’s humor contradicts yet complements Mark Twain’s humor in the author’s use of the humor strategies. Though Poe is a humorist, he is different from Mark Twain. Poe’s use of satire, hoax and the grotesque does not create laughter because “these techniques were instruments of wit and therefore served to show an incisive mind rather than provide a way to laugh” (Tomlinson 188). Poe’s humorous stories relied on intellectual moves rather than on the interaction of the readers with the humor. His convoluted satires created enemies because his sense of humor was vengeful and bitter. In many cases, “often those he satirized, missed it entirely, and when it was called to their attention, they would sometimes react with great anger, seeing Poe’s derision as unfair criticism” (Tomlinson 188). Poe’s humor was often an attack on others rather than a consoling and happy event. This nutshell definition of Poe’s humor explains one of the reasons his humor is less accessible to a large audience.

On one hand, Mark Twain’s “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” story causes laughter because it is not directly related to the readers’ experiences. Jim Smiley was a gambler and his betting on animals is portrayed as harmless fun. Furthermore, readers can distance themselves from the bleak descriptions that
the “Stolen White Elephant” story produces. Laughing and crying at the gory
destructions caused by the stray elephant are possible because an unbelievably
huge elephant is often left loose in real life. The description of the elephant eating
a quarter ton of food every day is equally blown out of reasonable proportions.

On the other hand, Poe’s humor stories focus on topics that are bleak, not
escapist fun, and closer to the audiences’ fears. Like Twain, Poe wrote a
humorous story about a gambler. However, in “Never Bet the Devil Your Head”
(1841) the humor borders the gothic. Unlike Jim Smiley, Toby Dammit bets his
head to the Devil and ends up losing it. In the process of telling the story, the
narrator identified as Toby’s good friend uses absurd expressions like “had
anyone taken him up, his head was small, and thus his loss would have been
small too” (118). The sarcasm about the loss of the head is typical of Poe’s
humor because it posits a very frightful idea (losing one’s head) and undermines
it with incongruous details (the head was small, therefore the loss is small), all
the while using a logical inference that is based on absurdities. The fun in the
story is Poe’s attack on the transcendentalist school that was apparently
responsible for Toby’s behavior. After Toby’s head was cut off, he did not take
medications so “in the end he grew worse, and at length died” (124). The delayed
action of death after decapitation creates a very gloomy atmosphere wherein
bitter sarcasm replaces the fun of watching Mark Twain’s frog Daniel Webster
unable to hop.

A recurring topic in Poe’s fiction is characters struggling with their identity.
In his humor stories, Poe treats this problem comically. For instance, the story
“The Man that Was Used up” details the life of a war hero, who is renowned for his physical beauty but who in fact is physically comprised of artificial devices, ranging from a voice machine to dentures and plastic eyes, among other items. This black farce of military hero-worship glorifies the false yet beautiful image of the General as an identity attached to a dying body (16). Poe’s humor is in the success of such a charade and in his attack on the culture that beautifies ugliness at the expense of truth. Thus, the General’s real identity is found between the real and the illusion.

In addition to this textual investigation of a character’s identity, Poe’s personal identity as a writer, a critic, and a man obsessed with his own fear of insanity is indirectly presented in the stories. Not only do Poe’s stories attest to this fact, but also in an 1848 letter to an admirer, he literally expressed his desire to arrive at the “source of his own instability” (qtd. in Galloway 20). Poe’s personal agenda drove him to investigate the question of the insane, and writing became therapeutic for him because he kept his fears under control when he invented stories. In fiction, Poe could investigate his own fears and desires without directly putting himself on the pages. His humor is dark and valuable because the fears he taps into are not just limited to one individual or one culture: these worries transcend cultural boundaries.

In his humorous stories, Poe delicately balances the element of fear so that it does not overpower his plots and characters. Lewis explains that “current research is demonstrating that humor and fear often seem to arise together in a sequence not because fear causes humor but because they have a common
origin in incongruity” (Comic 5). The readers of incongruities, however, do not feel fear when reading a humorous story. Noel Carroll, in his 1999 article “Horror and Humor,” offers a clarification about the horror-humor pairing: “the boundary line between horror and incongruity humor is drawn in terms of fear” (157). It is only when fear is too strong, then, according to Lewis and Carroll, those incongruities cease to be humorous and become gothic. Therefore, when there is the absence of fear in the audience, the incongruous horrific element becomes instead humorous. Poe’s humor makes the fearful situations laughable. This theory may be one reason that Poe’s move to horror is a logical progression from his humor writing.

In his Broadway Journal of January 18, 1845, Poe elaborated on the humor and horror relationship and used the term ‘fantasy’ to allude to horror. Poe affirms that although “fantasy seeks not merely disproportionate but incongruous or antagonistical elements, the effect is rendered more pleasurable from its greater positiveness - there is an effort of Truth to shake from her that which is no property of hers- and we laugh” (qtd. in Carroll 146). In being grotesque, horror - like humor- draws on incompatible opposites and becomes laughable. Therefore, similar texts can generate either laughter or horror. This double quality is a restatement of earlier theories, such as Freud’s linking the comic and its laughter to the uncanny.

Despite their many differences, humor and horror deal with crossing the boundaries of both acceptable behavior and recognized genres. Both genres involve “the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace
expectation” (emphasis added, Carroll 154). Humor and horror represent new and unanticipated events that go beyond the limits of the reader’s normal expectations. This link between humor and horror does not blend genres, because humor has its own regulations, its own way of addressing its topics and manners of dealing with the reader, text and context.

Poe frequently resorted to vulgar images of body mutilations as horrific details to get across his humor, thus challenging the sensitivity of his audiences. In this respect, his story “The Black Cat” is horrific rather than humorous, because the fear element in the audience is emphasized rather than eliminated. Usually, the incongruities based in the ugly and the deadly do not generate laughter. However, Poe’s humorous stories border on the fearful, but the humor strategies concerning plot, characters, and the reader’s interactions successfully make the incongruities humorous. While fear looms in Poe’s humorous stories, the other humor elements such as repetition and funny names and situations assuage this fear, and laughter results. However, there are additional challenges for today’s readers to grasp Poe’s humor.

One of the difficulties in understanding this humor is the historically ambiguous and outdated allusions, but in looking at Poe’s humorous strategies these challenges become less important. The references of Poe’s allusions were more readily available to his nineteenth century audiences. For instance, such Poe characters as Zenobia and Napoleon are a parody of their historical namesakes through their extreme pettiness. These two examples of allusions are incongruous and create a humorous laughter. “Signora Psyche Zenobia”—the
narrator in two Poe stories “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “Article for Blackwood”—is an allusion to the queen of the Palmyrene Empire, Queen Zenobia (3rd century AD), who successfully defied the Roman Empire. In the second example of “Napoleon Buonaparte Froissart,” also called “Simpson” (125) - the narrator of “The Spectacles”- the reference is to the famous French leader Napoleon Bonaparte (nineteenth century). The humor lies in the opposing nature of Zenobia to the real queen and of Napoleon to his French namesake. Although, Poe’s allusions may obstruct the laughter created by these allusions because today’s readers can be unaware of the hidden meaning in these historical references, the humor strategies that Poe uses remain timeless. It is the use of the incongruous humorous names that identify the humor even when the reader cannot assimilate all the implications of the humorous ideas.

Poe uses self-referential techniques to make the reader pay attention to the humorous nature of the characters and their names. In some cases, Poe names his main characters in order to involve a historical or a literary namesake with the clear intention of poking fun at those references. In other stories, he coins new and funny names. The minor characters mostly have the funny names, such as “The duchess of Bless-my-Soul” from “Lionizing” (26), “Windenough” from “Loss of Breath” (41), and “Legs” in “King Pest” (44). In these cases, Poe chooses one important characteristic that defines each character and makes it into a proper name. The humor by repetition occurs when these proper names are explained in terms of their function. For instance, in the story “Loss of Breath,” the unlikely event of a neighbor’s catching the narrator’s breath and
causing his horrible demise is the central plot. “Windenough” is the name of the neighbor, and the narrator who dies is “Lackobreath,” who lacked a breath when the wind blew his breath away and caused the neighbor passing under the window to catch it (40). The humorous intent built into these names make them valuable in studying Poe’s humor strategies.

Another characteristic of Poe’s humor is the combination of opposing elements. Francis Hutcheson’s description of incongruities best describes this aspect of Poe’s humor. When a beautiful and a dignified image is coupled with a relevant but ugly and profane one, the result is that our intellect is strained by this comparison, and the result is laughter (Telfer 360). This juxtaposition of opposing concepts that convey contradictory reactions while retaining a link to an overall idea creates humor. In addition, the incongruities happen with “breaches of norms of propriety where, for example, an inappropriate, rather than an illogical, behavior is adopted” (Carroll 154). In Poe’s stories the inappropriate is in the gory and physically impossible acts that are mixed with the daily and the mundane. Consequently, the reader’s suspension of belief is further emphasized. It is the piling up of physically impossible acts happening to the same character in one story that creates these humor fictional plots. These improbable scenarios place the story at a distance from the reader’s own life; therefore, the humor occurs not because it is funny that a character underwent a forced biopsy and lived to tell the story in “Loss of Breath,” but because the reader has been desensitized to fear gory elements by the sheer repetitive number of their occurrences.
In Poe’s humor, the topics are both personal and serious in their nature, and the author uses humor devices such as parody and irony to convey and underscore their seriousness. “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” “Lionizing,” and “Why the Frenchman Wears his Right Arm in a Sling” from The Other Poe present central questions and illustrate some of Poe’s major humor tendencies. Poe’s three humor strategies of narrative structures, reactions in readers, and context explain the relationship of horror and humor and laughter in these stories. In addition, the incongruities between the intended meaning, and the reader’s background knowledge, and the layout of the information (in many cases, plots) are also valuable elements in Poe’s fiction. Poe’s various humor strategies are mostly defined by his excessive use of repetition, funny coined names, comic misspellings, satires, jokes, and punch lines.

“THE SYSTEM OF DOCTOR TARR AND PROFESSOR FETHER”

Among Poe’s humorous stories, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” - first published in Graham Magazine November 1845- has received the most attention from his critics, especially from those exploring political and autobiographical contexts. In this story, the problem of insanity and the fact that the narrator becomes the victim of a joke played by a madman are disturbing topics. The reader catches up on this fact somewhat belatedly. The plotline consists of a traveling narrator who visits a French asylum (210). One of his traveling companions introduces him to Monsieur Maillard, suggesting that he is the asylum director; however, the narrator realizes belatedly that his host is one of the patients. Because of the lenient, “soothing system,” Maillard had
plotted against the guards, who, “having been suddenly overpowered, were first well tarred, then carefully feathered, and then shut up in underground cells” (218), hence the ironic title of the story. In the story, Maillard dupes the narrator and convinces him that Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether have published extensively on the topic of insanity and the soothing system. But all ends well and order is restored when the guards escape and the narrator and the patients receive a good beating.

The plot structure of this story is that of a joke with the narrator and the readers being victims of an insane man’s joke. In his 2001 *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*, Salvatore Attardo confirms that according to the General Theory of Verbal Humor, this story has the structure of a joke because of the “‘systematic withholding of information’ within the text” (93). The plot action and the revelations of information occur at different times in the story: here, the fabula and the plot “differ in specific ways such that the surprising aspects of the ‘punch line’ are not given away before the occurrence thereof (i.e., the end of the text)” (Attardo 94). When the events in a plot are chronological, they can be called the fabula, but in a joke usually these events are in different order. For instance, the joke lies in distancing both the narrator and the reader from understanding that Maillard is insane. The narrator in the “System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” is recalling an event that happened to him during a tour in France, and though he knows the truth about Maillard from the beginning of his tale, he withholds this information. The punch line is the revelation of this fact, which happened chronologically before the narrator sat down to write the
story. Even if the reader realizes that Maillard is insane before the end, the joke structure still stands because the narrator writes himself as the victim of the joke.

Another humor strategy is the tone of the deadpan narrator. In most humor stories, Poe’s narrator has emotional detachment from the fabula even when Poe is recounting a personal story. In the case of “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” the unnamed narrator keeps a disturbing deadpan ignorance about the reality surrounding him. In spite of Maillard’s early warning to “believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see” (205), the narrator gets engrossed in the details of describing the other characters, and he forgets to share the most important fact, their insanity. The “tea-pot” man (207) and the “donkey” man (208) are two examples of the crazy stories the narrator retells. The reader of these stories suspects early on the insanity of these characters, but it is the deadpan attitude of the narrator that makes the story humorous. It is the incongruity of what is being told, the actions of the characters, and the firm belief of the narrator that the dinner guests are not insane that contributes to humor here.

To add to this laughter, the incongruities in the names of the minor characters become interesting. In citing a few, the unnamed narrator has dinner with Monsieur Maillard, Mr de Kock, Mamzelle Laplace, Petit Gaillard, Jules Desoulieres, Bouffon Le Grand, Bouillard, the Teetotum, Madame Joyeuse, and Eugenie Salsafette. These names, all French, reflect the characters’ insanity. For instance, Mr de Kock acts like a donkey, and Bouffon Le Grand thinks he is a pumpkin and wants to be cooked, while Madame Joyeuse acts like a chicken and
sings cock-a-doodle-doo, and Boullard is a human Teetotum spinning at great speed (20-213). The lighthearted incongruity between these coined names, the characters, and the object of their insanity is another example of Poe’s humor. These names defamiliarize his characters and set them up as unreal crazy people to be laughed at.

With this laughter, Poe’s humor stories also depend on satirizing serious topics. Because his humor is addressed to his reader’s intellect rather than emotion, many critics strive to find the hidden agendas in Poe’s stories. In this story, the fact that the insane crowd sings Yankee Doodle shortly before it is subdued by the guards has been read as Poe’s dissatisfaction with the politics of his day. Attardo affirms “the entire story is a parable of the democratic process in the U.S. during Poe’s time” (93). Attardo argues that this story is a satire of contemporary American politics.

In this story, Poe’s humor strategy is also a double satire of Charles Dickens and of the system of moral treatment prevalent in psychiatric circles in his time. The more obvious satire is on “the management of insane hospitals” that advocates a “soothing system” which does not restrain crazy people, and the more subtle satire is that of “the narrator himself,” because he is a “traveler, who never completely understands what has happened” (Whipple 122). The real identity of the narrator that Poe is parodying has long been the subject of debate. William Whipple argues that the satirized narrator is “Charles Dickens” and is not Dr. Earl, Poe’s friend who introduced him to the soothing system, and who many believed was the object of satire (126). Critics agree that Poe is directly
parodying the section of Dickens’ visit to a Boston insane hospital in Dickens’s
*American Notes*. Biographical evidence confirms that Poe met with Dickens in
1842 in Philadelphia when the latter was on his American tour. Furthermore, at
the time Poe wrote this story, he was upset with Dickens, who did not keep his
promise to help Poe publish his *Tales* in England (Whipple 127). For a long time,
Poe managed to divert his critics’ attention from Dickens to Dr. Earle, since the
main topic of the story is about psychiatric treatment and the references to
Dickens are indirect. Whipple concludes, “if we interpret the satire correctly, and
it seems clear enough, Poe is saying- Dickens, you were duped” (132). This
textual comparison and the biographical information clarify this target of satire.

A main humor strategy lies in Poe’s extensive description of the system of
soothing. Poe seems to be attacking the literature of the soothing system rather
than the psychological foundations of this treatment. Critics agree that Poe’s
system of soothing is a reference to the “‗Moral Treatment‘” that was a common
idea in “psychiatric circles of the time” as a strategy to “reform the insane
hospitals in 1792” (Whipple 122). However, the story itself is better read as a
response to Dickens rather than as a study of the failures of the soothing system.
The ending of the story proves this theory because the narrator, after this
incident, goes on an unsuccessful search in “every library in Europe for the works
of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (218). This redirection to the fact that it is
the literature that interested the narrator reflects Poe’s similar interest.

In “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” the laughter caused
by these characters and their actions is ironic. The ultimate victim of the jokes is
the narrator, whose naïve perception heightens the incongruities by changing
laughter into a sad smile. Though this narrator continues feigning ignorance with
his endless and somewhat repetitive description of the crazy people around him,
the sad reality is always lurking on the pages. The laughter in this story depends
on understanding the joke and the insanity. When the story ends, Poe, the
readers, and the characters, especially Monsieur Maillard, are aware of the
insanity. However, the unnamed narrator is left in an ambiguous situation,
because the reader is not completely certain that the narrator understands the
joke played at his expense by Poe, by the other characters, and ultimately by the
reader. The narrator still searches for the literature of Doctor Tarr and Professor
Fether, implying that he has not repudiated all the information he acquired during
his visit to the asylum. Ultimately, it is Poe who distances himself from the
narrator by creating this incongruity. In this way, Poe creates complicity between
himself, the reader and Maillard and leaves the narrator open to criticism.

    Poe was always intrigued by his own fears of insanity, and since Maillard
is the one giving lessons in this story, the Maillard-Poe connection is valuable.
Monsieur Maillard tells the narrator, “When a madman appears thoroughly sane,
indeed, it is high time to put him in a strait-jacket” (215). This statement sounds
like Poe’s biggest fear. Was Poe seeing some of himself in Maillard? Was the
joke also played on Maillard and not just on the unnamed narrator? These
questions confirm the fact that the humor in this story goes in multiple directions.
While Maillard and the crazy tenants of “la maison de santé” poke fun at their
guards, everyone pokes fun at the unnamed narrator, and the whole story pokes
fun at the readers. In this process, Poe gets the space to express his fears and to at least partially identify with some of the characters while keeping his own identity as a mastermind puppeteer at bay.

"LIONIZING"

Poe’s second humorous story is “Lionizing,” which first appeared in the Southern Literary Messenger in May 1835. Its title carries a double meaning that verbalizes a noun and makes the title stand for a metaphor. The narrator wants to be compared to a lion, but the lions are a group of adult, very learned, and important men. This palimpsest quality to the story exemplifies and explains the difficulty of understanding Poe’s humor. Among other themes, Poe elaborates on questions of identity, just as Robert’s biography focuses on his need to learn about noses to become a lion. When Robert’s father considers him an adult, he kicks him out of the parental house. On his own, Robert is homeless but women from high society debate the topic of selling his nose. The punch line in this humorous story is the surprise ending that deprives Robert of his greatness. Most of the story is a long list of repetitive actions, funny names, and characters. One object of Poe’s humor is using the incongruities in Robert’s education as a means to satirize all types of learning - philosophy, theology, and social sciences. The focus on the science of nosology (a term coined by Poe) is also central to the story.

The ending of this story presents a final punch line, a major characteristic of verbal humor. Robert shoots off the nose of his colleague, and loses all self-
respect because “a lion with no nose is stronger than one with a fine nose” (30). The expectations of Robert and the reader have been built around the single concept of achieving greatness through nosology. This single life goal is taken away from Robert because he violently deprives Bluddennuff of his nose. To emphasize the humor, Robert is literally labeled as “bête, fool, dolt, ass, ninny, noodle” because he “overshot [his] mark” (30). Thus, the power of nothing is stronger than Robert’s great nose. Bluddennuff is a better lion than him because he has no nose. In this story, the succinct descriptions, the climaxing punch line, and the juxtaposition of opposites cause humor.

The first –out of five- structure that creates humorous incongruities is in “presenting things that stand at extreme opposite ends of a scale to one another” (Carroll 154), a technique that both toys with expectations and creates laughter. “Lionizing” starts with this incongruity. The pompous and somewhat shocking opening statement is: “I am - that is to say, I was- a great man; but I am neither the author of Junius nor the man in the mask; for my name, I believe, is Robert Jones, and I was born somewhere in the city of Fum-Fudge” (25). The narrator uses an image of greatness (“I was a great man” along with allusions to the author of Junius and the man in the mask) and links it to practically nobody (the common name of Robert and Jones) in a town no one had heard of (regardless of Poe’s humorous stories, who has heard of Fum-Fudge?) Nevertheless, Robert quickly subverts and contradicts these pieces of information with the clause “I believe,” instead of using a more affirmative statement. Robert’s identity is determined by his lack of humility, and his doubts concerning the one thing he
should be certain of – his proper name. The humorous discrepancy in meaning between believing and knowing creates doubt about the seriousness of Robert and his reliability as a narrator.

In addition, the allusions in the opening statement to the author of Junius and the man in the mask foreshadow a complicated political context to this story. In his endnotes, David Galloway explains that “‘Junius’ was the author of a famous series of political letters in the London Public Advertiser, 1769-1772” (241) and “the man in the Iron Mask was a political prisoner in France, well known to readers of Romance” (241). These two allusions, British and French, also address two forms of writing: epistolary in journalism, and romances about real political figures. In using them, Poe draws on his literary allusions to negate Robert’s relationship with them, thus creating a fake distance between the narrator and his references. The images of Robert, Junius and the man in the iron mask are quickly brought to the reader’s mind as opposites, only to be dismissed, thus creating an erudite yet unreliable narrator.

In Poe’s humor, readers can treat repetition as a familiarizing tool. In most of his stories, Poe repeatedly reemphasizes content (key ideas) and structures (using same sentence structures). In Poe’s “Lionizing,” the comfort of knowing what comes next on the page enriches the humor, because the reader can laugh better at what is seen as old news. At the same time, while repetitive, the minor changes strengthen the humor because readers are not bored with the redundancy of accurate expectations. For instance, the price of Robert’s nose is estimated at a thousand pounds, and this price is repeated seven times, four by
the narrator who adds the adverb “precisely” (27). In many cases, readers laugh because they - dulled by the repetition- start to expect a certain ending, only to have Poe intervene and modify the results. Poe builds up Robert as the best among his peers, only to end the story with the affirmation that a lion with no nose is more powerful than Robert with his great nose. In addition, in “Lionizing,” the repetition of such words as “divine” (26), which comes second in frequency after the word “nose,” invoke humor. Through extensive repetition this story creates the identity of the learned narrator, who spends his time obsessing about trying to sell his nose. The list of compliments concerning Robert’s nose are a set of interjections, “oh” and “oh my,” with adjectives such as “beautiful,” “shocking,” and “abominable.” And these adjectives are mentioned with verbs connoting negative reactions, such as “sighed,” “lisped,” “groaned,” and “growled” (25-26).

In this respect, this story is a direct assessment of the characters who utter these compliments and, through them, a criticism of the social classification of earl, marquis, duchess, and above all the king.

Coupled with the redundant questions are the names of the characters who ask them. All the characters who meet with the homeless narrator in the artist’s shop are distinguished by their names and their endlessly repetitive words. Among them are three ladies sharing the family name of “Bas-Bleu,” a French term with the English homonym of “babble;” and the act of babbling accurately describes them. The ladies are Mrs., Big Miss and Little Miss Bas-Bleu. 

In addition, the family names of the four prominent characters reflect their main traits and/ or sole function in the plot. Their names are “Duchess of Bless-
my-soul, Marquis of So and So [a poodle], Earl of This-and-That, and Royal Highness of Touch-me-not” (26). Each name focuses on the individual quality that Poe wishes to convey. In one reading, the humor in these names lies in the nonsensical babbling of the three ladies Bas-bleu, the overwhelming self-centeredness of the Duchess, the insignificant vanity of the Marquis and Earl, and the arrogant aloofness of the royal personage later identified as the Prince of Wales (27).

As if the seven royal characters with their funny names were not enough, Poe adds twelve other characters read as direct critiques of the professions they represent, and the humor lies in devaluing those fields of knowledge. For instance, “The modern Platonist” and “The human-perfectibility man” are both busy quoting from Greek and modern thinkers respectively. In addition, “the six Positive Paradox” character (26) just affirms that fools are philosophers and vice versa, while “Aestheticus Ethix” confuses ethics and aesthetics (26-7). “Theologos” and the rest, namely “Fricassée from the Rocher de Cancale,” “Bibulus O’Bumper,” “Signor Tintontintino,” “president of Fum-Fudge University,” “Grand Turk from Stamboul,” “Delphinus Polyglott,” and “Ferdinand Fitz-Fossilus Feldspar”(28) reveal an excessive erudition about eight fields of knowledge ranging from religion, nutrition, world history, art criticism, scholarly endeavors, foreign affairs, ancient literature, and diverse sciences. These nonsensical sets of obscure references and information contribute to the humor in this story by widening the gap between the reader and the characters.
Poe halts the chronology in his fabula “when I came of age” in what seems to be the bildungsroman of Robert’s identity in favor of a conversation about the central theme or word: Nosology. The anticipation and double-entendre of the narrator’s actions “in the science” of nosology are humorous. Poe coined this new pun nosology, borrowing this nose concept from “Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*... in which the nose as a sign of manly superiority is a euphemism for the penis” (Galloway 9). This explanation of the title “lionizing” also evokes the image of the animal but situates it within the confines of sexuality. In the story, the nose is also referred to as the “proboscis” (25), an elongated appendage on the head of animals, also referred to a nose. This triple (animal-nose/proboscis- penis) image creates humor for the reader who mentally associates the images of the animal (lion) with the science of noses (human and animal) and with an intended euphemism pointing to a different body organ. However, this layer of meaning can only be added with the help of critics. Even without the humorous double entendre of the nose standing for the sexual organ, the story is comprehensible as a critique of any elitist group of learned men who spend their time in pursuing useless knowledge.

One reason Poe’s humor is controversial is because it occurs when one of his objects of satire becomes obvious to the readers. This knowledge necessitates a second reading of the story. For instance, if we were to follow the sexuality reference, the physical description of Robert’s Nosology becomes funny yet disturbing. The narrator affirms that along with studying, he daily “gave [his] proboscis a couple of pulls and swallowed a half-dozen of drams,” because the
narrator has the double need for theory and practice to enlarge his nose (25). This redundant insistence on a complete mastery of this science creates a grotesque reaction for the reader who has already understood that Nosology is related to sexuality.

In this respect, the most controversial action comes toward the beginning of the story when the narrator affirms that the very “first action of [his] life was the taking hold of [his] nose, with both hands.” The narrator goes on to describe the reactions of his mother and father to his act. The mother “saw this and called [him] a genius; [his] father wept for joy and presented [him] with a treatise on Nosology” (25). The reader’s own reaction is thus delayed and shaped by the two parental reactions. Poe, not taking his reader’s reaction for granted, guarantees the laughter by yet another statement— that Robert mastered this action of nosology in his early childhood before he was breeched. This insistence on repetition that creates an alternate meaning to the stories is a defining characteristic of Poe’s humor. In “Lionizing,” the consecutive juxtaposition of shocking elements moves the action forward while creating incongruities and humor. Robert becomes not only a narrator of unbelievable tales bordering on nonsense and improbabilities, but also a very peculiar case of traditionally challenged behaviors.

Some of the dialogues and descriptions of this narrator are also humorous. For instance, when defining the nose, Robert resembles an actor reciting a treatise on stage. When his father tests him, Robert “pulled out [his] watch” with a dramatic attitude and mentioned the vast array of sources he will
be quoting from “about a thousand different authors” (25). The exaggeration about the possibility of a huge number of quotes and the theatricality in the narrator’s attitude are further enhanced by his statement: “it is now noon or thereabouts— we shall have time enough to get through with them all before midnight.” This dialogue sets the stage for a long conversation which the reader knows is unlikely to happen in the limited time frame. The narrator sighs in relief when the father quickly avoids the erudition of his son, and adds “‘will do, Robert’” (26). This anticipated knowledge is the source of laughter, because this somewhat Herculean telling is worthy of a Scheherazade and not a Robert Jones. It must be noted that these verbal humor elements can interfere with laughter, which can vanish if a funny situation is over-analyzed.

“WHY THE LITTLE FRENCHMAN WEARS HIS ARM IN A SLING”

Another example of Poe’s humor is “Why the Little Frenchman Wears his Arm in a Sling” (its original publication occurred between 1837 and 1839 in a little known periodical). This story has received little critical acknowledgement, but it is relevant to Poe’s humor because it exemplifies his creativity with words and his mastery of using nonsense as a surface manifestation of complicated issues. In this humorous story, Poe’s narrator defines his national identity through comparing his American self with a foreigner, namely a Frenchman, with whom he enters into a conflict. This story is humorous because Poe misspells words, uses a lot of repetition, and undermines the violent action of breaking the Frenchman’s arm in the passion of a courtship involving a love triangle. The
identities of the two men are tested and shaped by their relationship with the woman who is the object of their amorous desires.

The humor of this story is revealed in its slapstick nature coupled with its comic misspellings. Since the comic misspellings are not puns and can be translated, the easiest way to navigate the bad English spelling of this story is to read it out loud. In the plot, the narrator “Sir Patrick O'Grandison, Barronitt” moves next door to “widdy Misthress Tracle” [witty Mistress Tracle]. His other neighbor is referred to as “Mounseer Maiter di-dauns [Monsieur Maitre de dance] the count,” or the “fureener frinchman” [foreigner frenchman], or “mounseer frog” [monsieur frog] (110-113). The two men are courting Misstress Tracle. Set in London, the story is told in the first person and in addressing his reader, Barronitt narrates that during a social visit, he and his rival sit on the couch with Mistress Tracle in the middle. Both men think that they are secretly squeezing her “flipper,” but they soon discover that they have been tightly holding each other’s arm, behind the back of their hostess. This slapstick ends with the angry Barronitt violently breaking the arm of the Frenchman before they are both thrown out by their hostess.

The French count, the foreigner in this comic story, becomes the object of ridicule only because he is part of a rivalry, and because the narrator can safely relegate to the Frenchman the qualities he refuses to see in himself. Sir Patrick complains to his readers, “if it wasn’t his spalpeeny little paw that I had hould in my own” (114). The animal imagery, the negation, and the gaps in meaning in this statement become key issues. The quality of the small wrist that the narrator
thought belonged to the woman is an essential quality in the study of the French count’s identity. The effeminate foreigner can try to compete with the narrator, because the identities of the two men are created in juxtaposition to each other and not independently.

The culmination of this rivalry is violent, yet humorous. While not explaining the violence, the humor is mainly achieved by the distance between the reader and the violent act. It is similar to physical humor when we laugh if someone falls and gets hurt. We are not being insensitive to the pain of the fall, but the laughter is induced by the unexpected act of falling. In this story, the left arm of the Frenchman ends up in a sling, after the narrator confesses that he gave “it such a nate little broth of a squaze as made it all up into raspberry jam” (114). This action of squeezing the arm till it breaks to pieces explains the title of this story. The distorted formalized English language in Poe’s slapstick comedy does not disguise the violence of Barronitt’s action. Interestingly, the foreigner is a Frenchman who is not only derogatorily described through the eyes of his rival, but also portrayed in terms that make the reader poke fun at Barronitt, a biased yet funny narrator. The negative adjectives given to the Frenchman, instead of slandering him, create comic relief and reveal more about the prejudices and competitive nature of the narrator himself.

Poe’s story is also an attack on his readers. Bryant explains that Poe’s “bizarrely cartoonish characters … expose the ignorance of the reader, as if the resort to this regressive comic form were in itself a sign of his oppression by the tyranny of the American mob” (19). Poe, who never tolerated a mass mentality,
uses his stories to attack his readers’ ignorance. In describing both the men and their actions, Poe questioned the value systems that allowed them to enter into a conflict over this woman. The incongruous fact is that their object of affection was not interested in either one of them: both men had created their own fantasy of a romance. Barronitt used “the spy-glass” (110) to convince himself that his beautiful neighbor is interested in him. He even made up an imaginary conversation with her—“Och! The tip of the morning to ye, Sir Patrick O’Grandison” (110)—at a time when she was physically out of his reach, and not even aware of his presence.

As stated earlier, Poe had the tendency to work his personal problems into writing, and in this story it is the narrator’s own insecurities about this love triangle that culminate in violence. Reading this fiction in juxtaposition with the biographical elements of Poe’s life can lend to more interesting conclusions about the narrator’s identity. Baronnitt’s London address in this fiction is in fact that of John Allan, the foster father who raised Poe after his parents died. In addition, John’s landlord was a Frenchman (Galloway 249). In “Lionizing,” when Robert is kicked out of his parental home, a biographical reference emerges between the narrator and Poe. At the age of 17, Edgar Allan Poe left for college and his adoptive father John Allan stopped supporting him financially. The rift between the two continued for years, and Poe never returned to his parental home.

In his appeal to his audience’s intellect rather than feelings, Poe was often misunderstood as a humorist because his object of satire was hidden in the
stories. Bryant summarizes a main problem in Poe’s humor stating that he “strains to attack the very audience he might otherwise hope to convert. In consequence, the mean spiritedness of his satire intent seems rhetorically self-destructive and politically trivial” (19). His carefully structured stories carry multiple interpretations that many readers saw as a source of offense rather than laughter. His bitter criticism —frequently noted in reviews— prevented his critics from appreciating his mastery of humor.

Finally, though Poe’s satire is not to be taken seriously, Poe’s readers often cannot overcome the shock of some of his implied meanings such as Poe’s attack on his own foster parent and on Charles Dickens, and his insistence on an implied sexual meaning for nosology. By mocking characters and making them the butt of jokes, and by using humor strategies such as humorous incongruities, repetitions, joke structures, Poe’s humor becomes translatable and carries laughter despite all the challenges.
NOTES: POE

1 Poe seems fond of this family name and reuses it to refer to a minor character in another story “The Man that was Used Up.” Miss Blas-Bleu contradicted the narrator while discussing Byron’s *Manfred* (Galloway 96). “Blas-Bleu” can be read as a variant of “bas bleu” which means “bluestocking” a derogatory term to talk about a woman having literary or intellectual interests.

2 Breeching was a tradition of dressing boys in girls’ clothes until they were an older toddler / younger child. This tradition went on until the late part of the nineteenth century. When a boy was ready to be dressed in boys’ clothes, it was called breeching, which referred to breeches, which were similar to trousers (online dictionary).
CHAPTER V
Framing Humor in Selected Tales of Emile Habiby

In this chapter, I study the humor strategies that Habiby shares with Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe and Mikhail Naimy. Emile Habiby's “The Oration,” “The Museum Story,” “The Story of Inas’s Haircut,” and “The Son’s Letter,” are four exemplary stories from Peter Theroux's translation of Habiby’s Saraya Bint el-Ghoul: Khurrafiyya (Saraya, the Ogre’s Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale). The humor techniques do not focus on Habiby’s messages but on the translatable elements of his humor. In this post-modern tale that is fragmented into twenty stories, the major link is the framing character of Saraya. Defining her and trying to understand the narrator Abdallah in his relationship to the author help the reader understand some of Habiby’s humor. Habiby utilizes humorous incongruities, multiple narrators, and ironies in these four stories. Moreover, the contradictions along with the trivial topics (haircut problem), create sarcastic laughter that is challenged by many allusions and by Habiby’s complicated writing style. In this tale, laughter is also a central humor strategy and leitmotif. The reader’s reactions to the stories vary from laughter to a laughter mixed with sorrow to a placid smile. Although the trivial and lighthearted topics are meant to satirize gloomy realities, it is the humorous strategies that are the focus of my study. Therefore, I juxtapose the English translation with the original Arabic tale.
in order to emphasize the humor strategies the translator, Peter Theroux, prioritizes.

I start with a short introduction to Emile Habiby, and then define the three main characters in this tale: Saraya, Abdallah and the narrator-author. Next, I provide a close reading of these stories including Habiby’s discussion of laughter. Last, I explore questions of language and translation to provide further insight into Habiby’s humor strategies.

EMILE HABIBY: THE WRITER

Emile Habiby (1921-1996) is a Palestinian writer whose name has been closely associated with his hometown of Haifa. Habiby—or “Abu Salam” as he called himself (Faur 71)—was a member of the Knesset [legislature of Israel], a founder of the Israeli communist party, and the editor of its newspaper, al-Ittihad. He also founded the literary journal Masharef that advocates for the co-existence between Arabs and Jews. A major event in Habiby’s career occurred in 1992, when he accepted the “Israel Prize for Arabic Literature” (Jarrar 17). Many Arab critics politicized this literary event and considered Habiby’s acceptance of the prize to be a betrayal to the Palestinian cause. Habiby’s response was firm. He argued that literature was his way of living and understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that accepting the prize was a reflection of his beliefs in a peaceful co-existence. Since then, there has been a significant decline in the Arabic criticism on his latter works including his last book, Saraya Bint el-Ghoul: Khurrafiyya (Saraya, The Ogre’s Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale, 1991). However, the benefit of Habiby’s fame has meant that his books have been
translated into many languages, and the non-Arabic scholarly circles became interested in analyzing his works, mainly his 1974 famous novel, Al-Waka’i al gharieba fi ikhtifa Sa’ied Aboe an-Nash al-Moetasaja’il (The Secret Life of Saeed: the Pessoptimist) which was first serialized in the daily Al-Jadid from 1972 to 1974 (Jarrar 16). Habiby is also the author of a 1969 collection of stories Sudaseyyat el-ayyam el-setta (The Sextet of the Six-Days War) which is about the 1967 war between the Jews and the Arabs, along with two plays Luka’ Ibn Luka’ (Luka the son of Luka, 1979) and Umm al-Rubabikia (The Pedlar Woman, 1992), and a novel entitled Ikhtiyyah (The Palestinian Woman of the Past, 1985).

In this chapter, I study stories from Emile Habiby’s last work Saraya Bint el-Ghoul: Khurrafiyya (1991) using Peter Theroux’s English translation Saraya, the Ogre’s Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale which was published in 2006. Though in critical circles Emile Habiby is best known for his novel The Pessoptimist (1974) he reworked his best ideas and styles into his last work. Labeling Habiby as a Palestinian dealing with politics and understanding his texts within the Palestinian and Israeli constant conflict is certainly valuable. In Saraya, Habiby claims that in his life he “believed that it was possible, and even useful, to ‘carry two watermelons under one arm’- that is, to take up both politics and literature” (8). However, in this study, I will deal primarily with “one watermelon” since the complexity of this tale allows ample room for literary criticism while acknowledging yet not analyzing the political implications.

Currently, no comprehensive major study of this Saraya exists, but I use some of the criticism on his earlier works, especially studies of his sarcasm, that
can also apply to this tale. In the context of humor, in 1993, Akram Khater’s article written in English “Emile Habiby: The Mirror of Irony in Palestinian Literature” and Yasin Ahmad Faur’s Arabic critical book on the sarcasm in the Emile Habiby’s literature not including his last work. Both critical works discuss irony and sarcasm as two forms of humor that distinguish Habiby’s style from other Arabic humor writers. Faur distinguished three forms of humor in Habiby’s works. In summary:

The first kind is surface humor such as sarcasm of the characters, or sarcasm related to the logic of the literary work itself. The second type is a humor defined by literary works and it is usually politically oriented. The third type of humor blows up from the heart of a situation, and it is the best kind of humor (my adapted translation, Faur 99).

In other words, Faur is describing sarcasm, political satire and situational humor as three modes of humor in Habiby’s works. These arguments can transfer to some of the stories in Saraya, despite the fact that critics have not yet analyzed this work in such terms.

A brief overview of the plotline in this tale suggests that this book is a series of stories: the postmodern fragmented nature of the tale of Saraya allows each section to be read independently. Like the Arabian Nights, the whole tale is interlinked using a framing element. In this case, the link among the various stories is in the title: Saraya. Thus, the whole tale is framed around Saraya, but each section interests itself with a distinct topic or story. Hence, choosing to discuss humor in some of the stories from this tale becomes relevant to this study of humor in short fiction.
While Edgar Allan Poe’s humor allowed him the space to investigate both madness and identity and to practice with themes that later became his most famous, humor defined Emile Habiby as a writer. If dark humor is defined as ordinary characters put into situations that go beyond the limits of satire as they deal with unreasonable absurdities, cruelties and insensitivities, then a number of stories from Saraya fit this description too. In addition, Emile Habiby relied on his readings of English and American literature especially “Mark Twain” to reinforce his own writings in regard to “irony” (Faur 97). Humor in this tale ranges from laughter as a theme and a reader’s physical reaction to the incongruities, as well as the use of irony. This humor also deals with questions of identity for the characters, the writer, and even the audiences. In addition, the comparison of the Arabic and English version of this tale calls attention to Theroux’s translation and its relationship to humor.

In his last work, Saraya, Emile Habiby deals with two main themes that he always investigated: identities and loss. Habiby confounds the identities of his main characters as a way to oppose the traditional function of Arabic literature that offers one answer only. He believed that through writing he could explore the various questions related to his Palestinian identity. For Habiby, “to write in Arabic, in a Hebrew environment, is already taking a step towards reclaiming his Arab identity; the act of reading becomes then a reaffirmation of a similar identity. This identity, however, is by no means clearly defined or set, for Habiby raises questions but does not always answer them” (Khater 3). This creation of an identity through writing is complete when the readers understand it. In Habiby’s
postmodern tale there are no simple formulas for the readers to find, therefore, multiple answers and interpretations become acceptable.

Most of Habiby’s critics note that his tragedy of lost identity and lost love is a driving force in his literature. He repeatedly tries to answer “‘who are WE?’ [which] is the agonizing question that in The Pessoptimist was continuously confronted – if not answered—while in Ikhtayyi it was camouflaged, hidden and tucked away under the blanket of time and false identities” (Khater 82). If we were to agree with Khater’s assessment, Saraya becomes the seminal work wherein he reconciles himself with his identity as a writer, a citizen and a lover. He is a Palestinian living in Haifa, Israel who uses his characters and his art to answer some of the complicated questions of identity.

WHO IS SARAYA?

To study the humor in Saraya, the need to define the characters is valuable. If the pronoun “She” refers solely to the female protagonist, Saraya, then who are the “I” and the “He” referring to in this tale? Who is the narrator? And when does the authorial voice tell biographical information? Most importantly, who is Saraya? In the postmodern tale, limiting this female figure of Saraya to one or few definitions is complicated. When Habiby defines her identity, reality and fiction collide. She is a real person, the cousin of the narrator, but she also stands for the Palestinian land and other intangible concepts.

As a real person, Saraya is the cousin of one of the main narrators, Abdallah. Habiby describes his hero as he “is searching for a girl he loved in his youth, until the cares of his days overwhelmed him and made him forget her” (7).
This Saraya is the daughter of his uncle, Ibrahim. Her identity can be constructed from the different segments of the twenty stories in which she is repeatedly mentioned. Since Habiby does not follow a chronological order, the most plausible plotline for the biography of this Saraya is compiled moving backward in the stories to the beginning of the tale. The narrator says his uncle “returned to his village from Egypt with a girl child he had fathered with a Coptic wife named Maria. She had given up her soul to its Maker during the delivery” (15th story, 146). When the maternal grandparents refused to give the infant to the Palestinian father, Ibrahim kidnapped his daughter and pretended she died on the road. The other story is told by the narrator’s grandmother who insisted that her son, Ibrahim “claimed he found [Saraya] sleeping in swaddling clothes in one of the hollows of Mount Carmel, in whose depths he was searching for treasures” (10th story, 106). Both versions of Saraya’s birth and childhood end on the same note. Her father or “finder” gave her to Bedouins. Growing up, she was always different from everyone around her. Ibrahim repeatedly visited her, and he “had taken it upon himself to raise and educate her just like a ‘city girl’” (106). That education meant she could read, and she could efficiently use medicinal herbs. Most of Abdallah’s memories of Saraya are about them as children roaming the hills and the shoreline together.

Another identity to Saraya is her being the daughter of the Ogre in the Arabic fairytale of Saraya and the Ghoul, which is a variant of Grimm’s story of Rapunzel. In both Grimm’s and the Palestinian tales, the girl—separated from her parents—lets her long beautiful hair down for others to climb it. Rapunzel’s
jailor is a witch, and the girl waits for her handsome prince to climb and rescue her from her tower. In the Palestinian tale, modified by Habiby, Saraya is kidnapped by an ogre. But the ogre is also her father, and her hair is a ladder to rescue others not just herself. Habiby opens his tale by affirming “I took this title-"Saraya, the Ogre’s Daughter" from an old Palestinian tale, which may also be known in other parts of the Arab world, about an inquisitive young girl who was kidnapped by an ogre on one of her daily walks in the hills. He built her a castle on top of a mountain and set her inside it to dwell there. Throughout the land her cousin searched for her” (7). In the fairytale, the cousin eventually finds her and climbs her hair, and she ends up drugging her kidnapper and escaping with her rescuer. The cousin in Habiby’s story, however, confesses “But I, I will cling to the braid and climb upward toward the light. And Saraya will hold out her hand, and pull me up and out with a single swoop” (73). Therefore, in Habiby’s tale, Saraya becomes the powerful figure of a female protagonist who rescues her suitor instead of being the character in need of rescuing. Throughout the tale, she even becomes a creature of light who helps the narrator live a hopeful and better life.

Another distinctive characteristic of Habiby’s Saraya is that she consciously distances herself from her namesake in the Palestinian fairytale. The narrator mentions, “whenever I told Saraya the fairy tale of Saraya, the ogre’s daughter, she’d laugh her Saraya laugh and move her arms, like a bird flapping its wings in flight, and say, ‘This is my castle’” (189). In one interpretation, this fictional character refers to the land around her as her castle, and she makes her
imprisonment a source of laughter instead of tears. In the context of her joy, the narrator’s plea to Saraya to rescue him from his present is repeated throughout the tale (74). He often cries out to her “Saraya, daughter of the ogre, let down your hair for me to climb!” (71). The hopefulness associated with Saraya who is all light and happiness creates one humorous diptych of laughter that contradicts the gloomy topics of pains, hopelessness, and forgetfulness.

The narrator corroborates “Nymphs live only in Paradise. Saraya, however, and despite the dust heaps of oblivion, is flesh and blood!” (77). Even when Saraya is a real person she also morphs into multiple identities so long as she represents something positive and hopeful. In many instances, Saraya is a source of laughter. She becomes “Farasheh” who successfully helps smuggle Palestinians back into the country (19th story, 192). Saraya also refers to the source of a spring in “‘Ayn Saraya’” (102) and her eyes are “pure and clear as the spring on al-Carmel” where the narrator first met her (96). These water references emphasize the reality but also the fluidity of her character. Like water, she can take many shapes, but she is also strong enough to leave an impact. In this respect, she is also described as a “phantom” and a “ghost” (50). Saraya’s ethereal quality blurs the human and the non-human identities; it also counters the time limitations when the narrator questions “How was she still just a girl after all these years?” (35) This last quality, of remaining a young girl as time passes, moves her identity into the fictional concept of a fantasy girl that transcends time and space limitations.
WHO IS ABDALLAH?

To understand the incongruities that create the humor in Saraya, it is useful to assume that the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘he’ refer to the narrator Abdallah. Though defining the distances between Abdallah and the author is complicated, it must be noted that like Twain, the double narrative frames allow the space for humor because the readers can laugh with Habiby at Abdallah, even when Abdallah sounds like he is representing the authorial views and stories. When Habiby’s authorial voice takes over, Abdallah becomes the third person. Interestingly, most reviews of Saraya attempt to label the different stories as memoirs and literary allusions, dubbing the narrator as Habiby’s alter-ego. Abdallah is seen as a novelist who is also a politician, and a committed fisherman. However, while these readings ring true, they often focus on the female character of Saraya and they tend to conflate the stories without any emphasis on the question of the author-narrator identity. It must be noted that Habiby, the author, often joins the reader into looking at the characters without bringing himself under direct scrutiny. In this reading, Abdallah is an independent character, and he is not simply the author’s alter-ego.

Despite the fact that the separation between Abdallah and Habiby is not clear cut there is a constant confusion between author and narrator. Even when the author often turns himself into a narrator, Abdallah is often kept at a distance from the author because he becomes the subject of humor. Early in the tale—in the third story—Abdallah’s character is created and developed. Abdallah is a fisherman, a hobby that Habiby enjoyed and gave to his fictional character. As a
fisherman, the author sets Abdallah apart from his fellows by making him the object of their fun: "They enjoyed his absentmindedness and made up funny names for the fish whose names were already funny…His pretending to be naïve entertained them, as he gaped at the fish and they looked on" (27). Habiby created humor through the two distinctive traits of the narrator: his lack of concentration and his false make-believe that he is an inexperienced fisherman. These qualities make him an easy target for the fun of other fishermen.

However, Habiby complicates the narrator by making him aware of the joke made at his expense. Abdallah has been fishing all his life, “from the time I was a boy, I have found no better way to soothe my nerves- which since birth have been tense- than fishing” (22). Abdallah deliberately acts as a novice around the other experienced men because his intellectual activities distinguish him from the group. He pretends to be stupid at fishing, because he is more than a fisherman and they are all aware of this fact. Abdallah makes himself the object of their fun to become one of them and make them forget that he is not a typical fisherman. Ironically, the other fishermen are the subject of ridicule for their lack of comprehension that he is deliberately pretending ignorance.

Although Abdallah can be Emile Habiby at times, he mainly parallels Saraya. He is a fictional character who is not only immune to bullets (43), but can also survive all kinds of tragedies. Unlike their author, Abdallah and Saraya constantly escape limiting definitions because they are fictional characters, who are their unique selves. They are both real and fictitious. These two individuals escape the harsh realities of conflicts and dangers through their imaginations.
Their flights in dreams of fantasies make them survive when all bets come against them. Through Saraya, Habiby had searched for himself and found some complex questions. While trying to answer them, he was laughing through tears like Mikhail Naimy’s readers because the hopeful dreamlike quality of Saraya and the good memories of the author clashed with the harsh reality of displacement and memory loss. Rather than finding an answer to all Palestinians and Arabs and Israelis, Habiby finds his unique identity and comes to peace with it. In this reading, the political background that creates the harsh reality to this tale is important, but in Habiby’s Saraya most of the details of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are either camouflaged or universalized so that displacement, war, violence and death become generalized symbols of war zones.

To illustrate the humor in Saraya, I have chosen to read four stories that exemplify Habiby’s humor strategies based on ironies and sarcasm. Except for the oration story, Habiby does not give title to the individual stories. In this chapter, I gave titles to the stories of “The Oration” (7-11), “The Museum Story” (18-20), “The Story of Inas’s Haircut” (139-143), and “The Son’s Letter” (49-50). Similar to Poe, Habiby uses literary allusions that can obstruct the humor in his stories, and at the same time these references become a great sign of his scholarship. In addition, analyzing some of Theroux’s translation challenges emphasizes some of the humor elements. In “The Oration,” the tale is based on a humor device. In “The Museum Story,” gallows humor is emphasized. The trivial subject matter in “The Story of Inas’s Haircut” and “The Son’s Letter” hide more serious issues. The end result is a laughter that tried to heal the characters, but
the audiences are left confused at their own reactions because the tale with its literary allusions and elite language conveys simple topics in a highly convoluted manner. Similar to the audiences’ reaction to Edgar Allan Poe’s and Mikhail Naimy’s humor, Habiby’s audiences waver between laughter and tears because the tragedy hidden by the optimism and the physical laughter is counterbalanced with harsh realities of displacement and loss.

“THE ORATION”

This first story sets the whole tale as humorous with its incongruous meanings, complex metaphors, and translation challenges (7-11). “The Author’s Oration: Pear Trees Were Planted to Give Us Pears” states the obvious. In addition, the title of this oration in Arabic is footnoted with the remark that “oration was the old term writers used to introduce their literary works” (my translation, Arabic page 9). This footnote is the first sign that Habiby was localizing his tale within an older Arabic literary tradition. In his translation, Theroux omitted this footnote thus leaving the English speaking reader wondering about the term “oration” and focusing on the incongruities. The humorous incongruity is in the writer’s need to have an oration to share what seems to be impractical information. After reading the story, critics notice that Habiby uses this tree as a metaphor for the writers who must not cater to the people’s needs by offering them what they want. Instead, writers should present what they were destined to give, like pear trees offering pears and not eggplants. To Habiby, eggplants refer to “poor people’s meat,” and in this context eggplants stand for his reader’s literary expectations (11). This set of complex incongruities starts with this story
and they are carried throughout the tale. Habiby’s meanings are not obvious and understanding his humor requires several readings of the tale and a constant negotiation of interpretations. Ironically, Habiby’s intentions to distance his tale from his audiences by not giving them what they want are counterbalanced with his attempt to share with this same audience his solutions for complex questions like identity, displacement, and memory.

In “The Oration,” Habiby starts his tale with an artifice to criticism. He describes his work on the tale as someone “who offers up - by way of excuse- the claim that he had acted under a genie’s spell; he speaks of what he has seen, but isn’t believed by people, who say he’s just ‘telling fairy tale’- that is, a fine story but something essentially untrue” (9). In undermining the readers’ general tendency to belittle the importance of a fairy tale Habiby conversely emphasizes the magnitude of his work. In this respect, Habiby’s tale echoes a definition of humor as “a powerful tool for criticizing because, among other reasons, it tends to provide ample opportunity to thwart or deflect any angry reactions to it. For example, one can easily resort to the typical excuse ‘I was only joking’” (Zabalbeascoa 197-98). A humor writer thus hides his true intentions like Habiby’s narrator who pretends to be an inexperienced fisherman.

In this context, Habiby describes his work as different from novels and other writing genres. He affirms “from the start I distinguished between this story of mine and the genre of the long novel. What, then, is this book? I’ve called Saraya, The Ogre’s Daughter a Khurrafiyya, or fairy tale” (8). This creative definition of the tale is a hallmark of Habiby’s humor. However, Habiby draws on
earlier forms of tales such as an old Palestinian tale about Saraya and her father who is an Ogre. Habiby’s khurafa (another form of the term Khurrafiyya meaning a tale) is best defined as a postmodern fairy tale that is simultaneously a fairy tale, an incomplete autobiography, a prose poem, a set of literary commentaries, and representation of a vast number of additional literary genres.

In his attempt to make his literature answer to his own needs, Habiby remolds the genre of “khurafa” to include various literary modes that suit his ideas and his investigations. He confirms the richness of his tale by stating that his goal is to write something “that amazes. Precise definition, or interpretation, would inevitably limit the word’s resonance, and each new khurrafiyya would then refute the old meaning of the word. And, if it isn’t precisely defined, the new khurrafiyya itself launches one into a world of associations that have no need for further definition” (8). Therefore, the humor distancing strategies become a way to understand this tale because the genre of this tale allows for contradicting interpretations since the author leaves his readers free to contribute their own meanings.

In Theroux’s English translation, there are three major omissions that relate to the main questions that Habiby is investigating through his humor: Palestinian identity and the theme of hopefulness. The first omission draws a comparison between the Palestinian word for tale and its common Egyptian equivalent “bita’ ” (Arabic page 13). In denying the link between the Palestinian and Egyptian words, Habiby focuses on the national identity of his tale within Arabic literature. By insisting that his tale is Palestinian and not just Arabic,
Habiby gives his work its own special distance from the other literatures that also use Arabic as a medium.

The other omissions deal with the question of hopefulness for Arabs to follow up on modern scientific progress. Habiby states his belief that he was able in his old age to “make up for the gains of ‘the philosophy of science’ that he missed” in studying philosophy (10). The omitted section is comparing himself with every person who has the same linguistic background. As a result, every Arab can make up for this loss of scientific knowledge: “For I am one of them, and what I can, someone else —from the sons of this language and its daughters — besides me can also do” (my translation of a missing sentence on page 14 in Arabic). In addition, the third omission is a hopeful vision for the future of modern Arabic literature. Habiby admits that although he is not fully versed in modern Arabic literature, he believes that the end result of all the changes is a “crumbling of all differences and a return to one origin which is to accept one’s personal responsibility and not blame one’s problems on the others (an adapted translation of the omitted paragraph in the original Arabic on page 14). These missing sections in Theroux’s version do not hinder the plot of the story but they explain the need for a critical approach to explain those omissions.

“THE MUSEUM STORY”

In this Saraya tale, the humorous story of al-Zeeb museum (2nd story, 18-20) foreshadows the humorous and gloomy conversation Habiby holds with his readers. Critic Akram Khater proclaims that Habiby, “uses irony—the main literary current in his work—as a mirror from which the laughter is reflected as
heightened tragedy” (76). In this story, Habiby’s narrator Abdallah mixes laughter and tragedy when he recounts the story of the nameless Jewish man who turned the ruins of al-Zeeb town into his own “‘national territory’” (19). The humor is in the ironies. This story with its implied meaning creates irony because the incongruities can only be explained if the main character is analyzed as a peculiar man. The somber themes of death, ruins, loss, and danger are presented with light-hearted depictions of good memories with a landlord who calls himself a “president” (20). In addition, some of the irony lies between the identity of this man and Habiby’s commentary on that identity, and in the juxtaposition of the reader’s idea of a nation and this one-man-show.

The plot of the museum story is straightforward. After the almost complete destruction of the Palestinian town, al-Zeeb, the only building in the town was “the mayor’s house [that] fell to a ‘vagabond’ cousin of ours—a Jew, that is—of Persian extraction. Who knows? He might have been, in his deeper origins, a Judaized Ismaili”(19). A common theme in the Palestinian and Israeli struggle focuses on the identity of the owner to give him legitimate ownership over the land. Habiby reworks this theme, but he focuses the story on the actions of this man rather than on his identity. The man changes “the mayor’s house into a museum in which he gathered the Arab artifacts of al-Zeeb, from millstones to skulls” (Habiby 19). Disturbingly, the museum holdings of dead weights and bones celebrate the death of human beings, and measure the bones and stones using the same value system.
This unique museum curator sees in things and human remains valuable art works, and he resembles a character out of ‘la maison de santé’ from Poe’s story, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1845). The absurdities of this man’s actions are caused by the absence of other residents in his state. 

This land owner has defied the known conventions as he “fenced in the entire area, proclaimed the Free and Independent State of al-Zeeb, and gave its visitors ‘passports’ authorized with his signature, for which he collected a fixed fee” (19). 

For the readers, it is plausible to laugh at this nameless man and his seemingly absurd actions of creating a state out of one house, of issuing passports to visitors, and of giving himself official titles. The fact that he hosted visitors makes the whole situation disquieting and weird.

This man turned the one building in the state of al-Zeeb into a state museum as well as a “hostel for penniless young vagabonds, mostly those who had traveled from Europe with their tents in their backpacks” (19). Instead of paying for their camping, these young tourists accomplish all the labor tasks in the museum-hostel. To get his money, this man also allows fishermen from the area to sleep over. Interestingly, one of the narrator’s good memories is his sleep over in that museum-hostel. However, Abdallah’s description of the place and its owner is ironic and behind the laughter there is a lot of gloom.

The narrator-fisherman Abdallah knows about this place because he had slept there many times. Abdallah’s ironic tone describes how the fishermen went to the shelter of his state, eating fresh fish for dinner and fresh fish for breakfast, and then returning safe and sound to their families, their arms
filled with their catch. Sometimes they returned only safe. In either case, ‘his Excellency, the president’ saw them off with the same smiles with which he’d received them, and with the same affection and tenderness he felt for the contents of his museum: his millstones and his skull. It was all one. (20)

Making this man a president with his own state is incongruously humorous because of the discrepancies between his real intentions and his actions. He is not generous, he steals the fish. He values humans as he values the bones and stones in his museum. Abdallah even mentions that the hostel-museum is not safe. Despite this dangerous man and place, the narrator affirms some of the fisherman “chose the shore of his kingdom as a place to escape their fellow fishermen on moonless nights” (20). This refuge quality undermines the negative list cited about the place and its president. A central irony focuses on the idea that this man presides over the dead, and his state is made up of poor visitors, and his wealth is made by stealing from others and mimicking forms of governments.

As in gallows humor, “there is no right or wrong and no cause and effect” but what remains is “chaotic plurality” of meanings and interpretations (Mandia 5). Habiby seems to answer to this form of humor by leaving his stories open ended and overloaded with many themes that defy a unified and completely coherent criticism. In addition, unlike satire that exaggerates to correct, gallows humor exaggerates with no moral position and no right answer. All gallows humorists “offer [is] laughter” (Mandia 7). Under this framework, and in the museum story, Abdallah offers laughter in every sentence. He pokes fun at the crazy president, who is left nameless because he is allowed to become the
representative of all sorts of governments. In simultaneously directing his gallows humor in various directions, Habiby criticizes and laughs but does not intend any reform.

This tale is not only about gallows humor, Habiby also uses a vast range of humor techniques and topics to make his work a rich tapestry of meanings. In regard to humor, Habiby’s theory of laughter is not only proclaimed but is used both as a theme and as a resolution for a serious problem. Laughter is a recurrent topic, and Habiby’s readers not only laugh with him, but he also discusses with them the power of laughing. To sum up Habiby’s philosophy, the Jester in Habiby’s play Luka’ bin Luka voices the authorial views:

Laugh! For laughter unleashes the tongue and cures muteness
Oh! You generations of silence, it is time for you to laugh.
Speak! And if you don’t speak, then laugh!
Laugh all of you, laugh; if they stifle your moans, then explode with laughter.
Laughter is a very sharp weapon with only one edge.
If all the prisoners laughed together at the same instant, and continued to laugh, then will the jailer be able to laugh? (qtd. in Khater 76)

The power of laughter in this 1983 play is to be a remedy, to initiate conversations, and to free prisoners. That laughter—a tool to fight many evils—is also highlighted in Saraya.

“THE STORY OF INAS’S HAIRCUT”

In the 14th story, the trivial elements in this haircut story and their dangerous repercussions create humorous incongruities (139-143). Abdallah spends several pages telling the haircut story of his cousin, Inas and the fact that actual physical laughter saves this girl’s life. Inas “wanted to be like the people
around her‖ (140) and cut her hair like her Jewish female colleagues at work. When her family refused to let her cut her hair, Inas went against their wishes. As a result of her disobedience, all the men in the family, including the young narrator, were invited by the mother “to conduct a ‘field trial’ of her daughter Inas, who had been charged with the crime of insisting on cutting her hair in the *shalish* style” (139). Though cutting one’s hair is hardly a felony and hardly deserves a trial, the family took the issue very seriously. Not all readers can fully understand the dangerous situation of Inas, because the humor is closely linked to her family. For Inas’s parents, her actions are punishable by death because of her disobedience. Through this story, Habiby pokes fun at any inherited tradition that involved heavy punishment to any woman who goes against the wishes of the men in her family.

In this instance, the description of the narrator stifling then bursting into a contagious laughter that becomes a communal reaction and turns a dangerous situation into a comic scene resonates with Habiby’s description of laughter in his earlier play *Luka’ bin Luka*. This intertextuality on the theme of laughter renders Habiby’s ideas on this topic more of a philosophy than a single occurrence. The resolution of this conflict is, simply, laughter. Upon seeing his cousin with her short hair, the narrator “stifled a peal of hysterical laughter in [his] chest. Instead, out came a kind of a snort or rattle, which fell among the men as a relief… Then a volcano of laughter erupted in [his] chest, and [he] squirmed down under [his] uncle’s feet, [he] was laughing so hard” (141). The built up tension caused by the absurd accusation, the wait before Inas arrived, and the sight of her new look
made the narrator burst into laughter which was contagious enough to save the girl. Among the adults, Uncle Ibrahim is the one whose “chest was heaving with the laughter he was trying to stifle, as a result of [the young narrator’s] snort” (142). The result is chaos as all the men burst into uncontrollable laughter, thus losing seriousness and feeling ashamed they quickly left the aunt’s house (142). The punishment goes undone because what might have been a serious trial was undercut by the physical action of laughing. Inas was safe from their wrath simply because the laughter escalated.

At the same time, the passivity of the other women is also under attack, especially those represented by the aunt. Rather than being proactive and finding a solution to a seemingly absurd problem, the aunt’s first reaction to the trial is to prepare her clothes and her thoughts in order to wail over a dead body. The narrator carefully describes his mother who got her “khalaq” (142) ready for a time when the girl would die. According to the Palestinian traditions, women “would choose some shabby old khalaq to wear whenever they had to pay their condolences following a death. They would go into the house of the bereaved and start to rend their clothes- their khalaq as visible proof of their intense grief over the deceased” (143). This whole situation of the girl being killed by her own relatives because of a hairdo, and of her aunt preparing her mourning clothes, reads like a bad joke. However, the reader’s thoughts that this is really silly and even the cynical laughter that accompanies the thought do not undermine the seriousness of the situation. Adballah was very serious when he stated that the family would kill Inas for disobeying their orders. This story is an example of
considering the humor regardless of the reader’s own preconceived notions of what constitutes a cause of death. The frivolous quality of the accusation does not eliminate its dangerous repercussions. This story is less about cutting one’s hair and more about disobedience to rules.

In his Saraya, while Habiby advocates laughter as an action to free his characters from their depressing realities, he also uses it as a leitmotif to connect the stories. Laughter thus becomes a connector not just between the characters to create peaceful bonds, but it also links the fragmented stories in this postmodern tale. A reader notices that Habiby either starts or wraps up a personal anecdote with laughter, while he constantly emphasizes the happy laughter every time he mentions his female protagonist Saraya.

“THE SON’S LETTER”

In the letter story—the 5th story—laughter is simultaneously a major theme and a leitmotif (49-50). In this story, as in the haircut story, Habiby starts with a trivial topic - such as a haircut or someone staring at a stranger on a bus- but beneath their triviality, Habiby creates complicated situations and humorously criticizes them. In this story, Habiby replaces Abdallah to become a second narrator. Using his autobiographical voice, Habiby introduces the story with the declaration “I laughed, thinking that might banish the insomniac vision: if the apparition of Saraya were to sneak up behind me now and suddenly shout ‘Boo!’ in my ear, like a child, and I died laughing at my fright, what could I do?” (49). The complex joining of laughter and fear is linked to the element of surprise. Though
Saraya is not part of the letter story, Habiby uses her as a source of laughter that counterbalances his own fears of the unexpected.

This letter story is an autobiographical snippet. To illustrate a type of laughter that heals and connects strangers, Habiby tells the story of the letter he received from his son. The son writes that while on a bus to the Tatra Mountains, in Czechoslovakia, he mistakenly feels that the eyes of a stranger staring at him resembled his father’s. The situation escalates when the two men get on the offensive, but both the son and the stranger end up laughing. After asking each other about the staring, the son continues his letter saying “The stranger laughed loudly and said, ‘I thought you were the one who was staring at me and threatening me!’ So we both laughed. The spell was broken, and I saw that he didn’t look like you at all- in fact, he looked more like me than like you’” (50). In this story, the fear and the surprise of finding a familiar face in a foreign country put the son in a tough situation. The ensuing laughter defused the tension because it made both the son and the stranger realize that their similarities bridged the gap of the misunderstanding caused by the stare.

In addition, this conscious blurring of the identities of the father-son-stranger triangle is often investigated in most of the stories of this tale, with the most important triangle being the author- Abdallah - Saraya. For example, the narrator wraps up the story about Inas’s haircut with ”[I]t amazed me, the role that laughter played in his life” (143). In this statement, the complexity of the person that ‘his life’ is referring to is emphasized. Is it Habiby talking about his narrator? Is it the narrator referring to his Uncle Ibrahim to whom he was being
compared in earlier sentences? Is it the author referring to himself in the third person? The ambiguous antecedent is a common element in this work, often used to initiate new interpretations. The distance between the authorial voice of Habiby and his narrator Abdallah is so hazy that it escapes all generalizations. Whoever this third person possessive pronoun refers to, one fact remains. Habiby often goes back to explaining the role of laughter and its effect on either his narrator or on Saraya. Laughter becomes a means to know and to create bonds with Saraya, no matter whom or what she ends up being.

LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION AND HUMOR

Another layer of humor in this tale is Habiby’s Arabic language which is often a mixture of formal and colloquial Palestinian words. The colloquial words define the original Arabic tale because they “are laden with an emotional history and tradition,” and “Habiby’s use of everyday language in his writing; namely, that colloquial language distinguishes between Arabs. Thus one can tell that an expression is Palestinian, Egyptian, Moroccan, or Iraqi, and not simply Arab” (Khater 89). Therefore, Habiby is able to ascertain his Palestinian identity in comparison with the multiple Arab countries. In describing his use of language, Khater affirms “ [w]hen classical language falters in its rigidity and inability to adjust to and express new circumstances and tragedies, he either makes up new words or he falls back on colloquial expressions without missing a literary beat” (89). This praise also underscores— though it does not verbalize the idea— that the use of the colloquial enhances the humor experience in the stories.
However, this colloquial language is mostly lost in the English translation. Peter Theroux avoided much of the colloquial language in his translation, and some his omissions involve instances of humor. Comparing the Arabic and Saraya’s English translation make the author and the translator responsible for their choices and intentions. The few reviews on Saraya all agree that Theroux’s translation is excellent. Noha Radwan said it best in her 2007 review that the “English translation by Peter Theroux is especially laudable in light of the difficulty of the original, which vaunts the richness of its language and the diverse linguistic registers in which it is assembled” (117). Admitting the differences between the original Arabic version and its English translation, praises Theroux’s translation, and the instances of omissions and additions elucidate general problems with translating humor. It is important to note that the humor strategies that Habiby shares with the other writers in this dissertation were prioritized and translated.

The omissions mostly focus on repetition and colloquial Palestinian idioms that are tough to translate, or else the translator considered them unnecessary. If one is not looking for humor, these omissions can be labeled as Theroux’s right to make translator choices. For example, Theroux decided that since Habiby had already illustrated his need to deal with literature and politics simultaneously, with the image of a man holding two watermelons under his arm, then Habiby’s second reference to a man and his goat can be completely omitted. Interestingly, the omitted saying is a Palestinian reference to a popular saying that is also written in colloquial language, and in the Arabic context it is funny: “Kil:
‘hamelouh ‗anza fa darat. Kal : shilou ‗ally al thania’” (It was said: ‘they made him carry a goat, so he farted. He said: remove the second one from my shoulders’”) (my translation of the omitted Arabic saying, page 28). In Arabic, the sentence is describing a man who felt overloaded carrying one heavy goat, so he thought he has been given two goats instead of one. After he farted, the man asked those who put the goat to remove the second one off his shoulders. Theroux decided that his readers didn’t need to know about someone holding a goat and farting and this image is absent from the English version (22). Knowing the story behind the saying and then finding the right explanation all the while not using too many lines to translate two sentences accounts for the difficulty of translating this saying.

One reason could be Theroux’s desire for his translation to be read as “less ‘foreign’” and maybe “even pass for an original” (Baker 78). This form of translation domesticates the text, using Laurence Venutti’s idea of the hegemony of the Target language (English) that modifies to control the source text (Arabic). The vulgar image of a man farting while holding the heavy goat is written in the form of a colloquial Palestinian saying. The colloquialism in the Arabic tale situates this saying and allows the Arab audiences the ability to laugh and appreciate the humor despite the vulgar image. Since Theroux could not include the colloquial in his English text, translating this proverb was problematic because without proper explanations this vulgar image could undermine Habiby’s academic achievements.
In this case, this maxim is important since the discussions of Habiby’s involvement in politics and literature have triggered many debates and have shaped his identity as a person and a writer. Omitting it takes away from the complexity of Habiby’s ideas. The saying becomes a metaphor about the impossibility of holding one goat which anticipates the answer that someone working with literature and politics is dealing with more than he can support. If to the person holding the goat one of the two endeavors is as heavy as two goats, then carrying two goats is impossible. This saying complements the watermelon imagery of holding two of them under one arm to which Habiby doesn’t give a clear answer. It is in the colloquial saying that Habiby’s intentions are clear: it is almost unbearable to deal with either politics or literature. It follows that it is most difficult to deal with both of them simultaneously.

Despite this omission, the coherence of Theroux’s translation depends as Mona Baker phrases it “on the reader’s cultural and intellectual background [and that] determines how much sense s/he gets out of a text” (222). For example, in the Maria song, Theroux omitted several lines and switched the order of lines (108). When Theroux does leave some Arabic sentences out of his translation, the reasons are clear: the text functions even without them, they are mere repetition that can be easily misunderstood or it is impossible to replicate the ideas without burdening the English translation.

Nevertheless, the translator’s additions to the tale are a little more disturbing than the omissions because there is no indication in English that some of the factual pieces of information are actual footnotes that Habiby added to his
Arabic tale. For instance, Habiby does not insert the title of “Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*” in the tale, but he separates it and puts it in a footnote (Arabic 36) while Theroux included it in the text (31). This minor change is significant because it hides the complexity of the relationship between Habiby and his readers. Though the omissions and additions can be problematic, but they also emphasize the complex task of all good translators in making choices. Whatever these choices are, they don’t affect the main humor strategies of incongruities and humorous description, reciprocal interference, and diffuse disjunction.

Habiby treated this tale as an academic work besides being a series of fictional, autobiographical, and historical stories mixed with literary allusions. Habiby often referenced and footnoted his allusions and historical sources. Another example is the detailed description of “the crossing gate at Ras al-Naquina” (59) which is completely footnoted in the Arabic original (66). In Arabic, the fiction was not disrupted by explanations, and the Arab readers were forced to look for the footnotes to complement the missing information. This pause created a space to assimilate ideas, and to distinguish between the fictional stories and the historical realities.

In the English version, this whole mechanism of reading is lost, and the readers’ relationship to the text is changed. In his translation Theroux failed at having a “dynamic translation” that depends on “the principle of equivalent effect” which is the attempt to create a “relationship between receptor and message” that is “substantially the same as that which existed between the original
receptors and the message” (Nida 129). The English translation does not have a similar relationship with its readers as the original Arabic tale has with its audiences. To avoid this disconnect, Theroux could have followed Vladimir Nabokov’s suggestion: “I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like Skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity” (83).

The complex relationship of Habiby with his audience defines his humor and complicates the work of his translators. Habiby’s humor resembles Poe’s because both writers rely on literary allusions to enrich yet complicate their humor. In Habiby’s case, Saraya is about a writer who moves fairytales and orally transmitted stories and songs into a written text empowered by literary allusions from world literature. In his references, Habiby mixes Arabic writers such as Baha’ al-Din Shaddad, the biographer of Saladin (54), and Abu al-‘Ala al- Ma’ari (70) with a famous Arabic folk song about Maria (108), with British literature such as “Wuthering Heights” (24). He also quotes from Plato’s The Republic (story 17, 171) and compares it with Lenin’s “allegory of the swamp” (Story 18, 179). These references contribute to further allusions and even literary interpretations of written and oral texts and songs.

These sources enrich the tale yet in the mixing of genres, literatures and imagery, Habiby’s humor is often lost. His attempt to inscribe his tale within world literature using intertextuality and borrowed themes and literary commentaries makes Habiby’s humor another almost hidden metaphor, like the pear trees. Finally, Habiby called on his readers to “Take this fairy tale from me and do with
it as you will. And may God bring it to a successful conclusion” (118). His tale is a continuous attempt to understand what it means to be a writer involved in both art and politics. In this postmodern tale, it is impossible to pinpoint one identity for Saraya, the authorial voice, and the narrator. They all blend into each other and this fusion creates various and even conflicting interpretations of the tale. This fluidity of interpretations is Habiby’s contribution and, in some ways, his solution to find an acceptable medium to talk about both politics and art without taking sides. Laughter becomes his leitmotif and his answer to many problems in the tale and in his life philosophy.
NOTES: HABIBY

I have not found a good summary of this tale; that is the reason I attempt to summarize the many stories. In the Habiby chapter, the numbering of the stories corresponds to the following summary of Saraya:

I argue that each of the twenty sections from the tale is in fact a story that can stand on its own. The tale starts with an introductory short section entitled “The Author’s Oration: Pear Trees were Planted to Give Us Pears.” The twenty sections include the introductory story and four different parts entitled “Ya Yaba” (which includes four different sets of sections/stories), “Yamma” (which includes five sections), “Amen” with its six sections, and the final part is “the Ogre” that concludes the collection with four sections.

Most of the following nineteen stories do not follow a linear plot of reasoning, and they include a lot of pastiches of events and names and both allusions and illusions that hinder easy understanding of the stories. Apparently unrelated thoughts are juxtaposed throughout this tale. Analyzing the points of view with which these stories are told sets them apart from each other as well as creates some meaningful associations. The poetic nature of the stories balances their lack of clarity. The following summary of the stories explains some complexities while emphasizing the mastery of Habiby’s work. Each section in this tale has a complete meaning.

To begin, the characters are recycled in each story and sometimes one plot is completed or retold differently in a new story, but what is essential is that the plot of every story does not necessarily depend on the one before or after it. Even if the reader misses the connection between Su’ad, the dead daughter of Jawad, in the sixth story, and Su’ad in the seventh story, not much is lost. However, the fragmented nature of the stories does make them difficult to understand.

After “The Oration Story” (analyzed in this chapter), “Ya Yaba,” starts with a selective history of the town of Al-Zeeb (2nd story). This history sets the war as a point of reference and focuses on the story of the museum (a story which is also discussed in this chapter).

The second section of Ya Yaba, (3rd story), introduces Abdallah one of the narrators, who is a fisherman from Al-Zeeb (35). This ten year biography focuses on his fishing skills, his personal feelings especially that of suffocation and the story of his once losing his catch to seagulls and crows.

In the third section from “Ya Yaba,” (4th story) Saraya makes her first appearance and to Habiby this female protagonist stands for the land (35). The narration also includes the relationship of Saraya and the narrator, the fisherman. One night while fishing, someone shot at him, and Saraya came to his rescue (44) when she guided him up the mountains away from danger.

In the last section of the first part (5th story), there are three different stories. The first one is an autobiographical snippet wherein Habiby, as a second narrator, relates the story of his son’s letter (40) (a tale also discussed in this
chapter). In the letter, the power of laughter defuses a very problematic and tense situation. In the second story, the narrator draws back on historical resources by directly quoting the heroic story of Issa al–Awwam from the biographer of Saladin (54), all the while linking this ancient history to a fellow fisherman, who was fond of diving into the sea, named Badran (52). The last story is a confession from the narrator of his desires to be with Saraya, who is at the same time the symbol of the land as well as a real woman. This narrator can be equated with Habiby, the author, but the lack of a linear plot and factual elements blurs Habiby with Abdallah, the narrator-fisherman.

The “Yamma” part with its five sections covers the second quarter of the twenty stories. The first section (6th story) includes the biography of the narrator’s brother, Jawad, who married Mariam of Shefa’amar (62), but he could not save her from drowning. Jawad’s tragedy doesn’t stop with the death of Mariam. His only daughter, Su’a’d, dies very young from a freak electrocution accident (63). The rest of the story focuses on a three ringed stick that Jawad inherited and that has a special meaning to his own life. The narrator sees a link between the stick and the women in Jawad’s life. One of these women, Saraya, is mentioned for the first time as the Ogre’s daughter (64). In this story, as in many of the others, the author also defies time restrictions and creates a linear chronological chain of stories dating from 1948 to 1983.

In the second section of “Yamma” (7th story) a series of seemingly unrelated fragments/mini-stories tell the story of Uncle Ibrahim. This new story is the link between Saraya who is the daughter of Uncle Ibrahim and Su’a’d. At one point, the two female identities become one. At another, Saraya becomes the Gypsy girl who faithfully puts flowers on the grave of the dead girl, Su’a’d. This section includes another story “of the two rats-Gallows and white- and the beehive” (72) quoted verbatim from *Kalila and Dimna* (71) by "Roozbih ibn al-Muqaffa" (72). The two main stories in this section are related because Uncle Ibrahim got his nephew, the narrator, interested in this book of fables. Uncle Ibrahim is also “Abu Saraya” (the father of Saraya) (71). The narrator uses the rats’ story as a parable for his own life. This whole section is highlighted with the five repetitions of the sentence “I walked the Via Dolorosa” (70) which renders this whole section more like a chant that divides the internal mini-stories while linking them through the theme of a life filled with pain.

The third section of part two (8th story) details the story of Saraya as a real person. In this story, she is the Gypsy girl (78). Oddly, the narration moves quickly to a completely different topic, to the old historic schoolhouse where the young narrator (Abdallah or possibly Habiby himself) was raised. The sarcasm reaches its height when the narrator confesses “I divulge this memory only reluctantly, lest I alert my fundamentalist compatriots to the existence of that running water and they decide to put sheikhs in my grandchildren’s schools, and in their children’s schools, to stand in front of the spigots and check their ID cards” (81) and forbid the Muslim children from drinking water during the lent of Ramadan. This short example of Habiby’s sarcasm is in fact a double take on the institution that will not modernize the school, and the belief that no change will be
made. The narrator goes into another memory of his Christian playmate and Saraya, thus reconfirming the fact that Saraya was a real girl.

The fourth section of “Yamma” (9th story), relates the story of the brother Jawad. The difference with the 6th story mentioned above is that Jawad marries again after Mariam and this time his wife is Badi’a. Habiby enters as narrator and introduces a piece of his own biography by mentioning that Jawad was in fact photographed for a history book about the city of Haifa (85). The following fragments are about the notebook of his uncle Ibrahim, and the story of the wardrobe of his mother (90) that the author kept after she left Haifa. This section draws from characters mentioned in previous stories, but this time it links them directly to Habiby himself, thus blurring the boundaries between the narrator Abdallah and the autobiographical voice.

The last section of part two (10th story) is perhaps the most problematic. An attempt to reveal the plot of this section is hard to explain because each element deserves careful investigation. The most important snippets in this story are about Saraya and her link to Uncle Ibrahim. The narrator believes that the gypsy girl is his cousin, and that her father gave her away to the Bedouins to raise her after her mother died (106). In another snippet, Saraya becomes a water source “Ayn Saraya” (102). All the while, the narrator Habiby wanders through his past memories and his present life simultaneously. For instance, the old Habiby stops his car (103) and recalls when he was a young boy wandering in Mount Carmel with his cousin Saraya (98). Some of the remaining elements mentioned in this section are the three ringed cane (104), talking about gods (105), quoting the famous Arabic song “Ya Maria” (108), and directly talking about the disappeared, and closing this part with its title “O Yamma” (113). This full circle of bringing all stories together in this10th story is hard to assimilate even at the tenth reading because Habiby manages to hide his meanings through complicated messages and allusions.

The six chapters in “Amen” all include stories about religion and theology drawn from multiple sources. The first story in “Amen” (11th story) is a single page that links Saraya with time, historical bloodshed and wars.

The second story (12th story) is Habiby’s biography made fictional by the insertion of Saraya. An important novelty in this story is Habiby himself talking to his narrator Abdallah about his previous work, The Pessoptimist (122). This distancing between the authorial voice and the narrator is clearly delineated in this story. Further fragments include quotes from Saint John the Divine (122-23) and a listing of family members who left Haifa. Saraya and her father Ibrahim are important characters in this story because the narrator repeatedly acknowledges that all his knowledge is the result of his Uncle Ibrahim’s teachings (121).

The third chapter of “Amen,” (13th story) tells the story of four aunts. The first one is nameless (127), the second is Aunt Sirhana (129), then another nameless aunt (132) and the fourth is Aunt Naziha (132). The carefully picked details about the four aunts all support ideas about political activism and religion. For instance, Aunt Sirhana would “extract a bible from her meager bosom. She’d point to it and whisper in my ear, ‘Everything is written here, my boy’” (130). However, this religion quickly becomes a gateway to talk about the dead ones
and the aunt’s belief in destiny (131). The other interesting personal story is about Aunt Sirhana and how she was mistreated at the Jewish airport before boarding the plane to visit with her son in America (133).

The fourth story of “Amen” (14th story also discussed in this chapter) is the story of a cousin, Inas, who was saved from her family wrath because the narrator starts laughing at her new hairdo. When Uncle Ibrahim seconds the laughter, the seriousness of the angry men evaporates, and they do not punish Inas for disobeying them.

The fifth story (the 15th) is the story of Uncle Ibrahim told by the narrator but from the perspective of the narrator’s father. In one version, Saraya, the gypsy girl, is the daughter of Ibrahim and his Egyptian Coptic wife Maria (146). The story of the three ringed cane and its drawing (152) are also explained in the context of the Egyptian god, Amon (150) and the word “Amen.”

In the last chapter of the third part (16th story), Uncle Ibrahim becomes the story once again. This time the new story is mostly told from the angle of the narrator as a child and his mother. The clothes of the uncle when he visited the family home are minutely described (155-56). The uncle’s actions are also described from the perspective of the family children and the adults. His presence with the narrator’s family and his use of the famous cane and his bag that held fascinating objects for the young narrator are equally carefully detailed.

The story of course ends with Saraya.

The final part of this tale is “The Ogre,” and it contains the last four stories. The first chapter (17th story) starts with Habiby’s admitting that he is having a hard time ending this tale and his friend’s suggestion that the hardship stems from Habiby’s need to end it too soon. The following fragments are three different versions of the same story about Habiby’s biking with his friends. The rest of the story starts with the interlude of Habiby’s talking about “furnaces of grief” (171) that nearly destroyed him were it not for his remembering the cave story. This interlude ends with an almost four page quote from Plato’s The Republic, specifically the parable of the cave.

The second chapter of “the Ogre” (18th story) is also biographical, but it deals with a new story about Habiby, the scholar. He starts with a desire to find internal peace by fighting forgetfulness while dealing with his grief. He moves into a direct address to one of his translators, then directs his thoughts to talking about Lenin as someone influenced by Plato’s cave story. Habiby then quotes from “Lenin’s cave” (179), bringing together some of Habiby’s thoughts about communism and Uncle Ibrahim’s idea of being “a Christianized Ismaili” (181). In this story, Maxim Gorky’s legend of the boy Danko (182) is retold with commentaries from Saraya. The rest of the story is about the narrator’s being a driver of a power crane and the day he saw the three-ringed cane unveiled (185). Interestingly, it is in this story that we find the different versions of the story of Saraya as the Ogre’s daughter (186-9) and there is an ending to this story, which explains how the stick helped the narrator reach a release that told him to “Go!” (191).

The third chapter (19th story) talks about the need to disappear, and the story of “Farasheh” (192), the woman who helped smuggle people between
Lebanon and Palestine (193). She successfully hid them in her cave; she was extremely brave and good at getting them back home. She bore many names (195) even a “Saraya“ (196).

The final chapter (20th story) opens with Farasheh bringing to the narrator’s office a red parcel from Saraya which contained a gift for his daughter: “a pink girl’s dress of thin taffeta that rustled without even being touched” (204). The message conveyed through this the gift is most interesting because the narrator is “the only hope [Saraya] has left” (205) and he is the only one who knows how to find her. The narrator tries to find her but he fails. The very end of this tale can make sense if one gives up on fitting Saraya into one definition, and if one accepts that this fairy tale has no clearly defined ending. It is the remembering that has meaning in this journey. Almost everyone has a Saraya and the only way to find her is by remembering her without imprisoning her. In letting her be free, Saraya, in this tale, can be everything related to the memory and the past of the person and of his land.

Habiby ends with an Arabic variant of the typical “and they lived happily ever after, the end.” Habiby’s words play on the words that a grandmother would say to the children to wrap up her fairy tale: “And if my home were near, I’d bring you a bowl of raisins and pears- or maybe the apples of jinn” (210). In Arabic, this ending varies from country to country and depends on the context of the story to list the fruits. The first part of this ending is usually ironic because grandmothers do live in the same or a neighboring home from the children. Saraya closes with the hopeful note “And so until we meet again, in the tale to come - say with me: Amen” (210).

2There is confusion as to the exact date of Saraya publication. This discrepancy might infer a possible revision that the author did to the original that Theroux translated, but I have no proof. The cover jacket of the English version refers to an original version from a 1991 edition by Dar Arabesque, in Haifa. The Arabic original consulted for this dissertation also claims to be the first edition available in Arabic, but it is dated January 1992, from Riad-El Rayyes Books Ltd, in London.
CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

In this dissertation the four writers share various humor strategies that cross the boundaries of time, literary traditions, and readers’ notions of the funny. Regardless of linguistic and cultural origins, the authors use common humor techniques of incongruities, repetition and reciprocal interference. Their stories also incorporate deadpan narrators who create metanarrative disruptions that complement the use of diffuse disjunctions, which are mostly dramatic ironies. These translatable humor strategies result in multiple reactions ranging from laughter to laughter through tears.

SUMMARY OF STORIES IN RELATION TO HUMOR STRATEGIES

In Mark Twain’s five stories, the manner of telling rather than the content explains the humor in “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog,” “The Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” and “The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn’t Come to Grief,” “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper,” and “The Stolen White Elephant.” Twain requires the reader’s active participation in order to understand the incongruities that cause laughter. In the stories, the double deadpan narrators create a story-within-a-story framework, which distances the author from the narrators and the characters. Twain also makes verbal jokes. But it is only after several readings that readers can catch up to the fact that they are
the butt of his jokes. The repetition of words and of stories and the narrator’s metanarrative disruptions add to the exaggerations and humorous contradictory details. Anticipating gallows humor, Twain creates a double effect on the reader by following humorous scenes with tragic ones. The ensuing sad laughter is both satiric and humorous. Using the persona of Mark Twain and performance theory of American humor, Samuel Clemens wrote not only great American humor stories but also great humor stories that can be labeled as world literature.

Mikhail Naimy’s four stories, “Her Finest Hour,” “Um Ya’qub’s Chickens,” “The Present,” and “The Bancarolia,” are also humorous because they reflect translatable strategies that create enjoyment. In addition, the stories revolve around characters that are comic types, and build dramatic ironies through humorous descriptions told by a third-person deadpan narrator. The reversal of meanings, reciprocal interference, and incongruities, especially in the physical descriptions, add to the humor elements. The juxtaposition of happy and sad endings, like the technique in Twain, allows for laughter through tears. Even though Naimy’s humor is influenced by that of Nikolai Gogol, he shares many strategies with Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe and Emile Habiby.

Edgar Allan Poe’s three stories, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” “Lionizing,” and “Why the Frenchman Wears his Right Arm in a Sling,” are humorous stories written as practice pieces for his horror writing. Many challenges prevent the reader from accessing Poe’s humor, such as outdated allusions and his reliance on a humor addressed to the reader’s intellect rather than feelings. Despite these challenges, Poe also uses humor strategies similar
to those used by Twain, Habiby and Naimy. His stories feature humorous incongruities, descriptions, and repetition. Poe also uses a deadpan narrator along with funny names and situations. In his combination of opposite elements, he desensitizes the reader from the fear that could arise if the stories were not humorous. The incongruities that make a humorous story are the same as those that create a horror story, but it is the element of fear in the reader that differentiates the two from each other. Poe, like Twain, applies parody and a joke structure to a serious narrative for comic effect. I argue that these stories are valuable in and of themselves, as they display Poe’s use of humor strategies that can cross linguistic borders when the stories are translated into another language. In Poe’s stories, the target of satire is important because it shapes sad smiles as a reaction to his humor. Comic misspellings and humorous endings are humor strategies that distinguish Poe from the other three writers.

In Emile Habiby’s stories, “The Oration,” “The Museum Story,” “The Story of Inas’s Haircut,” and “The Son’s Letter,” the multiple narrators complicate the humorous incongruities. The stories are from Saraya, The Ogre’s Daughter, which can be seen as a postmodern tale that includes a series of stories structured like The Arabian Nights, in that the multiple stories can be read on their own, and are all linked to one main female character. In this tale, the ambiguous nature of the main characters necessitates an investigation of their identities to understand Saraya, Abdallah, and the author-narrator. The laughter through tears in these stories is caused mainly by diffuse disjunctions, a humor strategy that uses trivial topics to point to serious issues. The humor strategies
that Habiby shares with the other three writers include not only diffuse
disjunctions, but also incongruities, repetition, and humorous descriptions. The
laughter in Habiby’s stories becomes a leitmotif as well as a reader’s reaction. He
calls for laughter as a healing force in the face of heightened tragedy. In light of
the complicated structure of Habiby’s texts, critics tend to focus on the critical
nature of his serious messages rather than on the humorous stories. It is the
social and literary criticism that always takes precedence in most of the studies of
Habiby. In the chapter on Habiby, I focus on his humor stories for the sake of
identifying humor strategies and not for the sake of larger and more abstract
arguments.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In humor studies, current approaches to comic texts are usually grounded
in formalist methodology. This study demonstrates that instead of imposing
theories, or even mini-theories, on stories, close readings that uncover the humor
can inform and reinforce old theories, or create new ones. This modified
approach acknowledges the talents and skills of the writers’ strategies that
emerge from letting the stories themselves dictate the theory.

This type of comparative humor also provides a model for future research
in humor literature that covers a wide range of stories across cultures. Expanding
this study to incorporate more authors and stories will help to clarify the types of
literary techniques that build a common or universal form of humor.

Reading these writers not solely through the lens of their particular cultural
and literary traditions uncovers many similarities in style between them and
others from all over the world. Even before the twentieth century, the education of most Arab writers included at least one foreign language or literature. As a result, influences on Arab writers go beyond the geographical boundaries of the Arab World. Critics of Arabic literature see these connections, but they tend to simply apply western terms and strategies without letting the similarities and differences emerge from the texts themselves. Critics should consider using humor as a way of drawing more authentic relationships between the two literary traditions. For example, the Lebanese writer Maroun Abboud could be usefully paired with Mark Twain. And given the scarcity of readable English translations of this author, there is a need to translate his stories as well as to study them.

Conversely, critical studies on Arab writers in America can facilitate the inclusion of these texts in the original or in translation in world literature classes. In American literature, writers from the American canon are typically studied in isolation from other world literatures, while in comparative studies, they are viewed almost exclusively in relation to other European writers. A study such as this one can broaden the critical landscape of both literary traditions by opening doors for comparison that go beyond first impressions. In fact, a deeper analysis will reveal that Arab and American writers have more similarities than critics and readers have previously acknowledged. Discussing both the common ground among these writers as well as emphasizing their uniqueness can be the main goal of many comparative literary endeavors.

In the context of American literary criticism, the study of Arabic and American literatures usually means the study of Arab-American literature. Instead
critics need to consider the cross-cultural currents between literatures written in both cultures, not just minorities in one or the other. This study emphasizes the value of considering American writers and Arab writers in connection with each other and in the context of world literature, which is the main purpose of comparative studies. In fact, the gaps between the Arabic and American literary and cultural contexts of these writers became less significant because they were trained in foreign literatures and had a worldwide perspective that informed their structures and styles with regard to humor.

Currently, most theories of translation focus on the implications of the losses and gains in the process. Unlike in the 1960’s when the questions of translatability ranged widely between philosophical skepticism and practical optimism, in the 1990’s, and according to the editor of *The Translation Studies Reader*, the Gricean conversation is now widely accepted as the preferred translation technique. This technique focuses on not just translating the word but other variables such as the readers of the translation, and the amount of information that can be omitted or added in the translation. Although these variables are valid and must be studied, critics also need to focus on what gets translated, which is the focus of this dissertation. Although critics need to acknowledge the complicated task of the translator and that every translator has an agenda, they should focus on the translatable elements, not on just what has been modified. Studying the humor in the stories can reveal these elements as well as explain the choices translators make in the process. Translators shape their readers’ perception of the original stories, and convey the authors’ ideas in
The great gain is that any new translation situates the translated stories in a new host literature. In “Mother Courage’s Cucumbers,” Andre Lefevere affirms “a writer’s work gains exposure and achieves influence mainly through ‘misunderstandings and misconceptions,’ or, to use a more neutral term, refractions” (234). Even bad translations that misdirect the intentions of the author can accumulate new meanings in the target literature. Lefevere writes, “if a work of literature is not rewritten in one way or another, it is not likely to survive its date of publication by many years or even many months” (Translating 14).

Being translated into multiple languages gives any work more chances to be anthologized. Such an opportunity will be particularly important for humor stories, since their adoption into literary canons is still emerging.

A FINAL WORD ON HUMOR

James C. Austin opens his American Humor in France by reaffirming that “to know a country one must know its humor” (3). Similarly, I would argue that it is also in knowing humor that world humor literature takes shape. Focusing on the humor that emerges from literature itself connects the stories and their writers to a vast array of readers across the globe. In literature as in life, humor can be used to deflect tensions and solve problems. Humor allows the writer the unique ability to scrutinize someone, or the status quo, while remaining protected from
direct criticism. It also helps the reader to achieve emotional relaxation from the
stress caused by the subject of study. In many cases, a big challenge for a
humor study and for the success of humor itself is to convince readers around
the world to laugh together.
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