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Beyond Amusement

Language and Emotion in Narrative Comedy

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Abstract

This thesis builds on cognitive stylistics, humour studies and psychological approaches to literature, film and television to explore how the stylistic features of comic novels and short stories may shape readers' experience of comedy. I suggest that our responses to written humorous narratives are triggered by two types of stylistic cue: those which lead to amusement and stabilise our experience of comedy, and those which destabilise it by evoking non-humorous emotions associated with experiencing narrative worlds generally. When presented simultaneously, those cues can trigger complex humorous responses in which amusement is experienced alongside other, often negative, emotions.

In order to investigate how textual elements can influence our emotional experience of humorous narratives, this thesis examines the ways in which stylistic cues affect some of the main experiential features of the narrative worlds of comedy: the moods evoked by the world, our relationships with characters, and our reactions to plot events. Following on from the Introduction and the Literature Review (Chapters 1 and 2), Chapter 3 explores the ways in which stylistic cues may evoke various moods by establishing, reinforcing and disrupting our expectations. Chapter 4 focuses on the role of characterisation in humorous narratives, concentrating on those cues which encourage us to laugh at narrative characters, and those which evoke other, non-humorous responses to them. In Chapter 5, I consider how the presentation of story events affects our experience of humorous plots. I discuss the cues which add humour to the presentation of otherwise problematic events, as well as those which combine humour with more uncomfortable emotions that stem from our reactions to story structures. Chapter 6, finally, provides a summary of the argument and of the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis.

My exploration of the non-humorous side of experiencing narrative comedy offers a key contribution to the study of humorous narratives. By investigating humour as part of a wider narrative world, this thesis moves beyond the analysis of amusing language and towards addressing the complexity of the creation and experience of humour in a narrative world. The interdisciplinary, stylistic-psychological approach adopted here allows for hypotheses to be made not only about the emotional experience of humour in comic novels and short stories, but also about the affective side of narrative comprehension more generally.

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1. Introduction

The fact is that, in humour, the diversities of our living and thinking tumble together in patterns adventitious and freakish and elegant, like the elaborate conformations of a kaleidoscope.

(Nash 1985: xi)

This thesis examines humorous narratives from a cognitive stylistic perspective complemented by insights from humour studies and psychological approaches to literature, film and television. It explores the language of comic novels and short stories, focusing on those stylistic features of narrative comedy which may shape the emotional experience it evokes in its readers. Narrative humour is discussed as part of a larger framework in which it occurs, the narrative world, the construction of which is said to rely on various stylistic cues that affect the readers' experience of both the world itself, and the humour which appears in it. Those cues, it is argued, have the potential to trigger a range of different emotional responses, many of which are far removed from the straightforward amusement typically associated with comedy. The main focus of this thesis, therefore, is to show how the language of comic narratives allows for humour to coexist with other, non-humorous responses which stem from our immersion in narrative worlds.

In order to explore the ways in which the textual cues in written comic narratives may affect our emotional reactions to humorous narrative worlds, I combine insights from (cognitive) stylistics, literary and film/television studies and psychology of entertainment with a range of perspectives from humour studies (including linguistic, psychological and philosophical). This thesis, consequently, offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the language of narrative comedy – an approach which has implications not only for the cognitive stylistics of humour and for humour studies, but which can also be employed more broadly in stylistics and discourse analysis, especially in those applications concerned with the affective side of text processing.

1.1. Beyond amusement: The experience of narrative comedy

This thesis investigates the experience of narrative humour in the context in which it occurs, that is, as part of the wider narrative world of the comic novel or short story in which it is found (see 1.2. below for an outline of the world-based approaches to texts which inform this thesis). Based on my previous work (2012, 2013, in press), I will be referring to the narrative worlds of comedy as *humorous worlds* (explained below). This thesis, therefore, explores the emotional experience of engaging with humorous worlds and, more specifically, the ways in which that experience is shaped by the language of comic narratives. In what follows, I briefly summarise my previous work on humorous worlds (1.1.1), outline the approach to experiencing humorous worlds adopted in this thesis (1.1.2), and discuss the relationship between this work and the existing research on narrative comedy which has informed it (1.1.3).

1.1.1. Comic narratives and humorous worlds

A humorous world (Marszalek 2012, 2013, in press) is a narrative world which is constructed in a way that elicits an overall impression of humour, and which consequently enhances the humorous potential of the elements which appear in it. The amusing quality of such elements is context-dependent, meaning that it is the wider context which helps to ‘unlock’ the humour in them for the receiver. Unlike simple canned jokes and puns which are constructed to be inherently funny regardless of the linguistic context in which they appear, narrative humour tends to be bound to that context and therefore lose some of its effect when taken out of it. That is because humorous worlds rely on *patterns of extended humour* which run through the whole text and are often only accessible to the reader who has become familiar with them in the course of reading the full, extended narrative.

Humorous worlds are constructed to feature three main properties which ensure their overall humorous quality. Firstly, a proportion of their building-blocks (e.g. characters, objects, settings) are stylistically manipulated in order to surprisingly, incongruously clash with the representations of those entities which we are likely to hold in our minds. This process can be linked to what Cook (1994: 1991) calls *schema disruption*, the term *schema* referring to our mental stores of information about world entities (see 3.3 in this thesis). Secondly, the disrupted building-blocks of humorous worlds are combined through diverse

patterns of repetition, ranging from simple lexical repetition noticeable in a single paragraph to thematic recurrence running through the entire text. Finally, a comic narrative encourages the reader to interpret the text in a non-serious mode of comprehension which facilitates a humorous interpretation – stylistically, this can be done through a manipulation of the perceived distance between the reader and the narrator or implied author.

This study builds on my previous work, which, as outlined above, linked humour creation to the construction of the wider narrative world in which that humour occurs. While here I also draw on the idea of contextually-bound narrative humour, my focus develops beyond the construction of the humorous world and moves toward the potential experience of that world for the reader. The emphasis here is, therefore, on experiencing humorous worlds. In what can be considered a pilot of this thesis (Marszalek in press), I suggested how each of the structural features of humorous worlds – the disrupted world-building elements, the repetition and the techniques which trigger a humorous mode – can be linked with emotional responses ranging from humorous amusement to non-humorous reactions associated with engaging with narrative worlds generally. Based on a discussion of examples from film comedy, I combined insights from (cognitive) stylistics and psychology of entertainment to propose how the responses of mood, empathy and suspense can potentially be elicited by the world-building techniques used in the texts, and how those responses were cued alongside the emotion of amusement for the texts’ receivers. The relationship between mode and mood, representations of disrupted character interaction and empathy, and the link between repetition and suspense discussed in that study are ideas which are also developed in the present thesis (Chapters 3, 4 and 5, respectively). Here, however, they are presented as components of a larger framework of emotional cues in humorous narratives, a framework based on the dichotomy between humorous amusement and non-humorous, often negative, emotion elicited by comic novels and short stories.

1.1.2. The language of comic narratives and the experience of humorous worlds

The main premise of this work is that humorous narratives contain stylistic cues which shape our emotional experience of the narrative worlds which they encourage us to inhabit. Stylistic cues here are understood as those elements of the linguistic layer of the text which elicit or signal emotional responses. In humorous narratives, those elements can be divided into two types, depending on whether they contribute to our perception of the world of the text as a

humorous one or, by contrast, trigger responses not typically associated with humour. Comic narratives, as I argue throughout this thesis, contain *stabilising cues* which evoke amusement and thus stabilise our experience of comedy, as well as *destabilising cues* which trigger negative, non-humorous emotional reactions that destabilise our impression of the world as comic. While the stabilising cues are said to *distance* us from the narrative world to encourage a detached, playful attitude towards the world, destabilising cues lead us to *immerse* ourselves in the world and form feelings for and attachments to its entities. Narrative comedy, therefore, can be seen as a balancing act between distancing the readers from the textual world so as to enable them to perceive it as laughable, and immersing them in the world of the text in order to maintain an interest in the story. While the distancing stabilising cues and the immersive destabilising cues can occur independently and lead to either amusement or a non-humorous emotion in the process of reading a humorous narrative, the experience of a humorous world is based in part on what I call a *complex humorous response*, which is a combination of the two. A complex humorous response – a blend of amusement and a non-humorous emotion – can be evoked when a destabilising cue is introduced to a part of a narrative context otherwise stabilised as humorous. It is when the two types of cues are presented simultaneously that a complex humorous response can occur.

Stabilising cues are those elements of the linguistic layer of the text which can be expected to trigger amusement, and which, through frequent use, contribute to our perception of the narrative world as one which is generally humorous. The close link between humour and amusement is a notion which underlies much of the psychological research on the emotional aspects of humour, where amusement (and the synonymous mirth, hilarity, cheerfulness or merriment) is defined as a pleasant emotion closely related to joy, elicited by a perception that a situation is funny (Martin 2007: 8). Its experiential qualities are associated with feelings of pleasure – amusement is, as Martin suggests, that ‘unique feeling of well-being’ familiar to all of us (2007: 8). Like other emotions, amusement is elicited by our cognitive appraisal of an encountered stimulus (cognitive appraisal theories of emotion will be discussed further in 2.1.1). In order to evoke amusement, therefore, verbal stimuli such as humorous texts need to contain linguistic elements which are evaluated as humorous – in the case of written comic narratives, those elements will be the particular stylistic cues which readers appraise as amusing. Based on philosophical, linguistic and psychological work on humour, the amusing effect of those cues will be associated with our responses to incongruity, and specifically, incongruity which is appraised in a non-serious, playful cognitive state of detachment from ordinary concerns (see 2.2.1.iii for incongruity and 3.1.3 for

humorous/play/paratelic mode). In the following chapters, I outline how text-based incongruity, manipulations of narrative distance and other stylistic features can act as stabilising cues which shape our impression of the moods, characters and events in narrative worlds as amusing, thus establishing our experience of those worlds as humorous.

While amusement-inducing cues are said to stabilise our experience of comedy, the main hypothesis investigated in this work is that humorous narratives additionally contain elements which destabilise the comic experience by evoking emotions not typically associated with humour. Those non-humorous emotions stem from our engagement with the characters and situations which make up the narrative world of the text; engagement which is facilitated by our immersion in that world (immersion will be introduced in 1.2.2 below). From an upsetting mood triggered by emotionally-charged, evocative language of a passage, to the experience of embarrassment on behalf of a character, to a tense, anxious feeling as a response to a suspenseful story event, non-humorous emotional states are responses which stem from our involvement in the narrative. In this thesis, emphasis will be placed specifically on those reactions which, as based on psychological theories of emotion, can be associated with negative affect (see 2.1.1). It is the negative emotions which will therefore be discussed as destabilising the otherwise positive experiential quality of humorous worlds. It will be argued, however, that in the context of reading comic narratives, emotions otherwise seen as negative will add to the enjoyment of humour in the humorous world of the text.

Humorous narratives, as suggested above, often present the destabilising cues associated with evoking negative emotional reactions alongside the stabilising cues which establish the reader's experience of the world as generally humorous. The occurrence of destabilising cues in an otherwise humorous context will lead, as previously mentioned, to a complex humorous response, which is a combination of amusement with another, negative emotion. A complex humorous response, simply put, is the reason why some narratives (or their passages) can be described by readers as simultaneously funny *and* sad, painful, awkward or tense. The following quote, which demonstrates this phenomenon, is an extract from one reader's review of Mark Haddon's *A Spot of Bother* (one of the novels analysed in this thesis) submitted for the online reading community Goodreads¹:

¹ This and other Goodreads comments were last accessed on 6/12/15 (<http://www.goodreads.com/>). For a discussion of this approach to gathering real readers' responses to literature, see 1.3.2 in this thesis.

[...] it seems to me [...] tender, sweet and heartbreaking. it's also hilariously funny. haddon does heartbreaking and funny with such grace, simplicity, and verbal virtuosity, it's wonderful.²

(jo, 29 Jan 2009)

The majority of the authors whose works are discussed in this thesis can be said to, as the reader calls it, 'do heartbreaking and funny' – to intertwine the stabilising and destabilising cues so as to evoke a combination of amusement and negative emotion as a response to reading the text. In the following chapters, I draw on psychological research to discuss those emotional responses to humorous narratives, as well as investigate the linguistic cues which constitute the 'verbal virtuosity' that gives rise to those responses.

1.1.3. This approach in relation to other work

Amusing structural features of humorous narratives – here referred to as 'stabilising cues' – have been widely discussed in the linguistic literature on narrative comedy (e.g. Attardo 1998 and 2001, Ermida 2008, Triezenberg 2004 and 2008, outlined further in 2.2.3). In fact, in Ermida's view, when analysing a humorous text one is best advised to 'seek the necessary and sufficient conditions for it to be funny', since it is the intention of humour (the illocution), not the effect of the text (the perlocution), that should be the analyst's core concern (2008: 107). In this thesis, I take a different approach. Not only am I interested in the experiential qualities of humorous narratives, but I also move my analysis beyond the investigation of humour in narrative texts. By adopting a world-based approach to the study of comic novels and short stories, I am able to discuss humour and amusement as component parts, not the full scope, of the experience of the worlds of comic narratives. In those worlds, I suggest, humorous amusement is often triggered not on its own, but as part of a more complex emotional reaction which stems from the reader's immersion in the narrative world. The main contribution of this study, therefore, is an account of a whole range of emotions cued by the stylistic techniques present in humorous narratives. By approaching comic novels and short stories as narrative worlds inhabited by readers rather than as collections of humorous lines (see e.g. Attardo 2001), I am able to observe not only how humour is created, but also how it is made to coexist with the other elements of the narrative. This cognitive stylistic, world-based approach to full-length humorous narratives allows me, consequently, to suggest the

² Reader's original format here and throughout.

ways in which the amusement associated with narrative humour is inexplicably bound with other emotions evoked by narrative worlds.

My account of the different emotional responses experienced through reading humorous novels and short stories has been influenced by the work of King (2002, 2011), whose discussions of film comedy feature references to the various effects elicited by humorous film narratives. By approaching comedy as a *mode* rather than a genre (2002: 2), King suggests how comedy can be introduced as light ‘comic relief’ to films whose primary objective is not to amuse (e.g. action-thrillers), but also how certain films (e.g. those created by Quentin Tarantino) can be considered in equal parts comic and shocking (see chapter ‘Comedy beyond comedy’ in King 2002: 170-201). Those films in which the mix of comedy and tragedy creates a viewing experience too unbearable to be considered mainstream (like the work of Mike Leigh or Todd Solondz), as King suggests, generate ‘a state of unstable and contradictory emotional response’ based on an uncomfortable blend of comedy and seriousness (King 2002: 196). It is this ‘unstable and contradictory emotional response’ which, in this thesis, informs the notion of a complex humorous response.

Viewers’ emotional engagement with characters and their implication in on-screen events are qualities which, as King suggests in his later work (2011), are typical for conventional, mainstream film productions. In his discussion of *In Bruges* (dir. Martin McDonagh, 2008), King outlines how the features which add to the film’s mainstream appeal to emotional engagement are set in opposition to those elements in it which create a contrasting – distinctive, stylised, poetic – quality of irony and detachment:

The combination of these qualities – the ironic, darkly comic, somewhat detached and the more sincerely coded emotional engagement – is a key part of the dual address offered by the film. Viewers are offered the distinctive, and distinction-marking, pleasure of the particular qualities of the dialogue and other ironic and/or distancing effects, but combined with a more mainstream-conventional invitation to engage with the emotional experiences of the characters.

(King 2011: 145)

The opposition set up by King is one between the emotionally involving experience of engaging with the narrative world typical for mainstream, crowd-pleasing entertainment and the distancing effects of detached irony associated with more distinctive, alternative, ‘quality’ film texts. The mixing of these two registers, ‘striking a balance between culture and fun’ (as

King entitles his article, quoting from *In Bruges* itself), is a quality which lies at the heart of the appeal of the film. While King occasionally refers to the dark humour of *In Bruges*, its comic potential is not his main concern. His ‘engagement versus detachment’ division is based on the existence of two distinct registers associated with different film genres, with little reference to humour creation. Like his idea of a blend of comedy and seriousness, however, it will be developed in this thesis in relation specifically to comic novels and short stories.

King’s idea of ‘a state of unstable and contradictory emotional response’ to film tragicomedy (2002: 196), as suggested above, has influenced my concept of a complex humorous response in written humorous narrative comprehension. Like King, I discuss the combination of amusement and negative, unpleasant emotion triggered in the course of engaging with narrative comedy, although I concentrate on written, not multimodal texts, and analyse those texts stylistically. Unlike him, however, I apply the idea not to alternative tragicomedies with a limited audience, but to widely read humorous narratives regarded as best examples of comedy by real readers (see ‘Texts’ in 1.3). Complex humorous responses, I argue, are not limited to ‘quality’ or ‘niche’ texts, and can be triggered by any narrative which cues emotional engagement to its narrative world. The concept of emotional engagement is key here, as I additionally draw on King’s (2011) ‘engagement versus detachment’ dichotomy (based on mainstream and alternative generic conventions) to point to the balance between humorous distance and narrative immersion which – as I mentioned above (1.1.2) – I believe to be a distinctive experiential quality of written humorous narratives.

1.2. Theoretical background: World-based approaches to discourse

The approach to the language of humorous narratives adopted in this thesis, as it has been signalled already, relies on the notion of narrative worlds which are constructed, partly from the stylistic elements of the text and partly from the reader’s cognitive input, in the process of reading. Readers’ immersion in the humorous worlds of comic narratives, as mentioned above, will be said to lead to a range of emotional reactions, both humorous and non-humorous. While research on the emotional side of literary comprehension and relevant

aspects of humour studies will be summarised in the Literature Review (Chapter 2), here I outline the classic literary, linguistic and psychological work on textual worlds and their experiential qualities, which informs the world-based angle of this thesis.

1.2.1. Texts as worlds: Literary and linguistic approaches

This study is based on the premise that behind the words of any novel or short story, there is a *narrative world* that comes into existence in the course of reading the text. That world is a mental representation of the space outlined by the narrative, constructed partly from the linguistic elements present in the text, and partly from the readers' own knowledge and cognitive mechanisms. My decision to associate written narratives with the worlds they allow us to build in our minds is based on those approaches to discourse which emphasise the role of the narrative context in text comprehension. That context, here referred to as a narrative world, is a concept informed by existing literary and linguistic research in narrative and discourse processing.

Some of the early world-based approaches to literature arose as a response to the problem of fictionality in philosophy, which concerned the complicated ontological and logical status of fictional characters, events and settings. Although the non-actual entities present in literary fictions can be considered to exist in the works of fiction to which they belong, their existence is not as straightforward in the real world in which the fiction is being read. A solution to this ontological uncertainty was proposed by applying the philosophical concept of *possible worlds* to the legitimation of fictional beings and situations (e.g. Ryan 1980, Pavel 1986, Doležel 1989, see also Semino 1997), where the possible-world framework was based on the idea that the world we perceive as real is simply one of the limitless number of alternative universes. The fictional worlds of literature, therefore, have been defined as sets of possible states of affairs which were unlimited and maximally varied, and which were accessible from the actual world in which literature is being read (Doležel 1989: 230-2). Aside from being accessible to readers from the real world, as Ryan suggests, fictional worlds will be construed by us 'as being the closest possible to the reality we know' (Ryan 1980: 406). What she terms *the principle of minimal departure* signifies readers' tendency to project their knowledge of the actual world onto the world of fiction, making adjustments only when absolutely necessary (Ryan 1980: 406).

A model of discourse comprehension which develops this distinction between readers' general knowledge of the real world and their text-based knowledge of the fictional world of

a narrative is Emmott's (1994, 1997) *contextual frame theory* (although she additionally distinguishes between readers' knowledge of typical text structures and knowledge of the style of a particular text, 1997: 21). A *contextual frame*, meaning 'a mental store of information about the current context, built up from the text itself and from inferences made from the text' (1997: 121), is a building-block of what Emmott refers to as *text-specific knowledge* – the information about textual entities which we accumulate in the course of reading (1997: 35). Contextual frames, which readers keep track of through an active form of memory called *contextual monitoring* (1997: 106), provide information about the precise configurations of characters, locations, and times at various points in a narrative. Narrative comprehension, therefore, relies on the reader's ability to monitor the narrative context in order to construct a mental representation of the textual world as a whole.

The idea of a mental model of a text-driven context, together with the focus on the non-actual world outlined by discourse, lies at the heart of *text world theory* (Werth 1999, developed by Gavins 2007). Here, a distinction is made between the actual world in which the reading takes place, the *discourse world*, and the world constructed in the course of reading, the *text world* (Werth 1999: 17). Both the immediate situation of the discourse world and the textual situation of the text world, as Werth suggests, contain the same basic types of elements, such as characters, objects, place and time (1999: 81-2). The text world – the 'conceptual space into which the discourse refers' (Werth 1999: 48) – is created as a negotiation between discourse participants (e.g. the writer and the reader), based partly on the linguistic elements present in the text, and partly on the participants' own knowledge which allows them to build a mental space of the textual situation represented in the discourse.

Concepts such as possible world of literature, fictional world and text world are all based on the premise that the texts we read lead us to construct mental representations of the spaces which they describe. While the possible-world models are predominantly concerned with works of literary fiction, contextual frame theory is based specifically on written narratives, and text world theory can be applied to texts of any kind. In this thesis, I draw on these world-based approaches to discourse comprehension to focus on some of the elements which make up the narrative worlds of written humorous narratives: moods (Chapter 3), characters (Chapter 4) and events (Chapter 5).

1.2.2. Experiencing narrative worlds: Psychological approaches

While the world-based angle adopted in this thesis is based partly on the linguistic approaches to text construction and comprehension, my focus on the experiential qualities of narrative processing is informed by the psychological research on the emotional effects which narrative worlds have on readers. Aside from creating mental representations of those worlds in the course of reading, readers are said to have an opportunity to ‘visit fictional lands, inhabit them for a while’ (Pavel 1986: 85). Those phenomena, as I outline below, can be referred to as *transportation* and *immersion*.

The idea of readers visiting or inhabiting narrative spaces when reading is developed in the work of Gerrig (1993), who emphasises the distinction between a narrative (a text with some formal features) and the experience of a narrative world (a result of a set of mental operations – the focus of his work). Gerrig suggests that the experience of a narrative world relies on the reader ‘being in’ the space to which the narrative refers. The metaphors which Gerrig uses to characterise the experience are *transportation* and *performance*: ‘readers,’ according to him, ‘are often described as *being transported* by a narrative by virtue of *performing* that narrative’ (Gerrig 1993: 2). While transportation can be defined as a temporary departure from the real world, performance relates to the fact that while readers’ experiences of narrative worlds will not be identical (every reader will perform the narrative in a different way), certain generalisations can be made about some of the noninferential responses that they will generate in the course of reading. Those responses that arise as a result of involvement in the narrative are referred to as *participatory responses* (or *p-responses*) (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991, discussed further in 5.3.1).

The idea of transportation into narrative worlds has been discussed by a number of researchers. While Green and Brock approach it as *absorption* or *immersion* in a story that can be measured with a 7-point *transportation scale* (2000: 701-3), Green expands the definition to ‘an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events’ (Green 2010: 248). In Nell’s account of *ludic reading* (reading for pleasure), he writes about ‘the experience of being lost in a book, in absorption or entrancement’ (1988: 8). Both Green (2010) and Oatley (2011) link this experience to that of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), where the full engagement in an activity means a temporary abandonment of all the other concerns. Cohen (2006) points out that the psychological notion of transportation in relation to being absorbed in a narrative world corresponds to the concept of *involvement*, which has a long history in film and television studies, and finally, Miall (2007) suggests

decentering as a term for a process of shifting away from our own lives as a result of our interest in the lives of fictional characters (a process closely related to what Ryan 1991: 22 calls *recentering*, where the reader is pushed into a fictional world as a result of immersion in a work of fiction).

Sanford and Emmott's *Rhetorical Processing Framework* (2012, discussed further in 2.1.2.i) outlines some of the cognitive and affective mechanisms involved in engaging with narrative worlds. Experiencing narratives, according to Sanford and Emmott, relies on narrative comprehension being complemented by processes from the two broad classes of *embodiment* and *emotion*, which enrich our understanding of texts with aspects of what the authors call *experientiality*. Embodiment here refers to the idea that while reading, we draw on our bodily, sensory experience, which is said to sometimes enable us to imagine that we are performing the actions described in the text (see Kuzmičová 2012 for a discussion of this or Gibbs 2005 for a general approach to embodiment theory). Emotion, the other aspect of experientiality, is said to interact with the cognitive processes involved in reading so as to 'colour and modify' them in what Sanford and Emmott refer to as *hot cognition*. The three components of hot cognition discussed by them involve emotional judgements and feelings evoked by texts, empathy for characters, and the emotions of suspense, surprise and curiosity elicited by story structures (Chapter 8, 'Hot cognition: emotion, empathy and suspense', 2012: 191-232).

While the general concepts of transportation and immersion – together with the related notions of absorption, involvement, recentering and flow – underlie the approach to experiencing humorous worlds adopted in this thesis, it is Sanford and Emmott's notion of hot cognition which will be examined here in more detail. More specifically, I will apply the three types of hot cognition outlined by them to the study of the experience of narrative comedy: I will address the overall feelings evoked by comic narratives (Chapter 3), our responses – including empathy – towards comic characters (Chapter 4) and our reactions – such as surprise and suspense – to comic events (Chapter 5).

1.3. Method

This thesis offers a predominantly stylistic, world-based approach to the language of comic narratives, complemented by psychological theories which are used to account for the emotional experience of humorous narrative worlds. Below, I outline my choice of comic

narratives, the stylistic and linguistic tools used in the analysis of their language, as well as the psychological concepts which allow me to discuss their emotional qualities. I also introduce another source of data which will be drawn on in this thesis – real readers’ online comments about their experience of reading the novels and short stories analysed in this study.

1.3.1. Texts

The humorous narratives which inform this study are the novels and short stories which have been found to be described as ‘funny’, ‘humorous’ or ‘comic’ by readers and critics in a number of – mostly UK-based – rankings and listings. The majority of the books analysed here (a, b, c, e, g, i, l from the list below) can be found on the list of *Top 10 Funniest Books According to the British* provided by the bookseller ABE Books, based on a survey of 555 of its British customers. The other narratives were listeners’ suggestions mentioned on the website of the BBC Radio 4’s *Open Book* (‘Funny Books Special’) (d, k), shortlisted for the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for Comic Fiction (h), and voted for by the users of the online reading community Goodreads in a ranking of Best Humorous Books (j, f)³. While the various lists understandably mention a number of the same, much-loved comic texts (a, e, and g, for example, appear in the both the ABE and Goodreads ranking), the newer narratives (h and j) do not reoccur. Drawing on a few different listings, therefore, allowed me to compile a list which, although predominantly composed of classic comic novels, includes a number of lesser-known humorous texts:

- (a) Adams, D. (2002 [1979]) *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. London: Picador.
- (b) Amis, K. (2000 [1954]) *Lucky Jim*. London: Penguin.
- (c) Fielding, H. (1998 [1996]) *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. London: Picador.
- (d) Haddon, M. (2007) *A Spot of Bother*. London: Vintage.
- (e) Heller, J. (1994 [1961]) *Catch-22*. London: Vintage.
- (f) Hornby, N. (1995) *High Fidelity*. London: Penguin.
- (g) Jerome, J.K. (1993 [1889]) *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog!)*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

³ The following sites were last accessed on 05/05/13: *Top 10 Funniest Books According to the British* (<http://www.abebooks.co.uk/books/funniest-books.shtml>), *BBC4 Open Book: Funny Books Special* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b018fzwb>), *Best Humorous Books* (http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/312.Best_Humorous_Books).

- (h) Lewycka, M. (2006 [2005]) *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*. London: Penguin.
- (i) Milligan, S. (1971) *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd.
- (j) Sedaris, D. (2002 [2000]) *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. London: Abacus. ('The learning curve,' 'Jesus shaves' and 'Me talk pretty one day')
- (k) Townsend, S. (2002 [1982]) *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*. London: Puffin.
- (l) Wodehouse, P.G. (2008 [1934]) *Right Ho, Jeeves*. London: Arrow Books.

Out of these twelve texts, nine are comic novels which can be classified as fiction, while the remaining three (*Three Men in a Boat*, *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall* and *Me Talk Pretty One Day*) are autobiographical works. *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is the only collection of short stories analysed here, and, next to *Catch-22*, one of only two texts by American writers. In fact, the great majority of the narratives used here have been written by British – or more specifically, English – authors and are set in England, where they follow the lives of English characters. This cultural bias, as I suggest further (see 'Further directions' in 6.3), could be addressed by a cross-cultural examination of humorous texts written in languages other than English. In this thesis, however, I found it useful to conduct text analysis on the linguistic layer of narratives which have not been altered through translation. Aside from creating an Anglo-centric bias, the decision to rely on those existing rankings and listings of the best comic texts resulted in all but three books analysed (c, h, k) being written by male authors (out of ABE's top ten funniest books, for example, only *Bridget Jones's Diary* was written by a woman). Despite this lack of symmetry regarding authorship, the twelve chosen texts have been found to provide ample material for the analysis of language in written comic narratives.

1.3.2. Analysis

This thesis, although it draws from a range of disciplines, is rooted primarily in a stylistic analysis of written humorous narratives. While I address the issue of the experience – as shaped by linguistic cues – of the *whole* narrative in the course of reading, I support my argument with analyses of short narrative extracts chosen from full-length texts. Those

passages were selected as they exemplify the types of cue that, as I have found in my analysis of a number of texts, commonly reoccur in comic novels and short stories.

The narrative examples analysed here are considered from a predominantly (cognitive) stylistic perspective. The stylistic analysis includes both standard linguistic features such as register, sentence length, voice and tense, discourse analysis concepts like modality or patterns of text organisation, and narrative analysis terms like point of view, speech/thought representation and focalisation. The cognitive stylistic approach, which includes all of the above, additionally introduces concepts such as text worlds, foregrounding and schema theory. To complement the cognitive stylistic analysis, references are also made to linguistic theories of humour (with terms such as incongruity or irony), as well as pragmatics and conversation analysis (e.g. impoliteness, turn-taking).

While the analysis of examples is mostly language-based, it opens the discussion to more psychologically-motivated considerations of the potential experiential qualities of the stylistic organisation of the text. In this thesis, theories and concepts from various branches of psychology (most notably, psychology of humour and psychological approaches to literature and the media) are applied to the stylistic analysis of humorous extracts to explore the potential emotional effects of the language of comic narratives. Psychological research on, amongst others, negative affect, embarrassment and suspense is also discussed in relation to the non-humorous experiential qualities of humorous worlds, thereby allowing me to pose hypotheses which inform the core of this study.

In order to further support those hypotheses, I occasionally refer to real readers' comments about their emotional experience of the narratives analysed here. Those comments are extracts from reviews of those narratives submitted for the online reading community Goodreads (<http://www.goodreads.com/>, last accessed on 6/12/15) between 2007 (the year of its launch) and 2015. My choice of Goodreads posts as reader response data is informed by the approach taken by Gavins (2013) in her account of the experience of reading the literary absurd. Her study, although based primarily on a stylistic analysis and her own subjective responses to absurdist texts, includes references to readers' comments about those texts gathered from a number of websites. A consideration of such naturally occurring, pre-existing reviews in which readers voluntarily share their experience of full-length literary works with each other online, as Gavins argues, falls within what Swann and Allington (2009: 248) term *naturalistic studies* of reader response (Gavins 2014: 7, see also Peplow and Carter 2014). In contrast to *experimental studies*, which tend to focus on pre-specified interpretative activities, and in which 'the need for experimental control leads to rather artificial reading behaviour

being investigated, with readers interacting with atypical texts’, naturalistic studies concern habitual processes of reading whole texts in their typical form (Swann and Allington 2009: 248). This thesis, although based predominantly on a linguistic analysis of written narratives supported by insights from psychology, does pose hypotheses about habitual reading of full-length texts. A naturalistic investigation of a number of online reader responses therefore complements my cognitive stylistic analysis and discussions of psychological theories, providing additional evidence about the experience of reading comic narratives.

1.4. Thesis outline

(i) Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Literature Review is aimed at introducing the key topics which underlie the approach to narrative comedy adopted in this thesis. In the first part, Emotions and literature (2.1), I outline some of the psychological and literary linguistic approaches to readers’ emotional engagement with literary texts. I summarise those psychological theories of emotions which are especially relevant to this thesis and provide an overview of how emotional responses to literature have been described and classified in both psychology and literary linguistics. The second part of the review, Humour studies (2.2), provides an introduction to the area of humour studies as a whole (with its three main classes of theories which will be referred to throughout this thesis: incongruity, superiority and release), and summarises the most relevant research within the study of the language of humorous texts, from one-liners to comic novels. The purpose of the Literature Review is to provide a theoretical background for this study as well as point to the original contribution to existing knowledge made by this thesis – those are outlined in the summaries of each part of the Review.

(i) Chapter 3: Experiencing Modes and Moods

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which writers of humorous narratives prepare the reader for the experience of humour by cueing particular cognitive and affective predispositions. It will be argued that engaging with comic texts most likely leads to amusement when the reader has a cognitive awareness that the text is intended to be amusing and an affective sense that the text is amusing. These states of humorous expectation, referred to as the *humorous mode* and the *humorous mood*, respectively, will be said to stabilise the experience of comedy by facilitating amusement in the reader. In the chapter, I outline a

number of stylistic devices which help to cue the humorous predisposition, as well as techniques which disrupt the mode/mood, thus destabilising our experience of comedy and resulting in complex humorous responses.

(ii) *Chapter 4: Engaging with Characters*

The following chapter focuses on the role of characterisation in narrative humour creation. I discuss the techniques which allow representations of people in humorous narrative worlds to have a comic effect, thus stabilising the reader's experience of comedy. I outline a number of character stock types present in comic narratives and suggest a complex type who combines a number of amusing features – the *misfit*. In the second part of the chapter, I contrast the laughable misfit with another type, the sympathetic *everyman*, to show how imbuing protagonists with an amalgamation of misfit/everyman qualities can manipulate the reader's response to the situations they find themselves in, potentially destabilising our experience of humour.

(iii) *Chapter 5: Reacting to Story Structures*

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which the presentation of story events affects our experience of humorous narrative worlds. I discuss a typical trajectory of a comic plot and concentrate on the notion of a *humorous complication*: a surprising story event which is unfortunate to the character but – thanks to our ability to distance ourselves from its emotional impact and reach a *humorous resolution* – humorous to the reader. While *comic surprise* which accompanies humorous complications is said to stabilise our amusement and experience of comedy, *comic suspense* is seen as a more uncomfortable, destabilising reaction. In the second part of the chapter, therefore, I suggest some of the techniques which allow writers to create this suspense by delaying the presentation of a negative outcome which the reader has already been led to anticipate.

(iv) *Chapter 6: Conclusion*

The conclusion provides a summary of the main ideas introduced in this thesis, specifically the notion of linguistic cues stabilising and destabilising the reader's experience of the narrative worlds of comic texts, and the ability of those cues to either immerse the reader in the world or distance him or her from it. It offers, subsequently, an overview of how those themes were explored in the individual chapters. I suggest a list of the key original

contributions of this study and a number of suggested further directions which can be pursued in any future work which develops the ideas presented here.

1.5. Summary

This thesis examines the intersection of language and emotion in written humorous narratives. It combines linguistic tools and theories with research in psychology, literary/film/television studies and various perspectives on humour in order to offer an interdisciplinary – although rooted in linguistics – approach to the study of the experience of the humorous worlds of comic novels and short stories. By treating humorous narrative texts as the narrative worlds which they allow us to build in our minds and temporarily inhabit, I am able to consider narrative humour in the larger space to which it is bound and hypothesise about its effects in that space. In this study, the experience of narrative humour is therefore considered not as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of the experience of the entire narrative world to which it belongs. In the following chapters, I provide examples from humorous novels and short stories to suggest how particular stylistic cues can be used to affect our expectations of the text, our responses to the representations of characters and our reactions to the structuring of plot events. First, however, I situate this study of language and emotion in comic narratives within a wider theoretical context by providing a Literature Review of the existing approaches to literature and emotion and of relevant topics within humour studies.

2. Literature Review

This Literature Review provides an overview of the two key issues explored in this thesis: emotional aspects of literary comprehension (2.1 below) and the language of humorous texts (2.2). As well as offering a summary of the linguistic, literary and psychological research which informs the approach to humorous narratives adopted in this study, the Literature Review also specifies the ways in which this thesis both builds on previous work and pursues new theoretical directions (outlined in the summaries, 2.1.3 and 2.2.5).

2.1. Emotions and literature

This part of the Literature Review provides an overview of some of the existing psychological and literary linguistic research that investigates the emotional aspects of processing literary texts. I begin with a brief theoretical background of how emotions can be approached systematically as psychological phenomena – a background which informs the way in which emotion is discussed throughout this study. I then outline a number of those approaches to reading literature which, like this thesis, explore the emotional side of text comprehension, including both general models of literary response and classifications of the different types of emotion evoked by literature.

2.1.1. Emotions

The psychological views on emotion which suit the cognitive stylistic focus of this thesis particularly well are the cognitive *appraisal theories* (e.g. Arnold 1961, Frijda 1986 and 2007). ‘Emotions,’ according to Frijda, ‘are aroused when some object is being appraised.’ (2007: 93). They are ‘changes in action readiness’ (Frijda 1986: 5) elicited when we cognitively assess – appraise – a specific event in relation to our needs and desires. Those cognitive appraisal mechanisms allow us to evaluate a given stimulus as relevant to our concerns and determine whether that event does or does not lead to action readiness change, or emotion. Frijda suggests that:

Emergence of emotion thus depends upon occurrence of events, presence of concerns for which these events are relevant, and cognitive processes by means of which event consequences are or are not recognized.

(Frijda 1986: 6)

The key notions in Frijda's psychological theory of emotion are *stimuli* (the events or objects which are being encountered), *concerns* (the individual's motives, wishes or goals) and *appraisal* of those stimuli based on concerns (1986: 466-468). Once a stimulus is appraised as relevant to our concerns, a number of different types of change in action readiness can follow, from readiness for actions as such (changes in activation), cognitive readiness (attentional arousal), readiness for modifying or establishing relationships with the environment (action tendencies), to change in readiness for specific concern-satisfying activities (desires and enjoyments) (Frijda 1986: 466). The emotional experience of each of those changes is, as Frijda points out, not just the output, but an integral part of the emotion process (1986: 464).

The mechanism behind action readiness change, as mentioned above, is underlined by an individual's concerns, his or her 'motives, needs, strivings, desires, and major goals' (Frijda 2007: 123). The role of one's concerns in the appraisal process is also indicated by Oatley (1992), who points to the significance of *goals* in guiding the evaluation of situations and consequently leading to emotions. 'There is no physical situation that will reliably initiate particular emotions,' suggests Oatley, 'because emotions depend on evaluations of what has happened in relation to the person's goals and beliefs' (1992: 19). Goals are also central to Lazarus' (1991) approach, where emotions are said to be evoked in response to a particular life event – they 'refer to an immediate piece of business, a specific and relatively narrow goal in our adaptational encounter with the environment.' (1991: 48).

Based on the notion of goals, Lazarus additionally proposes a distinction between goal congruent emotions and goal incongruent emotions, experienced depending on whether the stimulus to which we respond is appraised as either compatible or incompatible with our needs and desires. While goal congruent emotions are positive emotions such as happiness/joy, pride, love/affection, relief, hope, compassion and aesthetic emotions, goal incongruent emotions include negative states like anger, fright/anxiety, guilt/shame, sadness, envy/jealousy and disgust (Lazarus 1991: 217, 264). At the core of this distinction between positive and negative emotions are the basic hedonic experiences of pleasure and pain, which are said to direct the changes in our mental states in a way which helps to sustain pleasure

and reduce pain. As states which centre around pleasure and pain, emotions, according to Frijda, prompt us to get rid of pain and follow what is perceived as pleasant (2007: 63). Both pleasure and pain are related to the notion of *affect*, which refers to, as Parkinson, Totterdell, Briner and Reynolds (1996: 4) suggest, ‘mental states involving *evaluative feelings*, in other words psychological conditions when the person feels good or bad, and either likes or dislikes what is happening.’

One type of emotion typically considered positive or pleasurable is the emotion associated with engaging with works of art, including literature. Lazarus refers to such positive emotions as ‘asthetic’ (1991: 217), while Frijda discusses ‘aesthetic pleasures’ as one of a number of different pleasures which motivate our emotions, together with sensory, activity or social pleasures (2007: 80). Aesthetic pleasures can be seen as distinct from any other emotions which accompany everyday interactions, and therefore, as Frijda suggests, pose a challenge for any theory of pleasure (2007: 84). Below, I outline a number of approaches to the emotions evoked by literary texts which, rather than treat those emotions as separate from more ‘ordinary’ affective states, view them as rooted in our basic processing mechanisms.

2.1.2. Literary emotions

(i) General approaches

As far as emotional responses to literature are concerned, the main theoretical direction of this thesis has been laid out in Sanford and Emmott’s (2012) *Rhetorical Processing Framework*, where the primary subject of investigation is the nature of the mental processing operations which account for our ability to comprehend narrative texts. Sanford and Emmott propose three main strands for their empirically-grounded framework: *Fundamental Scenario-Mapping Theory*, concerned with the use of general knowledge in making inferences about counterfactual worlds; *The Rhetorical Focussing Principle*, which regards writers’ rhetorical control of readers’ attention; and finally *Experientiality* – the role of embodiment and emotion in experiencing narratives. It is experientiality, as mentioned previously (1.2.2), which is most closely associated with emotional responses to narrative texts, as it concerns, among other issues, the intersection between the cognitive processing of the language of narrative texts and the emotions evoked by them in readers. One of the aspects of experientiality, *hot cognition*, refers to ‘the way emotion and feeling interact with

cognitive activities, that is, how cognition is coloured and modified by feelings' (Sanford and Emmott 2012: 191). The three aspects of hot cognition discussed by Sanford and Emmott are 'emotional judgements and feelings elicited by writing', 'the extent to which we empathize with characters in stories' and 'suspense and other emotions induced by story structure such as surprise and curiosity' (2012: 191). The notion of hot cognition is significant to this study as it emphasises the role of affect in narrative comprehension by recognising that interpretation of texts (especially literary ones) is closely bound with experiencing emotion.

This idea of interconnectedness of cognition and emotion in reading forms the core of Miall's (e.g. 1989, 1995, 2007) work on the role of feeling in experiencing literature (where 'literature' includes narratives, but refers to 'high culture' texts which exhibit the elite quality of *literariness*). Miall is interested in the ability of literature to cause *dehabituation*, meaning that 'it invites us to consider frames for understanding and feeling about the world that are likely to be novel, or at least, unfamiliar' (2007: 3). He points out the inadequacy of viewing literary comprehension as based on readers using their existing knowledge frames – schemata – as a means of interpretation and suggests that the unique, singular nature of many literary texts often stems from readers creating new frames instead of simply activating old ones (schemata as stores of knowledge will be discussed further in 3.3). This process of creating new schemata, according to Miall, is directed and controlled by affect (1989: 56). Readers' affective response to a text will thus guide their interpretation by providing information as to what types of schema are appropriate for them to form in a given context. Affect here is understood as 'the subjective experience of emotions and feelings, including [...] feelings that have little or no cognitive content but operate immediately as judgements, preferences, and the like' (Miall 1989: 61) and it is said to have three main qualities:

- (1) affect is self-referential: It allows experiential and evaluative aspects of the reader's self concept to be applied to the task of comprehension;
- (2) affect enables cross-domain categorisation of text elements;
- and (3) it is anticipatory, pre-structuring the reader's understanding of the meaning of a text early in the reading process.

(Miall 1989: 56)

This kind of an affect-led creation of new ways of thinking about our world associated with reading literature, according to Miall, allows us to consider various ways of being in that world: 'it is an "offline" way of experimenting with emotions and experiences that might have dangerous or unpleasant consequences in the real world' (2007: 17). Experiencing

emotions related to dangerous or unpleasant events, in fact, features prominently in Miall's approach to literary response. He classifies 'finding pleasure in negative feelings' as one of the five paradoxes of feelings in literary reading (2007: 81) and links it to Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* (releasing difficult emotions through art), associated with responding to the genre of tragedy (1995: 292). While he maintains that people do generally read literature as they anticipate the experience to be pleasurable (due to, for example, vivid imagery or plot twists), the process of reading places unpleasant, negative emotions in a critical context, allowing us a deeper understanding of them. 'In literary response,' Miall suggests, 'negative feelings are contextualized or transformed rather than avoided' (1995: 293).

The relationship between literature and what can be considered negative affect underlies aspects of Burke's (2011) model of emotion in literary reading (a model which, like Miall's approach, focuses on 'high' literary texts). The judgements and beliefs involved in processing literature, according to Burke, are 'unavoidably drenched in fragmentary emotive remembrances of the self, our loved ones and our lost childhood homes' (2011: 53). 'The home', together with 'death', 'nostalgia' and 'sense of incommunicability' are viewed as some of the *primary affective themes* through which literature channels emotion (2011: 103). Such primary affective themes are one of the five affective inputs in literary reading outlined in Burke's model, next to *location*, *literary reading-induced mental imagery*, *style* and *mood* (the 'mood' input will be discussed further throughout Chapter 3). The model, based partly on existing theories of emotion and text comprehension and partly on real readers' feedback, aims to investigate the ways in which literature evokes 'lingering after-effects in a reader's mind' by exploring three elements of literary reading:

- (i) textual elements, e.g. the rhetoric, style and themes on the page, (ii) contextual elements, e.g. the place of a reading event, and (iii) cognitive-emotive elements, e.g. the mood of a reader, as well as the literary reading-induced mental imagery that literature conjures up so well and so enigmatically.

(Burke 2011: 1-2)

By observing how these elements interact with the notions of memory, cognition and emotion, Burke attempts to capture what he calls 'that unique and cherished "feeling of reading"' (2011: 2).

(ii) Classifications of literary emotions

While the approaches mentioned above pose hypotheses about the ‘feeling of reading’ generally, a number of other studies provide classifications of the different types of emotions evoked by reading literature. Such a taxonomy of the emotions of literary response is proposed by Oatley (1994), whose focus is on what he calls ‘a semi-permeable membrane of the narrative world’ and the resulting distinction between ‘emotions outside the membrane of the narrative world’ and ‘emotions inside the membrane of the narrative world’. The *external* emotions, according to Oatley, result from two different processes evoked by literary comprehension: firstly, the straightforward *assimilation* of textual material into readers’ existing schemata, and secondly, the more challenging *accommodation* of unfamiliar, incongruous juxtapositions found in texts through forming new connections and reshaping schemata. Both assimilative and accommodative processes lead to the overall aesthetic pleasure of reading. The *internal* emotions, on the other hand, are the three groups of emotions that readers feel as entrants into narrative worlds: *sympathy* (feeling for literary characters), *emotion memories* (reliving past emotions) and *identification* (taking on characteristics of characters).

The classification into external/internal emotions has been subsequently revised and expanded in Oatley’s later work (2011), where he develops a new division based on a different dichotomy – that based on the concepts of *fresh emotions* and *emotional memories* as the two types of emotion evoked by literary texts, proposed by Cupchik, Oatley and Vorderer (1998). Cupchik and others’ reader response work investigated how literature elicits spontaneous responses to the text (called fresh emotions) as well as more personal, episodic and anecdotal memories (emotional memories). Oatley (2011) develops that idea to propose that the four main types of emotion associated with reading literature are the fresh emotions of *identification* (which stems from our empathy for the characters) and *sympathy* (recognising characters’ feelings), and the emotional memories of *literary emotions* (*rasas*, based on the distinction between ‘everyday’ *bhavas* and ‘aesthetic’ *rasas* in Indian poetics, Oatley 2011: 120) and *relieved emotions* (remembering past emotions).

Related to the concepts of fresh or internal emotions is the notion of *narrative feelings* proposed by Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004). Kuiken and others outline a classification based on four domains of feeling during literary reading: the *narrative feelings* mentioned above (which include, for example, empathy or sympathy, and can occur in response to settings, characters and situations in imagined worlds) are complemented by *aesthetic*

feelings like heightened interest prompted by certain textual components, *evaluative feelings* toward the text as a whole, and *self-modifying feelings* that restructure the readers' understanding of the text and their sense of themselves. It is important to note that Kuiken and others refer to those states as 'feelings', thus separating them from 'emotions' or 'affect', which, according to them, 'are less likely to occur during reading than are the subtle and fugitive feelings that are not so readily named' (Kuiken, Miall and Sikora 2004: 174).

2.1.3. Summary

This thesis is based on the idea of interconnectedness of cognition and emotion in literary reading. I am interested in how our cognitive appraisal of the entities presented in narrative worlds leads us to form evaluative feelings about those entities, consequently shaping our emotional experience of the worlds of novels and short stories. Specifically, I explore how the language used to create the humorous worlds of comedy cues our cognitive evaluations of and affective reactions to the elements which make up those worlds. In order to address those issues, I build on the emotional aspects of what Sanford and Emmott (2012) refer to as experientiality in narrative processing, focusing on the general feelings evoked by narratives, readers' empathy for narrative characters and the suspense and surprise elicited by plot structures. My discussion of the experience of comic narratives addresses the emotions associated with 'being in' the narrative world, and therefore can be associated with what Oatley (1994, 2011) refers to as internal or fresh emotions evoked 'inside the membrane of the narrative world' or what Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004) call narrative feelings, which occur in response to the settings, characters and situations in imagined worlds.

As is customary in psychological theories of emotion, I distinguish between positive and negative emotions associated with our evaluation of a given stimulus as either pleasurable or painful. I do not, however, classify the emotions associated with reading literature as generally positive 'aesthetic' emotions. Instead, I explore how the texts of full-length comic narratives can cue both positive emotions associated with humour and negative emotions associated with painful experiences – and most importantly, how the two can be evoked simultaneously. My discussion of negative affect in literary response, unlike in Miall's (2007) or Burke's (2011) approaches, is based not on texts classified as 'high literature', but on what can be considered popular fiction. For that reason, my emphasis is more on the entertainment value of literary texts than on their ability to dehabituate us or lead to catharsis. Above all, however, this thesis provides an account of the emotional experience

of humorous narrative comprehension. As such, it applies insights from emotional approaches to broadly-defined literature, specifically to comic narratives, in a way which offers implications for both cognitive stylistics and the linguistics of humour.

2.2. Humour studies

This part of the Literature Review concentrates on the classic research in humour studies which forms a theoretical background to this thesis. I give brief overviews of the three main groups of humour theories which will be drawn on at different stages throughout this study: the superiority (discussed further in Chapter 4), release (Chapter 5) and incongruity theories (3 and throughout). I then outline some of those concepts developed within the linguistics of humour which will be referred to in this thesis (especially incongruity and the related notions of, for example, script opposition and irony) and discuss a number of existing linguistic models of narrative humour which have informed my approach.

2.2.1. Schools of thought

(i) Superiority theories

The superiority theories within humour studies are concerned with humour as a means of disparaging other individuals, and the feeling of superiority associated with mocking others' shortcomings and misfortunes. The origins of this approach to laughter have been dated back to the philosophical works of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates (in Billig 2005: 40, Ermida 2008: 21), and the role of the feeling of superiority in humour appreciation has been linked to Hobbes, whose term *sudden glory* (1996 [1651]: 43) relates to the unexpected boost of self-congratulation which lies at the heart of our pleasure in humour. While Hobbes stresses the importance of the feeling of superiority in those who laugh, the work of Bergson (1913: 22-3) contains references to the amusing value of the deformity and ugliness in those who are laughed at. These early views of humour as aggressive and morally suspicious can be seen to have lost some of their relevance in the present-day context. That is why, rather than treating all humour as an expression of hostility, researchers now tend to speak of different types of humour, where the superiority-based kind is referred to as *disparagement humour* (e.g. Ferguson and Ford 2008).

Superiority theories, although originated in philosophy, have subsequently been developed within psychology. In his review of the psychological research on humour, Martin outlines the contemporary view of disparagement humour adopted in social sciences: ‘Today, this form of humor is evident in slapstick comedy and practical jokes, laughter at others’ clumsiness and verbal mistakes, laughter at “dumb blond” jokes, and any jokes that make fun of individuals from other ethnic groups’ (Martin 2007: 45). Superiority-based approaches to humour – from their origins in classical philosophy to the more contemporary psychological theories – will be discussed further in the literature review of Chapter 4, where I introduce some of the social dimensions of humour that help to explain readers’ responses to the characters in humorous narrative worlds.

(ii) Release theories

The release theories of humour (also referred to as arousal or relief theories) see humour as deriving from a sense of psychological relief which follows a release of some form of tension or energy. The origins of this approach can be linked to Spencer’s (1860) view of laughter as a means of releasing built-up excess nervous energy. A version of this view of the human nervous system as a mechanism for regulating nervous energy has been developed by Freud, who proposed a concept of *psychical expenditure* required for creating and maintaining psychological inhibitions (1960 [1905]: 145). Humour, according to Freud, relies on some form of energy (often the energy needed to suppress forbidden emotions such as aggression or sexual desire) to be saved and subsequently released together with laughter. This release satisfies the longing for freedom from the constraints imposed on the individual by the society, and therefore is seen as a source of pleasure. Since both Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and Spencer’s energy-release approach have been largely discredited by modern psychology (Martin 2007: 41, 58), it may be unsurprising that the related contemporary release-based approach to humour, Berlyne’s (e.g. 1972) notion of *arousal jag*, has not been supported by physiological research data (Martin 2007: 60). Due to its role in the research on amusement and other narrative emotions, however, Berlyne’s concept of arousal will be mentioned again in the literature review of Chapter 5 (5.1.1), where I discuss its relationship with our responses to plot structures, including what Brewer and Lichtenstein (e.g. 1982) refer to as *story liking*.

(iii) Incongruity theories

Incongruity theories – most applicable, as I outline in the following section, to the linguistics of humour – stress the role of incongruity in the humorous stimulus and the experience of this incongruity for the receiver. Schopenhauer, who was one of the first to describe laughter as a result of ‘a paradoxical, and therefore unexpected, subsumption’ of some contrasting features under a single point of view (1966 [1819]: 59), emphasised the perception of the hearer’s sudden perception of incongruity, suggesting that ‘In every case, *laughter* results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just an expression of this incongruity’ (Schopenhauer 1966: 59). While the incongruous nature of humorous objects is an axiom shared by incongruity-based theories, the mechanisms behind the processing of this incongruity have been debated (e.g. Forabosco 2008). It has been questioned whether amusement can be triggered by the mere perception of incongruity (like in the case of *nonsense humour*, e.g. Morreall 1987b, Mulkay 1988, see also Gavins 2013: 50 for a discussion of this in *absurd humour*), or whether humour lies in hearers’ *resolution* of the incongruity with which they are presented.

At the heart of the incongruity-resolution school lies Suls’ (1972) two-stage humor-appreciation model, based on the idea that laughter is an effect of a cognitive resolution of the incongruity presented by a humorous text. The openings of jokes, according to Suls, are constructed so as to encourage receivers to form certain predictions about how the text will progress and what the ending will be. If those predictions about the forthcoming text ‘do not match’ the text input, and if ‘this incongruous text comprises the ending, the result is surprise’ (1972: 87). Surprise marks the end of Stage 1 of the processing model, and is followed by Stage 2, where the receiver engages in problem-solving to find how the punch line follows from the main body of the joke. ‘In the ideal case,’ suggests Suls, ‘the problem solving will be successful and will retrieve the relevant rule that reconciles the joke parts. The punch line is then perceived to make sense, and the person “gets” the joke’ (Suls 1972: 88). Unless a cognitive rule is found which makes the incongruous element fit in with the rest of the text, incongruity is said to result in puzzlement, not humour. Suls’ model will be mentioned again in Chapter 5 (5.2.1.ii) when I discuss the role of surprise in humour appreciation, and the concept of incongruity will be referred to throughout this thesis.

2.2.2. Linguistic approaches to humour

Linguistic approaches to humour often draw on the idea of incongruity in the humorous text. As Simpson suggests in his overview of the linguistics of verbal humour (2011a: 897), humorous incongruity can be introduced at any level of language, from a play on the meaning of a single word or a function of a syntactic structure, to a mismatch between the pragmatic forces of an utterance, to manipulations of extended discourse organisation. Below, I introduce a number of linguistic models and concepts relevant to the study of humorous incongruity in the various forms in which it appears: a simple canned joke, an utterance in its conversational context and a long humorous text. ‘The stylistic analysis of humour,’ as Simpson argues, ‘involves identifying an incongruity in a text and pinpointing whereabouts in the language system it occurs’ (2004: 45). Although this thesis does not focus predominantly on identifying humorous incongruities, my analysis is nevertheless informed by models which approach humorous incongruity at a range of points on the linguistic continuum. In the following sections, I outline those linguistic models and theories which examine:

- (i) the semantic opposition which informs a joke,
- (ii) the pragmatic mismatch which lies at the heart of an ironic utterance, and
- (iii) the stylistic sources of discourse-level incongruity in a humorous text.

(i) Semantics: the joke

A highly influential and productive approach to the humorous incongruity found in verbal jokes is Raskin’s (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH). Its objective is to ‘formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions, in purely semantic terms, for a text to be funny’ (Raskin 1985: xiii), and as such it is predominantly concerned with the illocutionary force of a joke, with not much emphasis on the perlocutionary effect it might have on the hearer. The key term in the theory is a *semantic script*, which is to be understood as a chunk of semantic information evoked by some part of the text (similar to *scripts*, *frames* or *schemata* discussed further in 3.3). The basic premise of SSTH is that:

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions are satisfied:

- (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts;
 - (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense.
- (Raskin 1985: 99)

As far as the ‘special sense’ is concerned, jokes are said to ‘evoke one of the relatively few binary categories which are essential to human life’, such as good vs. bad, true vs. false or, on the most general level, real vs. unreal (1985: 113). A joke, then, describes ‘a certain “real” situation and evokes another “unreal” situation which does not take place and which is fully or partially incompatible with the former’ (1985: 108). Humour lies not only in this ‘special’ opposition, but also in the element that prompts the switch from one script to the other – a *trigger*.

Raskin’s SSTH, which originated as a semantic theory of jokes, subsequently developed into a more comprehensive model intended to be applicable to all verbal humour, from short jokes to humour found in longer texts. This development, Attardo and Raskin’s (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) identifies six ‘parameters of joke difference’ (despite its apparent relevance to all verbal humour, the authors base their theory on jokes) known as *knowledge resources* (KRs), which are said to inform a joke (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 297-309). Each KR represents a number of choices which have to be made for a joke to be conceived. A typical joke, as the authors suggest, will include a certain choice of script opposition (SO), a logical mechanism (LM), a situation (SI), a target (TA), a narrative strategy (NS) and language (LA). The same joke can take on different forms depending on the choices made within each KR, and the application of the theory relies mainly on identifying each KR for the joke which is analysed.

Even though both SSTH and GTVH are cognitive models of humorous language (that is, they make hypotheses about our language processing), the hearer’s cognitive mechanisms are not their main focus as they put more emphasis on the humorous text itself. This niche is addressed by the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 2003), which makes assumptions about the way in which the human cognitive processing mechanisms influence our perception of a certain kind of language – non-literal language such as metaphors, idioms, and jokes. Giora attributes joke comprehension to the working of our ‘salience-prone minds’, which cause a special temporal ordering of lexical access: ‘more salient meanings – coded meanings foremost on our mind due to conventionality, frequency, familiarity, or prototypicality – are accessed faster than and reach sufficient levels of activation before less salient ones’ (Giora 2003: 10). This idea is especially relevant to short jokes in which the single word that triggers

the humorous interpretation has a double meaning, but the concept of salience is likely to be applicable to humorous language in general.

The Frame-Shifting Theory (Coulson 2001) has a similar objective to the Graded Salience Hypothesis, as it deals with jokes and other constructions which gain ‘nonobvious meanings’ as a result of speaker productivity, referred to as *semantic leaps* (2001: 2). Those semantic leaps are results of the process of incorporating incongruity into a new frame in the search for meaning; ‘the operation of a semantic reanalysis process that reorganizes existing information into a new frame’ (2001: 34). The theory is, additionally, supplemented by empirical research in neuropsychology. Using the measurement of event-related brain potentials (ERPs), Coulson was able to show that incongruous joke endings are more difficult to integrate than non-joke endings (1997), and Coulson and Kutas (1998) found that joke endings required a longer reading time than endings which were unexpected, but not incongruous. That suggests that the ‘semantic reanalysis prompted by the integration of joke ending exerts a greater processing cost than [an unexpected but congruent word]’ (Coulson 2001: 79). Models such as Coulson’s and Giora’s investigate the comprehension of incongruity in short jokes, thus complementing Attardo and Raskin’s joke-based approach to humorous language.

(ii) Pragmatics: the ironic utterance

While the semantic approaches to humorous language outlined above concern primarily the creation and comprehension of jokes and one-liners, pragmatic theories investigate humour in its conversational context. One type of conversational humour widely discussed in pragmatics – and mentioned throughout this thesis – is irony, understood as ‘the space between what is meant and what is asserted’ (Simpson 2003: 90). Like the other types of humour outlined here, humorous irony relies on some form of incongruity, although in academic discussions the term incongruity is often replaced by ones like *paradox* (Simpson 2011: 39) or *contrast* (Colston and O’Brien 2000: 1559 and throughout, Dynel 2013a: 294-296).

Colston and O’Brien’s (2000) study of verbal irony and understatement provides both a theoretical and empirical approach to this irony-related notion of contrast. Specifically, the authors concentrate on the contrast between the expected event and the experienced event to which the irony or understatement refers, like that in the ironic ‘Oh fantastic, there is no queue at all’ or understated ‘There seems to be a bit of a queue’ uttered when faced with a long queue at the theatre where we expected there to be no queue (2000: 1557). The

situation-based approach to irony-related contrast is subsequently built on by Dynel (2013a), who draws on a range of secondary literature to outline what she views as the three types of contrast typical of irony: '(1) between the literal meaning of an utterance and its implied intended meaning', '(2) between the semantic meaning of an utterance and the actual physical context to which the utterance refers' (like the one discussed by Colston and O'Brien) and '(3) between expectations and reality' (2013a: 294). Dynel additionally discusses the humorous potential of ironic contrast in relation to the incongruity theories of humour and proposes a classification of the various types of humorous irony based on the incongruity-resolution model of humour comprehension.

Like Dynel, Simpson also draws on a number of existing models to provide a comprehensive definition of irony, here based on the notion of a paradox. 'Irony,' he suggests 'is the perception of a conceptual paradox, planned or unplanned, between two dimensions of the same discursive event' (2011b: 39). In his discussion of the classic pragmatic approaches to irony, Simpson summarises the idea of irony as deliberate non-observance of Grice's (1975) Co-operative Principle of efficient communication (also discussed in detail in Dynel 2013a: 291-293). An ironic (although not necessarily humorous) utterance can rely on the speaker flouting one of the sub-maxims of Grice's maxim of Quality by saying something that he or she knows to be untrue (e.g. 'I liked the way you helped with the washing up!' if no help has been provided) (Simpson 2011b: 36). Aside from this kind of *Gricean irony*, Simpson additionally discusses Sperber and Wilson's (1981) model of irony as *echoic mention* – 'echoic', as an ironic utterance is said to echo the proposition already mentioned (e.g. 'You're tired! And what do you think I am?' in response to 'I'm tired.', Simpson 2011b: 37, after Sperber and Wilson 1981: 306). Although Simpson points to the limitations of the echoic mention model by suggesting that 'just about everything in discourse can be cast as echoic of some other utterance' (2003: 93), Sperber and Wilson's theory does inform his classification of different modes of irony which characterize satirical discourse. Simpson's model for the study of satire, which moves beyond the conversational side of humour discussed here to investigating the language of humour on level of discourse, will be outlined in the following section.

(iii) Stylistics: the humorous text

'An axiom that underpins most stylistic research on humor,' as Simpson suggests, is that 'for a text to be humorous, it must exhibit (at least) some sort of stylistic **incongruity**' (2006: 426,

Simpson's emphasis). That incongruity can occur on any linguistic level, from the 'double meaning' triggered by a self-contained pun (on the level of lexis or grammar) to the mismatch between a character's utterance and the narrative-world context in which it appears (on the level of dialogue and discourse) (Simpson 2006: 426, 2011a: 897). Stylistic approaches to humour therefore examine incongruity as 'a stylistic twist in a pattern of language' (Simpson 2006: 427) – a pattern which can be found on any level of language, from aspects of morphology to elements of discourse structure.

One stylistic approach to verbal humour which focuses on the discourse-level features of humorous language is Simpson's (2000) model for the study of satire. The 'SMUT' model, based in part on the GTVH discussed above, outlines a (non-exhaustive) list of components of satirical discourse – *setting*, *method*, *uptake* and *target* – with an aim to highlight the special qualities of satire as compared with humorous discourse in general (2000: 244). The concept of incongruity discussed throughout this part of the Literature Review is key to the 'SMUT' model, as Simpson discusses a number of strategies which allow incongruity to be created on the discourse level of the satirical text (based on, e.g. Attardo 1997 and Semino 1997):

These include: the creation of grotesques or caricatures through exaggeration of features associated with the object of attack; the merging and inversion of scripts and schemata; the transition between positive and negative polarities; the alternation between normal and abnormal scripts; and the opposition of possible and impossible discourse worlds.

(Simpson 2000: 248)

Creation of discourse-level incongruity (part of the *method* category of the model), together with the rest of 'SMUT', are subsequently used to provide an analysis of an extract from an Irish sitcom *Father Ted* – an analysis which is given a contextualized-stylistic angle where humour is situated in its wider cultural context. The 'SMUT' model is subsequently developed in Simpson's later work on satirical discourse (2003). The later model, which considers satire as a *discursive practice*, focuses on the discursal and pragmatic qualities of satirical texts as they are negotiated by the three discursive subject positions – the *satirist*, the *satiree* (addressee) and the *satirised* (target) (Simpson 2003: 8). A satirical text is said to instantiate a certain discursal *prime*, which is 'echoic' of another discourse event (e.g. text or genre), and which is supplemented by a text-internal *dialectic* such that the two domains

are in dissonance. It is this dissonance between the prime and the dialectic ‘which creates an interpretative pragmatic framework for satire and brings about the style-shift necessary to place the reader-listener on a *satirical footing*’ (Simpson 2003: 10). In this kind of approach to the linguistic properties of a humorous text, the text is therefore viewed as a negotiation between participants in discourse.

2.2.3. Linguistic approaches to narrative humour

Like the satire-based approach outlined above, the following models of humorous language in comic narratives consider humour creation on the scale of the whole text. Although they can be considered stylistic approaches, they also draw on theories within the semantics and pragmatics of humour, some of which – like the SSTH and the GTVH – have been outlined above.

(i) SSTH- and GTVH-based approaches

Linguistic models of narrative humour which draw on Raskin’s SSTH investigate, among other features, the ways in which script opposition is introduced on a larger scale than in a verbal joke. In his reading of comic short stories, Holcomb (1992) identifies instances of humour as joke-like constructions based on script opposition, which he terms *nodal points of humour*. His view that ‘the scripts that characterize a node as humorous are the same as those that make the nodes coherent with the rest of the narrative’ (Holcomb 1992: 233) signals, on a semantic level, the importance of the larger context of the narrative in humour creation.

While SSTH-inspired models like Holcomb’s focus mainly on the necessary conditions for a text to be humorous, Attardo’s application of GTVH to complex texts (Attardo 1998, 2001) draws on this to provide a way of analysing a range of humorous features of written texts. Attardo suggests, primarily, ‘locating, via standard semantic analysis (as in the SSTH), all the humorous elements of a text’ (1998: 232). Those elements, *jab lines*, can then be analysed by describing them according to the KR criteria (as is done with jokes) in a way which can help to draw parallels and identify relationships between all the lines in a text. Attardo’s notions of *strands* (lines which are somehow related, for example, share one of the same KRs), *bridges* (occurrences of two related lines far from each other), and *combs* (occurrences of several lines close to each other) form a terminology for describing the structure of any text which features at least a few instances of humour (2002: 241, 236).

(ii) Ermida

Ermida's (2008) approach to the construction of humour in short stories can also be seen to have been influenced by the SSTH. Like Raskin, she believes that a linguistic analysis of humorous language should concentrate on the illocutionary, not perlocutionary, aspect of comic texts: 'so as to establish the nature of the humorous textual genre, one has to seek the necessary and sufficient conditions for it to be funny in illocutionary terms, that is, for it to be intended as humorous' (Ermida 2008: 107). Her comprehensive study of the language of comic narratives includes an outline of a range of linguistic resources of humour (e.g. sound, graphology, morpho-syntax, semantics), as well as the applications of a narrative structure and pragmatic analysis to the study of narrative humour. In her model of humorous narratives, she proposes a number of principles which need to be obeyed if a text is to be classified as humorous: Principle of Opposition (each script processed in the text activates an opposite script), Principle of Hierarchy (those scripts are divided into higher supra-scripts and lower infra-scripts), Principle of Recurrence (the supra-scripts are recurrently instantiated, which leads readers to form predictions and expectations), Principle of Informativeness (the ending of the story involves an unexpected breaking of those expectations) and Principle of Cooperation (this contradiction of built-up expectations carries a cooperative intention of comicality on the writer's part) (2008: 172-3).

(iii) Triezenberg

The SSTH- and GTVH-inspired models of narrative humour provide insights into the illocutionary force and the structural aspect of extended comic narratives. In her theory of *humour enhancers* in comic literature, Triezenberg (2004, 2008) challenges those semantic approaches to argue that literary humour should not be reduced to a simple analysis of knowledge resources in particular lines. She suggests that while humorous jab lines are present in comic literature, their full comic potential is best realised when it is enhanced by specific techniques present in the texts – humour enhancers:

A humor enhancer is a narrative technique that is not necessarily funny in and of itself, but that helps an audience to understand that the text is supposed to be funny, that warms them up to the author and to the text so that they will be more receptive to humor, and that magnifies their experience of humor in the text.

(Triezenberg 2008: 538)

The list of enhancers which add to the reader's experience of humour in the narrative includes unusual *diction*, easily accessible *shared stereotypes*, *cultural factors* related to the reader's general knowledge, *repetition and variation* of the same joke and finally *familiarity*, which puts the reader at ease by reducing the tension around processing new information. While the list may not be exhaustive or exclusive to comic texts, it nevertheless signals the importance of creating the right context for humour perception.

(iv) Larkin Galiñanes

Larkin Galiñanes (2000) applies relevance theory to the study of humorous narratives to argue that comic novels, unlike 'high' literature, rely on *strong implicature*, which is 'produced within the context of these novels by series of illocutionary acts whose possible richness of implicature is limited by the repetition of the same, or similar, salient connotations, which reinforce each-other and at the same time condition the reader's search for relevance within the on-going text' (Larkin Galiñanes 2000:100). Strong implicature, then, is a product of repetition, and can be used in the construction of predictable, comic *character-stereotypes* and generating surprising *internal incongruity*, the resolution of which is a source of satisfaction for the reader. In her analysis of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (2002), she additionally draws on the superiority theories within humour studies to suggest the role of *attitudinal positioning* in guiding the reader's identification (either positive or negative) with chosen characters. Her more recent work (2010) complements the incongruity- and superiority-based approaches to show how insights from each of the three schools within humour studies can benefit the study of literary humour. She draws on each of the groups to suggest how *superiority* is fuelled by readers' negative identification with particular characters, how sequences of events build up tension which is then *released* through humour, and how some character-related *incongruity* can be resolved with reference to the knowledge we already have about the character.

(v) Nash

Finally, in his study of the language of humour, Nash (1985) proposes the term *humorous expansion* for the humour present in long comic texts, as distinguished from *witty compression* found in short jokes and puns. Humorous expansion has three modes, or qualities: *generic*, *linguistic*, and *interactional*, where *generic* refers to the literary and cultural context, *linguistic* to patterns of syntax, semantics and sound, and *interactional* to the

relationship between the executant and the respondent (1985: 21). The design of extended comic narratives, according to Nash, additionally relies on three features which are brought to the reader's attention: the *locative formula*, the *formulate* and the *root joke* (1985: 70). The locative formula is a formulaic joke which can be found, for example, in character speech, especially as an attribute of a funny character. A formulate is, similarly, a humorous comment, but a comment which is expressed by the author or 'external' narrator. A root joke, finally, is one which informs the whole infrastructure of the narrative – one of which the reader is regularly reminded. As far as the overall relationship between language and humour in comedy is concerned, Nash makes a distinction between 'the language of comedy' and 'humorous language', where the latter refers to the stylistic qualities of particular sentences, phrases or words, and the former is a broader concept which concerns 'a discursive relationship between all the parts of a text and its infrastructure' (1985: 126). The two terms are not, of course, mutually exclusive, as any utterance can be described as both 'humorous' and *comedic* (Nash 1985: 126).

2.2.4. Summary

This thesis, like many of the other linguistic approaches to humour outlined above, relies on the notion of incongruity associated with humorous language. In my account of what Nash (1985: 126) refers to as the language of comedy (comedic language), I discuss various types of incongruity present in humorous narratives, from incongruity introduced at the level of discourse to the other 'stylistic twists in the pattern of language' mentioned by Simpson (2006: 427). In my broad, stylistic approach to comic narratives, therefore, I draw on the semantic, pragmatic and stylistic theories within the linguistics of humour, basing on concepts such as script opposition, irony and recurrence. Like Triezenberg (2004, 2008), I emphasise the construction of the wider narrative context as a tool for enhancing of the reader's experience of humour (even if her approach was not a stylistic one). Finally, in a way similar to Larkin Galiñanes (2010), I also draw from each of the superiority, release and incongruity schools of thought within humour studies to complement my linguistic analysis of humorous narratives with insights from the philosophy and psychology of humour.

Unlike the models mentioned here, my approach to humorous narratives is not limited to the study of humour – and especially, not limited to seeking those structural features of humorous texts which render the texts humorous. While humour is my concern, I view humorous amusement as simply one of the emotional reactions cued by the stylistic

techniques which shape our experience of humorous novels and short stories. I am therefore interested in how those linguistic elements which contribute to our perception of the narratives as humorous interact with those components which can be expected to cue very different, often negative, emotional responses. This thesis, consequently, moves beyond the study of the creation and comprehension of humorous language to an investigation of the affective side of comic narrative processing, one which is shaped by the stylistic world-building techniques used to create the narrative worlds of humorous novels and short stories.

3. Experiencing Modes and Moods

This chapter focuses on the role of textual cues in shaping the reader's expectations in a way which affects the experience of humorous narratives. It will be argued that the appreciation of comic novels and short stories is dependent on the writer's ability to cue particular predispositions in the reader – mental states which will guide the humorous interpretation of the text by creating an anticipation of amusement. This humorous expectation is often a combination of two distinct phenomena: the cognitive awareness that something is intended to be amusing and the affective response that predisposes us towards experiencing amusement. The cognitive component will be referred to as the *humorous mode* of comprehension, while the affective background will be described as the *humorous mood* which facilitates amusement. A consistent humorous response is best achieved when the mode and the mood are both simultaneously established as humorous, yet the distinction is useful in explaining the difference between knowing that something is intended to be amusing and feeling that something is amusing.

In the following sections, I will show how the cues which help to establish the humorous mode/mood in comic narratives can be said to have the stabilising effect of providing a larger humorous context in which the emotion of amusement is established as a preferred, dominant response. Those cues range from the use of elements which are inherently amusing to those which are not humorous in themselves, but which prepare us for the experience of humour by deprecating the subject-matter or distancing us from it. Some cues, however, will destabilise the comic context by evoking a serious mode/mood, thus triggering, potentially, more complex humorous responses, such as mood shifts, dark humour or mood blends. It is the balance between the stabilising and the destabilising cues present in the text which determine that reader's overall experience of a humorous narrative world.

3.1. Theoretical background

The approach to the reader's frame of mind in this cognitive stylistic account of humorous narratives brings together the literary and linguistic research on concepts such as *atmosphere*, *tone*, *resonance*, *aura* and *ambience* as qualities of literary and media texts with notions like

play, paratelic or humorous mode, frame or key as aspects of humorous communication discussed in both pragmatics and psychology of humour (all terms will be discussed in the following sections). These kinds of considerations, however, need to be complemented by a general discussion of *mood* as it is broadly defined in psychology – the focus of this work is on the emotional experience of reading, and it will be argued that the manipulations of the reader’s mood are essential to this experience.

3.1.1. The psychology of mood

A useful starting point to a review of some of the psychological approaches to moods is the definition provided by Parkinson et al. (1996) in their overview of the personality, cognitive and social (amongst others) applications of the concept:

Mood is an undirected evaluative mental state which temporarily predisposes a person to interpret and act towards a wide variety of events in ways according with its affective content.

(Parkinson et al. 1996: 9-10, their italics)

Mood is an ‘evaluative’ state, that is, involves feelings which are experienced as either positive or negative. This evaluative component means that, in contrast to what could be described as a purely cognitive mental state, mood is seen as an *affective state* which can be felt as good or bad (Parkinson 1995: 4). Affective states can be distinguished from each other on the basis of a number of dimensions, but the *pleasantness-unpleasantness* polarity seems to feature in a number of models of affective structure (e.g. Russell 1980, Watson and Tellegen 1985). In their model of affect, Watson and Tellegen (1985) include the superordinary, higher order dimensions of *positive affect* and *negative affect* that subsume any other polarities, and which can be experienced in various degrees of intensity. The ‘affective content’ of mood in Parkinson et al.’s definition above is therefore related to this positive-negative spectrum of evaluative feelings.

Affect, whether positive or negative, is not restricted to moods. In psychological literature, in fact, mood is most frequently defined through comparison with emotion. Both moods and emotions (or *acute emotions*, see Lazarus 1991) are classified as affective states. Unlike emotions, however, moods do not typically have an object or a target – there does not need to be a clear link between a mood and a specific situation, person or thing at which it is

directed (Gleitman et al. 2007). Moods, as Lazarus suggests, ‘do not seem to be clearly related to a single object or piece of business in an adaptational encounter’ and refer instead to ‘the larger, pervasive, existential issues of one’s life’ – unlike emotions, which are directed at specific causes or objects in the environment (Lazarus 1991: 48). Additionally, moods are said to exhibit a particular duration, usually lasting for hours, days or weeks, compared to the much shorter episodes of emotion (Oatley and Jenkins 1996). While *directedness* and *duration* seem to be the two main differences between moods and emotions, others, as outlined by Parkinson et al. (1996: 4-8) include *causation*, *time pattern*, *function* and *intensity* – in contrast to emotions, moods are not caused by specific events, they have a gradual onset and a continuous pattern, they provide information about the current state of self (not of the situation), and they are relatively weak, providing a low intensity emotional background.

Like causation and directedness, many of the other qualities of moods are fluid and unfixed. The one marked feature of moods which is most relevant to the literary linguistic approach of this thesis is that of moods being *tonic* states. While emotions appear and vanish rapidly, moods ‘set a background level or tone of experience which remains relatively stable’ (Parkinson 1995: 9). This idea of mood being a relatively stable affective background influencing an individual’s interpretation of events, when applied to literature, can be seen to be related to Miall’s (1995) notion of *affective tone*, which, once established, will have a long-term effect on subsequent reading. Affect in literary reading, according to Miall, is ‘anticipatory’, meaning that it pre-structures our understanding of the text early in the reading process (1989: 56). The notion of anticipatory affect is subsequently developed by Miall (1995) with reference to a number of existing neuropsychological studies of pathways involved in the functioning of the prefrontal cortex. He uses the work on *somatic markers* in guiding behaviour (Damasio et al. 1991) and on the speed of the response of the amygdala over that of the neo-cortex (LeDoux 1986) to hypothesise about the role of affect in directing thought and action. That leads him to make suggestions about the overall primacy of feeling in literary response, where affect is said to be instrumental in navigating through the complexities of elaborate literary texts. He proposes that ‘the affective tone, even though it may not be consciously noticed, will occur earlier in the processing, if the findings of LeDoux and others are correct, and it will constitute a longer-term influence on subsequent reading’ (Miall 1995: 284-5). The anticipatory quality of affect, then, relies on its power to shape our interpretation of literary texts. Once a certain tone has been set up, the reader will be predisposed to comprehending the text in concordance with that particular feeling – a notion which I elaborate on throughout this chapter.

3.1.2. Mood in literary and film studies

In literary criticism, the term ‘mood’ is rarely used in its own merit, but rather as an auxiliary to describe two other concepts – *atmosphere* and *tone* of literary texts. Even a basic review of a number of dictionaries of literary terms reveals that not only are both atmosphere and tone defined as moods evoked by literature, but that the three concepts can in fact be used interchangeably:

Atmosphere

The mood and feeling, the intangible quality which appeals to extra-sensory as well as sensory perception, evoked by a work of art.

(Cuddon 1999: 59, my underlining here and below)

Tone

A very vague critical term usually designating the mood or atmosphere of a work [...].

(Baldick 2008: 336)

Atmosphere is the emotional tone pervading a section or the whole of a literary work [...]. Alternative terms frequently used for atmosphere are mood and the French word *ambiance*.

(Abrams and Harpman 2012: 18-9)

Atmosphere and tone are described as qualities of texts rather than those of readers, yet they seem to generally refer to the way a literary work makes us feel, the mood it evokes in us. While the applications of the concept of atmosphere in disciplines related to literary criticism may rely on this rather vague quality of ‘an emotional climate’ of a text (Khozan 1993: 1993), tone tends to have a more specific angle, where emphasis is placed on the mood which stems from the writer’s attitude towards the reader or subject matter (e.g. Perrine 1963).

This attitude-based approach to tone is relevant to the way it is used in stylistics and narratology. Wales (2011: 425) suggests that a certain general tone (e.g. ironic, intimate) can be adapted by the narrator or the implied author as part of the *modality* (or *point of view*, Genette 1980) of the work. A more comprehensive stylistic account of tone has been developed by Leech and Short (2007: 225-229), who, like Wales, also link it to *discoursal point of view*, which they see as the relationship between the implied author (or other

addresser) and the fiction, expressed through the structure of the discourse. Part of this relationship is the *authorial tone*, that is, ‘the stance or attitude taken by an (implied) author towards his readers, and towards (parts of) his message’ (2007: 225). An important consideration here is that of symmetry between the attitude expressed by the author and that evoked in the reader (which may be close, but not complete), and the related notion of *distance*. Leech and Short distinguish between two types of distance: that between the writer and the reader, related to the perceived feeling of familiarity between them; and that between the writer and the subject matter, based on the writer’s sympathy towards elements of the world portrayed by him or her (Leech and Short 2007: 225-226). Tone is an expression of this distance, which, when inferred by the reader, can potentially create a particular mood.

A more encompassing approach to tone has been proposed by Stockwell (2014), who acknowledges the association between tone and the concept of authorial/narratorial voice, but who nevertheless recognises the close relationship between tone and atmosphere. The terms ‘tone’ and ‘atmosphere’, Stockwell notes, basing his view on an analysis of entries from the British National Corpus, both tend to be used in an imprecise, impressionistic sense, generally referring to a certain emotional quality of a passage of a literary text. For the purpose of cognitive stylistic analysis, he accordingly proposes *ambience* as a superordinate term for both words:

By this I mean the delicate sense of a halo of associations, some barely conscious, some subliminal but coalescing cumulatively across a stretch of discourse. A word, phrase, syntactic sequence, verse placement, poetic form, rhyme, or extended varied metaphor (and so on) might all contribute to a sense of ambience.

(Stockwell 2014: 365)

Ambience is distinguished from *resonance* (Stockwell 2009) in that while resonance is the striking, powerful feeling which persists after the reading, ambience is the effect of an accumulation of associations created across the discourse itself. Resonance, which, as Stockwell suggests, is a quality based on the properties of a *prolonged response* and an *aura of significance*, is defined as ‘a tone, an atmosphere in the mind that seems to persist’ (Stockwell 2009: 17-18). It is closely related to the concept of *texture* (Stockwell 2009), which is thought of as the experience of the cognitive processing of literature, with special weight given to the aesthetic pleasure which comes from engaging with literary style. A central idea is that of *textual attractors* used by writers, which can heighten the aesthetic

experience for the readers and ‘colour’ entire texts in a way which makes them especially evocative to readers (attractors will be discussed again 4.2.2.i). The power of those attractors partly stems from their ability to bring back emotional memories from the readers’ past – for example, many of the schemata activated during reading ‘have an aesthetic experiential dimension’, which means that they can evoke ‘the remembered feeling, the recollected tactile sense, the associated sensual, emotional and physical memories of an alluded experience’ (Stockwell 2010: 422).

The idea of resonance is also discussed by Burke (2011), who, as mentioned in the Literature Review (2.1.2.i), is interested in literature’s power to leave behind ‘lingering after effects in a reader’s mind’ (2011: 1). While Burke does not explicitly refer to resonance, ambience, atmosphere or tone, he does focus on mood. *Mood* is defined as the affective state of the reader experienced prior to reading: ‘a positive kind of feeling that a reader can get once a mainly subconscious “decision” has been made to engage with a literary work’ (2011: 86). The reader’s expectations and mood will affect the perception of the styles and themes of a literary work, but the mood will also, as Burke suggests, be affected by them.

The stylistic approaches to mood, atmosphere and tone mentioned above all relate to literary works and their readers, but these notions can also be applied to other, multimodal, texts. Smith’s (2003) *mood-cue approach to filmic emotion* relies on the idea that film narratives cue moods (lower-level emotional states) in their viewers in order to predispose them to experiencing brief moments of strong emotion in the course of watching. Films need to provide a variety and abundance of *mood cues* to sustain the particular emotional background which will guide their viewers’ mental processing in the direction desired by the production crew. That direction will involve brief moments of emotion elicited by *emotion markers*, which prompt feelings congruent with the overall mood that is being sustained. Smith points out that particular genres have their own patterns of emotional address encoded as *genre microscripts* that will guide our expectations as to how a certain film is likely to progress narratively, but that there exist *genre blends*, which rely on mixes of moods and cues (for example *Ghostbusters* is a blend of comedy and horror, Smith 2003: 49-51). The idea of these types of blend will be relevant in the final section of this chapter (3.3.3), where I discuss the ability of writers to achieve special effects by cueing a range of different, sometimes incongruent, moods within a humorous narrative.

3.1.3. Humour studies approaches to mode

While moods can be linked to genres, as Smith suggests, it will be shown that these blends of moods found in comic texts mean that the ‘genre of comedy’ is perhaps a slightly problematic term. Accordingly, referring to film comedy, King (2002) proposes that comedy is best understood as a *mode* of representation, rather than a genre. This mode is established through comedy-specific modality markers, which, although prone to variations and shifts, act so as to ‘establish a sense of clear distance from reality or seriousness’ (King 2002: 9). There will be times, argues King, when comedy is allowed to dominate the overall tone of the film, but there also exist comedies which encourage the mixing and shifts of tone, or indeed serious films where comic elements are used to create disruption and an imbalance of moods. Comedy as a mode of a text is also discussed by Mulkay (1988), who distinguishes between the *serious mode* and the *humorous mode* of discourse. ‘The requirements of acceptable discourse,’ argues Mulkay, ‘vary from one mode to another’ (1988: 21): while the humorous mode is much less restrictive with regards to standards of consistency, coherence and feasibility than the serious mode, it does require certain levels of ambiguity, contradiction and interpretative duality.

Another type of mode discussed by humour theorists is that not of the text, but of the receiver of humorous discourse. Morreall (2009) argues that humour is a sudden change of mental state (a *cognitive shift*) experienced in a *play mode*, that is, when we are disengaged from ordinary, practical concerns. Incongruity does not invariably lead to humour – it is most likely to trigger amusement when, as Morreall (1987b) suggests, we are not practically engaged in it and therefore do not feel a loss of control. The idea of being in a play mode when engaging in humorous activities is closely related to the reversal theory approach to humour (Apter 1982, 1991), according to which amusement is associated with a playful, *paratelic* state of mind of the participant. Unlike the goal-oriented *telic* state, the paratelic state is linked to various forms of play, where the primary motivation behind performing activities is not the completion of a task, but the act of engaging in the activity itself. We are said to be able to switch between the states numerous times during the course of a typical day, and humorous stimuli constitute one of the types of telic-to-paratelic triggers. A similar view from developmental psychology is that of *fantasy assimilation* proposed by McGhee (1972), who suggests that, when faced with a humorous situation, we are not likely to attempt to interpret it in a serious manner, provided that there are external cues available as to how to approach it. As Martin points out in his comprehensive review of psychological literature on

humour, ‘the view of humor as play reminds us that humor is a nonserious, playful activity that differs from more serious modes of thinking’ (2007: 81).

While psychology of humour focuses on mode as the frame of mind of the hearer, other disciplines, including linguistic pragmatics, provide approaches which stress the position of the speaker in eliciting that state in the recipient of humorous communication. De Jongste (2013) suggests that producing humorous utterances often requires signalling one’s *humorous intent*, and Dynel (2011) outlines a number of ways in which participants in conversations provide cues as to whether their utterances are to be interpreted in a *humorous* or *play frame*. This idea of a play frame is linked to Bateson’s (e.g. 2006 [1972]) notion of meta-communication surrounding play activities, where play is required to be accompanied by signals that carry the meta-message ‘this is play’ for it to be successfully carried out by participants. Using humour in conversation, according to Dynel, involves this kind of *humorous framing* or *keying*. She points out, however, that the humorous and non-humorous frames are prone to merging – depending on their balance, utterances can range from purely humorous to non-humorous ones imbued with humour (Dynel 2011: 228).

In the context of written humorous narratives, this type of framing will be related to the ways in which authors communicate the *intention of comicality* (Ermida 2008) to their readers. As it will be argued throughout this thesis, many elements which appear in humorous narrative worlds are not immediately amusing, but become humorous to the reader who is aware of the implied author’s intention to amuse. Such a reader recognises the overall humorous mode of the text, and she or he will have been cued into a pleasurable, playful frame of mind which facilitates amusement as a response to the text. Triezenberg (2004, 2008, as discussed previously, 2.2.3.iii) suggests that writers of comic fiction use devices called *humour enhancers* to ensure a humorous response to their works. Humour enhancers, which include broad classes such as *shared stereotypes* or *cultural factors*, are techniques which are not funny in themselves, but which signal to the reader that the text is supposed to be amusing. In this chapter (3.2, specifically), I explore the various types of stylistic devices (not discussed by Triezenberg) which, by stabilising the narrative world as a humorous one, enhance the reader’s humorous response.

3.1.4. Summary

The following table summarises the main points about mood- and mode-related qualities of both humorous and non-humorous discourse which have been outlined in the above literature

review. Although it serves primarily as a summary of the ways in which the terms atmosphere, tone, mood and humorous mode are defined in literary linguistics and humour studies, it is also a glossary of how these notions will be approached in this thesis.

DISCOURSE	QUALITY OF	TERM	DEFINITION
all types	text	ATMOSPHERE	[e.g. atmosphere of a passage] overall emotional quality of the text or its fragments
	sender	TONE	[e.g. tone of the narrator] attitude/distance expressed by the (implied) author or narrator towards (a) the reader or (b) aspects of the narrative world
	receiver	MOOD	[mood evoked in the reader] low-intensity affective state cued by the text which predisposes the reader towards experiencing particular emotions
humorous	text	HUMOROUS MODE	text in a humorous mode is marked as non-serious discourse that exists within a larger humorous/play frame
	sender		sender signals the humorous mode of the text by communicating the meta-message ‘this is comedy’
	receiver		humorous text is most likely to be appreciated if the receiver has been cued into a detached, playful state of mind – the humorous mode

Table.1. atmosphere, tone, mood and humorous mode in discourse

Although it has been signalled that the terms atmosphere, tone and mood tend to be used interchangeably by literary theorists and ordinary readers alike to describe a certain emotional quality of the text (see 3.1.2), research in literary linguistics indicates that each of the words relates to a different participant in discourse. Atmosphere can be seen as a quality of the text itself; tone is an expression of the attitude of the sender; and mood is an affective state evoked in the receiver – a state which shapes the receiver’s emotional experience of the text. While the terms atmosphere, tone and mood can be used to refer to any type of discourse, humorous mode is a quality associated with humorous texts specifically. Humorous mode can be seen as a quality of the humorous text which distinguishes it from the other, serious mode

of discourse, and which is signalled by the sender. Aside from being a quality of the text communicated by the sender, humorous mode can also be viewed as a cognitive frame of mind of the receiver – a frame of mind which facilitates a humorous interpretation of the text.

A particularly interesting difference between humorous and non-humorous discourse can be observed with regard to the way in which the reader's state of mind is approached. While the reader's mood evoked by the text is generally seen as an evaluative *affective* state which can be either positive or negative, the humorous mode triggered by comic discourse does not have that evaluative component. It is simply a non-serious frame of mind that guides our interpretation – a *cognitive* rather than affective state. Similarly, the other two senses of 'humorous mode' (as a quality of the text and of the sender) do not imply evaluative feelings of any kind, which puts them in contrast to the emotionally-charged notions of atmosphere and tone. It will be argued here that while the mental processing of humorous narratives relies on cueing the reader into the purely cognitive humorous mode, the experience of them will depend on the affective states which are triggered alongside it.

3.2. *Stabilising cues: Creating a predisposition towards experiencing comedy*

This section explores the ways in which the overall comicality of a text is established and negotiated between the writer, the text and the reader. I will outline a range of techniques used by writers to signal their humorous intent, as well as some of the cognitive and affective states which are associated with readers' comprehension and experience of comedy. These comedy-inducing strategies and their effects will be referred to as 'stabilising' with regard to creating comedy, meaning that they help to maintain a general impression that the text is a humorous one.

3.2.1. Mode versus mood

The humorous potential of comic narratives will be realised most successfully when appropriate textual devices have been used to cue the readers into both the humorous mode and the humorous mood, where the two are taken to mean the following:

Humorous mode: (a) the larger comic frame of discourse that is (b) communicated by the sender of the text, and which (c) evokes a playful cognitive state that facilitates a humorous interpretation. It is the awareness that a text is amusing, which creates a cognitive expectation of comedy.

Humorous mood: the pleasurable, low-intensity affective state that predisposes us towards experiencing the emotion of amusement. It is the feeling that a text is amusing, which creates an affective expectation of comedy.

These two states usually go hand-in-hand – the cognitive awareness influences the affective disposition, and vice versa. However, it is worth pointing out the distinction in order to explain the fact that it is possible to read or watch something that we know is intended to be funny and *not* be amused by it, that is, to be in the humorous mode, but not in the humorous mood. We are also likely to be amused by something that was not meant to be humorous when the humorous mood evoked by the text overrides the non-humorous mode for which it was intended. The latter situation can be seen in the following scene from Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*, where Adrian's father is cued into the wrong mood when watching a very serious, experimental, modern day adaptation of the Nativity story performed by his son's class:

Example 1

Driving home in the car my father said, 'That was the funniest Nativity play I have ever seen. Whose idea was to turn it into a comedy?' I didn't reply. It wasn't a comedy.

(Townsend 2002: 215)

Even though the mode of the play was serious, Adrian's father had been cued into the humorous mood, probably mistaking the unexpectedly severe, solemn elements of the narrative world for humorous cues. This affective state led him to form a cognitive impression of the mode of the text as a whole and confusing its actual intent. The (wrongly interpreted) emotional cues created an affective expectation which directed the humorous interpretation of the text.

The interpretation of a text can also be guided by a cognitive expectation regarding its humorous mode, that is, the awareness that what we read, hear or watch has been designed to be humorous. The importance of this kind of cognitive anticipation can be illustrated with the

following example from Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, where, at a party, two young German men trick the protagonists into thinking that they are about to hear a comic song in German:

Example 2

‘Oh, it will amuse you. You will laugh,’ whispered the two young men, as they passed through the room, and took up an unobtrusive position behind the Professor's back.

Herr Slossenn Boschen accompanied himself. The prelude did not suggest a comic song exactly. It was a weird, soulful air. It quite made one's flesh creep; but we murmured to one another that it was the German method, and prepared to enjoy it.

(Jerome 1993: 73)

Not knowing any German, the English characters must rely on the explicit message (‘Oh, it will amuse you. You will laugh.’) and use it to prepare themselves for the enjoyable experience of comedy. Once in the humorous mode, they disregard all the other signals and laugh all the way through the performance – the performance of what later turns out to be one of the most tragic songs in the German language. ‘If we had not known it was a funny song, we might have wept,’ admits the protagonist even before the true meaning of the song has been explained to him (Jerome 1993: 74), thus illustrating the importance of anticipation in text comprehension.

These notions of cognitive and affective expectations with regard to experiencing narrative comedy can be compared with what Double (1997) defines as *faith*. With reference to stand-up comedy routines (which, unlike written narrative humour, Double describes as based predominantly on jokes), Double summarises the ‘secret formula’ for a stand-up joke as: *Joke = Incongruity + Faith* (1997: 91). He suggests that while humorous incongruities on which jokes are based are relatively easy to think up, the challenge for a performer is: ‘putting these incongruities across in a way which makes the audience believe they're actually funny, making them have faith that you really are a comedian and that it's OK to laugh’ (Double 1997: 91).

Whether it is stand-up or written narrative comedy, it is clear that creating humorous texts requires not only putting together humorous material, but also cueing the receiver into thinking, feeling and *believing* that the text is a humorous one. The very explicit cueing of the humorous mode in the German song scene above was possible mostly due to the immediate

nature of the live performance. The (misleading) meta-message ‘this is comedy’ was communicated to the audience members directly and unambiguously before the performance started, which would perhaps be difficult to imagine being exercised with written texts intended for solitary reading. That said, written texts such as novels or short stories can be subjected to an analogous type of cueing which directs the readers’ expectations about the content even before the reading starts. The reader of *Three Men in a Boat*, for example, might have heard a variation on ‘Oh, it will amuse you. You will laugh.’ applied to the whole novel by means of personal recommendation from someone who had read it.

3.2.2. Paratexts

Aside from personal recommendation, another kind of explicit humorous cueing in written texts is that communicated through the *paratexts* (Genette 1997) which form the mediation between the reader, the author, the publisher and the book itself. Paratexts are those elements which are not part of the actual text, but which affect our impression of it even before the reading starts – this impression can start being formed as soon as we look at the cover of a book. For example, a quick glance at the blurb on the book’s back cover should leave little doubt that *Three Men in a Boat* is ‘perhaps the best-loved comic novel of the Victorian era’ (Wordsworth Classics, 1993). With the covers of lesser-known books, these kinds of bold statements can be replaced by extracts from book reviews, purposefully cropped to communicate the most crucial information: the *Sunday Telegraph* review on the front cover of Haddon’s *A Spot of Bother* has been condensed to ‘Brilliant... Very funny’ (Vintage, 2007) and *The Times* quote on Lewycka’s *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* simply says ‘Extremely funny’ (Penguin, 2005). Some of the best-selling titles will combine reviews with an element of personal recommendation, ideally from an established comedy writer, such as Nick Hornby’s testimonial, ‘Helen Fielding is one of the funniest writers in Britain and Bridget Jones is a creation of comic genius’ on the front of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Picador, 1998). Much like the young Germans’ comment about the ‘comic’ song, these explicit statements found on book covers are early attempts at directing the receiver’s cognitive expectations about the mode of the text. Readers’ comments about the efficiency – and often misleading qualities – of these kinds of paratexts can be found in their online reviews of humorous narratives. One Goodreads user, for example, writes:

I picked up this book because it had rave reviews printed all over the back and inside covers about how hilarious it was. I don't know if I'm missing something but I didn't find this book funny at all.

(Kate, 8 Apr 2008)

The kinds of (sometimes misleading) recommendations and reviews to which Kate is referring are publishers' attempts to market the book as humorous, and as such they are largely external to – and sometimes completely beyond the control of – the author of the actual text. Writers of humorous narratives, therefore, must find their own ways of ensuring appropriate framing for their work. It would perhaps not be appropriate for authors to proclaim their own books as 'creations of comic genius', and therefore the techniques used by them will be less explicit, allowing readers to guess the mode of the text rather than stating it directly. The comedian Spike Milligan's decision to call his Second World War memoirs *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*, for example, is likely have been a conscious attempt at indicating the larger humorous mode of the autobiographical series. Even the most basic knowledge of history suffices to 'get' the joke – Milligan might have fought in the war, but the claim that he directly contributed to the 'downfall' (a word with rather grandiose connotations) of Adolf Hitler seems preposterous. The humorous incongruity between the wording of the title and the scale of what we suspect actually happened, as well as the amusing narcissism of it (narcissism and humour will be discussed further in 4.3.2), may direct the reader's expectations as to the overall mode of the book. Milligan does not stop there, however, and continues this humorous cueing into the prologue:

Example 3

Prologue

After *Puckoon* I swore I would never write another novel. This is it...

(Milligan 1971: 11)

This brief and uninformative section appears to have little purpose rather than to cue a particular frame of mind in the reader. The paradox of holding in one's hands a novel which, technically, should not have been written, can result in a dissonance that is often thought to lie at the heart of humorous incongruity (see 2.2.1.iii, 2.2.2 and the following section). Additionally, from Milligan 'swearing' that he would never write another novel we can infer that the writing of the previous one was not an experience that he wanted to repeat. Aside

from creating a fleeting moment of amusement, this prologue also has wider implications for the way we approach the entire book. By suggesting that we are reading a novel which should not exist written by someone who did not particularly want to write it, Milligan is signalling his own tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the work, conveying a tone (see 3.1.2 and 3.1.4. for ‘tone’ as an attitude of the sender) which can be described as ironic. The use of irony, defined as a perception of a conceptual paradox between two dimensions of the same event (Simpson 2011: 39, see 2.2.2.ii), allows Milligan to introduce a humorous incongruity and set a humorous mode which stabilises the reader’s perception of the memoir as humorous.

Interestingly, Milligan’s attempts to cue a humorous mode via the title and the prologue will, to some readers, be gratuitous. One Goodreads user’s two-sentence-long review of *Adolf Hitler* reads simply:

It’s Spike Milligan, isn’t it. Of course it’s funny.
(Stephen Laidlaw, 15 Jan 2015)

Spike Milligan’s fame as a comedian means that, to those readers familiar with his other work, just seeing his name on the cover of a book will act as a paratext which cues a humorous mode. Based on any previous experience of Spike Milligan’s creations or even simply on basic knowledge of who he was, some readers may expect to be amused by a book written by him – and disappointed if the text does not deliver the expected humour. Together with the cover design, the book’s title, and the prologue, the writer’s name is therefore another example of a paratext which can stabilise the text as humorous.

3.2.3. Openings

While paratexts such as the cover design, the title, the prologue or even the author’s name can help to start guiding our cognitive expectations about the mode of the text, it would be difficult to argue that, on their own, they significantly contribute to the creation of a particular mood. Complex evaluative states such as moods are products of combinations of textual cues that are spread throughout entire narratives and for that reason are not easy to ‘pin down’. I will show, however, how a useful starting point in the search of such cues is the analysis of the opening sections of narratives, which introduce the reader to the narrative world. As Smith argues with reference to films, coordinated sets of mood cues in the opening will ‘signal an emotional orientation toward the film as a whole’ (Smith 2003: 44). In line

with Smith's mood-cue approach to filmic emotion, I will argue that, like in films, in written narratives the primary, dominant mood of the text will also be established at the beginning, so as to minimise the potential misinterpretation of what follows.

The assumption is that, in order to maximise humorousness, writers of comic narratives will aim to simultaneously communicate the humorous mode of their text and evoke a humorous mood in their readers. Therefore, the cues used in the openings will most likely guide both our cognitive and affective expectations. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the three classes of stabilising cues which help to establish our general impression of the narrative world as humorous:

- (i) instances of humour,
- (ii) distancing techniques, and
- (iii) downgrading strategies.

Even though the majority of the examples used here come from the openings of novels, all of those types of cues will be used continuously throughout humorous narratives.

(i) 'Humorous' humorous cues: Instances of humour

When it comes to introducing the reader to a humorous narrative world, it may seem like the most efficient and straightforward way of cueing an emotional orientation congruent with comedy would be to open with something that actually evokes amusement. An inherently humorous element such as a canned joke, a witticism or a one-liner based on a humorous incongruity, when placed in the opening, should evoke a brief moment of humorous emotion in the reader, a moment that would then trigger an overall comic mood. Even if the reader is not particularly amused by the joke, its mere occurrence could create awareness that we are reading a text which contains instances of humour, and so there would be a cognitive expectation of more to come. Milligan's *Adolf Hitler*, for example, is a novel which contains a high proportion of inherently funny quips, a quality that is signalled right from the beginning. The following paragraph follows from the previously discussed (and also inherently amusing) prologue:

Example 4

HOW IT ALL STARTED

September 3rd, 1939. The last minutes of peace ticking away. Father and I were watching Mother digging our air-raid shelter. (1) “She’s a great little woman,” said Father. “And getting smaller all the time,” I added. Two minutes later, (2) a man called Chamberlain who did Prime Minister impressions spoke on the wireless; he said, “As from eleven o’clock we are at war with Germany.” (3) (I loved the WE.) (4) “War?” said Mother. “It must have been something we said,” said Father. (5) The people next door panicked, burnt their post office books and took in the washing.

(Milligan 1971: 15, my numbering and underlining)

The lines underlined in this short passage are the ones which immediately stand out as humorous: a play on the non-literal meaning of the word ‘little’ as it is typically used in the phrase ‘a great little woman’ (related to what Simpson 2003: 21-22 refers to as a collapsed idiom) (1), a joke directed at the inefficiency of the wartime UK Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (2), an ironic comment where the speaker says the opposite of what he thinks (see 2.2.2.ii for Gricean irony) (3), a witty retort that downplays the seriousness of the subject (4), and an incongruous combination of activities presented as examples of war-time panic (5). These quips can be considered as signals of the overall mode of the text – a non-humorous narrative would be less likely to contain such abundance of inherently amusing elements than a humorous one. The one-liners can also be seen as cues of positive affect, as the brief episodes of amusement that they trigger can create an overall humorous mood and lead to an emotional predisposition towards experiencing more amusement.

One reason why this amusement-based method of cueing the humorous mood can be thought to be particularly effective is related to what Cantor, Bryant and Zillmann (1974) call *excitation transfer*. Excitation transfer is a phenomenon where one’s high level of excitation triggered by a rousing stimulus gets carried over and affects the perception of another stimulus. Cantor et al. conducted experiments in which subjects were cued into various degrees of both positive and negative emotional excitation, and then subsequently asked to rate the funniness of various jokes and cartoons. It was found that those people who were already in an excited state, regardless of whether the excitation was positive or negative, found the humorous materials more amusing than those in a state of low excitation. In the context of Example 4 above, it could be argued that the amusement triggered by such a high concentration of humorous lines in the opening raises the reader’s excitation, thus positively

affecting the perception of funniness in what follows. It may be relevant here that Spike Milligan was a performer as well as a writer, as this technique of evoking strong amusement in the introduction is not uncommon in stand-up comedy routines, in which, as comedian Stewart Lee points out, ‘Received wisdom says, ‘Open with your best line.’’ (2010: 162). Opening with one’s funniest line allows for the intense amusement evoked in the hearer/reader to be transferred into the following fragments of the text. What can be inferred from Lee’s comment, however, is that even though the ‘received wisdom’ within the comedy-writing circles is that one should open with something particularly amusing, there are also other, perhaps more sophisticated, ways of establishing the humorous mood/mode at the start of a humorous text.

(ii) **‘Non-humorous’ humorous cues: Distancing and downgrading**

The use of humorous material is certainly an effective way of cueing the humorous mode/mood, yet many writers will choose strategies which are less direct or explicit, but which can nevertheless guide the reader’s expectations about the text. These strategies are not humorous in themselves, but can help to establish a cognitive anticipation of comedy and a background affective state congruent with amusement. Here, I introduce two categories of stylistic techniques which help to stabilise the text as humorous:

Distancing: techniques aimed at increasing the reader’s detachment from the narrative world in a way that helps the reader adopt a non-serious attitude about textual entities.

Downgrading: devices used to reduce the value or importance of elements of the narrative world to make it easier to perceive them as laughable.

Before I discuss these techniques in more detail, they will now be briefly outlined with reference to the first two paragraphs of P. G. Wodehouse’s *Right Ho, Jeeves*. This particular introduction contains a number of devices which can also be found in other openings of humorous narratives. It is also particularly useful here as its main subject is the idea of ‘establishing an atmosphere’ at the beginning of a story.

Example 5

‘Jeeves,’ I said, ‘may I speak frankly?’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘What I have to say may wound you.’

‘Not at all, sir.’

‘Well, then –’

No – wait. Hold the line a minute. I’ve gone off the rails.

I don’t know if you have had the same experience, but the snag I always come up against when I’m telling a story is this dashed difficult problem of where to begin it. It’s a thing you don’t want to go wrong over, because one false step and you’re sunk. I mean, if you fool about too long at the start, trying to establish atmosphere, as they call it, and all that sort of rot, you fail to grip and the customers walk out on you.

(Wodehouse 2008: 9)

The opening of *Right Ho, Jeeves* is constructed in a way that – even if it does not evoke amusement – prepares the reader for the reception of a comic text by signalling the distance and mocking attitude that facilitate humour comprehension. The distancing techniques used here are mostly related to drawing attention to the craft of storytelling. The narrator openly discusses his problems with ‘telling a story’ and ‘trying to establish atmosphere’. By referring to the act of narrating itself, the author emphasises the fictionality of the text, thus distancing the reader from the content, implying perhaps that we do not need to take this story very seriously, because it is just a piece of writing. The narrator describes his own storytelling process in a largely downgrading, mocking way: ‘fool about’ and ‘all that sort of rot’ are only two of the expressions which seem to put a negative light on the importance or value of the subject. The line ‘No – wait. Hold the line a minute. I’ve gone off the rails’ is interesting in that it combines the two classes of techniques: it distances the reader by disrupting the flow of the dialogue and drawing attention to the act of storytelling, and it is (self-) deprecating in that the narrator presents himself in a bad light and admits that he has ‘gone off the rails’. Even though these techniques do not make this opening amusing, they help to signal the overall humorous mode of the novel and they set the right kind of mood for experiencing amusement later on. Some of the types of distancing and downgrading techniques, as well as the theoretical frameworks that underpin them, will now be explored in more detail.

(a) *Distancing*

The reason why distancing techniques can be particularly effective in cueing a humorous mode/mood can be explained with reference to the previously mentioned reversal theory, which stipulates that humour is typically correlated with the metamotivational state called the paratelic mode (Apter 1982, 1991). The paratelic mode associated with various kinds of play is a state in which one's motivation is directed not towards achieving a goal, but with the pursuit of the activity itself. Play, suggests Apter, is best thought of as a state of mind in which real-life problems and goals are forgotten: 'if you feel basically secure and unthreatened, with nothing you *have* to do, you are in a playful state of mind' (Apter 1991: 15). With reference to humour specifically, this view is also expressed by Morreall (1987b, 2009), for whom a humorous incongruity can only be perceived as amusing once there is sufficient cognitive and practical disengagement from it. In the context of humorous narratives, this humour-facilitating playful state of detachment from everyday concerns can be cued with the use of distancing techniques, which can help to establish a sense of a 'safe' distance from reality.

The two types of distancing stylistic techniques which will be discussed here are those associated with what Vandelanotte (2010) labels (a) *metalinguistic distance* and (b) *metafictional distance* in narrative fiction. Metalinguistic distance, according to Vandelanotte, is achieved through the kind of commenting on the linguistic layer of the text that 'points up the narrator's misgivings as to the success of any attempt to adequately capture in language the full richness of experience' (2010: 208). Here, it will be linked to the group of stylistic devices referred to as *foregrounding* (Havránek and Mukařovský in Garvin's 1964 translation, see also van Peer 1986, van Peer and Hakemulder 2006), meaning those techniques which allow the writer to draw the reader's attention to the stylistic layer of the text. Such a shift of focus to the usually backgrounded linguistic level of the text can lead to language becoming *defamiliarised* (Shklovsky 1965 [1917]), as we are encouraged to look at familiar words and expressions in new, unexpected ways. As far as cueing a humorous mode/mood is concerned, foregrounding can be effective in shifting our attention from the narrative world events to the stylistic level of the text, thus distancing us from the events themselves. With regard to humour creation, it can be said to help communicate the meta-message 'this is play' (Bateson 2006, discussed before), crucial in establishing the cognitive anticipation of a playful activity and triggering a switch to the paratelic mode of comprehension. As I mentioned before, the distance associated with being in the paratelic state is not specific to humour, and so the

following, foregrounding-dense opening of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* may not be amusing to all readers:

Example 6

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.

(Heller 1994: 7)

The foregrounding technique used here is the seemingly redundant repetition of the word 'jaundice'. This kind of lexical repetition can be linked to what van Peer, in his discussion of foregrounding (1986), calls *parallelism*: a process 'in which the author has repeatedly made the same, or similar, choices where the normal flux of language would tend to variation in selection' (van Peer 1986: 23, see also van Peer and Hakemulder 2006: 547). By putting so much emphasis on the word 'jaundice', the writer shifts some of the focus from the actual illness in its narrative world context to the playful exploration of the lexical term in the stylistic layer of the text. This partial shift of focus from the narrative events to the language of the narrative thus distances us from the narrative world – by foregrounding the literariness and the make-believe nature of the narrative, it facilitates a detached, paratelic mode of comprehension by reiterating the meta-message 'this is play'.

A different form of distancing found in comic narratives is that which draws our attention not to the stylistic level of the text, but to the act of storytelling itself. Metafictional distance is that in which 'the narrator distances *himself* from the narrative act, exposing and in a sense disrupting its functioning by calling into question elements of the storyworld' (Vandelanotte 2010: 216). An example of metafictional distancing could be seen in the *Right Ho, Jeeves* opening above (Example 5), when Wodehouse's narrator asks the reader to 'wait' and 'hold the line' as he temporarily disrupts the flow of the narrative in order to share his doubts about setting the right atmosphere when beginning a story. This kind of distancing can cue us into the detached paratelic mode more explicitly than the metalinguistic foregrounding discussed above – here, it is not the individual lexical choices which are brought to our attention, but the fictional, made-up nature of the text itself. Further examples of comic authors emphasising the process of storytelling will be outlined in the final chapter, where I discuss humorous manipulations of the exposition of story events (5.2.1.ii).

Distancing techniques can be used to shift our attention to the literariness or fictionality of the text, thus disassociating us from the narrative world events. Not all distancing devices will be related to increasing metalinguistic or metafictional distance, however. Some distancing techniques found in humorous openings will be associated with the point of view that the reader is led to adopt when reading the text. A distanced perspective which facilitates the humorous mode/mood can be achieved by decreasing the levels of sensory or emotional detail surrounding narrative world events, or by using the point of view of a character who has a detached attitude about those events. Those forms of distancing – and the ways in which they can be disrupted – will be outlined in section 3.3.

(b) *Downgrading*

As far as literary texts are concerned, a distanced attitude (and the distancing techniques which trigger it) are not specific to comedy, as any form of ludic reading can generally be considered to require a switch to the detached, paratelic state associated with play. That is why the addition of downgrading devices may be particularly useful in cueing a specifically humorous mode/mood in comic narratives. In reversal theory terms, downgrading has been described as an excitation-inducing *cognitive synergy* (meaning a combination of multiple incongruous characteristics under a single identity, e.g. Murgatroyd 1985), which can sometimes have an amusing effect. Apter suggests that downgrading of threatening identities (e.g. bosses) can be a particularly humorous type of synergy that combines the intimidating with the inconsequential (1982: 186). This kind of downgrading of an identity, apart from being inherently incongruous, gains its further humorous potential from the way in which it allows us to laugh *at* that identity – a quality emphasised by those theories of humour concerned with aggression towards and superiority over the humorous object (the superiority theories of humour were mentioned in 2.2.1.iii and will be explored further in Chapter 4). Downgrading techniques, then, can complement the distancing ones in cueing a mode that is not only playful, but even specifically humorous. By imbuing textual entities with unexpectedly belittling, unflattering qualities, downgrading devices provide the reader with a perception of incongruity and the feeling of superiority, which are often thought to lie at the heart of humour (see 2.2.1.i/iii). The two main types of downgrading discussed here will be, firstly, downgrading as *deprecating* and, secondly, downgrading as *deformalizing*.

Deprecating downgrading techniques are used to disparage or express disapproval of textual entities in a way which potentially increases the reader's sense of superiority over the

downgraded object. The following example from the opening of David Sedaris' autobiographical short story 'The learning curve' is interesting in that the narrator is making the object of humour out of himself by being self-deprecating for comic purposes:

Example 7

After my graduation from the School of Art Institute of Chicago, a terrible mistake was made and I was offered a position teaching a writing workshop. I had never gone to graduate school, and although several of my stories had been Xeroxed and stapled, none of them had ever been published in the traditional sense of the word.

(Sedaris 2002: 83)

Sedaris' self-deprecation will be elaborated on with regard to characterisation in Chapter 4, but it is also relevant here, as I suggest that using explicitly downgrading techniques at the beginning of the story – like the narrator's references to his own lack of success as a writer – predisposes the reader to be amused at the narrator's cost. By putting himself down, the narrator is allowing the reader to feel superior, which can facilitate a humorous response (see 2.2.1.i for superiority-based theories of humour). The actual humorous potential of the opening, however, is most likely to lie in the internal incongruity between the two clauses in the sentence 'a terrible mistake was made and I was offered a position teaching a writing workshop'. In line with the classic incongruity-resolution approach to humour appreciation (Suls 1972, see 2.2.1.iii) the first clause can be said to set a certain expectation as to what will follow, which is then surprisingly disrupted by the ill-fitting ending. The incongruity between the negative first clause and the unexpectedly positive second one is resolved when we realise that the narrator is humorously downgrading his own skills and qualifications. This particular example of self-deprecation shows how humour-inducing superiority and incongruity can be combined through downgrading techniques.

While deprecating downgrading devices are concerned with disparaging textual entities, deformalising downgrading strategies are used to reduce the importance, gravity or formality of elements which could otherwise seem too serious to be taken humorously. By deformalizing such elements, the writer can indicate that the narrative world is not an entirely serious one, and that it is acceptable to be amused by it. In the opening of Marina Lewycka's *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, the author slightly downgrades the usually more dignified concept of 'family ghosts':

Example 8

Two years after my mother died, my father fell in love with a glamorous blonde Ukrainian divorcee. He was eighty-four and she was thirty-six. She exploded into our lives like a fluffy pink grenade, churning up the murky water, bringing to the surface a sludge of sloughed-off memories, giving the family ghosts a kick up the backside.

(Lewycka 2005: 1)

Family ghosts here are, rather surprisingly, being given ‘a kick up the backside’. This expression does not seem directed at disparaging them, as the ghosts themselves are not described in any disapproving terms. Presenting the ghosts as having a ‘backside’, however, grounds them in the ‘real’, recognisable world of human experience, thus reducing their ethereal intangibility. This kind of downgrading of the normally unearthly, transcendental subject of family ghosts can signal to the reader that some of the other serious topics in the novel will be approached with a dose of flippancy.

3.2.4. Summary

So far, I have suggested that the readers’ understanding and experience of humorous narratives relies on the writers’ ability to mark their texts as comedy – stabilise them as comic. I have outlined a range of strategies which guide the readers’ expectations of the overall humorous mode of the text and which cue them into the humorous mood which facilitates the occurrence of amusement. I have argued that such stabilising humorous cues will be used as early on as in the opening paragraphs of novels and short stories, so that the reader makes no mistake as to how the text should be interpreted. The experience of comedy was generally described as being associated with a non-serious, disengaged state of mind and a pleasurable humorous mood congruent with the positive emotion of amusement. These basic assumptions conform with the view of humour as a playful activity which requires a detachment from goal-oriented behaviour and daily, ordinary concerns – ‘a type of mental play involving a lighthearted, nonserious attitude toward ideas and events’ (Martin 2007:1).

3.3. *Destabilising cues: Disrupting expectations within the humorous context*

As I suggested previously (1.1.2.i), the experience of humour is typically associated with the positive emotion of amusement. The relationship between amusement and other affective states is rather ambiguous, however, as it has been claimed that the detached perspective necessary for amusement distances us from experiencing any other emotions. Bergson, for example, argued that ‘the comic [...] appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion’ (Bergson 1913: 139), while Morreall suggests that ‘since emotions engage us with the situation we’re in and amusement disengages us, they tend to suppress each other’ (Morreall 2009: 33). In this section, I offer my own perspective on the view of amusement as inhibiting other affective states. I argue that humorous narratives can trigger a range of moods and emotions, some of which are far from positive and do not seem to be compatible with the disengaged, light-hearted, non-serious responses described above. Such combinations of amusement and other emotions evoked by humorous narratives, as I outlined in the introduction (1.1.2), are referred to as complex humorous responses. My account of complex humorous responses attempts to explain why, despite the positive emotional associations of comedy, covers of humorous novels can still be labelled with the following mixes of terms:

‘Delightful, funny, touching’ *Spectator* (*A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, Penguin 2006)

‘A painful, funny, humane novel’ *The Times* (*A Spot of Bother*, Vintage 2007)

Interestingly, these quotes have been placed on the *back* covers of the novels – the reviews on their front covers (as I have suggested in 3.2.2. when discussing paratexts) present these books as ‘funny’ above everything else, suggesting perhaps that the publishers intended for the texts to be regarded primarily as comedies. Neither of these books, however, can be considered amusing to the extent that they inhibit the reader from experiencing moments of serious thought and negative emotion. While they may rely on cueing the humorous mode/mood in order to stabilise comedy, they also destabilise it by introducing elements which are non-humorous, and which therefore create an impression of amusement *combined with* ‘touching’ or ‘painful’ emotion.

The reader will occasionally be alerted to these emotional combinations through paratexts (like the quotes discussed above), but, as in the case of cueing a humorous mode/mood, the signals will often appear in the opening of the actual text as well. In *A Spot of Bother* – a novel which, as mentioned previously, has been described as ‘heartbreaking and funny’ by one of its readers (see 1.1.2.ii) – Mark Haddon introduces the narrative world with the following passage:

Example 9

It began when George was trying on a black suit in Allders the week before Bob Green’s funeral.

It was not the prospect of the funeral that had unsettled him. Nor Bob dying. To be honest he had always found Bob’s locker-room bonhomie slightly tiring and he was secretly relieved that they would not be playing squash again. Moreover, the manner in which Bob had died (a heart attack while watching the Boat Race on television) was oddly reassuring. Susan had come back from her sister’s and found him lying on his back in the centre of the room with one hand over his eyes, looking so peaceful she thought initially that he was taking a nap.

(Haddon 2007: 1)

This opening, whether or not it evokes amusement, contains distancing and downgrading elements which can potentially cue a non-serious, detached mode of comprehension in the reader, especially considering the subject matter. Although the extract deals primarily with death, the reader is not encouraged to respond to the (typically tragic) event in an engaged, heartfelt manner – rather, we adopt the detached point of view of the main character, who admits not only to being unsettled by his acquaintance’s death, but also to being ‘secretly relieved’ about it. Aside from distancing the reader from the emotional weight of the situation, George’s relief – and especially the accompanying description of his former squash partner’s tiring locker-room manner – can be viewed as a downgrading strategy which slightly deprecates Bob and downplays the gravity of his death. The event of death itself is additionally portrayed in a rather undramatic way (‘a heart attack while watching the Boat Race on television’), a manner which George finds ‘oddly reassuring’. The techniques which, in the opening extract, distance us from the weight of the difficult subject matter and downgrade its seriousness can suggest to the reader that the approach to death and other difficult themes in *A Spot of Bother* may occasionally be bordering on flippant. Importantly,

however, the fact that a description of someone's death is used to introduce us to the entire narrative world signals that such serious, not transparently funny subjects will play a significant part in this otherwise amusing novel. In this thesis, the serious subjects which occur in humorous narratives (such as the death in the passage above) will be referred to as *dark elements*, and it will be argued that their inherently serious, emotionally engaging nature destabilises comedy by evoking states which are not immediately compatible with the detached, playful condition that facilitates amusement.

The linguistic expression of such dark elements can be explained with reference to the cognitive stylistic applications of *schema theory*. Schema theory originated in psychology as an aspect of Bartlett's (1995 [1932]) theory of remembering, where the mechanism of adult human remembering was said to rely on an individual's assortment of *schemata* coordinated and organised according to the attitudes, interests and ideals which build them up (1932: 308). 'Schema,' in Bartlett's theory, 'refers to an active organisation of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response' (Bartlett 1932: 201). This psychological concept of schemata as organisations of built-up memories which shape our reactions to the environment was subsequently used at the intersection of text processing and artificial intelligence, where schemata (or *frames*, Minsky 1977) were seen as 'the building blocks of cognition' which allow readers to understand written texts (e.g. Rumelhart 1980). Schemata, from that perspective, can be defined as the mental stores of information which form the background knowledge about the world that we rely on when processing discourse – 'All our generic knowledge,' suggests Rumelhart, 'is embedded in schemata' (1980: 41). While schemata is a general term for mental networks of encyclopaedic information, different terms have been proposed to distinguish between the type of knowledge contained within the network – *scripts*, for example, are associated with our knowledge of the typical sequences of actions which define well-known situations (Schank and Abelson 1977, Sanford and Garrod 1981; cf Raskin's 1985 use of the term discussed in 2.2.2.i). Scripts, frames and schemata (here collectively referred to as 'schemata') will therefore be understood as the stores of information about typical entities which become activated as we read a text which makes references to those entities (see Emmott, Alexander and Marszalek 2014 for stylistic applications of schema theory).

Schema theory, although useful in making basic assumptions about discourse comprehension, makes little reference to the emotional weight carried by particular schemata – a limitation emphasised by Semino (1997: 149-151) in her discussion of the theory's

application to literary linguistic analysis. In her own account of literary texts, however, Semino does consider ‘the likely emotional associations of different schemata’ – an idea based on existing research in the emotional states (positive, negative, neutral, or a combination) typically associated with culture-specific knowledge about various circumstances and situations (1997: 151, based on Conway and Bekerian 1987 and Lehnert and Vine 1987). The necessity to complement the purely cognitive concept of a schema with an evaluative component of – positive or negative – affect is also discussed by van Dijk (e.g. 1989), who uses the term *attitude schemata* to explain how our social memory can store positive and negative attitudes towards particular social groups. A similar approach is proposed by Montoro (2007), whose concept *positive affective schemas* explains the positive attitudes evoked in readers as a response to certain fictional characters (the relationship between affect and social cognition will be discussed further in Chapter 4).

In this chapter, I consider the negative emotional associations of certain schemata – schemata which can typically be expected to trigger negative emotion and a serious state of mind. The general knowledge of a situation such as a human death, for example, can be expected to be linked with negative emotion by members of a range of cultural backgrounds, and consequently can be said to have negative emotional associations. The schema of ‘death’ activated by the words and phrases ‘funeral’, ‘dying’, ‘died’ and ‘heart attack’ in Example 9, can therefore be described as having a negative affective quality typically associated with painful, unpleasant circumstances. A schema with such an unpleasant affective quality will be referred to as a *negatively charged schema*, meaning that it carries a negative emotional charge.

In the context of humorous narrative worlds, such negatively charged schemata – triggered both by individual words and longer stretches of text – will be viewed as associated with the dark elements which, by disrupting the positive mood congruent with amusement, can temporarily destabilise our experience of comedy. It will be argued that such negatively charged dark elements can impact our emotional experience of the narrative in three major ways:

- (1) they can trigger a switch of mood to non-humorous,
- (2) they can enhance the overall humorous mood, and
- (3) they can lead to mood blends.

Each of these will now be discussed with reference to narrative examples. While (1) will be linked to mood shifts, (2) will be associated with dark humour, and an analysis of (3) will emphasise the fact that mood switches and boosts of mood cued by dark elements are not necessarily either fully humorous or fully non-humorous – they are often *both*. These kinds of affective blends are prevailing features of our experience of humorous narrative worlds, which suggests that amusement may not be as separate from other emotional states as it is sometimes thought.

3.3.1. Switching to a non-humorous mood

A number of the humorous narratives analysed in this thesis deal with extremely ‘non-humorous’ subjects such as death, illness or war. While there will be times when such elements are used for a humorous effect (as I show in 3.3.2), sometimes the authors will choose to suspend the overall humorous mood and allow these dark elements to trigger highly serious and unpleasant emotional states. In those cases, even if the background mood has been established as humorous, a dark element can trigger a shift to a non-humorous one, accompanied by moments of acute negative emotion.

Clear examples of such extreme mood shifts can be seen in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, where the main, generally humorous, narrative set in present-day England is occasionally interrupted by deeply disturbing flashbacks from early Twentieth Century Eastern Europe. The novel can be said to be built around a number of conceptual spaces, or *text worlds* (Werth 1999, see 1.2.1 for an overview of text world theory), where the reader is required to switch between the main, present-day, England-based world inhabited by Nadia (the first-person narrator of Ukrainian parentage born and raised in England after the war) and the intermittent mainland European wartime worlds, from which Nadia is absent. *World-switches*, according to Gavins (as based on Emmott’s notion of *frame switches*, 1997: 173), occur when ‘the temporal boundaries of a text-world shift’ and readers are led to construct new text worlds with distinct time-zones (Gavins 2007: 48). In the case of *A Short History*, the text worlds differ not only temporally, but also spatially and, most importantly here, *emotionally*, as they evoke very distinct moods. This quality of the novel has been commented on by one Goodreads user, who points out that:

This story is so neatly balanced between the humour and farce of the present “situation” and the scary, desperate past.

(Shannon (Giraffe Days), 10 May 2008)

In Example 10, which illustrates Shannon’s point, Nadia and her sister Vera are chatting while getting ready for bed in Nadia’s house in Peterborough, England. Their jokey exchange about their dad (which corresponds with the overall humorous mood of world-1, the main text world) gradually leads to a switch to a very different world, world-2, where the mood changes completely. There distinction between the two worlds is very clear – the switch between present-day Peterborough and wartime Drachensee is explicitly marked by the graphic boundary ‘***’ (referred to as an *orthographic break* in Emmott 1997: 148). The switch itself, however, is not entirely abrupt, as it is mediated by what I call a *buffer* section, where Nadia and Vera negotiate whether the switch should be brought about or not.

Example 10

(world-1 starts) ‘Surely he couldn’t be *so* stupid.’

‘Of course he could,’ says Vera. ‘Look at his track record so far.’

We chuckle smugly. I feel close to her and far at the same time, stacked up above her in the dark. When we were children we used to share jokes about our parents.

[buffer starts] It must be at least three o’clock in the morning. [...] I know there may never be a chance like this again.

‘Pappa said something happened to you in the camp at Drachensee. Something about cigarettes. Do you remember?’

‘Of course I remember.’ I wait for her to continue, and after a while she says, ‘There are some things it’s better not to know, Nadia.’

‘I know. But tell me anyway.’ **[buffer ends] (world-1 ends)**

(world-2 starts) The labour camp at Drachensee was a huge, ugly, chaotic and cruel place. [...]

(Lewycka 2005: 268, my bold and brackets)

Vera, who experienced the reality of the Drachensee world as a child, is not keen to relive the memories for the benefit of her sister. Her reluctance cues the reader in the external *discourse world* (Werth 1999) that the switch will not be a pleasant one and that we should prepare ourselves for a radical shift of mood in the new world. As it can be seen in the passage below (Example 11), the world of the concentration camp where Vera and her parents were detained is an entirely non-humorous world. The extract contains phrases and passages that can be linked to distancing and downgrading techniques which, in a humorous world, would be associated with signaling a humorous mode/mood and stabilising comedy. In this particular world, however, the humorous cueing is suspended due to a change in mode and mood:

Example 11

The labour camp at Drachensee was a huge, ugly, chaotic and cruel place. Forced labourers from Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, conscripted to boost the German war effort, communists and trade unionists sent from the Low Countries for re-education, Gypsies, homosexuals, criminals, Jews in transit to their deaths, inmates of lunatic asylums and captured resistance fighters, all lived cheek by jowl in low concrete lice-infested barracks. In such a place, the only order was terror. And the rule of terror was reinforced at every level; each community and subcommunity had its own hierarchy of terror.

(Lewycka 2005: 268-269)

This expository paragraph leads us, potentially, to anticipate distressing events to follow further in the narrative. The highly negative emotional impact of the setting is rooted largely in its perceived realism – we are aware that the construction of this largely fictional labour camp world must have been based on the author’s research into a particularly tragic period of modern history. The mere mention of the introductory phrase ‘the labour camp at Drachensee’, therefore, may have a destabilising effect on the reader’s mood. The perceived authenticity of this hopeless world so rigidly separated from the main, humorous, text world of the novel means that the distancing and deprecating stylistic techniques used in the passage lose the comic potential which they could be expected to trigger in a humorous context. In section 3.2.3.ii, I showed how deprecation of textual entities can be linked to establishing a humorous mood. Here, the camp is described as ‘ugly, chaotic and cruel’, but the effect is far from amusing. Similarly, the extensive list of types of detainees confined in a sentence that is

uncharacteristically long for the style of the novel, and the repetition of the word ‘terror’ in the final lines could be seen as foregrounding techniques which draw attention to the style of the text and distance us from the events described. Again, their occurrence here adds to the threatening mood, not a humorous one.

It would be easy to assume that these distancing and downgrading techniques do not have the same effect here as they did in the humorous openings because the subject-matter is so tragic that it completely inhibits our humorous response. As I show below (3.3.2), however, similarly disturbing and equally realistic elements can appear in humorous narrative worlds and have rather more amusing effects. The difference, I suggest, is in the implied author/narrator giving us *permission to laugh*. ‘Permission to laugh’, in the way in which it is used in this thesis, is a term which comedian Stewart Lee (who, in his 2010 book, attributes it to a former colleague, Tom Morris) uses to explain how audiences can be manipulated to laugh at something that they find uncomfortable. For Lee, permission to laugh is something that can be granted by the comedian through particular combinations of structural devices built into the comic text – it is a stylistic manipulation of our interpretation of the text that is part of ‘the comedy process’ (2010: 213). In more theoretical, socioculturally-oriented approaches to humour *permissibility* of certain jokes is sometimes thought of as a quality that is determined by the socio-cultural situation – the nature of the occasion, the relationship between the participants and the cultural and historical factors will all have an impact on whether a particular joke is successful or not (Douglas 1968, Palmer 1994, Ermida 2009).

In this thesis, emphasis is placed on the writer’s ability to grant the reader permission to laugh at humour that would not otherwise be permissible. It was shown above that in the main text world of *A Short History*, the reader is encouraged to interpret events playfully and to anticipate amusement as an appropriate response – permission to laugh is granted. In the sub-world of the concentration camp, however, this permission is denied, as the reader is cued into a serious mode/mood and comedy is destabilised. In Example 10, Marina Lewycka achieves this by overtly, physically separating the non-humorous world from the main, humorous text world. This can be contrasted with the approach taken by Spike Milligan, whose primary text world is set in wartime Britain. In Example 12 below, Milligan can be seen to cue a mood shift while at the same time granting us permission to laugh at a disturbing situation. In the final paragraph of the last chapter of the memoir which follows Milligan’s army training in England, the protagonist is making himself comfortable on a ship which is finally about to take him from Liverpool to Algiers, where the fighting will start:

Example 12

(world-1 starts) I set about putting up my hammock. It was very easy and I vaulted in like an old salt. No, I didn't fall out. Sorry. **[buffer starts]** In the dark, I smoked a cigarette, and thought... **[buffer ends](world-2 starts)** We were going to war. Would I survive? Would I be frightened? Could I survive a direct hit at point blank range by a German 88 mm.? Could I really push a bayonet into a man's body – twist it – and pull it out? I mean what would the neighbours say? **(world-2 ends) (world-1 ends)**
(Milligan 1971: 133, my bold and brackets)

The sentence which stands out here is the final line 'I mean what would the neighbours say?' – even though the entire memoir is packed with similar quips (as shown earlier in 3.2.3.i), the jokey line suddenly seems inappropriate in the context. That is because the mood has been switched to serious as the narrator stops joking about hammocks and suddenly explicitly alerts the reader to the severity of the situation. The shift, although quicker than in the *A Short History* example above (Example 10), has been conducted with the use of similar techniques, that is, a world-switch preceded by a buffering element. The line 'In the dark, I smoked a cigarette, and thought...' can be considered a buffer which mediates the transition between world-1, the humorous text world of the ship, to world-2, the serious world of the narrator's imagined future. The latter world can be classified as a *sub-world* (Werth 1999), as it exists within the main text world and is dependent on the participants of that higher level world. What is interesting here is that the seriousness of the sub-world is disrupted by the final, humorous, line. Unlike in Example 10, the distinction between the two worlds is not as clear-cut: seriousness is not only contained within the larger humorous world, but it contains humorous elements itself. Although the mood shift is evident, a lack of a clear boundary can help us infer that laughter is still permitted within the serious world, and so the overall humorous mode/mood of the book is not overturned. This strategy, as illustrated by one of the Goodreads reviews of the memoir, can be seen as inappropriate by some readers:

I didn't like this book.

WW2 was not a joke and this book makes the armed forces look like a bunch of bumbling idiots. I really have to wonder how "Spike" made it out alive.

(Edwina Hall Callan, 13 Jan 2014)

The lack of clear boundaries between the serious and the humorous in Milligan's text means that the serious, negatively charged world of the Second World War is usually presented in the humorous mode – a portrayal that some readers may find offensive and disrespectful, as it trivialises the subject matter which, in the view of those readers, should be retained in the serious mode.

3.3.2. Enhancing the humorous mood

The section above was concerned with applying dark elements in order to shift the mood, often as a way of introducing a more serious topic. Here, I discuss the use of dark elements specifically for humour creation. I outline some ways in which amusement can be brought out of elements which would normally be expected to evoke negative emotion in a way that can be associated with what in this thesis is referred to as *dark humour* (see e.g. Bloom 2010), but can also be called *black humour* (Friedman 1969) or *gallows humour* (Obrdlik 1942).

Gallows humour is said to be 'humor which arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situation' (Obrdlik 1942: 709) and which 'allows threatened individuals to have brief out-of-ego experiences' that temporarily transport them away from danger (Lewis 1997: 255). While gallows humour, as Obrdlik suggests, is typical in nations oppressed by invaders, the related labels of 'dark' and 'black' humour have also been linked to coping with trauma – such as Second World War (Boyer 1991), rising global risks in a desensitised political climate (Lewis 1997), 9/11 (Gournelos and Greene 2011) or everyday accident and emergency situations (Maxwell 2003). Such sociological considerations regarding the use of dark humour, however, here will give way to a more linguistically-centred approach that focuses on its creation and comprehension.

Particularly relevant, therefore, is Tsur's (1989) cognitive poetic account of this type of humour, based on two genres: horror jokes and black jokes. Because of this focus on short texts, Tsur relies on the idea of humour as resulting from a shift between two incompatible scripts often used in cognitive linguistics (see Raskin's 1985 theory of *script opposition* in 2.2.2.i). When we switch between them, we experience a pleasurable *shift of mental sets*, a *mental set* meaning 'readiness to respond in a certain way' (Tsur 1989: 249). These shifts will not be equally pleasurable for all of us, however. Some people, suggests Tsur, will be more comfortable with shifting their mental sets than others, meaning that they will be more open to humour in general. He argues that this can significantly affect the experience of horror/black jokes, as the scripts evoked by such jokes can be so unpleasant and shocking that

they lead to *extreme shifts of mental sets*, which for some people may be too threatening and emotionally disorienting. The following example from *A Spot of Bother* contains a humorous one-liner which is similar to the ones analysed by Tsur – it is a witticism which involves two incompatible scripts, one of which is tragic:

Example 13

He remembered his own thirtieth wedding anniversary. Bob staggering across the lawn, slapping a drunken arm around his shoulder and saying, ‘The funny thing is, if you’d killed her you’d have been out by now.’

(Haddon 2007: 60)

The joke relies on the juxtaposition of the ‘marriage’ script with the ‘murder’ script, which leads us to make comparisons between thirty years of married life and thirty years of imprisonment, the latter presented as leading to a more positive outcome. The simple humour-bearing script opposition is enhanced by what Tsur calls an extreme shift of mental sets, which happens as a result of incorporating the highly negative ‘murder’ script into a humorous framework. The extremity of this shift means that the joke seems rather risky in the situational context in which it was uttered. The speaker seems to be trying to minimise the risk of being misunderstood by adding a pre-sequence ‘the funny thing is’, which can be seen as a cue for the hearer to switch to the humorous mode of comprehension. Just like in everyday conversation, in written narratives the use of dark humour is a delicate balancing act which, for some readers, fails if the shift of mental sets is experienced as too extreme.

The question which will be addressed here is: how do writers of humorous narratives use destabilising, typically negative dark elements to achieve humorous effects? The black joke in Example 13 relies on its own internal humorous incongruity, which makes it funny out of context. As I suggest below, these types of inherently amusing jokes are rare in comic novels and short stories, and so writers of comedy will have to use different strategies to turn ‘unfunny’ into funny. An overall humorous mood/mode of the narrative world, although it definitely facilitates this process, will often not be enough to make serious, upsetting topics into subjects of comedy. The humour-enhancing strategies discussed here will be related to presenting dark elements as:

- (i) incongruously contrasted with trivial ones,
- (ii) exaggerated to the point of unrealistic, or
- (iii) both.

Such distancing stylistic manipulations of elements that would normally evoke negative emotions can grant the reader the permission to laugh, while at the same time retaining the extreme shift of mental sets associated with dark humour.

(i) Dark humour as incongruity

As outlined in the Literature Review (2.2.2), many linguistic approaches to verbal humour describe an incongruity between contrasting concepts as the main source of humour. The following example from David Sedaris' short story 'Jesus shaves' can be used to illustrate how serious, dark elements, when juxtaposed with more trivial ones, can help to create humour:

Example 14

In the evening we had the traditional Greek meal followed by a game in which we would toast one another with blood-colored eggs. The symbolism escapes me, but the holder of the table's one uncracked egg was supposedly rewarded with a year of good luck. I won only once. It was the year my mother died, my apartment got broken into, and I was taken to the emergency room suffering from what the attending physician diagnosed as "housewife's knee."

(Sedaris 2002: 176-7)

With regard to the traditional, script-based approach to humour (Raskin 1985, see 2.2.2.i), this passage can be said to be built around two incompatible scripts: 'good luck' and 'bad luck'. The positive opening leads us to formulate a 'good luck' script, and the expectation that follows from 'I won only once.' is unexpectedly violated by the list of events which evoke a 'bad luck' script. The disparity between the emotional weight of the two can lead to what Tsur calls an extreme mental shift, where the reader resolves the incongruity between 'good' and 'bad' luck to conclude that the Greek egg tradition is not entirely credible. What is notable is that this main incongruity is enhanced by another, embedded, incongruity in the second part of the passage: 'It was the year my mother died, my apartment got broken into,

and I was taken to the emergency room suffering from what the attending physician diagnosed as “housewife’s knee.” (Sedaris 2002: 177). Taken out of context, this surprising ending can be seen to retain some of its humour, as it is built on its own internal humorous incongruity. The final element in the list of three tragic life events can be said to stand out from the rest, partly because it is contained within a sentence which is considerably longer than the other two, and partly because of the nature of the situation. Apart from the humorous incongruity potentially arising from the fact that the sufferer of ‘housewife’s knee’ is a man, the choice of the folk, non-Latinate term used to describe the injury reduces the gravity of the situation. In the list of events presented, ‘mother’s death’, ‘apartment break-in’ and ‘housewife’s knee’, the latter leads to surprise, as it does not exactly match the first two.

The fact that these events are presented in the form of a list of three only enhances the humorous potential of the passage. Lists are especially useful for comic purposes in that they can provide a comic build-up which leads to what, in a canned joke, would be called a ‘punch line’. In the account of his own comedy writing, Stewart Lee outlines how a *list of three things* – a device often used by stand-up comedians – relies on two elements followed by one that raises a laugh, a ‘topper’ (2010: 64). The first two provide the build-up, which is subsequently discharged. Lee does not elaborate on how to best choose these three elements in order to ensure humour – in fact, he suggests that ‘this is almost alchemical, beyond reason’ (2010: 66). As I have shown above, the humorous effect of the ‘list of three’ device can be linked to the incongruous nature of the final element. It can be seen, therefore, that one of the ways in which lists help to bring humour out of dark elements is to create incongruity by juxtaposing negative events with differing levels of severity. A case of ‘housewife’s knee’, although undoubtedly distressing for the patient, appears trivial when contrasted with the much more serious events of ‘mother’s death’ and ‘apartment break-in’. The potential triviality is likely to be interpreted as humorous when the non-serious element appears in the ‘punch line’ slot, that is, at the end of the sequence.

(ii) Dark humour as exaggeration

While humorous lists of three sometimes rely on unexpected juxtapositions of schemata, some lists of dark elements found in comic narratives will help to create humour not only through the combination of the types of schemata involved, but also through the number of them. In an otherwise humorous context, amplification of negatively charged schemata can be linked to what is commonly viewed as ‘exaggeration for comic effect’ – a technique

related to what Nash (1985: 169) describes as the conventional comic tropes of *overstatement* and *hyperbole*. In the example below, the form of a list allows for a comic build-up as well as an opportunity to exaggerate for humour purposes:

Example 15

‘Apparently, going on holiday is the fourth most stressful thing you can do,’ said Katie. ‘After the death of a spouse and changing your job. If I remember correctly.’

‘Fourth?’ Ray said, staring at the water. ‘What about if your kid dies?’

‘OK. Maybe not the fourth.’

‘Wife dies. Kid with disability,’ said Ray.

‘Terminal disease,’ said Katie. ‘Loss of limb. Car crash.’

‘House burning down,’ said Ray.

‘Declaration of war,’ said Katie.

‘Seeing a dog run over.’

‘Seeing a person run over.’

‘Actually running a person over,’ said Ray.

‘Actually running a dog over.’

‘Running an entire family over.’

They were laughing again.

(Haddon 2007: 252)

This conversation, which is essentially a list of very tragic life events, leads to the characters’ (and possibly also the reader’s) amusement. The distancing effect of this hypothetical, impersonal list is enhanced by the internal incongruity between the types of dark elements which appear in it (‘seeing a dog run over’ may seem surprisingly trivial when it follows straight from ‘declaration of war’). The humorous potential is also increased by the gradual build-up which leads up to a punch line-like final entry that triggers Katie and Ray’s laughter. Interestingly, unlike in the ‘housewife’s knee’ example above, the punch line here (‘running an entire family over’) is not an element of the least emotional weight, but one which is highly negative. In fact, it is so negative that it appears excessive and improbable. It is not only the final entry in the list which is exaggerated, however. The purpose of the whole exchange between Katie and Ray seems to be to ‘top’ the tragic event contrived by the previous speaker. This level of excess means that while each individual element on the list

evokes a negatively charged schema, en masse, they appear too fabricated to be taken seriously. Exaggeration, then, can be seen as a form of distancing the reader from the depicted events in a way which may bring about permission to laugh.

(iii) Dark humour as exaggerated incongruity

To achieve humorous effects, non-humorous, dark elements can either be incongruously placed in contrast to less-serious ones or absurdly exaggerated. As I show below, these two techniques of exaggeration and contrast are especially effective when combined. This combination can simply be achieved within an extended list of dark elements of varying emotional charge, as in Example 15. It can, however, be more subtle than that. A powerful device for narrative humour creation which involves this kind of manipulation of dark elements is to present an objectively trivial situation in an over-the-top negative way. Playing something non-serious up as excessively serious is a source of humorous incongruity enhanced by humorous exaggeration. In Example 16 below, the narrator of Sedaris' 'Me talk pretty one day' is describing his 'traumatic' experiences (due to a rude, unpleasant teacher) in a French language school:

Example 16

My only comfort was the knowledge that I was not alone. Huddled in the hallways and making the most of our pathetic French, my fellow students and I engaged in the sort of conversation commonly overheard in refugee camps.

“Sometimes me cry alone at night.”

“That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty. People start love you soon. Maybe tomorrow, okay.”

(Sedaris 2002: 172)

Regardless of the actual nature of the French language school, comparing it to a refugee camp stands out in two ways. Firstly, the 'language school' and 'refugee camp' schemata, even though both associated with temporary assemblages of strangers, are very different in the level of negative emotional impact associated with them. Describing a language school in terms of a refugee camp is a source of humorous incongruity – humorous, because the surprising incongruity is resolved once we recognise that the actual, non-serious situation has been blown out of proportion.

3.3.3. Blending the humorous and the non-humorous

So far, I have concentrated on the ways in which dark elements affect our experience of humorous narrative worlds by temporarily shifting the mood to a more serious one, or alternatively, by enhancing the humorous mood by creating dark humour. These techniques, although they were said to evoke contrasting emotional responses (negative emotion versus amusement), can nevertheless be seen to be linked to the idea of complex humorous responses, as they rely on destabilising, negatively charged, dark elements being introduced to worlds which are otherwise stabilised as largely positive. The assumption has been, however, that in an otherwise humorous world, the balance of moods will not be significantly affected by the occurrence of such negatively charged elements – despite the introduction of destabilising cues, the generally humorous *primary mood* will be preserved. ‘Primary mood’ is a term used by Smith (2003), who argues that in films classified as *genre blends* which rely on mixes of various mood cues (e.g. comedy horrors), the primary mood will not be overturned as long as the secondary cues are kept fairly brief (2003: 51). In his account of film comedy, King (2002) also refers to this idea of a balance of moods (or *tones*, as he calls them), suggesting that while in some films comedy will be allowed to dominate the general tone, in others it will simply provide moments of relief or disruption in an otherwise non-humorous context.

This thesis is focused on those narratives in which the primary humorous mood dominates the overall ambience of the text. It does not, however, ignore the importance of the secondary moods evoked by writers, as those are believed to significantly contribute to our experience of narrative worlds. In fact, one of the reasons why some of the texts analysed here will not be equally amusing to all readers (as illustrated by some of the Goodreads comments throughout) is that some of us will be so highly affected by the secondary non-humorous moods evoked that their experience of the humorous mood will be compromised. An example of this is Lewycka’s *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*: a winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic fiction, and yet a book so tragic in its descriptions of wartime Europe, that some readers, as can be inferred from the Goodreads reviews discussed previously, would not be likely to classify it as a comedy. The overall balance of moods can affect our impression of the text, but it can also, as I show here, directly impact on our experience of the individual elements of humorous narrative worlds.

In this section, I concentrate on those instances where the humorous and non-humorous moods are not as much experienced alongside each other, but when they are

blended into one, complex, contradictory mood. I argue that the use of serious or negative elements in a humorous context, aside from shifting the mood or enhancing it, can lead to a much more complex response, where amusement and other emotions are experienced simultaneously. King, whose impact on this thesis has been discussed previously (1.1.2.iii), sums up this quality of blending comedy and seriousness, suggesting that such a mix ‘results in something more than a simple sum of the parts’ and ‘generates, potentially, a state of unstable and contradictory emotional response’ (King 2002: 196). Cueing this contradictory emotional response is a balancing act between maintaining two conflicting states: the detached, non-serious, playful frame of mind which facilitates amusement, and the engaged, heartfelt mood which opens us up to experiencing other narrative emotions. This dichotomy is explicitly laid out in King’s (2011) analysis of the dark comedy *In Bruges* (dir. Martin McDonagh, 2008): ‘the text in which elements that generate a distinctive degree of irony and detachment are combined with more conventional/mainstream appeal to emotional engagement’ (2011: 133). King suggests that the humorous detachment can be cued through the devices of *irony*, *incongruity* and *reflexivity*, where reflexivity means self-referential elements that foreground the role of the producer of the text (which can be linked to what was described as ‘distancing’ in 3.2.3.ii.a). The consequent detachment not only facilitates humour, but also acts as a ‘defensive layer’ which ‘insulates’ the viewer from the often painful, emotionally disturbing events in the narrative world (King 2011: 143). This insulation of detachment, however, is only partial, as the film manages to simultaneously encourage us to closely engage with the fates and feelings of its characters.

One reason why *In Bruges* is successful in blending the detached humorous with the closely engaged non-humorous is that its plot, even though stylistically manipulated to increase humorous distance, revolves around highly dramatic events which happen to very sympathetic characters. Since characters and story events will be elaborated on in the following chapters (4 and 5, respectively), here I focus on the relative emotional weight of the schemata that contribute to the complex humorous responses in those comedies which blend the serious with the trivial. The plot of *In Bruges*, for example, is based on elements such as murder, suicide, extreme violence, drug overuse, injury and permanent mutilation, physical disability and racial tensions – strongly negatively charged schemata which, even individually (let alone all together), could be expected to lead to destabilising effects in any comedy. The apparent seriousness of the emotional charge of these schemata is key to the power of the mood blends which they provoke.

In the previous section (3.3.2), I showed how non-serious schemata can become humorous if their seriousness is incongruously exaggerated, or ‘played up’. Here, I suggest that schemata which are inherently serious, when ‘played down’ to appear more trivial with the use of distancing or downgrading techniques, are able to retain their emotional charge while simultaneously triggering amusement. Some of the most clear-cut examples of mood blends leading to complex humorous responses are those evoked by particularly serious elements whose seriousness has been played down for comic effect. An interesting schema for the purpose of this kind of investigation is ‘death of a relative’, which, despite its painful, serious associations, can successfully be used for humour creation. As I show below, stylistic manipulations – particularly those of narrative distance – used to depict a death of a relative can potentially lead to a number of reactions, ranging from straightforward amusement to complex, contradictory mixes of emotions. The following extract from Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is an example of how a mention of a death of a relative can be manipulated to become a source of humour, thus stabilising our experience of comedy. It is part of a footnote which elaborates on the highly unpronounceable original name of the character whom we get to know as Ford Prefect:

Example 17

Because Ford never learned to say his original name, his father eventually died of shame, which is still a terminal disease in some parts of the Galaxy.

(Adams 2002: 41, footnote)

The humorousness of the line plays on the conventional, everyday meaning of the phrase ‘to die of shame’ as a figurative way of saying ‘to feel extremely ashamed’. Here, the verb ‘to die’ is given back its literal sense, suggesting that shame can in fact lead to death. The word ‘still’ in ‘[shame] is still a terminal disease’ implies that the ‘shame’ disease used to be a problem in the whole of the Galaxy, suggesting perhaps that the origins of the phrase ‘to die of shame’ were literal. The presentation of death here relies on two different types of humorous distancing. Firstly, by drawing on our knowledge of the conventional meaning of ‘to die of shame’, the narrator emphasises the figurative sense of ‘to die’ as it is used in the phrase, increasing our detachment from the more serious, emotionally charged, literal meaning of it. We are thus temporarily distanced from the negative associations of the general concept of death. This is enhanced by the second type of distancing – the manipulation of the distance between the reader and the particular death described in the

narrative world. Even though Ford Prefect is one of the main characters in the novel, the mention of his father's death is rather superficial – it is a passing digression that, being part of a footnote, is physically separated from the main body of the text. The death occurred in the past and, we can assume, in a remote part of the Galaxy, and therefore is an element of a sub-world that is both spatially and temporally distant from the main text world of the novel. The reader is placed in a 'safe', detached position, far removed from the event. This almost physical distance from the situation, combined with the distance from the literal meaning of death itself, means that the amusement triggered by the humorous mention of it is not likely to be affected by the intrinsic negative charge of the schema. Such a straightforwardly amusing effect of *The Hitchhiker's Guide* is discussed by one of the Goodreads readers:

It [the novel] is unlikely to affect you on any deep emotional level and you probably won't spend sleepless nights thinking about it.

But it's a simple, humorous sci-fi adventure.

(Emily May, 8 Apr 2011)

Adams' writing, the reader suggest, is a 'simple' humorous science-fiction novel, unlikely to trigger serious, negative emotional responses. The way it distances the reader from the death of a relative schema can be seen as an effect of the author's decision to evoke amusement rather than exploit the potential negative emotional charge of the element in order to achieve a more complex humorous response.

How, then, can a dark element such as a death of a relative be manipulated to result in a more complex humorous response? A useful starting point in the search of death-based mood blends is Joseph Heller's war novel *Catch-22*, whose comedy, as Nash points out in his account of humorous language, is rooted in a particularly tragic, nightmarish, absurd reality of war (1985: 111). The comic surface, as remarked by one reviewer, is underlined by inescapable tragedy: 'Sure, it's been funny. But all along the comedy has been an expression of horror' (*The Guardian*, 2011, Chris Cox 'Catch-22: 50 years later'). Comedy as an expression of horror, where the horror retains its emotional impact, must be based on mood blends that result in the combination of amusement and other, negative, emotions. A particularly painful (and amusing) example of this is the following scene from *Catch-22*, in which Yossarian, the protagonist, is asked to lie on a hospital bed and pretend that he is the dying son of a family he had never met. The real son, Giuseppe, is already dead by the time

his family arrive to say their final goodbyes to him, and the doctors ask Yossarian to ‘fill in’ so that the family do not have to leave disappointed:

Example 18 (a)

‘It all sounds a bit crazy,’ Yossarian reflected. ‘What do they want to watch their son die for, anyway?’

‘I’ve never been able to figure that one out,’ the doctor admitted, ‘but they always do. Well, what do you say? All you’ve got to do is lie there a few minutes and die a little. Is that asking so much?’

(Heller 1994: 211)

Yossarian finally agrees and, wrapped in bandages and placed in a dimly lit room, he is visited by three members of the family – the mother, the father and the brother – who are led to believe that he is their dying relative. Yossarian initially introduces himself as ‘Yossarian’ instead of ‘Giuseppe’, which the family try to play along with, as they take it as a sign of their relative’s deteriorating condition. This leads to confusion, as in the end no one knows how to address the ‘patient’, including the ‘patient’ himself:

Example 18 (b)

Yossarian remembered suddenly why they were all crying, and he began crying too. A doctor Yossarian had never seen before stepped inside the room and told the visitors courteously that they had to go. The father drew himself up formally to say goodbye.

‘Giuseppe,’ he began.

‘Yossarian,’ corrected the son.

‘Yossarian,’ said the father.

‘Giuseppe,’ corrected Yossarian.

‘Soon you’re going to die.’

Yossarian began to cry again. The doctor threw him a dirty look from the rear of the room, and Yossarian made himself stop.

(Heller 1994: 214)

The paradoxical phrase ‘die a little’ in Example 18 (a) has the potential to both distance the reader from the concept of death in a similar way to ‘die of shame’ in the Adams extract

(Example 17) above. The modifier ‘a little’ seems incongruous, as it would normally be expected accompany metaphorical meanings of the word ‘die’ (e.g. ‘A man kills the thing he loves, and he must die a little himself.’ in the BNC or ‘Every time we say goodbye, I die a little.’ from the SCOTS Corpus⁴). Here, the death is supposed to be literal (as far as the soldier’s parents are concerned), and so the doctor’s use of the phrase ‘die a little’ highlights the fact that the dying in the following scenes will not be real, as the whole situation is a set-up. The internal incongruity of the phrase, combined with the fake, fabricated nature of the narrative events, help to distance the reader from the negative associations of the original ‘death of a relative’ schema. This distance allows us to see the absurd in Example 18 (b), where everyone’s, especially Yossarian’s, confusion is humorously exaggerated.

What may not be immediately apparent from these short extracts but is noticeable in the wider context of the narrative is that the absurd humour here is underlined by acute tragedy. This is how one of the Goodreads users describes his experience of the novel:

Catch-22 reminds me a lot of those comedy/tragedy masks – you know the ones that are supposed to represent like, fine theater or something? Not that I’m comparing *Catch-22* to some great Italian opera. All I’m saying is that the book oscillates cleverly between the absurdly humorous and the grievingly tragic.

(Jason, 29 Jan 2015)

The most arresting quality of *Catch-22*, as Jason suggests, is the way it manages to fluctuate smoothly between the seemingly contrasting modes of comedy and tragedy. The tragic does not occur in order to enhance the comic (as it was discussed in 3.3.2), and neither does the comic simply emphasise the tragic. Rather, the tragedy and the comedy exist in symbiosis, where each is allowed to evoke a powerful emotional effect. Like many of the novel’s scenes, the death of a relative passage (Examples 18 (a) and 18 (b)) is therefore constructed to be as humorous as it is disturbing. We are made aware that the final goodbye has been prefabricated and that the patient is only dying ‘a little’, but our amusement is likely to be affected by the vivid visual and emotional detail of the otherwise heart-breaking scene. The painful detail is hard to disregard, as we are made to adopt Yossarian’s point of view, meaning that we are placed in the middle of the action – the patient’s bed, in fact. Having been encouraged to view the textual events from up close, we may not achieve a state of

⁴ <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/> and <http://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/> (accessed on 21/01/15)

complete detachment required for pure amusement, even if the textual events have been manipulated to trigger a humorous response. The key difference between this use of the ‘death of a relative’ schema and the one mentioned in relation to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide*, then, is the distance from which the reader is encouraged to view the humorously distorted tragic situation in the narrative world. A mood blend is most likely to occur when the techniques which distance us from the emotional weight of the dark element are accompanied by those devices which simultaneously decrease the distance between us and that element as it appears in the narrative world.

3.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the psychological, literary and stylistic approaches to notions such as atmosphere, mood and tone associated with engaging with narratives, as well as the concepts of paratelic or play mode linked to processing humorous texts. I have argued that writers of humorous narratives depend on being able to cue their readers into detached, non-serious, playful cognitive and affective states which facilitate amusement as a preferred response to textual entities – those were referred to as the humorous mode and the humorous mood. While the cognitive humorous mode is the knowledge that something is intended to be amusing, the affective humorous mood is the feeling that something is amusing – in comic narratives, they can both be signalled with the use of stabilising cues that communicate the humorous nature of the text. These cues, as inferred from the openings of a number of humorous narratives, include the classes of distancing techniques that encourage detachment from textual events, and downgrading devices that help to present those events as laughable. While stabilising cues help to establish a humorous mode/mood congruent with amusement, many comic novels and short stories will also make use of negatively charged dark elements that trigger effects seemingly unrelated to humour. Although some dark elements can be used specifically for humour creation (as is the case with dark humour), often they act so as to shift the mood from humorous to more solemn, thus allowing for moments of painful emotion. Using dark elements in an otherwise amusing context, as I showed, can also lead to situations where the humorous and the non-humorous blend into one, triggering complex humorous responses based on the simultaneous experience of contrasting emotions. Such emotional blends, I have suggested, are made possible through specifically designed configurations of narrative distance and immersion. The interplay between humorous distance and emotional

engagement will be further explored in Chapter 4, where I also expand on the relationship between stylistic manipulations of distance and narrative point of view.

4. Engaging with Characters

In this chapter, I explore characterisation in comic narratives. I consider how representations of people and their interactions can be manipulated for comic effect, and also show how this character-induced amusement can be accompanied by non-humorous emotions associated with engaging with characters more generally. The characterisation techniques used to build amusing, laughable characters and manufacture funny interactions will be referred to as the ‘stabilising cues’ that maximise amusement – amusement being a response congruent with the dominant mode/mood of the humorous world, as discussed in the previous chapter and throughout this thesis generally. It will be shown that just as the humorous mode/mood can occasionally be disrupted to trigger non-humorous affective reactions, characterisation in comic narratives can also become destabilised so as to evoke emotions unrelated to amusement. Similar to the negatively charged dark elements used to shape the mode or mood of the text, the potential effects of the destabilising cues related to characterisation will also be manipulated by adjusting the distance between the reader and the narrative world – especially, by building an *illusion of intimacy* (Horton and Wohl 1956) between the reader and the protagonist, and leading to the reader feeling immersed in the narrative world. The underlying theme of this chapter, then, is the contrast and the interplay of the comic detachment that allows us to laugh at characters’ qualities, and the emotional engagement that encourages us to feel for them or with them.

The first part of the chapter is devoted to the amusement-inducing stabilising cues which help writers create laughable characters. I discuss the superiority theories of humour to explore the ‘us versus them’ dynamic that enables us to laugh at other people, especially people belong to social groups which we do not identify with. I also introduce the notion of humorous stock types and propose an all-encompassing class of amusing characters more suited to contemporary humorous narratives, the *misfits*. In the second part of the chapter, I show how stylistic manipulations of distance (here meaning narrative perspective or viewpoint) can disrupt our humorous responses to comic protagonists, including those with otherwise amusing misfit qualities. I argue that the destabilising cues which lead us to identify, sympathise or empathise with laughable characters help to blend amusement with more negative emotions, causing readers to switch from the safety of laughing at someone else to the discomfort and vulnerability of laughing at themselves.

4.1. Theoretical background

4.1.1. Approaches to emotions evoked by people in literary and media narratives

Emotional engagement with people in narratives relies on our ability to create mental models of them based on our interpretation of textual input. In his approach to characterisation based on research in social cognition, Culpeper (2000, 2001, based on e.g. Fiske and Taylor 1991) suggests that our perceptions of literary/media characters are guided by the same processes as our perceptions of real people. Very often, in order to simplify the complex task of impression formation, we rely on our knowledge of people in general to perceive others not as individuals, but as members of social groups that we are familiar with. The three broad categories which accommodate our knowledge of people are, according to Culpeper, *personal categories* (knowledge about people's preferences, interests, habits and traits), *social role categories* (knowledge about people's social functions) and *group membership categories* (knowledge about social groups, such as sex, race, age) (Culpeper 2001: 75-6). The three groupings contain links and form networks in our general knowledge – those networks are referred to as *social schemata*. In addition to the use of our social schemata, forming impressions of fictional characters requires the use of yet another category, that of prototypical *dramatic roles*, which are often genre-specific. This kind of a character impression guided by our general knowledge (a top-down 'category-based' impression) can be complemented by a richer, more personalised, but also more cognitively demanding bottom-up 'person-based' impression (for the latter, see Culpeper 2009 for a theoretical discussion, and Rapp, Gerrig and Prentice 2001 for an empirical study).

A component of Culpeper's model which is useful in this discussion of emotional responses to characters is that of *attitude schemata* (from van Dijk, e.g. 1989, first introduced in 3.3) – our positive or negative evaluations of particular social groups, driven not by personal opinions, but rather by more general aspects of prevailing ideologies. Montoro (2007) draws on the notion of attitude schemata to investigate the motivations behind reading what she refers to as *cappuccino fiction* (popular fiction aimed at women, 'chick lit'). She suggests that the key to these books' success is the type of knowledge activated in readers' minds by the way authors construct female protagonists: 'In Cappuccino Fiction, the social schemas evoked appear to give way to an important affective side, in as much as these

authors expect a positive response to the characters in their novels' (Montoro 2007: 79). The appreciation of these novels, therefore, stems partly from the readers' activation of what Montoro calls 'positive *affective schemas*' (2007: 79) (mentioned previously in 3.3).

The idea that our affective engagement with fictional characters lies at the heart of our experience of narrative worlds has a strong theoretical base in psychology as well as literary/media studies. *Disposition theory*, first conceived of as a psychological theory of joke appreciation (Zillmann and Cantor 1996 [1976], see section 4.1.2 below), has been applied to media texts to explain viewers' enjoyment of watching films and television programmes. Raney summarises:

Disposition-based theories [...] contend that enjoyment of media content is a function of a viewer's affective disposition toward characters and the story line outcomes associated with those characters. The theories predict that enjoyment increases when highly liked characters experience positive outcomes, when highly disliked characters experience negative outcomes, or both.

(Raney 2004: 349)

The key to these theories is the concept of *character liking* (e.g. Raney 2004), based on the notion that the enjoyment of narrative comprehension stems from our emotional affiliations with narrative characters. The idea behind disposition-based theories is that the joy of experiencing narrative worlds lies in seeing liked characters succeed, and disliked characters fail. The crucial aspect of our enjoyment of narratives, therefore, is the existence of any kind of feeling towards characters: 'The lack of a positive or negative feeling toward the character (i.e., indifference),' according to Raney, 'does not trigger an emotional response to the drama. No emotion, no enjoyment' (Raney 2006: 141).

Another way of accounting for the pleasure of engaging with fictional characters is through the application of the psychological theory of *mindreading* (Baron-Cohen 1995, or *mentalizing* in e.g. Frith and Frith 2006) to the study of literature (Zunshine 2006). Mindreading is defined as 'the capacity to imagine or represent states of mind that we or others might hold' (Baron-Cohen 1995: 2) and it is said to rely on a number of cognitive 'devices', one of which, the *Theory of Mind Mechanism* (ToMM), allows us to apply our *theory of mind* to infer mental states from other people's behaviours. It has been suggested that theory of mind is applied not only in response to real people, but also to characters in fiction – Zunshine's approach to literature is based on the idea that one of the main pleasures

of reading lies in testing how well we can infer fictional people's thoughts and feelings. 'Intensely social species that we are,' Zunshine suggests, 'we thus read fiction because it engages, in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind' (Zunshine 2006: 162). The pleasure of experiencing narrative worlds, according to this approach, lies in our ability to use fictional characters to evaluate the functioning of our theory of mind.

While both character liking and theory of mind provide an insight into the ways in which we engage with characters, these notions are only a background to the research on the emotions evoked by people who populate narrative worlds. Our affective responses to characters can be grouped into the three broad categories of *empathy*, *sympathy* and *identification*. Empathy will be understood as feeling *with* the character (feeling something similar to what we imagine the character feels), sympathy as feeling *for* the character (feeling supportive emotions for the character) and identification as taking on a character's plans and goals as our own, which can facilitate empathy and sympathy (based on Keen 2006: 209, Mar, Oatley, Djikic and Mullin 2011: 824).

(i) **Empathy**

A comprehensive psychological view on empathy – feeling *with* – has been proposed by Davis (1994), whose *organizational model* broadly defines empathy as 'a set of constructs having to do with the response of one individual to the experience of another' (Davis 1994: 12). The main components of the model are *antecedents*, *processes*, *intrapersonal outcomes* and *interpersonal outcomes*. The antecedents are the qualities of *the person* experiencing empathy, for example his or her innate capacity for empathy or learning history, as well as the qualities of *the situation* – its relative strength which stems from the perceived level of seriousness, and the degree of similarity between the observer and the target. The most powerful reaction of empathy, then, will be experienced by a highly empathetic (through both natural predisposition and personal experiences) person who observes a strong display of negative emotion towards a helpless target, where the target is perceived to be similar to the observer. The processes which may be evoked in the observer range from *noncognitive* (such as motor mimicry – automatic copying of someone's reactions) to *advanced cognitive* (for example role taking, which involves mentally stepping out of one's usual perspective). Intrapersonal outcomes of these processes can be both *non-affective* (cognitive judgements and evaluations) or *affective*. Affective outcomes are what we typically associate with the feeling of empathy: an actual reproduction of the target's emotion in the observer is referred

to as a *parallel outcome*, while *reactive outcomes* are the feelings of empathic concern (sympathy), empathic anger or personal distress experienced as reactions to others' affect. Both affective and non-affective intrapersonal outcomes can lead to interpersonal outcomes such as *helping*, *aggression* and *social behaviour* exhibited towards other people.

Whereas Davis' model aims to outline empathy as a general psychological phenomenon, the work of Zillmann (e.g. 1991, 1994, 2006) not only provides a theoretical basis for the concept itself, but also indicates the relationship between empathy and our enjoyment of narratives. Zillmann suggests that it is empathy for fictional characters that leads to our emotional involvement in media texts: 'It would appear, in fact, that empathic engagement is what fuels interest in tales' (Zillmann 2006: 152). This idea is based on the disposition theory of drama appreciation mentioned earlier, where the emphasis is on the viewer caring about the characters, hoping for protagonists' success and for antagonists' failures – according to Zillmann, 'Characters in drama must be introduced such that respondents react to protagonists as if they were friends and to antagonists as if they were enemies' (Zillmann 1994: 48). As Zillmann and Cantor (1977) found in an empirical study of children's responses to a number of versions of the same film, viewers' affective responses to the emotion of a protagonist were dependent on empathy only in the situations where the viewers perceived the protagonist as benevolent or neutral, not when they judged the protagonist's behaviour as malevolent (for a comprehensive account of empathy and morality in fiction, see Hakemulder 2000). Like Davis' approach, Zillmann's theory of empathy relies on the idea of concordance of affect in the observer, where the affective outcomes in the observer must be compatible with the emotion of the target.

While Zillmann's research is concerned with media viewers' responses to characters, a literary perspective on narrative empathy has been proposed by Keen (2006, 2007). Keen, who based her hypotheses on a qualitative analysis of written feedback from a group of students, calls empathy 'a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect,' which 'can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading' (Keen 2007: 4). As far as reading-induced empathy is concerned, Keen suggests that the sharing of affect is facilitated by the readers' perception of a text's fictionality. Characters in a fictional text are, according to Keen, more likely to evoke empathy than real people, as the fictional context deactivates the suspicion and scepticism that we rely on as forms of self-protection in our everyday lives. The empathy elicited in the reader can be either categorical, where the character matches the reader's group identity, or situational, where spontaneous role taking is based on aspects of the situation. There is also what Keen refers to as *strategic*

empathy, by which authors guide our dispositions toward characters in order to pursue certain ideologies (Keen 2006: 223). The main empathetic narrative techniques used by authors to facilitate empathy, Keen suggests, can be divided into those that increase *character identification* (e.g. naming, traits, quality of speech) and those that manipulate the *narrative situation* (e.g. perspective, mediation between author and reader, Keen 2006: 216). Both character identification and narrative situation can be seen to correspond with Davis' notions of the person and the situation as antecedents to experiencing empathy mentioned earlier, and perhaps even with the hypothesis that the observer-target similarity and the perceived strength of the situation lead to higher empathy.

(ii) Sympathy

Sympathy – feeling *for* – is closely related to empathy. From a literary linguistic perspective, Stockwell (2009) suggests that the two responses can be explained with the use of the same metaphor, *READING IS INVESTMENT*, where readers are said to invest in fictional characters in order to gain affective returns (Stockwell 2009: 94). Apart from the general distinction between empathy as 'feeling with the character' and sympathy as 'feeling for the character', the difference between them can be described in cognitive stylistic terms, which help to relate these two responses to the ways in which real-world (discourse world) readers inhabit narrative worlds (text worlds of narratives): 'In text world theory terms, sympathy involves a reader in the discourse world observing a character in a text world and their world-switches; empathy, by contrast, involves a bidirectional trans-world mapping between the discourse world reader and the character in the embedded worlds.' (Stockwell 2009: 93).

The relationship between empathy and sympathy has also been discussed in film studies – Tan (1994, 1995), for example, proposes that 'sympathy is the major empathic emotion in film viewing' and, next to *interest*, it is one of the two central affective responses to film narratives (Tan 1994: 7). An *empathic emotion*, according to Tan, is an emotion evoked in the viewer who observes a fictional character undergoing something which the viewer judges as significant. In contrast to other theories of empathy (e.g. Zillmann 1991), here the viewer's emotional response does not need to be concordant with the emotion of the character – the two do not have to be hedonically compatible in order for the observer's reaction to be classified as empathic. Most empathic emotions (the main ones being sympathy, pity, admiration, hope and fear), according to Tan, are sympathetic, which means that they rely on a sympathy concern. In comparison to sympathy in everyday interactions, narrative

sympathy can be given to fictional characters at low cost, meaning that viewers do not need to invest much in order to obtain pleasurable gratifications from watching films (Tan 1995: 191-2). Narrative worlds, then, promise us similar emotional returns to the real world, only at a lower cost.

Another sympathy-centred approach in film studies is Smith's (1995) model of the *structure of sympathy*, which is aimed to replace the inadequate – according to Smith (and others, see Zillmann 1994) – concept of *identification* with fictional characters. Smith proposes a system of different *levels of engagement* which viewers have with characters in narratives: *recognition*, which describes how viewers form impressions of characters, *alignment*, the process of manipulating point of view by which we are placed in relation to those characters, and finally *allegiance*, which concerns our moral evaluation of characters. Smith's structure of sympathy is distinguished from empathy via the notion of *central/acentral imagining* – while empathy requires the viewer to centrally imagine a scenario from the character's perspective, sympathy relies mostly on our acentral comprehension and evaluation of the situation, which does not necessitate us to 'empty out' our own mental states to simulate those of the fictional character (Smith 1995: 96).

(iii) Identification

While identification as a concept may have been questioned in media studies, it is nevertheless still used to explain our engagement with film and television characters. Cohen (2006) hypothesises about the potential link between identification with fictional characters and our ability to be immersed in the worlds which they inhabit. He proposes that 'Identifying with a character means feeling an affinity toward the character that is so strong that we become absorbed in the text and come to an empathic understanding for the feelings the character experiences, and for his or her motives and goals' (Cohen 2006: 184).

The importance of taking on a character's plans and goals lies at the heart of the theory of identification in narratives proposed by Oatley (1994). Oatley sees identification as one of the modes of emotion which arise when readers or viewers enter narrative worlds. Fictional characters, like real people, have goals and carry out plans in order to pursue those goals. Oatley suggests that, when processing narrative plots, we experience emotions as characters' plans meet obstacles. These emotions are our own, and do not merely mirror those of the characters (Oatley 1994: 68-9). Oatley's theory of identification is thus a theory of simulation that we run in our minds once we adopt the goals of fictional protagonists.

Identification is seen as a narrative-world equivalent to the real world phenomenon of empathy, which enables us to mentally put ourselves in someone else's position in order to temporarily enter their world.

In literary linguistics, an interesting view of this type of engagement with fictional characters has been suggested by Stockwell (2009), who applies the sociolinguistic notion of *accommodation* to argue that when reading, we accommodate our personality patterns to be able to engage with literary characters: 'Just as speakers accommodate their speech towards each other in extended conversation, readers accommodate their personalities towards the fictional characters that they must engage with in the process of reading' (Stockwell 2009: 153). Identification with characters, however, is not the only type of identification that occurs in the course of experiencing narrative worlds. Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) draw on pragmatics and conversation analysis to argue that it is common for readers to identify with the narrator of the story, since the representation of the narrator is constructed by them in a similar way to that of a conversational participant. We identify with the narrator by attributing our knowledge and experience in the course of drawing on what Bortolussi and Dixon refer to as *narratorial implicatures*. 'In effect,' they suggest, 'the text invites readers [...] to construct a representation of the narrator that shares important elements of the readers' background and attitudes' (Bortolussi and Dixon 2003: 90).

4.1.2. Social aspects of humour

The theories of humour most concerned with representations of other people are those which focus on others as objects of humour – referred to as superiority, disparagement or hostility theories (introduced in 2.2.1.i). With their origins linked to Plato and Aristotle (Zillmann 1983, Morreall 1987a, Ferguson and Ford 2008), they are said to have emerged in times when laughter was more often than today seen as an expression of delight at other people's misfortunes, suffering and physical infirmities (Billig 2005: 40). This unfavourable view of humour is also linked to the work of Hobbes (as discussed in e.g. Ewin 2001), who saw laughter as resulting from a feeling of *Sudden Glory*, induced in people 'either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves' (Hobbes 1996 [1651]: 43, also mentioned in 2.2.1.i). Others' inferiority as a source of amusement has also been emphasised by Bergson, who argued that a person's flaws can be seen as humorous as long as

they are not presented so as to evoke sympathy for the disparaged subject – laughing at someone requires us to suspend any other emotion we feel for them (Bergson 1913: 139).

The early superiority-based theories of humour emerged in philosophy, and subsequently advanced into such areas as psychoanalysis and experimental social psychology, where disparagement humour began to be studied as one of the various existing types of humour. Freud, for example, distinguished aggressive, cynical or obscene *tendentious jokes* from those which are *non-tendentious* – ‘abstract’ or ‘innocent’ (1960 [1905]: 107). The reception of tendentious jokes that disparage particular social groups has since been empirically tested, suggesting that amusement is likely to result from targeting ‘an unaffiliated object in a disparaging situation’ (Wolff et al. 1934: 341), where the lack of affiliation can stem from the object belonging to a social group that we are not part of, or one that we simply do not identify with (*reference groups* and *identification classes*, La Fave 1972). In the ensuing *disposition theory of humour* (Zillmann and Cantor 1996 [1976]), the dichotomy-based notion of associating/disassociating ourselves with particular groups has been replaced by a more fluid continuum of *affective disposition*, where clear-cut group membership is replaced by the scale of our attitudes towards others. ‘Humor appreciation,’ argue Zillmann and Cantor, ‘varies inversely with the favourableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity being disparaged, and varies directly with the favourableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity disparaging it’ (1996: 101). A disparaging joke, then, is most successful when it is told by our friend and directed at our enemy. As Ferguson and Ford suggest in their review of superiority theories of humour (2008), one of the limitations of these rather simplistic psychological approaches to superiority-based humour (and, it should be added, also of the earlier philosophical theories), is their focus on amusement as the exclusive emotional response to humorous disparagement. As I show in this chapter, non-humorous reactions such as pity or embarrassment that seem likely to inhibit amusement can in fact add to our experience of humour directed at other people.

Aside from viewing others as targets of humour discussed by the superiority theories, another social dimension of humour relevant here is its place in interpersonal interactions. The anthropological notion of *joking relationships* (e.g. Apte 1985) relates to the social constraints on joking behaviour and the way humorous exchanges help to maintain group identity. In certain situations, suggests Apte, ‘Acceptance of a person’s joking is an indication that he or she is part of the social group’ (1985: 54). Joke-telling as a means of reducing interpersonal distance and creating intimacy has also been studied empirically within social psychology, where it has been linked to, for example, building group cohesion and alleviating

the tension in uncomfortable, overly intimate, social situations (Chapman 1983, Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Based on a number of recorded experimenter-schoolchildren exchanges conducted prior to exposing the subjects to a humorous stimulus (a funny video), Chapman (1983) outlined a number of humour-enhancing features of social interaction, such as creating a relaxed atmosphere at the outset, minimising supervision (as observation was found to kill laughter), and increasing the size of the group watching the film, where a developmental trend was found, showing an increase in susceptibility to social influence in older children (1983: 145). The idea that we are more likely to laugh when surrounded by other people is compatible with the view of humour as a social phenomenon that is not only a pleasurable form of social play, but which also performs a number of important, ‘serious’ functions. Maintaining relationships, reinforcing status and control, conflict de-escalation or resolution, and expressing affection or hostility are just a few uses mentioned by Martin (2007), who suggests that the social dimension of humour is central both to amusement experienced around others, as well as to that felt when we are on our own:

People do occasionally laugh when they are alone, such as while watching a comedy show on television, reading a humorous book, or remembering a funny personal experience. However, these instances of laughter can usually be seen as “pseudo-social” in nature, because one is still responding to the characters in the television program or the author of the book, or reliving in memory an event that involved other people.

(Martin 2007: 5)

4.2. *Stabilising cues: Populating the world with laughable characters*

The importance of the social features of humour and its resulting ‘pseudo-social’ nature in written and media narratives indicate the significance of the comic character as a vital component of narrative humour creation. In his guide to writing the popular television genre of situation comedy, Byrne (2010) points out that sitcoms are not as much about situations as about the characters who find themselves engaged in them. ‘Character,’ he suggests ‘is often the element which turns something that is not intrinsically funny into something that raises a

laugh, as well as the ingredient that allows us to use the same comedy tools like surprise, observation, shock and the others over and over again and still have them come out differently every time' (2010: 21). The main uses of characterisation in narrative humour creation outlined by Byrne can be summarised as building larger-than-life, overblown creations surrounded by more ordinary ones who balance their eccentricity, and leading diverse characters to contrast and clash humorously. This section will explore and expand on both of these techniques, showing how various stylistic devices can cue us to laugh *at* fictional characters, stabilising amusement as the dominant affective response in experiencing humorous worlds.

4.2.1. Humorous stereotypes

Within literary linguistics, much of the research on comic characterisation focuses on the use of prototypes and stereotypes in humorous character creation. Culpeper (2001), for example, suggests two characterisation techniques used for a comic effect: *prototypicality distortion* achieved through exaggerating a prototype of a particular social category and *dramatic recategorisation*, where a character with certain prototypical characteristics unexpectedly turns out to belong to a completely different social category. Triezenberg (2004) argues that excessively magnified stereotypes are effective in character humour creation, as they are built on an easily recognisable script opposition (Raskin 1985, see 2.2.2.i) between what is normal and what is abnormal – an incongruity which is straightforward to resolve to the reader aware of the particular stereotype. Stock characters in comic fiction are therefore most successful when built on stereotypes which are culturally accessible and familiar to the audience. Larkin Galiñanes (2010) also stresses the importance of stereotypes in humorous narratives, although her emphasis is on the ways in which authors of comic novels construct some of their characters as if they were stereotypes: 'characters in humorous narratives are very frequently created to act like stereotypes in that their characteristics are established at the beginning of the narration and remain unchanged all the way through it' (2010: 206). Additionally, she points out the significance of encouraging the reader to form certain attitudes towards the narrator and the characters in comic fiction (2002). These attitudes can lead to forming identification groups between the participants in humorous narrative discourse that can affect humour appreciation in ways similar to those outlined by Zillmann and Cantor's disposition theory and other social psychological models mentioned earlier.

As outlined in the discussion of some of the more general social dimensions of humour, joking is not only said to occur predominantly in social situations, but it can also rely on other people as targets of humorous communication. One particularly effective way of making people the objects of humour is through labelling and pigeonholing individuals as members of social groups that are presented as transparent and homogenous. Stereotyping, that is, classifying people as prototypical members of such culturally-constructed social categories, allows us to access stores of knowledge about those categories in a fast, efficient way. By approaching an individual not as a sophisticated blend of various personal traits but as a member of an easily defined, familiar social group, we should be able to connect to a cognitive shorthand for that group – a social schema. This schema-based assessment of others is particularly useful in processing short humorous texts such as jokes or gags, the understanding of which often relies on the ability to spot and resolve the incongruity between two contrasting schemata. Being able to access culturally-established stereotypes is therefore crucial to comprehending jokes about people. The following example from Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* is a conversational gag which broadly illustrates the role of social stereotypes in verbal humour, as its appreciation requires that the people who appear in it are treated not as individuals, but as prototypical members of the – seemingly distinct – social groups to which they belong:

Example 19

If you don't know what to do I can't show you, as the actress said to the bishop.

(Amis 2000: 121)

In British English, 'as the actress said to the bishop' is a catch phrase that can be added to an innocuous statement in order to imply a sexual innuendo. In the example above, it acts as a punch line, highlighting the potential sexual meaning of the otherwise innocent 'If you don't know what to do I can't show you', thus turning it into a double entendre. While some sources treat 'as the actress said to the bishop' as an idiom (e.g. Cambridge Dictionaries Online, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>), it is not impossible to deduce its meaning from the individual words which form it, or more specifically, from the schemata which those words help us access. 'The actress' and 'the bishop' are not to be thought of as complex individuals, but as clear-cut, stereotypical members of two social groups, which have certain culture-specific associations. The word 'actress' has connotations which are largely sexual – Pullen, for example, writes about the 'trope of the actress/whore' and 'the association between

actress and prostitute within the foundations of Western civilization' (2005: 2-3). This sexual know-how is a stereotypical quality of the social group of actresses which we must be able to connect to in order to detect the apparent incongruity in the interaction between the actress and the bishop, where the stereotypical bishop initially triggers clashing associations of chastity and celibacy. The resolution of this juxtaposition of opposing stereotypes is the realisation that the bishop is not being entirely chaste (as is often the case in religious jokes, see Hempelmann 2003 for 'Christian script opposition'), and that the actress is addressing the bishop in a particularly intimate moment. Both the detection and the resolution of the incongruity rely on our ability to access certain culturally-constructed, social stereotypes.

Being able to reduce people to stereotypes is important not only in understanding simple jokes, but also in forming mental models of humorous characters in more complex narratives. Culpeper's model of characterisation mentioned before is based on the idea that when forming impressions of people (both real and fictional), we rely on a number of knowledge stores that provide us with easily accessible information about social groups and their prototypical members – the networks between those stores are referred to as social schemata or *cognitive stereotypes* (Culpeper 2001: 77). In order to achieve certain effects, including humour, authors will manipulate those cognitive stereotypes in the process of characterisation. Such manipulations often rely on distorting the links between our knowledge about:

Personal categories: These include knowledge about people's preferences and interests (e.g. likes Chinese food), habits (e.g. late for appointments), traits (e.g. extrovert) and goals (e.g. to seduce somebody).

Social role categories: These include knowledge about people's social functions. They include kinship roles (e.g. parents, grandparents), occupational roles (e.g. doctor, shop assistant), and relational roles (e.g. friends, partners, lovers, colleagues).

Group membership categories: These include knowledge about social groups: sex, race, class, age, nationality, religion, and so on.

(Culpeper 2001: 75-6)

The two major devices which, as Culpeper suggests, help to disrupt these links humorously so as to create comic characters in various texts are *prototypicality distortion* and *dramatic recategorisation* (2001: 89, 97). Since Culpeper only briefly mentions these terms and does not apply them in analysis of examples from narrative comedy, the ways in which these

characterisation techniques can contribute to humour creation in comic novels will now be illustrated with extracts from *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*.

A prototypicality distortion means ‘an exaggerated prototype of some social category’, and may include ‘an exaggeration of a schematic link between the social role category and a personal category’ (Culpeper 2001: 88, 156). In jokes, that might involve a magnification of a personal trait (for example ‘drinking a lot’) being linked to a social category (for example ‘Irish nationals’) in a representation of a member of that category. While this technique seems particularly well-suited to ethnic jokes (like those about the Irish), it has its place in humorous narratives, where characterisation occasionally also relies on this device. The humorous value of the entry which Adrian Mole makes in his diary before going to a party at his Irish neighbours’ is partly based on this kind of prototypicality distortion:

Example 20

Sean O’Leary is nineteen today. He has invited me to his birthday party. It is only over the road so I won’t have far to go.

I am writing up my diary now just in case I have one too many. People seem to get drunk just stepping over the O’Learys’ threshold.

(Townsend 2002: 129)

Even though the neighbours’ nationality is not explicitly stated, ‘Sean O’Leary’ is a prototypical Irish name that evokes the ‘Irish nationals’ group membership category, which should be easily linked to the ‘heavy drinking’ trait stereotypically associated with that nationality (e.g. Stivers 2000). Here, the link between the two is comically exaggerated by Adrian’s observation about the levels of intoxication of the guests attending the Irish family’s party, and especially the ease with which they seem to be reaching those levels. Presumably, everyone at the party is already so inebriated that people appear to be getting drunk ‘just stepping over the O’Learys’ threshold’ as if through osmosis. Although such a hyperbolic, figurative comment could potentially be applied to any group of people, the nationality of the hosts adds to the humour, as it builds on a familiar strand in a long tradition of ethnic jokes that focus on excessive alcohol consumption (for ethnic alcohol jokes, see Chapter 7 in Davies 1998). The characterisation of the O’Leary family in this short passage relies on a humorous exaggeration of a certain stereotype, distorting the link between a group membership category and a personal category. The O’Learys are not presented as a group of

individuals with idiosyncratic personalities, but rather as comic stereotypes, accessible to those readers who are able to recognise the manipulation of the social schema.

While a prototypicality distortion was based predominantly on a magnification of a certain category's traits, a dramatic recategorisation is a technique that may 'take place by abandoning one category totally and activating another' (Culpeper 2001: 96). In jokes, that might involve the surprise that occurs when a person who we thought was a member of one category turns out to be a member of a different one. It is not unlike the device which comedian Stewart Lee refers to as *pull back and reveal*, where the first half of the joke text creates a set of expectations regarding, for example, the age, occupation or social status of the participants in the story, which is then reversed as the frame widens to include new, unexpected details (Lee 2010: 197). The following example of character humour from Adrian Mole's diary, which can be thought to rely on a variation of this mechanism, describes a situation where Adrian's father has to face negative feedback about one of the hand-made spice-racks he had started selling to his acquaintances:

Example 21

Pandora's mother came round last night to complain about her spice-rack. It fell off the wall and spilt rosemary and turmeric all over her cork tiles. My mother apologised on behalf of my father who was hiding in the coal shed.

(Townsend 2002: 240)

The image of Adrian's father hiding in the coal shed can come as a surprise, as that kind of timid, cowardly behaviour does not seem compatible with the social role category of fathers, or even with the group membership category of adults. Physically hiding from responsibility or punishment, especially in non-threatening situations, is an action motivated by traits and goals more stereotypically associated with the social group of children than those of parents. Regardless of Adrian's father's personality in the entire novel, his immaturity in this passage is relatively unexpected, as the first part of the extract establishes him as, at least in the British context, a prototypical member of the social group of fathers – he is married, he tries to support his family financially, he has some (if clearly rather limited) knowledge of joinery. The final words of the extract, 'hiding in the coal shed', are therefore likely to humorously disrupt this masculine image by pulling back the 'father' schema and revealing the 'child' schema. This unexpected activation of the 'child' schema can be thought of as a dramatic

recategorisation based on certain culturally-established cognitive stereotypes regarding social roles, which adds to the humorous characterisation of Adrian's father in the novel.

4.2.2. Humorous roles

From canned jokes to stand-up to humorous novels, characterisation in comic texts can be seen to rely on exaggerations and shifts of the links between the personal, social role and group membership categories of our knowledge about people. While accessing these three information stores allows us to comprehend various humorous texts aimed at social groups, engaging with extended humorous narratives such as novels and short stories demands that we connect to an additional group of social knowledge categories – that of the universal 'dramatic roles' which underlie story plots (Culpeper 2001: 87). The concept of dramatic roles is based on the work of Propp (1975 [1968]), who outlines the basic roles typically assumed by characters in tales – the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. Propp's inventory is based on simple folktales, and while it may not necessarily be directly applicable to the analysis of contemporary novels, nevertheless signals that readers familiar with a culture-specific canon of traditional tales will have grown to expect narratives to revolve around a certain cast of characters.

Those expectations, importantly, are tied to generic conventions, meaning that various genres will employ different configurations of stock characters. A discussion of the stock types specific to the genre of comedy can be found in the work of Frye (1957), who uses the classical theory of drama (*Tractatus Coislinianus* and Aristotle's *Poetics*) to suggest the four main classes of figures which form the basis of comic plots: the self-deprecator (*eiron*), the impostor (*alazon*), the buffoon (*bomolochoi*) and the churl (*agroikos*). These groups contain various stock characters – for example, the class of eirons in Classical comedy includes the central 'hero' figure, who tends to be involved in a romantic intrigue, and whose will and actions are opposed by an alazon character, often that of 'the heavy father'. While the clashes between the wilful eirons and the blocking alazons form the basis of the comic plot, characters who fall under the bolomochoi (professional fools, clowns, pages, singers) and the agroikos (killjoys, refusers of festivity) categories function so as to 'polarize the comic mood' (Frye 1957: 172). These types, supported by Frye with examples from a broad range of comic texts such as Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Wodehouse's *Jeeves and Wooster* series, indicate the significance of stock characters for the comic genre within the Western literary tradition.

The appearance of humorous stock types, whether or not they can be neatly classified into a number of clear-cut categories, can be said to ‘stabilise’ comedy by creating an expectation of humour and triggering a humorous response. According to Frye, ‘There are two ways of developing the form of comedy: one is to throw the main emphasis on the blocking characters [alazons/impostors]; the other is to throw it forward on the scenes of discovery and reconciliation’ (1957: 167). While plot structures and ‘scenes of discovery and reconciliation’ will be the subject of the following chapter, in this section I consider the ‘blocking characters’ (the impostors), as well as the buffoons and the churls who contribute to the creation of humour in comic narratives. Since these three types and their specific stock figures have been outlined in detail by Frye (1957: 172-176), here I combine their characteristics to suggest a more general (and more complex) type of comic character found in the contemporary humorous narratives analysed in this study – the *misfit*.

(i) The misfit

The ‘misfit’ humorous stock type label, in a way in which it is used in this thesis, has been informed by the documentary series *The United States of Television: America in Primetime* (BBC, 2013) devoted to the most influential characters in American television programmes. From the four main types of primetime TV characters, ‘Man of the House’, ‘The Independent Woman’, ‘The Crusader’ and ‘The Misfit’, it is ‘The Misfit’ who is based predominantly on examples from television comedy. Misfits are said to be ‘the most high-risk characters in the primetime crowd’: ‘These are the awkward squad – the ones who can’t, or won’t, or aren’t allowed to fit in: nerds, geeks, freaks, rebels, outsiders’ (*The Misfit*, 2013). The misfit is a volatile character whose eccentricity is emphasised, and whose unpredictable behaviour and disregard for social norms become integral, expected features of his or her character. Misfits’ offbeat personalities cause them to stand out and disrupt humorously any stability and equilibrium they may find themselves in. In the context of contemporary humorous narratives, what Frye categorised as the distinct humorous types of obtrusive impostors, entertaining buffoons and surly churls can be grouped together under the ‘misfit’ label. That kind of classification is more applicable to those of the humorous characters who, rather than fitting a single stock role, are constructed as a more nuanced blend of various qualities – those who can be described as ‘round’ rather than ‘flat’ characters (Forster 1927).

A character who encompasses the traits and narrative functions of an impostor, a buffoon and a churl, and who is a prototypical example of the misfits category is Barry from

Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*. Barry and Dick are Rob's employees in his London-based record store, Championship Vinyl. While Dick's extreme introversion and social awkwardness mean that he is most comfortable when listening to music on his own (an exploded stereotype of the 'music geek' category), Barry seems to thrive in the spotlight and revel in causing disruption. One Goodreads reader describes Barry's comic character as follows:

Especially Barry, who is described by Rob as a '*snob obscurantist*', makes you laugh uncontrollably with his habit of belittling everything, his sneaky tactics of selling records no one has heard of and his interactions with Dick.

(Samadrita, 14 Jun 2013)

Out of all the characters in the novel, the reader chooses to single out Barry as the one who is 'especially' likely to make you laugh. While the comic value of his interactions with other characters (emphasised by the reader above) will be discussed further (4.2.3), here I explore the characterisation techniques which add humour to his habits and qualities. Below is an extract from the scene when Barry first appears in the narrative world of *High Fidelity*, turning up to work late and disturbing Dick and Rob's quiet afternoon. It is narrated by Rob:

Example 22

He comes into the shop humming a Clash riff. Actually, 'humming' is the wrong word: he's making that guitar noise that all little boys make, the one where you stick your lips out, clench your teeth and go 'DA-DA!' Barry is thirty-three years old.

'Awright boys? Hey, Dick, what's this music, man? It stinks.' He makes a face and holds his nose. 'Phwoar.' [...]

Barry puts his hand into his leather jacket pocket, produces a tape, puts it in the machine and jacks up the volume. Within seconds the shop is shaking to the bass line of 'Walking On Sunshine', by Katrina and the Waves. It's February. It's cold. It's wet. Laura has gone. I don't want to hear 'Walking On Sunshine'. Somehow it doesn't fit my mood.

(Hornby 1995: 34-35)

There are a number of discernible techniques here which contribute to Barry's characterisation as a misfit. Firstly, he is built through a manipulation of certain cognitive

stereotypes, mostly those related to the intensity of personal traits and habits, and their suitability to a particular age group. Barry is a ‘card’ (Harvey 1966) – a ‘larger than life’ character who is ‘an exaggerated prototype of some social category’ (Culpeper 2001: 88). Even though it is difficult to pinpoint the single social group which is being manipulated here, it can be argued that Barry is a magnified prototype of the personal category of extroverts. His overblown self-confidence manifests itself in the way he loudly and impolitely occupies the space, his behaviour likened to that of a little boy. In the eyes of Rob, Barry comes across as a slightly irksome eccentric – the comment ‘Barry is thirty-three years old’ acts as an antithesis to the description of his strikingly childlike demeanour, emphasising the oddity of Barry’s personality.

The fact that Rob, the protagonist, is prone to getting irritated with Barry is significant, as it highlights Barry’s role as one of the impostors in the humorous world of *High Fidelity*. Impostors, as mentioned before, are often the characters who block the hero’s actions and desires, interfering and creating obstacles that form the basis of the comic action. By invading Rob’s peaceful afternoon (especially on the day after his girlfriend Laura left him) with his mocking comments and his obnoxious music, Barry creates disruption that, in the following paragraphs, spurs Rob to act. Barry’s boorishness, particularly his rude criticism about the music in the shop and subsequent imposition of his own tape, can be linked to the comic function of a churl, who deprives others of joy and enforces his own order. His impoliteness, while off-putting for the other characters, can potentially have an entertaining effect on the reader, thus showcasing his additional role as a convivial, merry-making buffoon. Barry’s choice of music, the exceedingly cheerful ‘Walking On Sunshine’, expresses his tendency, or perhaps desire, to be the life and soul of the party – in this case not appreciated by his co-workers.

One final element of Barry’s characterisation as a misfit regards the level of attention he is made to attract, both from the other characters and from the reader. His appearance in the shop is impossible to ignore, as he seems to take over the space completely by appealing to various components of our sensory experience. The compelling sensory stimuli he produces range from visual (facial expressions) to auditory (humming, playing music), tactile (making the room shake) and appealing to olfactory (when he fakes smelling an odour). Drawing on elements of our sensory perception when reading narratives (see Sanford and Emmott 2012: 132 for *embodied understanding*), while not directly related to focus and attention, in the example above is magnified so as to make Barry’s character stand out from the others in a way typical for the category of misfits. Stylistically, that can be explained with

reference to Stockwell's (2009) notion of *textual attractors*. Attractors are elements in the text which capture the reader's attention, and typically include features like newness, agency, topicality, empathetic recognisability, definiteness, activeness, brightness, fullness, largeness, height, noisiness, aesthetic distance from the norm (Stockwell 2009: 25). In Barry's case, the most apparent quality is that of noisiness – his distinctive humming and blaring music – but the agency, activeness and fullness in his description are also highlighted by the use of the active voice, action verbs and references to the loudness of his music. Although colours are not explicitly mentioned, it is interesting to note the juxtaposition of 'Sunshine' brought by Barry (in 'Walking On Sunshine') with Rob's 'It's February. It's cold. It's wet.' evocative of a grey winter's day. While each of the attractors can contribute to the characterisation of a misfit, the one which seems particularly appropriate is the one which Stockwell terms 'aesthetic distance from the norm', which includes, for example, 'beautiful or ugly referents, dangerous referents, alien objects denoted, dissonance' (2009: 25). A misfit is constructed and presented to stand out from the norm and create disruption. Barry, with his overblown, childlike extroversion, his off-putting gestures and grimaces, and his unpredictable behaviour which disturbs others, illustrates considerable aesthetic distance from the norm.

A prototypical misfit is a character who attracts attention, fills the comic role of an impostor, a buffoon or a churl (or all of them), and who is built from exaggerated traits. While misfits' disruptive, inappropriate behaviour certainly contributes to advancing the comic plot and to the creation of humour, in some cases it has another social function, that of pushing the limits of what is socially acceptable in a given culture. The role of comedy and ridicule in subverting the social order will be expanded on in the following section, where I discuss some of the destabilising qualities of character humour. Here, the focus is on constructing misfits (and the humorous characters built through prototypicality distortion or dramatic recategorisation) as 'the other' – the unadjusted, abnormal, eccentric outsiders, whose lack of conformity with 'our' norms sets them up as targets of laughter. This 'us versus them' dynamic in comedy complies with the superiority theories of humour discussed before, where those who laugh and those who are laughed at are said not to share a common ground. As Gray suggests, 'The comedy of eccentricity,' where the eccentric individual is at odds with the world and – to our amusement – loses, functions as 'an assertion of superiority, an act of social exclusion' (Gray 2005: 148). This kind of mocking ridicule of what can be considered culturally inappropriate, according to Billig, 'protects the codes of daily behaviour, ensuring much routine conformity with social order' (Billig 2005: 202).

4.2.3. Humorous interactions

Some of the specific codes of behaviour which can be successfully manipulated for comic effect relate to conversational norms. In comic narratives, humorous verbal interactions between characters are often based on communication breakdowns, blunders, vulgarity and other instances where it is possible to detect the incongruity between what would be expected as cooperative (in the Gricean sense, 1975) and that which is surprising, awkward or disruptive. The two key groups of techniques for manufacturing that kind of inappropriate conversational behaviour discussed here will be those which (1) produce miscommunication, and those which (2) generate impoliteness in character interactions. Both can be found in the following example from *High Fidelity*, where Rob is trying to understand the full meaning of the word ‘yet’ after his ex-girlfriend, Laura, who left him for someone else, admits that she has not consummated her new relationship *yet* (‘We’ve slept together but we haven’t made love. Not yet.’ – Hornby 1995: 87). Jealousy-stricken (but also vaguely hopeful), he attempts to coax the connotations of ‘yet’ from Barry, trying to predict what Laura is going to do based on her use of the adverb. Rob’s indirectness and Barry’s qualities of a misfit lead to a rather uncooperative exchange:

Example 23

What does ‘yet’ mean, after all? ‘I haven’t seen *Reservoir Dogs* yet.’ What does that mean? It means you’re going to go, doesn’t it?

‘Barry, if I were to say to you that I haven’t seen *Reservoir Dogs* yet, what would that mean?’

Barry looks at me.

‘Just ... come on, what would it mean to you? That sentence? “I haven’t seen *Reservoir Dogs* yet”?’

‘To me, it would mean that you’re a liar. Either that or you’ve gone potty. You saw it twice. Once with Laura, once with me and Dick. We had that conversation about who killed Mr Pink or whatever fucking colour he was.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know. But say I hadn’t seen it and I said to you, “I haven’t seen *Reservoir Dogs* yet”, what would you think?’

‘I’d think, you’re a sick man. And I’d feel sorry for you.’

(Hornby 1995: 111-2)

While much of the humorous potential of the exchange can largely be attributed to Barry's lack of concern for social conventions, Rob (more specifically, his indirectness) can be held responsible for the amusing miscommunication that occurs. Instead of being open about his motive and asking 'Laura said she hasn't slept with her new boyfriend "yet". Do you think she's going to do it?', he places the word 'yet' in an unrelated context, 'I haven't seen *Reservoir Dogs* yet', and – rather ambiguously – asks 'what would that mean?' Since Barry, perhaps understandably, fails to grasp the meaning intended by Rob (*speaker-meaning*, Leech 1983: 17, based on Grice's 1957 *non-natural meaning*), Rob's initial turn in the conversation can thus be referred to as a *trouble-source turn* (TST), as it is the turn which is problematic and leads to a conversational breakdown (Schegloff 1987). The miscommunication here stems not from the hearer's failure to recognise the pragmatic force of the speaker's utterance (as is the case in what Thomas 1983 calls *pragmatic failure*), but from the inability to grasp the intended sense and reference of the utterance. That kind of misunderstanding at the level of utterance meaning, according to Tzanne (1999), stems from 'pragmatically ambiguous and/or incomplete (elliptical) TSTs', where 'pragmatic ambiguity' can result from the choice of lexical items or incomplete utterances which 'can be reconstructed in more than one way in context' (1999: 63). Rob's TST seems to be lacking a referent that specifies what the verb 'mean' refers to. The utterance which he intends to convey – 'what would that mean *about the word "yet"?*' – Barry interprets as 'what would that mean *about me?*' As a result of this ambiguity they begin talking at cross-purposes in a way that may be frustrating to them, but is likely to be amusing to the reader who has access to Rob's thoughts and is able to spot the incongruity between the intended meaning and the inferred meaning. The contrast here is between the different contextual 'lenses' which Rob and Barry are using to interpret the same situation, where Rob's emphasis is on the abstract notion of word meaning, and Barry is focusing on the more down-to-earth aspects of using pop culture references. It illustrates Tzanne's point about the importance of discussing 'creation of misunderstandings in relation to features which are meaningful to the participants' where participants are seen as being influenced by the situational context as well as their own specific roles and goals (1999: 9), which in the case of *High Fidelity* are possible to retrieve based on our knowledge of the narrative world and the roles and qualities of the characters who inhabit it. Similarly, the humorous potential of this misunderstanding lies not only in the incongruity between divergent utterance meanings, but also in the expectation of amusement typical for engaging with humorous worlds discussed in the previous chapter.

While the amused reader recognises that the miscommunication is likely to be frustrating to the participants, Barry's response is still surprisingly impolite, given the relatively innocuous subject matter. A lack of reply to a direct question ('Barry looks at me. '), name-calling ('liar', 'sick man'), swearing ('fucking') and a general lack of sympathy or interest in what Rob is trying to get across can all be seen as impoliteness strategies that threaten Rob's feelings and identity. Specifically, they can be classified as *positive impoliteness output strategies* associated with attacking someone's positive self-image (Culpeper 1996: 357-358). This positive self-image is referred to as *positive face* (based on Goffman's 1967 concept of *face*), and it can be damaged by certain face-threatening acts (FTAs), which, according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, include expressions of disapproval, criticism, ridicule, insults, contradictions, disagreements, challenges and blatant non-cooperation in an activity (1987: 67), many of which can be found in Example 23 above. Aside from complying with the notions from traditional politeness research, Barry's behaviour can be viewed as impolite with reference to more contemporary approaches within pragmatics, such as Bousfield's:

[...] impoliteness constitutes the issuing of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully performed unmitigated, in contexts when mitigation is required, and/or, with deliberate *aggression*, that is, with the face threat exacerbated, 'boosted', or maximised in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted.

(Bousfield 2008: 262)

Barry's FTAs certainly seem intentionally gratuitous and deliberately aggressive, as they would have easily been avoided if he had chosen to be cooperative. The question remains, however, whether they occurred in one of the 'contexts when mitigation is required'. On the one hand, Rob is Barry's boss and therefore the *power* dynamics would typically mean that Barry's FTAs should be mitigated to avoid the damage to Rob's face. The *social distance* between them, however, is likely to be small, as they have known each other for years and frequently socialise together ('power' and 'social distance' are variables used by Brown and Levinson 1987 to estimate the seriousness of the face threat). The apparent intimacy between Rob and Barry can in fact lead us to assume that, in the context in which it occurs, the interaction between them could be treated not as impoliteness, but as *banter*. That hypothesis proves incorrect, however, once our knowledge of the narrative world is applied to the

definition of banter, as outlined in Leech (1983). According to Leech's *Banter Principle*, banter arises when 'In order to show solidarity with h[earer],' speaker says 'something which is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to h', as what speaker 'really means is polite to h and true' (Leech 1983: 144). It would be difficult to argue that Barry says something which is 'obviously untrue' – nothing in his exchange with Rob suggests that he is not being genuine. While he is certainly being 'obviously impolite', there is no reason to believe that he does it to 'show solidarity' with Rob, especially if we take into account what we know about his character. Our knowledge of Barry is, as outlined before, that he is a disruptive misfit who provokes others by disobeying social conventions, including conversational norms associated with mitigating politeness. While the context of the interaction could facilitate banter between a different pair of participants, Barry's personality overshadows contextual constraints and leads him to being intentionally, deliberately aggressive.

Verbal aggression, although potentially hurtful to the hearer, can have an entertaining effect on a distanced observer, such as a reader or a viewer. In his discussion of *entertaining impoliteness*, Culpeper (2011) suggests that contemporary television chat shows, quiz shows, talent shows and other 'docu-soaps' have developed their own, highly entertaining, variants of verbal impoliteness which attract viewers in similar ways in which violent sports have done for centuries (2011: 234). He also points out the humorous potential of such linguistic violence, suggesting that that the television genre with the highest levels of verbal aggression is comedy (2011: 234, based on Chory 2010). Humorous impoliteness is also the focus of Dynel's (2013b) study of *disaffiliative humour* in film discourse, which 'involves the butt and operates on two levels of communication, the *characters'/inter-character level* and the *recipient's level*, the latter concerning the viewer as a hearer to characters' talk' (2013b: 107). Disaffiliative humour is that which is offensive to the butt or target, and which showcases the speaker's wit for the observer's benefit – linked to what is referred to as disparagement, aggressive or superiority humour discussed before. This association with superiority theories of humour means that one of the pleasures of disaffiliative humour is that of feeling superior to the butt of the joke (the 'pleasure of being superior' is also one of the pleasures of entertaining impoliteness, as outlined by Culpeper 2011: 235). While the links between entertaining impoliteness/disaffiliative humour and superiority over the target of aggression are valid in many cases (as Culpeper and Dynel show), they do not seem to match the *High Fidelity* example analysed here (Example 23). That is because the butt of impoliteness and the object of humour are not the same person. Even though it is Rob who is the target of

Barry's insults, the character who is presented as odd and laughable to the reader (and has been since the beginning of the novel) is Barry, the misfit. As distanced observers, we may be amused by the interaction, but we are not likely to be laughing at Rob. Rob (as I outline in the following section) is 'one of us' – someone who, unlike the socially maladjusted misfit Barry, has been constructed to trigger identification, sympathy and empathy.

4.3. *Destabilising cues: Building an 'illusion of intimacy' with the protagonist*

So far, I have suggested that certain stylistic techniques can cue the reader to laugh *at* characters in humorous narratives, stabilising straightforward amusement as a dominant response to the character-driven events in humorous worlds. Here, I show how this amusement can be destabilised by other, non-humorous, emotion by the means of, for example, empathy, sympathy and identification. By focusing on such potential affective reactions to the *protagonists* of humorous narratives, I suggest that reducing the perceived distance between us and the comic heroes and building attachment for them can blend the boundary between laughing *at* and laughing *with* characters, resulting in a more complex emotional response to the inhabitants of humorous worlds.

4.3.1. The 'everyman' protagonist

It is worth pointing out that in all of the examples of stabilising character humour discussed above, the laughable, maladjusted, eccentric characters are presented to the reader from the point of view of a more 'average' first person narrator who acts as a backdrop to their craziness. It is the contrast between the misfit and the 'normal' main character that often leads to humour, as it allows the exaggerated qualities of the misfit to truly shine. Apart from emphasising the humorous eccentricity of the other, however, the ordinariness of the protagonist has additional functions and a long tradition in narrative comedy. As suggested by Frye (1957), in the low mimetic New Comedy of the Classical period, which laid foundations for the genre as we know it today, characters were created to be on the level of the audience (e.g. they did not have special powers) so as to inspire identification. In that kind of comedy, suggests Frye, 'The hero himself is seldom a very interesting person: in

conformity with low mimetic decorum, he is ordinary in his virtues, but socially attractive' (1957: 44). The comic hero typically belongs to the character category of *eirons*, self-deprecators – a 'self-deprecating or unobtrusively treated character' faced with obstacles that need to be overcome (often related to reuniting with a lover) in order for a happy ending to occur (Frye 1957: 365).

In contemporary humorous narratives, that kind of a plot trajectory can be associated with romantic comedies, and therefore it is the sub-genre of romantic comedy where prototypical self-deprecator-type protagonists are likely to be found. Hornby's *High Fidelity* is a quintessential rom-com, where the hero (Rob) is separated from his lover (Laura) and complications occur as he faces opposition from a number of blocking characters (including Barry discussed above), but he eventually reunites with his partner in a happy ending. Rob's role in the narrative is summarised by one of the novel's readers on Goodreads:

Rob, the main character, is quite obviously meant to be identified with [...].
(Fiona, 4 Aug 2014)

Rob's qualities as a prototypical comic hero come across not only as a result of the contrast with the misfits who stand in his way, but also through constant, direct access to his thoughts, where he occasionally characterises himself. In the following extract, Rob is introducing himself to the reader in a way which clearly illustrates his characterisation as a classic self-deprecator figure:

Example 24

My genius, if I can call it that, is to combine a whole load of averageness into one compact frame. I'd say that there were millions like me, but there aren't, really: lots of blokes have impeccable music taste but don't read, lots of blokes read but are really fat, lots of blokes are sympathetic to feminism but have stupid beards, lots of blokes have a Woody Allen sense of humour but look like Woody Allen. Lots of blokes drink too much, lots of blokes behave stupidly when they drive cars, lots of blokes get into fights, or show off about money, or take drugs. I don't do any of these things, really; if I do OK with women it's not because of the virtues I have, but because of the shadows I don't have.

(Hornby 1995: 22)

The passage can be seen to demonstrate the characterisation of Rob as a protagonist who is, in Frye's words, 'ordinary in his virtues, but socially attractive'. As I outline below, the three key techniques which add to presenting the hero as an 'attractive everyman' here are:

- (i) constructing him as a prototypical member of a social group with which the reader can identify,
- (ii) creating an impression of closeness and intimacy between him and the reader, and
- (iii) adding more or less explicit self-deprecating elements to his speech and thought.

Aside from appearing in the extract above, these devices contribute to the characterisation of Rob throughout the whole novel, and indeed can be found in other humorous narratives with an 'everyman' or 'everywoman' protagonist.

(i) The comic protagonist as 'one of us'

The first step in creating a comic hero who is ordinary seems to require choosing a particular demographic towards whom the narrative is aimed, as the character's average qualities will only be recognised as average by readers who share a certain socio-cultural background. Rob, who emphasises his ordinariness from the beginning of *High Fidelity*, opens the narrative with a description of his unremarkable teenage years in 1970s suburban England (including 'I lived in Hertfordshire, but I might just as well have lived in any suburb in England', Hornby 1995: 1) – likely to be considered ordinary by those whose stereotypical knowledge of what is 'average' has been shaped by a biography similar to Rob's. Since Hornby's novel came out in 1995 in England, it is not unreasonable to assume that many of its first readers would have spent their teenage years in England (or the rest of the United Kingdom), some of them in the '70s. The readers who see Rob as average because they have had similar life trajectories (which they think of as average) can be said to relate to him through what Sanford and Emmott call *autobiographical alignment* (2012: 211), based on sharing some of the qualities of a character. The role of autobiographical alignment in creating a relatable protagonist can also be seen in Example 24 above, where the mention of more specific personal traits can lead some readers to 'align' themselves with Rob if they, too, consider themselves to have a good music taste, interest in books, sympathy towards feminism and a sense of humour. This is how one Goodreads user describes his relationship with Rob:

Swap out records for video games, and I am Rob. If you're a geek, and a male, and a member of these recent generations of "slackers" or "man-children", then you are Rob, too.

(Rick Monkey, 16 May 2008)

According to the concept of autobiographical alignment – and illustrated by the comment above – the reader who finds Rob average and therefore relatable, is a reader who shares Rob's characteristics, from his interests and political views to his age, nationality and life story – ideally, a white, middle-class, left-leaning English man in his thirties whose primary interests are pop culture and women. While it is likely that some of the most avid readers of *High Fidelity* (like Rick Monkey above) share those characteristics, it would be incorrect to assume that – both in the case of this novel and more generally – common autobiographical details are the only route to identification with the protagonist (which Sanford and Emmott 2012 point out).

For the readers lacking the common autobiographical ground, the example above provides clues not as to what is 'normal' perhaps, but as to what is *desirable*. By describing himself through a series of oppositions, Rob creates an outline of his own character not through any special features of his own qualities, but through contrast with the negative, unattractive traits he does not have. Not reading books, being fat, having a stupid beard and looking like Woody Allen are undesirable qualities which, according to Rob, 'lots of blokes' have. 'Lots of blokes,' similarly, 'drink too much, lots of blokes behave stupidly when they drive cars, lots of blokes get into fights, or show off about money, or take drugs.' By listing these negative qualities which allegedly many other men possess, Rob not only pictures himself as unique (despite his ordinariness), but also creates the boundaries of a certain social category – 'nice guys' – of which he sets himself as a prototypical member. That category, which excludes traits such as 'looking like Woody Allen' and 'taking drugs' but includes ones like 'reads books', is one which is not as unique as Rob makes it out to be. In fact, it is a category which many of the readers of *High Fidelity* are likely to identify with. The group is so inclusive, actually, that even someone who does happen to look like Woody Allen should be able to forgo that detail and relate to enough of the other traits to feel like one of the 'nice guys' – especially since the only alternative seems to be the drug-taking, irresponsible-driving social category of 'bad guys'. This kind of configuring of our personal traits to fit the qualities of a fictional character can be linked to what Stockwell (2009) calls *accommodation*

(introduced in 4.1.1.iii). Just as in spoken interactions we tend to accommodate our speech to those we are talking to, when engaging with literature:

[...] it seems we are perfectly capable of *accommodating* our personality pattern (to borrow a sociolinguistic term) in order to engage with literary and fictional minds. We can configure our personae into less prototypical forms, when we encounter what we conceive of as less prototypical situations and characters.
(Stockwell 2009: 152)

Even though the narrative example above seems to illustrate an opposite process, where we are configuring our personalities into *more* prototypical forms in order to become part of Rob's group, the mechanism is the same. In fact, much of *High Fidelity* relies on the bond between the reader and the protagonist established early on in the narrative through references to the hero's 'average' life and personality, and this identification helps us accommodate 'towards' Rob (to use Stockwell's term) in situations where we would otherwise be inclined to move 'away', like when he admits to committing morally dubious acts later in the novel. Accommodating our personality to that of a character is vital for building identification, and can be said to include accommodating our traits to fit the social category to which he or she belongs.

The importance of building identification between the audience and the humorous protagonist can be linked not only to the literary archetype of the 'everyman' hero in classical comedy, but also to the more contemporary theories of socially-based humour discussed in psychology. As outlined previously, jokes about people are said to rely on a mechanism where 'the jokers' and 'the joked at' belong to distinct social groups, and in order to laugh, the hearer needs to identify with the first and feel separate from the latter. Identifying with the comic protagonist – whether through autobiographical alignment or accommodation of personality – is crucial to humour appreciation in those instances where the hero is the joker, who targets other characters as sources of humour. The 'us versus them' dynamic is possible to set up through the use of a juxtaposition of specially constructed social categories, like 'good guys' versus 'bad guys' in the example above. Once we align ourselves with the 'good guys' group and recognise Rob as a prototypical member, we are more receptive to his humour, especially when it is targeted at other characters.

(ii) Likeability and communion with the comic protagonist

The rather simplistic view of group membership and humorous identification outlined above can be linked to La Fave's (1972) notion of *identification classes*, based on the idea that we are likely to laugh *with* those who belong to social groups that we can identify with, and *at* those who do not. A more sophisticated approach – and more relevant to the present discussion – is that of humour appreciation being dependent on a *scale of affective disposition* towards people, where amusement is said to 'be maximal when our friends humiliate our enemies, and minimal when our enemies manage to get the upper hand over our friends' (Zillmann and Cantor 1996 [1972]: 100-1). Here, the idea of identification gives way to that of affective disposition or, simply put, liking. As I will argue, an 'ordinary, but socially attractive' (in Frye's 1957 words) everyman protagonist is not only constructed as a member of an inclusive social category that encourages alignment and accommodation, but is also presented as likeable so as to facilitate those processes.

The techniques associated with creating a likeable comic hero especially relevant here are those which help to reduce the perceived distance between the character and the reader so as to create a sense of intimacy and communion (Booth's 1961 notion of a *secret communion* between the reader and the author behind the character's back can complicate this relationship, and it will be discussed further in 4.3.2). One of the most effective and simple devices for building closeness with a humorous protagonist is the use of first person narration – in fact, of the twelve texts analysed in this study, eight are narrated by their main characters. The role of first person perspective in manipulating distance between the reader and the narrative world is discussed by Dancygier (2011), who argues that narrative viewpoint is determined by configurations of three types of spaces: the story-viewpoint space (SV), where the narrator is located; the main narrative (MN) space of the primary plot; and an Ego-viewpoint established when a character in MN is selected as the narrator (2011: 63). She points out that third person narration 'is a device setting up a deictic centre of the narrating subjectivity outside of the main narrative space' which consequently 'distances the main narrative space from the SV-space' (2011: 68) The use of past tense, she suggests, has a similar effect. Other distancing tools mentioned by her include markers of epistemic distance (words such as 'presumably' or 'perhaps'), passive voice and formal vocabulary (2011: 72). None of those, notably, can be found in Example 24, which relies on first person narration, present tense, active voice and informal diction (e.g. 'blokes', 'I do OK'). The only marker of epistemic modality is the word 'really', which softens the impact of Rob's rather bold

statements and perhaps makes him appear less arrogant (see 4.3.1.iii for self-deprecation). These stylistic techniques reduce the distance between Rob and the narrative world, and also between him and the reader, helping to present Rob as a protagonist who is not only relatable, but also possible to connect with. This perceived closeness to the main character is stressed by one of the Goodreads readers of *High Fidelity*:

Rob is my soul mate, you see. He and I are the same fucked up, insecure, too-much-in-our-own-head-for-our-own-good person. I think he would get me. Really Get me.
(Jenn(ifer), 29 Jun 2015)

The reader justifies her affinity towards Rob by pointing out her identification with his negative qualities, which, as it will be discussed further (4.3.1.iii), the main character frequently refers to in the narrative as a self-deprecation strategy. Her emphasis on Rob being her ‘soul mate’ and someone who would really ‘get’ her can be seen as a general effect of those characterisation techniques in *High Fidelity* which, as outlined above, allow readers to emotionally connect with the protagonist. The idea of forming emotional connections with people from books, films or television shows has been referred to as the *parasocial interaction* (PSI) phenomenon, its primary focus being relationships between audiences and media figures, from celebrities to fictional characters (see Giles 2002 for a review). The term was first coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), who examined the likeability of television personalities (such as chat show hosts) and the *illusion of intimacy* created between them and the viewers. Horton and Wohl outlined a number of strategies used for achieving this illusion in TV audiences, stressing the shows’ underlying aim to blur the line between the ‘persona’ (and his show in the studio) and the viewers at home. While the techniques mentioned (e.g. using friendly gestures, addressing other cast members by first names, mingling with the studio audience) are not directly translatable to written narratives and their addressees, it is not difficult to draw an analogy between them and the distance-reducing narrative tools mentioned before.

Aside from reducing distance, a feature of PSI that is particularly relevant to the idea of forming communion with comic protagonists is the tendency of audiences to form *attachments* to fictional figures. Attachment theory (Bowlby, e.g. 1969) has been applied to explain how viewers’ imaginary relationships with media characters are affected by their attachment styles and the ensuing preconceptions about intimacy and loss (Cohen 2004, Greenwood 2008). Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004) link attachment to immersion in

narrative worlds, suggesting that ‘As individuals become increasingly enmeshed in a narrative world, it is likely that they will develop a strong sense of connection or familiarity with characters encountered repeatedly or continuously over time’ (2004: 319). While in the context of narrative comedy this is especially true of long running television sitcoms, it can also be applied to humorous novels with strong central figures and collections of short stories with a common protagonist.

(iii) The comic protagonist as a self-deprecator

While the group-based identification and the positive affective disposition towards the humorous protagonist relate to his or her qualities as an ‘ordinary but attractive’ member of the character category of self-deprecators (as outlined at the beginning of section 4.3.1), the clue as to the final feature of the stock type is in the name. Self-deprecation as a characterisation strategy can be linked both to constructing a relatable, likeable character and to humour creation generally. In their taxonomy of wit found in naturalistic conversation, Long and Graesser outline self-deprecation as one of the main types of humour, defining self-deprecating remarks as ones that ‘target oneself as the object of humor’ (1988: 43). Self-deprecating humour is that in which the role of the object of laughter – usually reserved for disliked or distant individuals – is filled by the jokers themselves. Putting oneself down for others’ enjoyment can be used ‘to demonstrate modesty, to put the listener at ease, or to ingratiate oneself to the listener’ (Long and Graesser 1988: 43) as it conceivably ‘places the self-disparager in a more positive light’ (Zillmann and Stocking 1976: 155). The link between the use of self-disparaging humorous remarks and perceived personal attractiveness has been studied in social psychology, with a number of studies suggesting that self-deprecating humour increases desirability if the target is otherwise physically attractive or has a high social status (Lundy, Tan and Cunningham 1998, Greengross and Miller 2008).

For a comic protagonist who is presented as high-status due to his or her central role in the plot and whose attractiveness is enhanced by distance-reducing devices, self-deprecation can be both a source of humour and a means of establishing an equal footing with the reader. *High Fidelity*’s Rob, for example, uses mildly self-disparaging elements to balance his disparagement of other people. He may mock people who ‘are really fat’ or ‘have stupid beards’, but he puts himself down while he does it by emphasising his own averageness and lack of special virtues. That way, the reader can both feel superior towards ‘lots of blokes’ and their unattractive qualities listed by Rob and towards Rob himself. By

showing his humility and allowing us that feeling of superiority, the narrator puts us at ease and reinforces his position as an affable joker, thus giving us permission to laugh at social groups that we would not otherwise be comfortable laughing at. He boosts his own attractiveness while simultaneously generating disparagement-based humour that adds to the humorous quality of the narrative world.

4.3.2. The ‘misfit’ protagonist

The self-deprecation that is characteristic of the ‘everyman’ comic protagonist stands in opposition to the trait of *narcissism* associated with the contrasting character category of misfits. Narcissistic tendencies of the stock type may have already become apparent in the discussion of *High Fidelity*’s Barry, whose overblown extroversion and disregard for politeness can be seen as symptomatic of an excessive self-centredness and an inflated sense of self-importance. The feature of narcissism is also explored in the *America in Primetime* documentary devoted to comic misfits mentioned before (BBC, 2013, see 4.2.2.i) where, interestingly, the focus is not on misfits as the blocking characters who get in the protagonist’s way, but on heroes and heroines who are misfits themselves. In this section, the interplay between the ‘everyman’ self-deprecation and the ‘misfit’ narcissism will be investigated in order to show how many comic protagonists can incorporate various levels of each of the traits, in ways which affect their relationships with the readers.

In Example 24 analysed above, self-deprecation is used to counterweigh the claims the protagonist makes about his own ‘genius’ and uniqueness, and his superiority over ‘other blokes’. As a quintessential ‘everyman’, Rob needs to remain unexceptional and unassuming in order to sustain the reader’s identification and positive affect towards him. Although he disparages other men’s personal traits for a comic effect, the underlying message of his self-characterisation is that he lacks any distinctive qualities of his own. He is, in fact, the epitome of ordinariness, whose main achievement is ‘to combine a whole load of averageness into one compact frame’. His boastful remarks, while largely superficial, help to prime a positive reaction to this otherwise unflattering confession of own mediocrity. Their superficiality, once recognised by the reader, helps to showcase him as an attractive character who is not afraid to set himself up as an object of laughter. The ability to put oneself down jokingly is a desirable quality for a protagonist who is otherwise presented as important and appealing (as discussed above). It can be argued, therefore, that Rob’s mock narcissism is in fact a self-

deprecating strategy that enhances his quality as an ordinary, yet attractive ‘everyman’ protagonist.

While for many comic heroes mock narcissism is a means of emphasising ordinariness and establishing an equal footing with the reader, the levels of awareness with which they use it can be manipulated by the author. Hornby’s protagonist seems self-conscious in how he comes across, and we have little trouble reading the intention behind his seemingly boastful comments. He is a *reliable narrator* (Booth 1961) who ‘speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms)’, thus earning ‘our basic trust and approval’ and decreasing the emotional distance between himself and us (Booth 1961: 159, 274). His use of mock narcissism is conscious and premeditated, leaving little doubt as to what the intended meaning is. An *unreliable narrator*, on the other hand, presents a different challenge. The following example from *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* shows the comic protagonist Adrian as an unambiguously unreliable narrator, whose narcissism cannot be linked to self-deprecation as directly as Rob’s:

Example 25

SUNDAY JANUARY 11th

First after Epiphany

Now I *know* I am an intellectual. I saw Malcolm Muggeridge on the television last night, and I understood nearly every word. It all adds up. A bad home, poor diet, not liking punk. I think I will join the library and see what happens.

It is a pity there aren’t any more intellectuals living round here. Mr Lucas wears corduroy trousers, but he’s an insurance man. Just my luck.

The first what after Epiphany?

(Townsend 2002: 10)

Like Rob, Adrian is a first person narrator, whose use of present tense, active voice, informal vocabulary and few markers of epistemic modality should in principle reduce the story-narrator distance, as it helps to set the story-viewpoint space within the main narrative space (to use Dancygier’s 2011 terminology). Despite being immersed in his narrative world to the extent that he should be a reliable guide, however, Adrian lacks the credibility we would expect from a character with whom we form a communion. An unreliable narrator, according to Booth, is one who is ‘mistaken’ or ‘believes himself to have qualities which the author

denies him' (1961: 159). Adrian's idea of what it takes to be an intellectual (e.g. not liking punk, wearing corduroy trousers) is likely to lead us to think that he is mistaken, and that his assessment of himself as one is wrong. Our judgement is based partly on our own preconceptions of what it means to be an intellectual (which may include 'not labelling people based on their superficial traits'), and partly on the author's rather explicit manipulation of the situation. Adrian's diary entry falls on a Sunday marked as 'First after Epiphany'. As an 'intellectual', he could be expected to know the meaning of that phrase (or at least discover a way of finding out). Instead, he openly reveals his ignorance, closing his entry with 'The first what after Epiphany?', conclusively undermining any claims about his developed intellect that he may have made. Goodreads users, in fact, often discuss those intellect-related aspects of Adrian's characterisation, referring to him Adrian as a 'self-styled', 'self-proclaimed' or 'self-classified' intellectual (see Goodreads 2015), and emphasising his lack of self-awareness and tendency towards narcissism:

Poor old Adrian: so innocent and pompous and self-deluded, all at the same time. [...] Great social document, with some enduring humour – a lot of it in the gap between what Adrian thinks/understands and what the reader understands.
(Beth Bonini, 1 Aug 2015)

While 'poor old Adrian' remains a relatable and likeable protagonist, his innocent, unformed understanding of the world leads to his lack of reliability as a narrator. This unreliability can lead us to relax the communion we have with him, and instead form a *secret communion* with the writer behind his back. Booth describes the process as:

[...] though the narrator may have some redeeming qualities of mind and heart, we travel with the silent author, observing as from a rear seat the humorous or disgraceful or ridiculous or vicious driving behaviour of the narrator seated in front. The author may wink and nudge, but he may not speak. The reader may sympathize or deplore, but he never accepts the narrator as a reliable guide.
(Booth 1961: 300)

Adrian can still inspire sympathy and other emotions, but his unreliability widens the distance between him and the reader. This increased emotional distance means that he is more likely to become the object of laughter. The secret communion with the author allows us to form a

reader-writer joking in-group that occasionally targets the protagonist. Adrian's narcissistic remarks about his exceptional intellect are far from being self-deprecating (as was the case with Rob) – rather, they signal his egotistical tendencies, adding to his characterisation as an *everyman protagonist with misfit qualities*. Despite being an otherwise likeable and relatable comic hero, his features of a narcissistic misfit allow the author to poke fun at him for our amusement – a humour-creation strategy made possible by the use of unreliable narration.

The protagonist's narcissism can be mild, feigned and used to put oneself down jokingly so as to decrease the reader-character distance; or it can be robust, genuine and imbue the character with amusing misfit tendencies, thus increasing the distance between them and the reader. An interesting mix of the two can be found in the works of David Sedaris, whose autobiographical short stories that centre around him as the comic hero involve complex blends of self-deprecation and narcissism. This complexity can be illustrated by the two, very different, Goodreads reviews of Sedaris' collection *Me Talk Pretty One Day* quoted below, which indicate a range of responses elicited by Sedaris' first person narration:

The main character of the book, however, is what ruined it for me. [...] So much of the narration in the book had a tone of arrogance when I could see no reason to be.
(Ian, 28 Jan 2009)

One key to humor writing can be self-deprecation, and Sedaris uses it to elicit guffaws at times from his audience.
(Jonathan, 22 May 2007)

There seems to be a lack of consensus as to whether the protagonist-narrator is a genuinely arrogant and narcissistic misfit or whether the opposite is true, and his humour is largely self-deprecating, as would be the case for an everyman protagonist. In the following example from a short story 'Smart guy', Sedaris uses highly pronounced narcissism to express highly pronounced self-deprecation in a way which complicates his status as an *everyman/misfit* protagonist:

Example 26

As a child I'd always harboured a sneaking suspicion that I might be a genius. The theory was completely my own, corroborated by no one, but so what? Being misunderstood was all part of the package. [...] I practiced thoughtfully removing my

glasses and imagined myself appearing on one of those Sunday-morning television shows, where I'd take my seat beside other learned men and voice my dark and radical theories on the human condition.

“People are insecure,” I'd say. “They wear masks and play games.”

My ideas would be like demons rushing from a hellish cave, and my fellow intellectuals, startled by the truth and enormity of my observations, would try to bottle them up before they spread.

(Sedaris 2002: 241-242)

So far, I have suggested that the levels of reader-character distance mean that an everyman is generally a relatable character that we laugh *with*, and a misfit is an eccentric character that we laugh *at*. In stories where main characters are also first person narrators, this tendency is facilitated by the use of reliable versus unreliable narration, where unreliable narrators are more prone to becoming the targets of the authors' humour. In the case of David Sedaris, the situation is more complicated, in that even though the reader is explicitly led to laugh *at* the main character, it is difficult to classify the first person narration as unreliable, since the author and the narrator are the same person. Sedaris' narcissism is, then, much more of the feigned, self-deprecating quality observed in the everyman protagonist, Rob. Unlike Rob's narcissism, however, Sedaris' self-reported arrogance is presented as considerably more severe – not entirely typical of an ‘average, but socially attractive’ relatable comic hero. Despite the underlying everyman-type self-deprecation, the distancing techniques in the description mean that Sedaris comes across as a misfit. Even though he talks about himself, he distances his adult viewpoint from the childhood-based narrative space by using the past tense to refer to imagined scenarios that never actually took place, describing the imaginary times when he ‘would’ appear on television shows and the ideas ‘would’ flow from his head so fast that the fellow intellectuals ‘would’ try to bottle them up. The spatio-temporal distance between the adult, real-life narrator and the past, imagined version of the narrator can give an impression that the adult ‘everyman’ David Sedaris is mocking the misfit qualities of his younger self, but that is only partly true. Below is the contemporary Sedaris' comment (also from ‘Smart guy’) on the outcome of his Mensa eligibility test which finally allowed him to find out his IQ score:

Example 27

It turns out that I'm really stupid, practically an idiot. There are cats that weigh more than my IQ score. Were my number translated into dollars, it would buy you about three buckets of fried chicken. The fact that this surprises me only bespeaks the depths of my ignorance.

(Sedaris 2002: 246)

There is very little distancing (in Dancygier's terms outlined previously) being used in the first two sentences of the passage (present tense, informal diction), leaving little doubt that the narrator is actually disparaging himself. The subjunctive mood ('Were my number translated...') and the unusually formal diction ('bespeaks the depths') used in the latter part seem to create the distance necessary for the reader to understand that the protagonist is not taking himself seriously and that it is acceptable to laugh – especially that the formal and informal elements of the passage can be said to create a humorous incongruity. The question is – does he want us to laugh *at* him or *with* him?

David Sedaris seems to combine the qualities of a likeable, self-deprecating, relatable everyman protagonist who can laugh at himself with that of a socially maladjusted, arrogant, larger-than-life misfit. In an article entitled 'What you read is what he is, sort of', Sarah Lyall describes the writer's blending of the ordinary and the unusual:

But even the most mundane experience is described through the skewed prism of his unusual sensibility. This makes it far more amusing than if it had happened to a regular person with prosaic powers of description or a lesser ability to find the absurd in the ordinary.

(*The New York Times*, 8th June 2008)

Sedaris is a self-deprecating misfit, and we are encouraged to laugh both with and at him. He may see the world through 'the skewed prism of his unusual sensibility' that can appear odd, eccentric and laughable, but he is 'one of us' in that he shares the mundane, ordinary reality that we can identify with. His less than prototypical qualities single him out as special (or perhaps odd), but the affinity we may have built up for him leads us to accommodate our own personalities to move 'towards' him (in the way suggested by Stockwell 2009, as discussed above). This is how one Goodreads user describes his experience of reading Sedaris' prose:

I came into this book expecting the voice of a pretentious, self-indulgent white male, and I finished this book smirking along with this funny, pretentious, and self-indulgent white male.

(Thomas, 15 Mar 2015)

Sedaris may be eccentric (or perhaps even ‘pretentious’ and ‘self-indulgent’), but by showing off his amusing, awkward qualities he draws our attention to similar qualities of our own, be it unfounded self-admiration or an embarrassingly low IQ. He is a relatable misfit who shows us the misfit part of ourselves – by allowing us to laugh at him, he allows us to laugh at ourselves.

4.3.3. Protagonists in disrupted interaction

I have suggested that a comic protagonist can be constructed from a combination of ordinary, relatable ‘everyman’ qualities with eccentric, laughable ‘misfit’ qualities, and that the ratio of one to the other affects the reader’s relationship with him or her. Based on the disposition theory of humour (and of narratives generally, see Raney 2004 above), the more perceived similarity and the lesser emotional distance between the character and the reader (as in the case of everyman-type protagonist), the less inclined we should be to laugh at them and enjoy their misfortunes. The correlation of identification with a character with hopes for positive outcomes for them can be explained by referring to the concept of empathy, which, as I summarised before based on the work of Davis (1994, see 4.1.1.i), is thought to be most powerful when it is a reaction to observing a target similar to us being entangled in a severely adverse situation. Since a high proportion of character humour involves characters – including protagonists – getting in trouble and experiencing misfortunes (as it will be outlined in Chapter 5), this section explores the potential emotional reactions that arise when we witness our favourite comic heroes and heroines fail humorously. The focus here will be on comic protagonists being socially disruptive – specifically, saying things that can be seen as inappropriate in a particular social situation. It will be suggested that while straightforward amusement is likely to be triggered when observing a misfit protagonist behaving inappropriately in a relatively low-risk situation, it can be destabilised by other emotions (like embarrassment) when our liking for, identification with or reduced distance towards the character and their world leads us to experience empathy, especially in serious, high-risk social situations. While the affinity with the character and the seriousness of the situation will

be emphasised as important variables that affect readers' response to protagonists' disruptive behaviour, other, complicating factors will also be taken into account.

(i) Comedy which grants us protection from embarrassment

Protagonists who possess conspicuous misfit qualities are, in many ways, invulnerable to the negative emotional impact associated with disrupted social interaction. Their eccentricity, often accompanied by a disregard for social conventions, acts as a protective layer both for the characters and the readers who witnesses their behaviour. That is especially true for those protagonists who purposefully set themselves up as amusing misfits, making it their aim to disrupt social situations to entertain others. In his autobiographical account of the Second World War, Spike Milligan proudly characterises himself as one such misfit:

Example 27

I was the clown of the Battery – I would give a demonstration of how to rifle drill in Braille, how to sleep standing up on guard, how to teach a battledress to beg, how to march standing still.

Roll call one morning.

“Neat?”

“Sah!”

“Edgington?”

“Sah!”

“Milligan ... MILLIGAN? ... GUNNER MILLIGAN?”

“Sah!”

“Why didn't you answer the first time?”

“I thought I'd bring a little tension into your life, Sarge.”

(Milligan 1971: 98)

Milligan recounts deliberately disrupting a morning roll call for others' amusement in what could be expected to be a relatively high-risk social imposition – taking into account the importance of obeying orders and respecting the hierarchy in the army context. Additionally, the narrator is presenting the events in the first person, minimising the distance between himself and the story and complementing our awareness of the non-fictionality of the narrative. Both the seriousness of the situation and our relationship with the protagonist,

however, are mitigated by his own self-characterisation as a ‘clown’. By setting himself up as someone whose primary concern is to amuse and entertain, Milligan manipulates what is expected from him by other people (fellow characters as well as readers). Rather than being interpreted as impoliteness, his socially inappropriate behaviour is thus more likely to be taken as humorous by those who recognise the intention to amuse as a key feature of his personality. The expectations we form of someone who takes on the role of a joker are based partly on the anticipation of amusement, and partly on labelling that person as quirky and eccentric. A clown, which in Frye’s (1957) categorisation of comic stock types falls under the entertaining, fun-loving class of *buffoons*, is a prototypical misfit. The social risks he takes, therefore, do not bother us as much as they would if he were ‘one of us’. Even if he gets hurt, his shield of eccentricity protects him (and us) from real damage.

Apart from having potential practical repercussions, the damage associated with being socially disruptive is largely emotional – it is that of experiencing *embarrassment*. ‘The prospect of ridicule and embarrassment,’ writes Billig in his account of the social functions of comedy, ‘protects the codes of daily behaviour, ensuring much routine conformity with social order’ (2005: 202). Infringing on established norms of interaction, Billig suggests, is as embarrassing for the agent as it is comic for the onlookers, making the fear of ridicule a key tool in the maintenance of social conventions. Psychological research views embarrassment, together with shame, pride or guilt, as a self-conscious emotion experienced as a result of evaluating our behaviour according to certain socio-culturally established standards, rules and goals (SRGs) – ‘Success or failure vis-à-vis our SRGs is likely to produce a signal to the self that results in self-reflection’ and a global evaluation of the self (Lewis 2008: 745). The negative, unpleasant emotion of embarrassment is based on that kind of unfavourable assessment of one’s actions (like shame, only less intense), or it can result from unwelcome exposure (e.g. being looked at, being complemented) (Lewis 2008: 750-1). In Example 27 above, Spike Milligan comes across as immune to embarrassment. Far from shying away from exposure, he revels in being the centre of attention like a typical misfit. The SRGs that potentially stop other soldiers from misbehaving seem to have a different meaning to him – rather than evaluating his actions as inappropriate and feeling embarrassment (or shame or guilt), he appears *proud* of himself, as if his self-reflection had been positive instead of negative. Milligan’s self-imposed role as a clown allows him to step outside the sociocultural norms and conventions and create his own set of SRGs, thus fulfilling an important social function of comedy, which, as Stewart Lee suggests, is ‘to manufacture inappropriate behaviour’ (Lee 2010: 241). In a passage on the Pueblo clowns of South America (but which

can be applied to other self-made clowns), Lee points out that: ‘By reversing the norms and breaking the taboos, the clowns show us what we have to lose, and what we might also stand to gain, if we step outside the restrictions of social convention and polite everyday discourse’ (Lee 2010: 241). Professional clowns like Spike Milligan can allow us to see that while simultaneously shielding us from the embarrassment we would otherwise risk.

Being protected from the embarrassment associated with humorously disrupted interactions is crucial to the experience of pure, unadulterated amusement. ‘Embarrassment, because it erodes the boundary between audience and butt, is a risky option in comedy and is generally kept in check by precise narrative boundaries’, suggests Gray in her discussion of the British sitcom (2005: 151). Emphasising the misfit qualities of the protagonist may be one of the tools for keeping embarrassment ‘in check’, allowing us ‘to join him in an untouchably private space where he could protect us from embarrassment’ (Gray 2005: 161). By creating his own private space that is separate from the rest of the narrative world, the misfit protagonist remains unaffected by the emotional consequences of his actions. The ‘clown’ status grants the comic hero such distance from the world and the standards, rules and goals that regulate the behaviour of its inhabitants. It is especially useful in those narrative worlds which are expected to operate according to rules very similar to the real world of the reader, particularly non-fictional narratives like Milligan’s Second World War memoir. Because the world he describes is one that we can be familiar with (if not through experience, through other accounts), Milligan needs to emphasise his special status of a misfit-joker and the ensuing humorous ‘private space’ that allows him to subvert conventions without risking damage. Through the lens of his eccentric, clownish point of view, the otherwise realistic world of the Second World War in Britain becomes a humorous one, where the levels of absurd behaviour and a suspension of social conventions render the self-reflective emotion of embarrassment redundant.

It is, in fact, not unlike the twisted, fictional, war-time world of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, where the overblown misfit qualities of the army commanders lead them to impose their own set of SRGs (standards, rules and goals) on the whole regiment in a way that can be seen in the following quote from the novel’s Colonel Korn:

Example 28

‘You know, that might be the answer – to act boastfully about something we ought to be ashamed of. That’s a trick that never seems to fail.’

(Heller 1994: 160)

In a world ruled by misfits who place narcissism over self-deprecation and who can effectively manipulate sociocultural standards of behaviour, the emotion of pride can be caused to replace that of shame – the ‘trick’ is to project boastfulness onto typically shameful behaviours. The narrative world of *Catch-22* thus seemingly keeps negative self-reflective emotions in check by running on its own set of rules, where eccentricity, arrogance and delusion are the desirable norm. The protagonist, Yossarian, is therefore not embarrassed to lie to doctors about ‘seeing everything twice’ in order to prolong his stay in the hospital or to have conversations while sitting in the tree naked. His lunacy is mild and it is nothing compared to the insanity of the world he belongs to – in fact, he is the only character who seems acutely aware of the absurd of what is going on around him. In the context that he is in, his socially inappropriate behaviour loses its inappropriateness. Rather than being embarrassed for him, the reader is encouraged to compare his rather harmless disruptive actions to those of his superiors, whose madness affects the lives and wellbeing of others. While Joseph Heller may protect us from embarrassment by not allowing his protagonist to feel that emotion, his narrative has very strong dark undertones of the collective shame that *should* be experienced by those in charge of the military operations. Those readers who vicariously experience that shame (conspicuous by its absence) while simultaneously being amused by the inappropriate behaviour of the novel’s misfit characters can fully appreciate the complex humorous responses cued by the author.

(ii) Cringe humour

A complex humorous response where amusement is combined with a negative self-reflective emotion like shame or embarrassment is at the heart of what in this thesis will be referred to as *cringe humour* (based on *cringe comedy* in Woodward 2010, see also Wright 2011). The emotional experience of that type of humour is succinctly described by one reader of Haddon’s *A Spot of Bother* (a comic novel which, as I suggest below, is rich in cringe) as:

there’s a tiny bit of an inward cringe even as you chuckle
(Valerie Pate, 8 Apr 2014)

The complex humorous response associated with cringe humour in narratives often relies on writers constructing unsuccessful social interactions, where readers’ amusement at someone’s blunder is evoked alongside the awkwardness they feel once they imagine what it must be

like to be in the disrupted situation. As Wright points out in his discussion of Larry David's sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-present), 'cringe humor relies not on the execution of a gag, but instead on the "dead air" that accompanies an unsuccessful social encounter' (Wright 2011: 662). David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, together with Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003), are two recent, highly prototypical cringe comedy texts that centre around the lives of eccentric, self-involved misfit protagonists whose unconventional approach to social norms leads them to cause (often severe) disruption. Rather than trying to conform to what is socially acceptable to avoid ridicule and embarrassment, those characters will, like the Hopi clowns described by Stewart Lee, say or do the most inappropriate thing in order to show us where the boundaries lie and what happens when we step outside them. The difference between cringe comedy protagonists and the other types of misfits discussed above is that while jokers like Milligan or Yossarian protect us from embarrassment in one way or the other, cringe comedy heroes do not (see Gray 2005 for a discussion of this in *The Office*).

The two discerning features of cringe comedy, suggests Woodward, basing on both David's and Gervais/Merchant's work, are that 'It shows us the ludicrous, but suggests that some real damage has been caused' and that 'It creates a very uneasy balance in us between feelings of superiority and inferiority' (2010: 4), meaning that it causes us to laugh at the misbehaving character while simultaneously leading us to a painful self-reflection. 'The essential poetics of cringe comedy,' writes Woodward, is 'this undecidable tension between feeling above the absurd character and his situation and recognizing ourselves in them' (2010: 10). Aside from the uncomfortable feeling of identification triggered by our familiarity with the misfit qualities of the protagonists, much of the cringe in cringe comedy comes from the relative seriousness of the situation that the characters find themselves in. What Woodward refers to as 'real damage caused' in the television context refers to the use of documentary elements that give an impression of realness and authenticity (2010: 4) – TV cringe comedy is often based on setting eccentric misfit protagonists up for ridicule by leading them to disrupt social situations, while emphasising the authenticity of the narrative world by adopting a documentary or improvised style. In written narratives, the 'real damage' associated with cringe humour is likely to be achieved by different means, since even explicit non-fictionality of the text cannot automatically be expected to expose the reader to embarrassment at the protagonist's misconduct, as illustrated by Spike Milligan's memoir.

The narrative strategy which I will discuss here in relation to the creation of cringe humour in written narratives is that of cueing *empathy* for the comic protagonist. Feeling the

character's awkwardness, I believe, requires us to be able to put ourselves in their position and imagine what it would be like from their perspective – a mechanism referred to as *role taking*, considered to be a highly advanced cognitive process which enables empathy (Davis 1994, Zillmann 1991). Of the general antecedents to empathy outlined by Davis (1994, see 4.1.1.i), those which can be applied in a narrative context to explain readers' empathetic reactions towards characters are the *strength of the situation* and the *degree of similarity* between the observer and target (Davis 1994: 15). In her literary approach to narrative empathy, Keen distinguishes *narrative situation* and *character identification* as the two main groups of empathetic narrative techniques, which can be seen to correspond with the components of Davis' psychological model. With regard to television cringe comedy which centres on highly eccentric, socially maladjusted misfit protagonists, it can be argued that the production teams of those shows use documentary elements to create an illusion of realness so as to emphasise the seriousness of the disrupted social situation and evoke empathetic responses from viewers. In written narratives, which are perhaps less arresting to the senses than multimodal texts and thus allow receivers to distance themselves from the events depicted more easily, it may be more effective to manipulate the qualities of the target of empathy, increasing the perceived similarity between the reader and the character. The more similarity between them, the stronger the empathetic response will be. Additionally, the target should also be perceived as morally sound, since malevolent characters may not trigger empathetic responses as well as benevolent or neutral ones can (Zillmann and Cantor 1997, Zillmann 2006). On the whole, then, a comic protagonist who is most likely to cue role taking (and cringe) in the reader is one who is perceived as similar and likeable – in short, a protagonist with pronounced 'everyman' qualities.

Due to the role of character identification and the strength of the situation in triggering the role taking process which enables the cringe in cringe comedy, the clearest examples of that type of humour in written narratives can be found in situations where a likeable, relatable everyman protagonist is put in a particularly high-risk social position. It is not surprising, therefore, that two of the novels with highly ordinary heroes discussed here, *Lucky Jim* and *A Spot of Bother*, culminate in scenes where the protagonists are compelled to give important speeches in front of large audiences. In fact, public speaking – particularly when it goes wrong – seems to be an effective comic trope generally. In 'The learning curve', David Sedaris is drawing on his humiliating experiences of it in his account of teaching creative writing (analysed further in 5.3.1.ii); one of the climactic scenes of *Right Ho, Jeeves* focuses on the character Gussie Fink-Nottle's intoxicated prize-giving in front of the whole

of Market Snodsbury Grammar School; and while Bridget Jones does not do any public speaking in the novel itself, there are two separate instances of her cringeworthy attempts at it in the film version of the narrative (2001, dir. Sharon Maguire). In each of these texts, the characters who are required to speak in front of an audience behave inappropriately – they are either unprepared and lost for words ('The learning curve', *Bridget Jones' Diary*) or they are so intoxicated that they are incomprehensible or say unsuitable, offensive things (*Right Ho, Jeeves*, *Lucky Jim*, *A Spot of Bother*). In the following extract from *A Spot of Bother*, George pauses his speech at his daughter's wedding reception to reflect to himself on whether mixing sedatives with alcohol prior to speaking, together with mentioning his recent health scare, had been appropriate:

Example 29

George had lost the thread somewhat.

The dessert wine had not sharpened his mind. He had been a good deal more emotional than he had intended. He had mentioned the cancer, which was not festive.

Was it possible that he had made a fool of himself?

(Haddon 2007: 474)

George, whose clumsy, improvised wedding speech focuses mostly on the inevitability of death, closes his public appearance by attacking one of the guests. In a way typical for cringe comedy, which relies on what Wright (2011) calls the 'dead air' that surrounds awkward social situations, the reader is being kept aware of the stunned silence that accompanies both George's speech and the succeeding assault. Haddon emphasises the absence of sound by interjecting George's viewpoint with sentence-long paragraphs of omniscient narration that alert the reader to the wedding guests' silence, like 'In a nearby garden Eileen and Ronnie's dog barked.' (2007: 473) or 'It was very, very quiet in the marquee.' (2007: 477). George's point of view in the extended wedding speech scene is also juxtaposed with the viewpoints of his family members, who speechlessly observe his humiliation, trying to assess the damage. Mostly, however, like in the example above, the scene is shown from George's angle with the use of *free indirect thought* (FIT). FIT is a technique of thought presentation which blends the thoughts of the character with those of the narrator/author, therefore making it impossible to determine – by using linguistic criteria alone – whose thoughts we are reading (Leech and Short 2007: 271). In terms of cringe humour creation, the choice of FIT for setting George up as the *focaliser* (Genette 1980) of the scene is not coincidental, as it forces the reader into

George's uncomfortable position by encouraging him or her to engage in role taking to imagine what it must be like to be in that highly embarrassing situation. We may still laugh *at* the protagonist's inappropriate behaviour, but stepping into his shoes can blur the boundary between him and the reader, making it easier for us to feel his discomfort.

The role of free indirect discourse in facilitating empathetic responses or giving readers the impression that they understand the character has been investigated empirically (Hakemulder and Koopman 2010, Bray 2007). While, as Bray (2007) points out, there are non-linguistic factors that can override formal textual features in cueing empathy (like character identification or seriousness of the situation), it is reasonable to suggest that linguistic manipulations of focalisation affect our relationships with characters. 'Free indirect discourse,' argues Vermeule, 'is one of the major literary techniques that writers use to put pressure on our mind-reading capacities' (2010: 72-3) – it gives us clues that point to the workings of someone else's psyche. The appeal of fiction, Vermeule suggests, is that it gives us access to 'really juicy social information': 'information that it would be too costly, dangerous, and difficult for us to extract from the world on our own' and that uncovers 'The deep truth about people's intentions – including, perhaps, one's own' (Vermeule 2010: 14, see also Zunshine 2006 for a similar approach). The allure of cringe humour like that in the wedding speech scene from Haddon's novel, therefore, is threefold. Firstly, it allows us to laugh at the expense of someone who is behaving inappropriately. Secondly, it shows us what happens when social conventions are being infringed in ways that we may not have witnessed in our lives. Thirdly, it enables us to step into the shoes of someone who is transgressing established cultural norms, allowing us to feel the accompanying embarrassment or shame, but feel it in a 'safe' context of an otherwise pleasant, playful humorous narrative world.

Narratives' ability to give us insight into the inner lives of other people can produce powerful emotional effects for readers of comedy. In a novel like *A Spot of Bother*, which relies on narration strategies that expose the thoughts and feelings of its characters, humour is imbued, as one Goodreads reader suggests, with genuine, heartfelt investment in those characters' lives:

Not so heavy on the punchline but more emphasis on character. It does eventually build up to bombastic farce but even then, it all goes to frame character arcs and the humour is tinged, as is in the whole book, with real heartthumping investment in the welfare of the characters.

[...]

Massively recommend. You'll laugh. You'll cry. You'll feel queasy. You'll want to call your mum.

(Elizabeth, 28 Dec 2014)

As Elizabeth suggests, the 'bombastic farce' to which the story builds – meaning, most likely, the climactic events on George's daughter's wedding day – is not straightforwardly amusing, but rather 'tinged' with feelings for the characters. The novel, according to the reader, will make you 'laugh', 'cry' and 'feel queasy'. The cringe humour cued by the stylistic construction of George's farcical speech scene can be considered one of those moments in which, owing to our investment in characters, such contrasting emotional reactions are evoked simultaneously. The complex humorous response associated with cringe comedy, therefore, can be viewed as part of the immersive quality of those humorous narratives which encourage us to form feelings for their characters.

4.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the notion of character humour in written comic narratives. Following a literature review of cognitive stylistic work on responses to fictional people and psychological approaches to social dimensions of humour, I explored the ways in which characterisation can be used as a tool in humour creation. I emphasised the importance of stereotypes and stock characters, outlining a class of laughable comic figures particularly effective in humorous narratives – the misfits. I then illustrated how the amusement triggered by character humour can be destabilised by other emotions experienced in the course of reading. By focusing on various types of comic protagonists – ranging from everymen to misfits – and their humorously unsuccessful interactions, I have suggested that while the characters' amusing, 'misfit' qualities allow us to laugh *at* them, their relatability and likeability that stem from their 'everyman' features can facilitate responses of identification and empathy, which make us vulnerable to uncomfortable, negative emotion. A misfit protagonist was said to be able to shield the reader from the potential negative impact of his or her humorously disruptive behaviour by granting us 'safe' distance from the situation – distance which allows us to see the disruption as humorous. The perceived closeness constructed between the reader and an everyman protagonist, however, causes us to experience the shame or embarrassment together with the character as well as laugh at their

behaviour, leading to a complex humorous response, such as that associated with cringe humour.

5. Reacting to Story Structures

This chapter focuses on the role of the plot in humorous narratives. From the overarching structure of the main story line to the build-up of individual narrative situations, I suggest how the ordering and structuring of events can both add to the creation of humour and destabilise comedy by cueing responses unrelated to amusement. The emphasis here is on the writer's ability to control the reader's familiarity with the narrative world, with many of the techniques discussed aimed at manipulating the amount of information readers receive as to how the story events are likely to develop. For the reader, the levels of awareness about what can be expected to happen in the narrative will determine the reaction to the unfolding plot situations: *surprise*, *suspense* or a combination of the two. The emotional reactions of surprise and suspense – integral parts of our experience of humorous worlds – will be shown to be cued by stylistic manipulations of the presentation of story events. The particular type of story events explored in this chapter are the *problems* encountered by characters in humorous narratives. Those problems, depending on how quickly they are resolved, can become sources of straightforward amusement, but they can also be made to cue more complex humorous responses in the readers of humorous narratives.

After a literature review of some of the plot-related aspects of both non-humorous and humorous narrative comprehension, I discuss those techniques which can be seen to stabilise our experience of a comic plot. I outline a typical comic macro-structure, characterised by a predictable story line where, from the beginning of the narrative, we are led to expect events to go humorously wrong before they reach a happy ending. On the micro-level of individual plot events, I suggest that the reaction of surprise is one that accompanies many *humorous complications* – situations problematic for the characters, but amusing for the readers. *Humorous surprise* and the swift *humorous resolution* which enables us to distance ourselves from the seriousness of the problem, will be shown to protect us from the emotional impact of what could otherwise be highly negative outcomes for well-liked characters. This protection, however, will not always be granted immediately – in order to destabilise our experience of comedy, writers will occasionally prolong the tension surrounding our anticipation of an unfortunate event by delaying the presentation of the negative outcome. Such withholding of a largely predictable outcome can be linked to *comic suspense*.

5.1. Theoretical background

5.1.1. Research into plot structures and their emotional effects

This chapter explores the idea that some of the responses which readers experience in the course of engaging with narrative texts are evoked by the way stories are told. The recognition that authors manipulate the distribution of information about narrative events when developing their plots is based on the theoretical distinction between the story which is being recounted and the discourse in which the story is presented to the recipient (Chatman 1978). ‘What is communicated,’ writes Chatman, ‘is the *story*, the formal content element of the narrative; and it is communicated by *discourse*, the formal expression element’ (1978: 31). The discourse, argues Chatman, ‘states’ the story using two different kinds of statement: those statements which describe something that exists in the story (*stasis*), and those related to the *events* which happen in the story (*process*) (1978: 31-32). Narrative events, and particularly their functions and ordering, are also key to Propp’s notion of *story grammars* (Propp 1975 [1968], mentioned in 4.2.2), which is based on the idea that tales contain particular configurations of components: *roles* (characters) and *functions* (the basic elements of the tale which are performed by characters).

The storyteller’s presentation and ordering of the events in the plot is a strategy that Sternberg (1978) refers to as *exposition*. Literary texts, according to Sternberg, are systems of expositional gaps which are being set up by authors, and which force readers to continue posing and answering questions, thus sustaining narrative interest. The importance of gaps in maintaining interest has also been discussed in relation to film – Tan, for example, points out that ‘temporary gaps or “mysteries” may be frustrating but are also expected to be lifted by some non-trivial information’ and that ‘in traditional films, narration is such that at any moment during the showing, there is a promise of reward’ (Tan 1994: 15). This reward is an increase in the viewer’s knowledge, which leads to a better understanding of the story as a whole. It is the promise of a reward that leads us to continue watching the film – to put it simply, we watch because we want to know what happens next. In discussing the importance of gaps, or ‘mysteries’, in narratives, Tan additionally links the enjoyment they provide with the reactions of *suspense* and *surprise*, where the emotion evoked is also described in terms of a reward (1994: 16).

The enjoyment of being able to fill in the gaps set up by the narrator and the associated emotional reward is related to what Brewer and Lichtenstein (e.g. 1982) call *story liking*. They suggest that we favour narratives which are structured to facilitate changes in our levels of arousal by leading to an *arousal boost*, a moderate increase in arousal, or an *arousal jag*, the pleasurable relief from a fall in arousal (Berlyne 1972, see section 5.1.2 in this literature review). The discourse structures which are most successful in eliciting this kind of pleasure, according to Brewer and Lichtenstein's (1982) *structural-affect theory of stories*, are those that succeed in producing the emotions of *surprise*, *suspense* and *curiosity*, which lead to most enjoyment when they are followed by *resolution*. While surprise and suspense will be discussed further, it is important to stress here the role of *outcomes* in guiding our responses to plot structures. Narrative plots contain events which have the potential to lead to significant, either good or bad, outcomes for characters. The significance of outcomes of narrative events and the hopes associated with them can be linked to Allbritton and Gerrig's (1991) notion of participatory responses (*p-responses*) that 'arise as a consequence of involvement in the text' (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991: 603). P-responses are tied to the hopes and preferences which we form in the course of reading, and the reactions triggered by either positive or negative outcomes. Gerrig (1993) outlines three kinds of p-responses: the *hopes and preferences* which arise when characters arrive at situations where their goals may or may not be met, the *replotting* which we engage in as we consider possible alternatives to a (usually negative) outcome for a character, and finally *suspense*.

The experience of narrative suspense, according to Gerrig (1993: 79), can be described as problem solving, where readers are led to seek a solution to a situation which presents them with uncertainty. That is most likely to happen when the situation can lead to a 'sufficiently important' outcome for a fictional character – the context of the situation will be significant in assessing that importance. As far as the structural features of suspense are concerned, Brewer suggests that 'suspense discourse is organized with the initiating event early in the text and with considerable intervening material before the outcome is presented' (Brewer 1996: 113), where 'initiating event' is one that has the potential to lead to an important outcome. Tan, similarly, points out that in suspense, 'a crucial outcome, involving the fate of a sympathetic protagonist, is withheld, while at the same time, the certainty that it is about to be communicated grows' (Tan 1994: 15). The emphasis, then, is on the period of delay between the initiating event and the outcome, with the outcome being significant enough to trigger us to form hopes and preferences.

While in suspense we are aware that important information is being withheld from us, in surprise ‘the author withholds the critical information from the initial portions of the text and does not let the reader know that the information has been withheld’ (Brewer 1996: 111-112). The author subsequently discloses the information, producing surprise and forcing the reader to review his or her knowledge of the narrative events and form a fresh interpretation of the text. Tan also stresses the importance of revising current knowledge and opening a new perspective in experiencing narrative surprise – a process which he describes both as frustrating and rewarding (1994: 15-16). The reward associated with the ‘satisfying surprise’ triggered by narratives is emphasised by Tobin (2009), who argues that this kind of a pleasurable *narrative rug-pull* ‘must undermine expectations, while maintaining a sense that the undermining has all been done in a spirit of fair play’ (2009: 157). A successful surprise, therefore, is one that inspires an unexpected reinterpretation of textual information, but at the same time contains an element of predictability – we may not have seen it coming, but we have been given cues that become apparent in retrospect. Cueing expectations and the element of re-evaluation in narrative surprise are also key to Emmott’s (2003) discussion of plot reversals in written narratives, where she outlines some of the mechanisms used to encourage readers to form certain assumptions, before breaking those assumptions in surprising ‘twist in the tale’ endings. In text world theory terms, Gavins (2007) suggests *world-repair* and *world-replacement* as the enjoyment-inducing narrative mechanisms which help to manipulate readers’ expectations by forcing them to reassess their knowledge of the text and draw new, unexpected conclusions.

While the ordering of events in the plot can lead to a number of emotional responses such as suspense and surprise, those responses result to a large extent from our investment in the lives of the characters who are implicated in those events. Narrative plots, according to Oatley (2011), are studies of how fictional people negotiate problems or incidents which clash with their plans and goals. ‘In a typically structured narrative plot,’ he suggests, ‘actions generate incidents, which typically occur because of vicissitudes in character’s plans’ (2011: 95). A character, therefore, is ‘an idea of a person who has goals, and who enacts plans that derive from them’ (Oatley 2004: 99). Hogan, similarly, suggests, that actions which lead to story events are inseparable from the persons who perform them, and so our comprehension of events will be affected by our response to the characters involved – ‘In this way, character may indeed play a guiding role in evaluation’ (Hogan 2010: 150). These theoretical views are backed up by empirical research on what Ross (1977) refers to as *the fundamental attribution error* – the idea that when assessing the causes and implications of

everyday events, we tend to overestimate the significance of the traits or motivations of the people engaged in those events, overlooking the aspects or constraints of the situations themselves. This theory of dispositional over situational attributions has been linked to narrative comprehension by Gerrig and Allbritton (1990), who use it to explain what Gerrig (1989) calls *anomalous suspense*. Anomalous suspense is the feeling of suspense experienced upon rereading a story with which one is already familiar – it is, for example, the anxiety we feel for a protagonist in threatening situation, even though we know from the previous reading of the story that the outcome of this situation will be positive. Gerrig and Allbritton suggest that the anomalous suspense is brought about by the temporary misconception that the outcome of the story event relies heavily on the actions of the character: ‘the illusion that even the most formulaic outcomes are brought about – afresh – by the internal properties of characters’ (Gerrig and Allbritton 1990: 382).

5.1.2. Humour studies approaches to plot structures in comedy

In the context of narrative comedy, the relationship between story structures and humour has been linked to two structural features found in comic texts: (a) comic events interspersed throughout the narrative and (b) a happy ending to the story (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 12). For a narrative to be a comedy, according to Frye, ‘its structure will require a comic resolution and a prevailing comic mood’ (Frye 1957: 172). While the comic resolution can be linked to a happy ending, the prevailing comic mood can be established, for example, through the use of multiple humorous events. Writing about the structural features of film comedy, King suggests a distinction between comedies which are ‘closely integrated with narrative, emerging quite smoothly from narrative situations’ and those which are ‘little more than strings of gags tied only loosely together by narrative thread’ (2002: 20), thus emphasising the difference between a comic structure based on individual gags and that more reliant on the plot line. As I discuss below, both distinct humorous events and an overarching trajectory of the plot have been described as key structural features of various forms of comedy.

In a comic plot, an individual ‘comic moment’ or ‘comic event’ that exists within a narrative context can be a result of, for example, a joke or a gag (Neale and Krutnik 1990). The role of these instances of humour is to generate laughter and add to the overall humorous mood of the narrative. Such *local* forms of immediately recognisable humour (Neale and Krutnik 1990, Marszalek 2013) are constructed so as to trigger amusement, often by means of creating an easily resolvable incongruity. Classic research within the incongruity-resolution

strand of humour studies (as outlined in the main Literature Review, 2.2.1.iii) emphasises the ‘puzzle-like’ construction of a short comic text such as a joke, which is said to engage us in problem solving as we try to determine how the incongruous punch line follows from the main body of the text. Once a rule is found and the surprising incongruity is resolved, we experience amusement – lack of resolution means that we did not ‘get’ the joke (Suls 1972). While this simple incongruity-resolution mechanism cannot account for all types of humour (e.g. nonsense humour or more complex narrative comedy), it can be applied to standard canned jokes or cartoons, which are based on the surprise we feel when a text presents us with humorous incongruity and the pleasure we get once the incongruity is successfully resolved.

The emotion of surprise is one which is closely tied to that of amusement. Not only does the notion of comic surprise feature in the cognitive incongruity-resolution class of theories within humour studies, but it is also linked to the more psycho-/physiologically-centred school of thought that focuses on the role of *arousal* in experiencing amusement. Arousal (or release) theories of humour have centred on the idea of amusement as relieving psychological tension or releasing excess physiological energy (see 2.2.1.ii). While, as Martin (2007) suggests, the release-based hypotheses have been found to be inconsistent with the current understanding of the nervous system, Berlyne’s notion of *arousal boost* (e.g. 1972) is accepted as a modern take on the arousal/release theory. Arousal boost, meaning ‘a moderate rise in arousal’ (Berlyne 1972: 46), accompanies engaging with stimuli enhanced with what Berlyne refers to as *collative variables* (e.g. 1972), such as complexity, ambiguity, incongruity and – most importantly for this chapter – surprise. Surprise and amusement, then, are both said to lead to an increase in arousal. Importantly, they can also be thought to enhance each other, since according to the *excitation transfer theory*, ‘a person’s response to humor may be influenced by his excitatory state deriving from immediately prior experiences’ (Cantor, Bryant and Zillmann 1974: 819, discussed previously in 3.2.3.i). This affective approach to surprise and amusement as arousal-boosting complements the more cognitive view of them as related to problem solving and incongruity resolution mentioned above.

As Neale and Krutnik suggest, complex comic texts such as film and television comedies abound in humour-inducing ‘gags, jokes, wisecracks, and comic events’, which all share ‘a fundamental reliance on surprise’ (1990: 43). Neale and Krutnik devote considerable attention to the form of a *gag*, which they define as a ‘non-linguistic comic action’ whose reliance on surprise stems from its tendency to interrupt the progress of the plot (1990: 51-52). In film studies terms, a gag is an unexpected visual interruption or digression which evokes

humour. A particularly interesting property of a gag is that while it can be a one-off comic event, narratives also contain gags which are more ‘developed’ or ‘articulated’, meaning that the surprising comic action is presented as a part of a series of similar, linked actions. As an example, Neale and Krutnik suggest Charlie Chaplin’s eleven consecutive attempts to get into his bed in the 1915 film *One A.M.* (1990: 53). Such a developed gag can, as the authors argue, be restricted to a single narrative occasion, but it can also be interspersed across the story as a *running gag* (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 53). Running gags, where variations on the same comic events appear throughout the narrative, can be linked to what Triezenberg calls *repetition and variation* (2004, see also Marszalek 2012 and 2013), and can be seen as a manifestation of the circular, repetitive quality of comic narratives which Ermida terms the *Principle of Recurrence* (2008). The role of recurrence and repetition of similar events in comic plots will be discussed further (5.3.2.ii).

While gags can be considered individual comic events which exist within the larger narrative structure of comedy, another distinguishing feature of humorous narratives is an overarching trajectory of the plot that leads, through numerous obstacles, to a happy ending. Just like a short humorous form relies on a local resolution of incongruity, so does the extended comic narrative rely on a more encompassing resolution of plot events. A positive, satisfying conclusion to a story as a feature that distinguishes comedy from tragedy has been discussed in classical theory, where both comedy and tragedy have been described as consisting of the following components: a *protasis* (exposition), followed by an *epitasis* (complication), concluded by a *catastrophe* (resolution), where the catastrophe includes a *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and an *anagnorisis* (transition from ignorance to knowledge) (Evanthius in Neale and Krutnik 1990). While the peripeteia in tragedy is a reversal of fortune from better to worse, a comic resolution involves a shift where the plot reaches a positive conclusion. That positive conclusion is one where, after a string of complications, the original status quo is restored, the status quo being one the audience believes to be ‘the proper and desirable state of affairs’ (Frye 1957: 164). Frye stresses that ‘the theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it’ (1957: 43) – that is particularly relevant to romantic comedy, which follows the obstacles faced by the protagonist on the road to becoming reunited with his loved one, and which ends in a marriage that is celebrated by the society which may have previously opposed the union. The comforting quality of a comic ending is based, according to comedy writer Jonathan Lynn, on ‘reassuring the audience that society’s values are still intact’ (2011:

4), despite the – often self-inflicted – obstacles, complications and misfortunes that the characters go through in the course of the narrative.

5.2. *Stabilising cues: Expecting the unexpected*

In this section, I explore how features such as obstacles, complications and misfortunes can be integrated into the humorous narrative structure for a comic effect. The emphasis will be on the problems which arise for the characters in comic narratives, and on the stylistic techniques which enable those problems to be presented as *humorous complications*. It will be shown that, even though readers of humorous texts are often cued to anticipate such complications in the course of the plot, the humorous quality of characters' failures and setbacks lies in the surprise they can trigger and the resolution of that surprise once we realise that the problematic event has a humorous quality to it – that realisation which allows readers to distance themselves from the seriousness of the problem will be referred to as *humorous resolution*. The predictability of the overall structure of the comic plot (where, typically, a series of obstacles is followed by a happy ending) does not diminish the surprise, but protects us from the negative emotional impact that negative plot outcomes could otherwise evoke.

5.2.1. Comic plots

As comedy writer Jonathan Lynn argues (2011), in terms of the overall construction of the plot, comedy and tragedy are not remarkably different: 'in both genres,' he suggests, 'events spin dangerously out of control, leading eventually to madness, usually followed by a measure of understanding and resolution' (2011: 4). Both comedy and tragedy, moreover, are driven by the protagonist's character flaws, which make him or her initiate events that lead to his or her own destruction (Lynn 2011:4). The difference between the two genres, as Neale and Krutnik (1990: 28) point out based on the neoclassical theory of drama, is that while a comic resolution involves a change of fortune from worse to better (and consequently a happy ending), resolution in tragedy is typically less positive. That view, although applicable to classical drama, seems to have lost some of its relevance to contemporary texts. Mainstream films, in particular, have been influenced by Hollywood's insistence on happy endings as conclusions to all film genres, not only comedies (a feature which emerged in the classical period of Hollywood, according to Bordwell 1982). In this section, I explore the

cues which help to stabilise the plot of a written narrative as specifically comic: from setting an overall expectation of amusing story events ((i) below), to the construction of humorous complications (ii), to creating happy endings (iii).

(i) Exposition: Setting an expectation of comedy

The expectation of amusement which allows us to see humour in a plot where ‘events spin dangerously out of control, leading eventually to madness’ is partly, as Lynn suggests, achieved through characterisation (including not only the creation of a comic protagonist but also populating the world with easily recognisable humorous character types, see Chapter 4), and partly through cueing a humorous mode/mood which predisposes us towards experiencing amusement (as discussed in Chapter 3). These two broad categories of comedy-specific techniques can be seen to be linked to a more general approach to managing the reader’s expectations within the written discourse context proposed by Hoey (2001). Hoey sees written text as a site for interaction where the writer attempts to meet the reader’s needs by anticipating what the reader may be expecting – reading seems in fact to be based on continuously forming expectations or hypotheses which are either supported or refuted. That occurs on two levels, where some of the reader’s questions are more immediate than others: ‘At the same time that we formulate expectations about the immediately unfolding text, so also we formulate larger-scale hypotheses about the text as a whole’ (Hoey 2001: 35).

While the immediate small-scale expectations of humorous narratives will be discussed in the following section, here I focus on the ways in which we are cued to form assumptions about the overall trajectory of the plot. Hoey ties large-scale expectations about the development of the text to the idea of *genre*, suggesting that ‘it is possible for skilled readers familiar with the genre to make extensive and accurate predictions about what the text will contain’ – the ‘regularity of patterning’ in genres means that, on the basis of other texts of the same type, we have grown to expect certain features, and therefore formulate certain expectations (2001: 42, 43). With regard to narratives specifically, the two additional techniques which help the reader form predictions about how the text will unfold are *previews* (statements which signal the nature of the text to the reader) and *intertextuality* (the way the understanding of the text is affected by other, previous texts) (Hoey 2001: 43). In many narratives, signalling the genre, preview statements and the use of intertextuality can lead the reader to formulate large-scale expectations about how the plot will develop. As in the case of the cueing of the humorous mode discussed in Chapter 3, in comic narratives

these signals should appear relatively early on in order to give the readers a clear indication about the type of story they can anticipate. Below are extracts from the opening of *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, which rather openly guide the reader's expectations about how the narrative will develop:

Example 30

I

Two phone calls and a funeral

[...]

It all started with a phone call.

My father's voice, quavery with excitement, crackles down the line. 'Good news, Nadezhda. I'm getting married!'

[...]

'But Pappa, have you really thought this through? It seems very sudden. I mean, she must be a lot younger than you.'

I modulate my voice carefully, to conceal any signs of disapproval, like a worldly-wise adult dealing with a love-struck adolescent.

'Thirty-six. She's thirty-six and I'm eighty-four. So what?' (He pronounces 'vat'.)

There is a snap in his voice. He has anticipated this question.

'Well, it's quite an age difference...'

'Nadezhda, I never thought you would be so bourgeois.' (He puts emphasis on the last syllable – wah!)

'No, no.' He has me on the defensive. 'It's just that ... there could be problems.'

There will be no problems, says Pappa. He has anticipated all problems. [...]

(Lewycka 2005: 1-2)

The first part of this opening (omitted here) has already been analysed in Chapter 3, where I outlined how the degrading techniques used in it helped cue the humorous mode/mood, and

consequently signal the comic genre (3.2.3.ii.b). The genre of *A Short History*, as I also indicated before (3.2.2), is additionally clearly indicated via paratexts, such as excerpts from press reviews included on the cover which stress how amusing the book is (the word ‘funny’ appears three times on my Penguin edition) and a note which describes the novel as ‘Winner of the Bollinger Everyman Prize for Comic Fiction’. If that were not enough to guide the reader’s expectations, it can be noted that the title of the first chapter, *Two phone calls and a funeral*, is a clear reference to the comedy classic *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994, dir. Mike Newell). That intertextuality cue, which aims to tie Lewycka’s novel to Newell’s rom-com, is a nod towards those viewers who are familiar with the film and an indication that, like the film, the novel will also involve multiple complications, the majority of them humorous, some of them tragic. Apart from the obvious reference to another comic text, some of the intertextuality in this opening can be found between the lines – the characterisation, with a sympathetic, ordinary protagonist (Nadezhda) and a volatile, eccentric misfit (father) is evocative of comedy (as discussed in Chapter 4) and can direct our expectations based on other texts of the kind that we may have come across.

Most interesting, however, are the preview statements interspersed through the opening paragraphs. On the first page of the novel, we are already given a clear indication that the main source of complications in the narrative will be an elderly man’s snap decision to marry a virtually unknown young woman. This alone could be enough to cue the reader to expect trouble later on in a way which can be linked to *foreshadowing* (e.g. Chatman 1978). Foreshadowing, which Chatman (1978: 60) defines as ‘the semination of anticipatory satellites’ (where *satellites* mean minor plot events) shapes our expectations as to the development of the plot. It can, as Chatman suggests, also rely on the inferences we draw from characters (1978: 60), which is especially relevant in the case of Example 30, where the repetition of the word ‘problems’ implies that the narrator is aware of the turn which the events are likely to take. Nadezhda’s tentative ‘It’s just that ... there could be problems.’ helps the reader to articulate his or her own expectations regarding the development of the story, indicating that there *will* be problems on the way. Her father, it appears, ‘has anticipated’ not only his daughter’s (and the reader’s) reservations, but also potential problems. The readers, however, are encouraged to side with the sympathetic comic protagonist, bracing themselves for a plot full of amusing obstacles.

(ii) **Complication: Generating amusing problems**

We expect the obstacles to be amusing because of the generic, intertextuality and mode/mood cues which prepare us for processing a comic plot. While ‘complication’ is a general label which applies to most narratives to mean ‘an event or series of events which are unexpected, dangerous, or in general unusual’ and often have negative consequences that demand a narrative resolution (van Dijk 1975: 289), here I concentrate on *humorous complications* specifically, and on their *humorous resolution* which allows us to ‘reframe’ the problem as humorous. Rather than appealing to our emotional engagement by triggering participatory responses (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991, discussed in 5.3), the role of a humorous complication is to evoke amusement.

Humorous complications, in the way in which they are approached in this thesis, will be linked to the notions of *comic events* and *gags* outlined by Neale and Krutnik (1990) in relation to film and television comedy. In a multimodal comic text, a comic event is a humorous form integral to the framework of the narrative – it is, as Neale and Krutnik point out, ‘a consequence of the existence of characters and a plot’ (1990: 44). Comic events can be more or less integral to the structure of the plot, with some that are essential to the development of the story, and some which are of no narrative consequence (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 45). A comic event, crucially, is an instance of humour in which action and dialogue are combined – unlike a *gag*, which Neale and Krutnik define as ‘non-linguistic comic action’ and link primarily to the domain of the visual and the physical (1990: 51). A *gag*, which, like a comic event, can be either an integral piece of the narrative structure, or an (often gratuitous) digression that interrupts the plot, relies on surprise for its humorous effect. More developed forms referred to as *articulated gags* ‘work by producing surprising variations on a single action or a series of lined actions’, where an action is led to take an unexpected turn by going against a sociocultural norm or a pre-established narrative expectation (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 53).

Chosen aspects of both comic events and gags, despite their primary relevance to multimodal media texts, can be applied to the humorous story structures which are integral to written humorous narratives. The following extract from Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is an example of a humorous complication which combines features of a comic event and a gag:

Example 31

At that moment the phone rang. It was the mini-cab firm the girls had rung half an hour earlier saying there'd been a terrible multiple pile-up in Ladbroke Grove, plus all their cars had unexpectedly exploded and they weren't going to be able to come for another three hours.

(Fielding 1996: 128)

Like a gag, this complication interrupts the plot in a surprising way. The surprise, while based partly on the abruptness of the phone call itself, stems mainly from the exaggerated nature of the event which seemingly caused the phone exchange – like in an articulated gag, we are presented with multiple incidents (a pile-up, car explosions) which form a series of related actions. The disruption provided by these actions is not strictly a mere digression (it has minor consequences for the characters whose cab is delayed), but it is relatively gratuitous in that it is not essential to the development of the plot. Despite the visual character of the complication triggered by the images of cars crashing and exploding, the centrality of the telephone conversation makes it difficult to classify the event as a 'non-linguistic comic action', therefore it may be more appropriate to refer to it as a comic event rather than a gag.

Relating the complications of written comedy to similar plot structures found in other texts allows us to situate the term 'humorous complication' alongside those already established in the study of narrative humour. It does not, however, necessarily explain why those structures can evoke amusement. In what follows, I focus on the notion of *surprise* to explore the amusing potential of humorous complications, which are defined as:

A **humorous complication** in the written narrative context is a surprising event which has a negative, sometimes very serious, consequence for one or more of the characters, but which is presented as humorous to the reader. It is a situation that (a) is based around a problem which (b) contains unexpected, incongruous qualities and which (c) swiftly reaches a **humorous resolution** once the reader is able to distance him- or herself from the seriousness of the problem.

The emphasis on surprise and a fast humorous resolution allow problematic plot events to trigger amusement instead of more serious emotional engagement. In a playful, non-serious humorous narrative context, we anticipate that events will go humorously wrong, but we want those humorous complications to take us by surprise.

As far as text organisation is concerned, such a problem-based course of events can be linked to what Hoey calls the *Problem-Solution pattern*, which leads our lower level expectations regarding how the immediately unfolding text will develop (as opposed to the higher level expectations about the text as a whole discussed earlier in 5.2.1.i). The easily recognisable, culturally popular Problem-Solution pattern is composed of the stages of *Situation, Problem, Response* and *Evaluation/Result* (2001: 123). Its key element, according to Hoey, is the question ‘What did you do about it?’ which the reader asks after finding out that an agent encountered a Problem. The following Response should lead to a Result. While Hoey’s Problem-Solution pattern of text organisation places emphasis on the Response (doing something about the problem that arose), its humour-specific equivalent seems to concentrate on the Problem itself. Instead of asking ‘What did you do about the Problem?’, we are more interested to know ‘What went wrong?’ In the humorous context where we are striving for events to spin amusingly out of control but have been given no cues as to how and when that will happen, encountering an unexpected problem triggers satisfying surprise. The problem, importantly, does not need to be solved – in the mini-cab extract (Example 31), our amusement is likely to be triggered exclusively by the unfortunate event, independent of how the characters responded to fix the situation.

For the reader of a humorous narrative, the humorous resolution of a surprise at an unexpected and problematic plot event stems not from observing the negative situation reaching a positive solution, but from shifting our perspective of the situation itself – noticing its humorous side. It is the reader’s recognition that the complication, despite causing problems for the characters, is in fact part of a larger humorous framework and it can therefore be treated as humorous, not threatening. It is particularly clear in the above passage from *Bridget Jones* (Example 31), where our potential puzzlement at the surprisingly exaggerated nature of the incident, when contrasted with our real-world preconceptions of the reliability of mini-cabs (in the British context, at least), can lead us to reach a conclusion that the narrative complication was created to cause our amusement, not concern.

That kind of puzzlement-humorous conclusion pattern can be seen to correspond with the incongruity-resolution approach to humour appreciation, where emphasis is placed on the surprising nature of a humorous stimulus and the resolution of this surprise as a source of humour. According to Suls’ classic model (1972, outlined 2.2.1.iii), surprise is a response which follows from encountering an incongruous humorous stimulus, and which precedes the cognitive work necessary to resolve the incongruity. The surprise stage, therefore, can be considered a crucial element of processing a humorous, problem-based situation. Drawing on

Hoey's (2001) Problem-Solution pattern and Suls' (1972) incongruity-resolution model, I suggest that the full structure of a humorous complication can thus be summarised as: *[situation], problem, surprise, humorous resolution, [amusement]*. The problem, which may be preceded by a description of the situation, can be seen as a humorous stimulus which triggers surprise and, if successfully – humorously – resolved, can lead to amusement.

To illustrate this process in more detail, below I show how a very serious problem which concerns a highly sympathetic protagonist can be manipulated to become a humorous complication. The following humorous complication revolves around a problem which, unlike the comparatively trivial minicab delay in Example 31, has serious repercussions for the narrative's protagonist. In the extract below, Arthur Dent, the hero of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, explains to his local council worker that he received very little notice about the fact that his house had been scheduled to be demolished:

Example 32

The first thing I knew about it was when a workman arrived at my home yesterday. I asked him if he'd come to clean the windows and he said no he'd come to demolish the house. He didn't tell me straight away, of course. Oh no. First he wiped a couple of windows and charged me a fiver. Then he told me.

(Adams 2002: 7)

While the house demolition certainly carries enormous weight for both the protagonist and the development of the plot, the way it is described here allows the reader to temporarily distance him- or herself from the seriousness of the problem, and view aspects of the event as humorous. There are two major techniques used here to present the protagonist's problem as a humorous complication: the structuring of the event which leads to a humorous resolution, and the distancing stylistic techniques which minimise the emotional impact of the event.

Example 32 can be viewed as a humorous complication because it is based around a problem, and the problem is constructed to feature incongruous qualities which evoke surprise. Rather unexpectedly, it turns out that the worker who first informed Arthur about the demolition of the house was posing as a window cleaner to make some money on the side. This unexpected detail about the worker's conduct is very far removed from what could be expected in a typical situation of this kind, and therefore its appearance creates a surprising, incongruous effect. In a narrative world which is otherwise humorous, the incorporation of

this incongruous quality into our interpretation of the problem is likely to lead to a humorous resolution.

With regard to style, what stands out is the chatty, informal register which does not seem to match the seriousness of the situation – the sentence ‘First he wiped a couple of windows and charged me a fiver.’ seems particularly nonchalant, with the indefinite phrase ‘a couple of windows’ and the informal noun ‘fiver’ suggesting the speaker’s surprisingly non-committal, casual attitude to what happened to him. Another technique which can potentially distance us from the events described is the use of parallel structures. The construction of ‘I asked him if he’d come to clean the windows and he said no he’d come to demolish the house.’ stands out due to the seemingly unnecessary repetition of the unit ‘he’d come to’, which appears twice in the short sentence. This noticeable structural parallelism can draw our attention to the linguistic layer of the text, shifting that attention away from the actual story events (see 3.2.3.ii.a for a discussion of foregrounding and parallelism). It is worth pointing out again that there is nothing inherently humorous about either foregrounding techniques or informal register, as they appear in both comic and non-comic texts. However, in a larger humorous context they can act as distancing devices which complement other stabilising cues, such as the problem-surprise-humorous resolution pattern discussed above.

A humorous resolution occurs when detecting an unexpected incongruity in some part of the description of the problem encourages us to reframe our perception of those aspects of the complication as humorous. Example 32 offers two sources of this kind of incongruity. Firstly, the surprising detail about the worker’s window-cleaning fraud stands out as inappropriate, or incongruous, in the situation. Secondly, the main character’s matter-of-fact description of the problematic event clashes with what could otherwise be expected from someone in that position. By being surprised by those incongruous qualities of the event, we are reminded that the narrative world in which we are immersed is a humorous one – one which, as one reader suggests in his Goodreads review of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide*, is based on ‘ridiculous plotting’:

Since I was maybe twelve or thirteen when I read this, I’m sure some of the dry humor flew right over my head, but the slapstick, sight gags, and ridiculous plotting sure didn’t. There are so many absurdist details in this ricocheting narrative that presenting you with a thorough summary would be tough.

(David, 6 Apr 2012)

Adams' novel, as David points out, abounds in various types of humorous complications. Some of them, although intended to amuse (e.g. gags or slapstick), may not follow a clear-cut problem-surprise-humorous resolution pattern. Generally, however, what distinguishes a comic complication from a non-comic one is some incongruous, surprising quality of the problem and the humorous resolution we reach once we reframe it in accordance with the overall humorous mode of the narrative.

(iii) Resolution: Leading to a happy ending

One reason why the problems which lead to humorous complications tend to be perceived as non-threatening is that our large-scale expectation of comic narratives is one of an overall comic resolution – a happy ending. There may be obstacles on the way, but they, as Frye suggests, simply 'form the action of the comedy', and it is the overcoming of them that leads to the comic resolution (1957: 164). This expectation that, despite complications, everything will be 'alright' in the end, can protect the reader from the potential negative impact of problematic story events. While this will not be true of all comic narratives (as I outline in 5.3. below), it is most likely to apply to the sub-genre of romantic comedy, which, as Frye points out in relation to its origins as the New Comedy of the classical period, culminates in a highly manipulated twist in the plot 'which is the comic form of Aristotle's "discovery"' (1957: 44). The low mimetic New Comedy, which centres around an intrigue between a young couple whose happiness is blocked by some kind of opposition, ends in a twist that allows for the characters to be united and accepted by the society.

The formula can still be found in contemporary romantic comedies, including *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *High Fidelity* analysed here. Both texts involve highly identifiable, ordinary protagonists faced with obstacles which stand in the way of them being united with their romantic interest. To the joy of their friends and families (and, most likely, the reader), they do eventually find their way back to their partners. The action of comedy, as Frye argues (1957: 44), 'moves towards the incorporation of the hero into the society that he naturally fits'. In their respective ways, both Bridget and Rob have found their ways back into that society – from the dreaded, socially frowned-upon state of being single over thirty, to the desired relationship applauded by their families and friends. In both cases, the positive change of fortune had an element of surprise to it and was more or less out of the protagonist's hands. Rob's ex-girlfriend Laura unexpectedly recommences their relationship after her father's funeral ('We're going home,' she says, and that is how our relationship

resumes its course', Hornby 2000: 197), and then subsequently surprises Rob even more by organising a big party for him, which allows for their local community to come together in a happy ending. Bridget, in an even more dramatic finale, is swept off her feet by Mark, 'his hair unkempt, his shirt unbuttoned' (Fielding 1996: 303), who appears during Christmas lunch at her parents' not only to finally confess his love for Bridget, but also to rescue the family from an inebriated Portuguese conman who attempts to elope with Bridget's mother. Both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *High Fidelity* end in a plot twist which brings about a restoration of the desired status quo – in other words, a comic resolution. 'Happy endings,' writes Frye, 'do not impress us as true, but as desirable' (Frye 1957: 170).

5.3. *Destabilising cues: Bearing the unbearable*

In this section, I focus on the techniques which can disrupt our experience of comic story structures by triggering responses unrelated to amusement. While the previous section was concerned with those cues that turn negative plot events into sources of humorous surprise, here I consider what happens when those situations are made to retain some of their negative emotional impact. It will be argued that our involvement in the story can affect our reactions to humorous complications, with *participatory responses* (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991) playing a role in destabilising our experience of comedy. Of the three types of participatory responses outlined by Gerrig (1993), *suspense* will be seen as the one especially relevant to destabilising humour. Here, I explore its relationship with those techniques which allow writers to construct differing *hierarchies of knowledge* amongst the readers and the characters, such as *dramatic irony* and *recurrence*.

5.3.1. Enhancing involvement in the plot

The humorous complications which drive comic plots, despite being framed as amusing for the reader's benefit, are adverse events which often have profound repercussions for the characters involved in them. 'The important thing to understand,' suggests Lynn, 'is that the events of the comedy are deadly serious and potentially tragic *for the characters*. If they are not sufficiently important, the audience may feel that its time has been wasted' (2011: 5-6). The audience's interest in the plot, therefore, is partly dependent on the seriousness of the potential *outcomes* faced by the characters. In their discussion of readers' involvement in

texts, Allbritton and Gerrig (1991) distinguish between *positive* and *negative outcomes* for characters, which give rise to *positive* or *negative preferences* in the readers. Positive preferences are those where the reader is hoping for a positive outcome – an outcome that would be considered desirable outside the context of the story. Negative preferences, on the other hand, are associated with hoping for negative outcomes – ones which would typically be considered undesirable (Allbritton and Gerrig suggest ‘a successful killing’ as an example). Those preferences give rise to patterns of participatory responses (p-responses), which are readers’ reactions ‘that arise as a consequence of involvement in the text’ (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991: 603).

The concept of p-responses was subsequently developed by Gerrig (1993), who stressed their noninferential nature (as opposed to the logical, knowledge-based inferencing we use to ‘bridge gaps’ in texts, Gerrig 1993: 27) and outlined *hopes and preferences*, *replotting* and *suspense* as the three types of such noninferential responses. Hopes and preferences are most closely tied to Allbritton and Gerrig’s original notion of readers hoping for particular outcomes, giving rise to positive or negative preferences. Gerrig stresses, however, that while in real-life situations positive preferences tend to be the norm, in the context of a particular narrative readers can be cued to prefer either kind of outcome (1993: 71). That, as I have already signalled (and will discuss further), is particularly true of humorous narratives, where readers are often encouraged to strive for unfortunate, problematic, unsuccessful events which could be considered negative outcomes, since those outcomes are comically presented for us as humorous complications. While hopes and preferences are responses which we formulate before we discover narrative outcomes, replotting is a reaction which can occur once those outcomes are revealed to us. Replotting involves mentally commenting on the resolution of events, considering possible alternatives to the actual outcome. It is easiest to observe, Gerrig suggests, when the outcome has been particularly negative (1993: 90). The final type of p-response, suspense, is the expression of uncertainty which surrounds an unknown outcome. Its vital component is the period of delay between the point when suspense is initiated and the point when the outcome is revealed. Suspense is the one p-response which will be discussed further in more detail, as its role in film and television comedy has received attention in humour studies (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 55-56, King 2002: 49), and the findings are highly relevant to written humorous narratives.

(i) Suspense

Suspense as a reaction to story structures has already been mentioned in the literary review at the beginning of this chapter (5.1.1.), where the structuring of suspenseful plot events was associated with a delayed revelation of an important plot outcome. Unlike surprise, which gives us quick, unexpected resolution of narrative events, suspense is built around a delay, first signalling that something will happen, and then postponing the disclosure of the details. In his approach to suspense as one of the p-responses which accompany processing narrative texts, Gerrig (1993) defines it as follows:

The experience of suspense should occur when a reader (1) lacks knowledge about (2) some sufficiently important target outcome. Feelings of suspense will be heightened to the extent that (3) the target outcome maps out a challenging problem space and (4) the author is able to sustain participatory responses over a period of delay.

(Gerrig 1993: 79)

Suspense is achieved when the reader is made to wait for an important outcome, and this wait is a source of tension. Suspense, in fact, is most typically associated with the fear-inducing genres of thriller or horror – Alfred Hitchcock, ‘The Master of Suspense’, gained his title on account of his ability to make viewers squirm in discomfort (see Smith 2000). Its close association with tension and discomfort make suspense rather far removed from the positive emotion of amusement, suggesting perhaps that the creation of suspense has little in common with the creation of humour. Douglas Adams plays with this idea in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, where on one occasion he makes a point out of protecting his reader from the uncomfortable feeling of suspense. The example, which appears as the characters’ space ship approaches an unknown planet (which may or may not be Magrathea, the planet that they are looking for), is particularly useful as it shows the inner workings of narrative suspense, as well as commenting on its experience for the reader:

Example 33

Stress and nervous tension are now serious social problems in all parts of the Galaxy, and it is in order that this situation should not be in any way exacerbated that the following facts will now be revealed in advance.

The planet in question *is* in fact the legendary Magrathea.

The deadly missile attack shortly to be launched by an ancient automatic defence system will result merely in the breakage of three cups and a mousecage, the bruising of somebody's upper arm, and the untimely creation and sudden demise of a bowl of petunias and an innocent sperm whale.

In order that some sense of mystery should still be preserved, no revelation will yet be made concerning whose upper arm sustains the bruise. This fact may safely be made the subject of suspense since it is of no significance whatsoever.

(Adams 2002: 103)

The narrator, mindful of the negative emotional effects of suspense, reveals the outcomes of the characters' arrival at Magrathea, so as to spare the reader the tension of waiting to find out what happens. It is interesting to note how Adams deconstructs the creation of suspense as a narrative strategy, choosing terms such as 'revelation' or 'significance' to describe how suspenseful situations are best constructed. I have been suggesting that psychological research views narrative suspense as the effect of a delayed revelation of a significant outcome – Adams seems to be confirming that, and his novel shows that he is a master of the craft. Despite the apparent concern about the reader's feelings, suspenseful events abound in *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, creating tension as we are made to wait for outcomes as significant as the end of the World (and that is just the beginning of the novel). Adams' book, part-comic novel, part-science fiction cliff-hanger, shows how one text can incorporate elements of both humour and suspense. The example above illustrates one of the possible uses of suspense for humour creation, but this type of a humorous deconstruction is by no means a common technique in comic novels and short stories. Below, I discuss how suspense and amusement can be cued simultaneously in a complex humorous response, resulting in what will be referred to as *comic suspense*.

(ii) **Comic suspense**

Comic suspense in humorous narratives occurs when amusement and suspense are triggered together, creating a blend of uncomfortable tension and humorous enjoyment. Its main ingredients, as I will show, are *predictability* and *delay* – a narrative situation involving comic suspense will be structured to cue an expectation of a particular course of events, but will delay the revelation of how these events actually develop. Since the focus of this chapter is on the role of failures and misfortunes as comic events, it can be said that comic suspense

is based on our awareness that something in the narrative world is about to go wrong, but we are made to wait to find out what it is and how exactly it happens. As Neale and Krutnik suggest in relation to film and television comedy, ‘If there is a banana skin around, *someone* will fall on it’ (1990: 55) – the source of tension is the delayed revelation of who it will be and in what circumstances.

This approach to suspense in humorous narratives is informed by King’s (2002) work on film comedy, where the tension associated with comic suspense is said to lie in the gap between our knowledge that something is about to go wrong and the ‘delayed revelation of what *exactly* will go wrong in any particular case’ (King 2002: 49). The following example from David Sedaris’ ‘A learning curve’ illustrates this phenomenon. In the autobiographical short story, Sedaris recounts his first class as a creative writing tutor – a job which he had been eagerly looking forward to, but for which he failed to adequately prepare. Based on his idea of what teachers did, he focused his preparations on finding the right briefcase and cutting leaf-shaped name tags out of orange paper. As a result, he arrives in the classroom with a professional-looking briefcase filled with nothing but paper leaves and pins, which he accordingly distributes to the students:

Example 34

“All right then,” I said. “Okay, here we go.” I opened my briefcase and realized that I’d never thought beyond this moment. The orange leaves were the extent of my lesson plan, but still I searched the empty briefcase, mindful that I had stupidly armed my audience with straight pins. I guess I’d been thinking that, without provocation, my students would talk, offering their thoughts and opinions on the issues of the day. I’d imagined myself sitting on the edge of the desk, overlooking a forest of raised hands. The students would simultaneously shout to be heard, and I’d pound on something in order to silence them. “Whoa people,” I’d yell. “Calm down, you’ll all get your turn. One at a time, one at a time.”

The error of my thinking yawned before me. A terrible silence overtook the room, and seeing no other option, I instructed my students to pull out their notebooks and write a brief essay related to the theme of profound disappointment.

(Sedaris 2002: 85)

We knew that David was unprepared to teach and expected that things would go wrong for him – what we did not know was *how*. The opening of the passage (“All right then,” I said.

“Okay, here we go.” I opened my briefcase and realized that I’d never thought beyond this moment.’) confirms our overall expectations regarding the course of events (that is, David will fail), but sets a new question, which can be summarised as ‘How much worse will it get before it gets better?’ Being familiar with the general humorous context of Sedaris’ writing helps to view the uncomfortable situation as a source of amusement rather than of genuine risk for the character, but it does not mean that we do not anticipate the unpleasantness of the situation to exacerbate. On the contrary, we suspect (and possibly dread the fact) that the situation will be getting worse, but the revelation of how bad exactly is being delayed.

Rather than immediately showing the reader how David resolves the problem, the narrator first shifts the perspective from the actual situation of the classroom to the imagined classroom which David envisaged when he was preparing for his first class. This shift is marked by the aspect which suddenly switches from the past simple to past perfect (‘I’d been thinking’, ‘I’d imagined’), and by the subjunctive mood which changes the focus from David’s reality to his imaginary first class (‘I’d pound’, ‘I’d yell’). This process can be linked to what Emmott calls a *frame switch*, as it is a situation where the reader’s attention is led to move from one context to another (1997: 173, see 1.2.1 for Emmott’s contextual frame theory). The contexts, although different in that one is real and one is imagined, refer to the same situation; David’s first class. As a result, the reader, although potentially distracted by the exaggerated qualities of the idyllic imagined scene, is being kept aware that a *frame recall* (Emmott 1997) is about to follow, in which we return to the original context and the outcome will finally be revealed. The comic suspense in the extract, therefore, relies on the narrator suspending the events in one narrative context (or *frame*, Emmott 1997) and forcing the reader to switch to a different context to wait for a resolution.

That resolution is provided when, after a period of delay, David finally suggests an activity to the students. The outcome of his first teaching experience, as expected, is a disappointing one – as emphasised by the theme of his proposed assignment. It is important to note that the protagonist, although previously blissfully unaware of how inadequate his preparation had been, realises his imminent failure soon after the class begins. This means that the reader is likely to experience what Smith (2000: 20) calls *shared suspense* – suspense which, thanks to the insight into the character’s mental state (here enabled by first person narration), the reader shares with the character.

Although the outcome of David’s first creative writing class is arguably negative, it has a humorous quality to it. At the heart of this humorous quality lies the surprising, unexpectedly relevant topic of the activity he finally proposes to his students. By asking them

to write ‘a brief essay related to the theme of profound disappointment’, the narrator unexpectedly sums up his own feelings about his first teaching experience, providing what can be considered a punch line to the whole episode. The surprise potentially triggered by that punch line can provide the kind of humorous resolution which, as outlined in the discussion of humorous complications (5.2.1.ii), allows us to humorously reframe David’s failure by turning something unfortunate into something amusing. While Example 34, due to its delayed presentation of the outcome, relies on suspense, it also possesses qualities of a surprising, amusing humorous complication. The relationship between suspense and surprise in our experiencing of comic events will now be explored in more detail.

In the previous section (5.2), I introduced the term ‘humorous complication’ as a surprise-inducing problem-based plot event and emphasised its reliance on unexpectedness and a swift comic resolution which helps us view the problem in a humorous light. Instances of comic suspense, by contrast, were said to differ from humorous complications in their reliance on predictability and a delayed revelation of a significant outcome – a slow narrative resolution (narrative resolution here simply means the presentation of the narrative outcome rather than the humorous ‘reframing’ discussed in relation to humorous complications.) This clear distinction between unpredictability/fast resolution in surprise-based comic events and predictability/slow resolution in suspense-based ones has been outlined by Neale and Krutnik (1990), who discuss it in relation to cinematic gags. A gag which involves suspense, they argue, delays the introduction of the comic event, ‘while the narration provides the information necessary to generate anticipation, or slowly unfolds the events with which it will culminate’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 57). A gag of surprise, however, is structured so that the comic event will be unexpected and it ‘will be presented as rapidly as possible’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 56). To return to the banana skin analogy – surprise is triggered once someone unexpectedly slips on one which we did not know was there, and suspense occurs when we are made to wait for someone to slip on one which we have been shown.

Despite this apparent contrast between suspense- and surprise-based gags, however, Neale and Krutnik point out that ‘however much a comedy may involve or depend upon suspense, it will usually at some point also involve surprise’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 40). A scene which involves nothing but a banana skin on which someone *may* fall, although potentially suspenseful, has little to do with humour. Amusement is most likely to occur once someone finally falls on the skin, and falls in an unexpected manner that triggers humorous surprise. The inextricable relationship between surprise and amusement (discussed previously in 5.1.2) means that humorous plot events which have been structured to evoke amusement

are likely to rely on surprise. That is why many instances of comic suspense (like Example 34 above) will, after a period of delay, culminate in a moment of amusement-inducing surprise.

5.3.2. Manipulating degrees of knowledge

In order to fully appreciate the blend of suspense and amusement, the reader needs to be led to wait for an outcome which is expected to be negative, but the details of the outcome must come as a surprise. Despite the element of surprise which accompanies the presentation of a negative outcome, comic suspense involves a degree of predictability, ensured by the writer's ability to signal that something is about to go wrong. In other words, we must be provided with some form of knowledge that a complication is about to occur, but with incomplete awareness of the actual nature of the complication.

King (2002: 48) uses the term 'differential hierarchies of knowledge' to describe how, in film comedy, the concealment of information from the viewer can lead to different effects than the concealment of information from the characters. While the withholding of information from the viewer (or the viewer and the character together), as King suggests, 'can result in a moment of comic surprise when the truth is revealed', 'concealment from characters within the narrative is often used to create comic suspense' (2002: 48). Since the first type of concealment has been discussed in the previous sections as a feature of surprise-based humorous complications, here I focus on the second type of withholding of information, that which forms a gap between the knowledge of the reader and the knowledge of the characters – 'a gap that is extended for some minutes in this case to increase the audience's comic anticipation' (King 2002: 49).

(i) Dramatic irony

'In comedy,' suggests Lynn, 'the more information the audience has about a scene and the less information one or more of the characters in the scene has, the funnier it will be' (Lynn 2011: 168). The device which allows for such a distribution of knowledge is *dramatic irony*, which, as Lynn summarises, 'is when the audience knows more about the plot than one or more of the characters' (Lynn 2011: 166). Aside from its use in humour creation, dramatic irony can be found in texts which involve suspense, making it particularly useful in the construction of comic suspense. The following example from *Right Ho, Jeeves* illustrates how dramatic irony can be used for comic effect, where the reader is made to writhe in anticipation of a humorous disaster – a disaster which the reader can clearly foresee, but

which the protagonist is oblivious to. The extracts come from a long scene in which the protagonist and first-person narrator Bertie Wooster makes an attempt at match-making, hoping to help Gussie Fink-Nottle unite with the woman of his dreams, Miss Bassett. Gussie is too shy to confess his love to Miss Bassett, and so Bertie invites her out for a walk to fill her in on the situation. Unfortunately, in his effort to create an air of mystery and romance, Bertie inadvertently leads Miss Bassett up the wrong path. ‘It may interest you,’ he begins, ‘that there is an aching heart at Brinkley Court’ (Wodehouse 2008: 112). After a prolonged exchange in which, to Bertie’s irritation, Miss Bassett is trying to guess whom Bertie is referring to as the ‘aching heart’ (there are a number of young couples at Brinkley Court), she seems to finally grasp what Bertie is trying to say:

Example 35 (a)

‘Oh, Mr Wooster!’

‘I take it you believe in love at first sight?’

‘I do, indeed.’

‘Well, that’s what happened to this aching heart. It fell in love at first sight, and ever since it’s been eating itself out, as I believe the expression is.’

There was a silence. She had turned away and was watching a duck out on the lake. It was tucking into weeds, a thing I’ve never been able to understand anyone wanting to do. Though I suppose, if you face it squarely, they’re no worse than spinach. She stood drinking it in for a bit, and then it suddenly stood on its head and disappeared, and this seemed to break the spell.

‘Oh, Mr Wooster!’ she said again, and from the tone of her voice, I could see that I had got her going.

(Wodehouse 2008: 113)

Familiarity with the narrative world and its multiple humorous complications may have led some readers to suspect that Bertie’s scheme would backfire from the moment he invited Miss Bassett for a walk to inform her about Gussie’s affection. The extract above, however, provides an indication as to *how exactly* the plan will fail: Miss Bassett misinterprets Bertie’s indirectness and romantic register to conclude that *Bertie* is confessing his love to her. Her sudden speechlessness, broken only by an occasional exclamation of ‘Oh, Mr Wooster!’, and the fact that she turns away from him to ponder on his words are signals that she has made up her mind as to who the ‘aching heart’ is and whom it is aching for. Bertie, however, seems

perfectly unaware of what Miss Bassett is thinking – in fact, he seems convinced that his match-making scheme is unfolding well.

This disparity between Bertie’s and Miss Bassett’s contrasting interpretations of the same event is communicated through the combination of direct speech between the characters (the meaning of which is left to the reader’s judgement) and Bertie’s free direct thought (in which he comments on what he believes to be happening, but which clashes with the reader’s position). Our direct access to Bertie’s thoughts – and the textual cues which allow us to evaluate those thoughts as erroneous – give an impression of what one Goodreads reader of Wodehouse refers to as ‘Bertie’s voice’:

Bertie’s voice in the Jeeves books is one of the greatest achievements in all of comic fiction—absolutely consistent, totally confident, unerringly wrong.

(Timothy Hallinan, 20 Aug 2013)

The reader’s interpretation of Bertie’s voice as ‘unerringly wrong’ suggests that readers of Wodehouse’s *Jeeves and Wooster* narratives, including *Right Ho, Jeeves*, are made aware of the gap between their own knowledge and the knowledge of the character. In the extract 35 (a), for example, that hierarchy of knowledge is established as the reader is encouraged to notice Bertie’s lack of ability to understand what Miss Bassett’s is thinking. His ignorance shows when he overlooks her loaded ‘Oh, Mr Wooster!’ exclamations, fails to read her body language (when she turns away to look at the lake, he is more interested in the duck) and misinterprets her tone of voice. To the reader already aware of Bertie’s lack of insight, his self-satisfied statement ‘from the tone of her voice, I could see that I had got her going’ is a clear indication that he failed to interpret her tone successfully, and believes that his plan is on the right track. To be on the safe side, he decides to elaborate on the suffering of the ‘aching heart’ in a way which can be both amusing and uncomfortable to the reader:

Example 35 (b)

‘It’s having a dickens of a time. Can’t eat, can’t sleep – all for love of you. And what makes it so particularly rotten is that it – this aching heart – can’t bring itself up to the scratch and tell you the position of affairs, because your profile has gone and given it cold feet. Just as it is about to speak, it catches sight of you sideways, and words fail it. Silly, of course, but there it is.’

I heard her give a gulp, and I saw that her eyes had become moistish.
Drenched irises, if you care to put it that way.

(Wodehouse 2008: 113)

The use of direct speech, again, allows us to form our own interpretation of what is being said (in a way not mitigated by Bertie), and most likely attempt to guess what Miss Bassett's interpretation may be. To us and to her, the language of Bertie's utterance may be evocative of a love letter. Hyperboles ('can't eat, can't sleep'), idioms ('cold feet') and metonymy ('this aching heart – can't bring itself...') are all used to describe mental states, and the accumulation of them in such a short passage can give an impression of the speaker as an amateur poet, trying to accurately (and lyrically) express his love. From her reaction, it is clear that Miss Bassett is overcome with emotion, most likely believing that she is taking part in a heartfelt confession of love – mistakenly (but understandably) misinterpreting the owner of the 'aching heart' metonymy. Unlike her, the reader witnesses the scene unfold from a privileged position of knowledge – we know what Bertie is thinking and we know what Miss Bassett is thinking, yet the two of them are in the dark as to what the other one means. Our ability to spot and make sense of the incongruity between their interpretations of the same event – match-making for Bertie and a love confession for Miss Bassett – can, in itself, be a source of amusement (see 4.2.3 for more on miscommunication and humour). Here, however, the amusement is destabilised by the prolonged feeling of suspense which is triggered once the miscommunication is signalled and then maintained until the problematic situation finally reaches a solution in which Bertie realises his mistake. To the reader's discomfort, that solution is significantly delayed, and is only presented after the characters are firmly set in their incorrect beliefs:

Example 35 (c)

'Please don't say any more, Mr Wooster.'

Well, I wasn't going to, of course.

'I understand.'

I was glad to hear this.

'Yes, I understand. I won't be so silly as to pretend not to know what you mean. I suspected this at Cannes, when you used to stand and stare at me without speaking a word, but with whole volumes in your eyes.'

(Wodehouse 2008: 114)

Miss Bassett finally reveals her interpretation of Bertie Wooster's words – and indeed the suspicions she had held for a longer time. By clarifying the miscommunication and putting an end to Bertie's ignorance, she provides a solution to the problem which had been the source of suspense. Up to this point, we have been experiencing suspense *on behalf* of Bertie, who himself was oblivious to the situation until the very last moment. It can be related to what Smith (2000: 18-19) calls *vicarious suspense*, one that 'requires the audience to experience anxieties and uncertainties on behalf of a character – i.e. vicariously – following receipt of crucial information of which that character is unaware'. While the revelation of the outcome relieves the reader from one type of discomfort, we are soon faced with another, this time one which we share with the protagonist. As it turns out, Miss Bassett thinks that Bertie is proposing to her, but instead of directly giving him the answer, she babbles on, keeping him and the reader in suspense as to what her response will be. 'My whole fate hung upon a woman's word' (Wodehouse 2008: 115), Bertie discloses to the reader, emphasising the tension of the wait for a definitive answer. The smooth transition from vicarious to shared suspense ('shared suspense' was discussed previously in relation to Example 34) illustrates Wodehouse's success at what Gerrig describes as 'the author's task (that is, the author's pleasure) to make readers wait as long as possible without exiting the narrative world in disgust or dismay' (Gerrig 1993: 86). Unlike the example from Sedaris (34), in which the suspense was condensed in a short paragraph with a surprising 'punch line' resolution, here the suspense is much more prolonged, and the surprise more subtle. Our privileged position of knowledge made possible through dramatic irony makes it easier to anticipate how exactly the events will go wrong, therefore maximising the suspense and minimising the surprise. Rather than leading to the 'ha-ha' moment which results from a comic resolution of surprise in more straightforward humorous complications, here we are faced with a few 'oh-no' moments which precede imminent (humorous) disaster, as the writer cues us to join the dots before the characters do.

(ii) Recurrence

Aside from giving us direct access to the protagonist's thoughts and allowing us to see that he is misinterpreting the situation, Wodehouse's other strategy for creating dramatic irony is the use of *recurrence* as a structural technique. One of the reasons why we knew that Bertie's plan would backfire is that we have been given sufficient information about the outcomes of his previous schemes – as Jeeves very politely sums it up in a conversation with Bertie which

precedes the Miss Bassett match-making fiasco, ‘Well, sir, if I may take the liberty of reminding you of it, your plans in the past have not always been uniformly successful’ (Wodehouse 2008: 91). Bertie Wooster’s failed schemes thus become a recurring theme in the novel, making it possible for the reader familiar with the narrative world to guess their outcomes before the character does. While the use of recurrence in comic narratives can be linked to a number of different effects, here I discuss its importance in establishing varying degrees of knowledge which affect our experience of humorous complications.

Research in comic narratives emphasises the importance of recurrence as a structural feature of comedy texts (many of the terms discussed below, therefore, were already introduced in the review of the linguistic work on comic narratives, 2.2.3). In her comprehensive account of humorous short stories, Ermida (2008: 172-173) suggests that *Principle of Recurrence* is one of the essential principles which the narrative has to obey in order to be classified as humorous – a narrative which does not exhibit recurrence, therefore, cannot be considered humorous. Nash (1985: 72-73) proposes the notion of a *root joke* which, through recurrent mention, informs the infrastructure of a comic narrative (like the circular logic of *Catch-22* frequently mentioned in Heller’s novel). Attardo (2002: 236), whose main focus is on the humorous *jab lines* which occur in comic narratives, outlines a number of ways in which individual lines show similarity to each other: a *strand*, for example, is a pattern of related lines (e.g. lines targeting a particular character) which can run through a passage, while a *bridge* is when such related lines occur far from each other. In Larkin Galiñanes’ relevance-theoretical approach to comic novels, she suggests that the easily recognisable strong implicature prevalent in humorous texts (as opposed to the weak implicature found in ‘high literature’) is a product of ‘series of illocutionary acts whose possible richness of implicature is limited by the repetition of the same, or similar, salient connotations, which reinforce each-other and at the same time condition the reader’s search for relevance within the on-going text’ (Larkin Galiñanes 2000:100). Triezenberg (2004, 2008) sees recurrence, which she refers to as *repetition and variation*, as one of the humour enhancers used by writers of comic narratives – techniques which are not funny in themselves, but which alert the reader that the text is to be interpreted as humorous. She suggests that ‘Repetition with skillful variation allows an author to use the same joke over and over again, magnifying it each time and also impressing the audience with his inventiveness’ (Triezenberg 2008: 539). This technique can be seen as the literary equivalent of the film and television-based device called a *running gag*, where the same gag or its variations are interspersed throughout the whole story (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 53). Stand-up comedy

makes use of a similar mechanism – comedian Stewart Lee outlines the device referred to as a *callback*, which is when ‘the mere reincorporation of an idea from earlier in the set can seem funny in and of itself, if its re-emergence happens at a surprising or satisfying enough point’ (Lee 2010: 301). Recurrence in comic texts, therefore, can be said to magnify the humour of gags and other comic structures, bring out the humour in elements not inherently humorous, as well as signal to the receiver that the text is to be perceived as comic.

The relationship between recurrence, dramatic irony and comic surprise/suspense in humorous narratives has been discussed by King (2002: 49) in his account of the ‘almost unbearable sense of anticipation’ generated in the viewers of those film comedies which construct differential hierarchies of knowledge between the audience and the characters. In order to explain this creation of painful, comic anticipation, he discusses the Warner Bros. Road Runner cartoons to suggest how their ‘repeated formula’ helps to construct the viewer’s knowledge and affect his or her experience of suspense and surprise triggered by story events:

A similar approach is used in the Warner Bros. Road Runner cartoons, the repeated formula of which assures the viewer that Wile E. Coyote’s efforts to catch the Road Runner will *always* fail. About that, there is no surprise; comic suspense and tension is created, however, in the gap between this knowledge and delayed revelation of what *exactly* will go wrong in any particular case.

(King 2002: 49)

This repeated formula which, as King suggests, creates the audience’s knowledge of how the story will develop, here will be referred to as recurrence, and will be understood as a repetition of a variant of a particular story event. In this discussion, I will concentrate on events with humorously negative outcomes, the recurrence of which invites an expectation – or perhaps conviction – of another similarly unsuccessful result. This conviction, importantly, is exclusive to the reader, as the characters involved are blissfully unaware of the disaster which they are heading towards (like the coyote in the Road Runner cartoons). The following examples illustrate how this kind of dramatic irony is created by Jerome K. Jerome, whose use of repetition of a particular type of story event and the speech and thought representation techniques used to describe it add to the creation of comic suspense. In *Three Men in a Boat*, one of the humorously disastrous recurring events is that of cooking, the first instance of which appears when Jerome, the first person narrator, describes what happened when another character, Harris, decided to make scrambled eggs on their boat:

Example 36 (a)

Harris proposed that we should have scrambled eggs for breakfast. He said he would cook them. It seemed, from his account, that he was very good at doing scrambled eggs. He often did them at picnics and when out on yachts. He was quite famous for them. People who had once tasted his scrambled eggs, so we gathered from his conversation, never cared for any other food afterwards, but pined away and died when they could not get them.

It made our mouths water to hear him talk about the things, and we handed him out the stove and the frying-pan and all the eggs that had not smashed and gone over everything in the hamper, and begged him to begin.

(Jerome 1993: 103)

This passage not only guides the reader's anticipation as to how the episode will progress, but also gives indication of what the characters' expectations are. Our dubious attitude towards Harris' eggs-cooking skills is cued by the way his words are reported by the first person narrator Jerome, particularly by the use of free indirect speech (FIS) which here forms a blend of the speaker's words and the narrator's thoughts. The indirect speech used in the first few sentences ('Harris proposed that...', 'He said...') soon gives way to FIS, which blurs the boundary between what was actually said by Harris and what was made up by Jerome. The suggestion that Harris insisted that people who tasted his scrambled eggs 'never cared for any other food afterwards, but pined away and died when they could not get them' may strike the reader as particularly far-fetched, especially when Jerome precedes it with a hedge 'so we gathered from his conversation' which indicates that the actual words were never uttered, but rather that the narrator provides a summary. This use of hyperbolic expressions to report Harris' speech (especially the reference to diners 'pining away and dying') may suggest that the narrator was trying to communicate an air of boastfulness that he noticed when Harris was describing his cooking abilities. It seems, in fact, as if Jerome aims to alert his audience to the fact that Harris is overestimating his talents, and that the whole endeavour will end in failure. The way he recounts Harris' speech communicates what Leech and Short (2007: 262) define as an attitude of *ironic distance* on the part of the narrator, which in this case creates a gap between the different expectations that Harris and the reader have about the progression of the story – a prerequisite to dramatic irony.

A factor which complicates the above interpretation of the passage is that, as it turns out, the first person narrator Jerome does not actually anticipate that the cooking event will

end in failure. On the contrary, he and George immediately hand over the necessary utensils and ‘beg’ Harris to begin. The only participant in this situation who expects events to spin out of control, it appears, is the reader. How is it possible, then, that Jerome managed to cue us to anticipate disaster, while himself remaining oblivious to impending failure? It seems that Jerome-narrator is in fact a combination of two separate entities: Jerome-character and Jerome-author. It was Jerome-author who was creating the ironic distance between the reader and Harris – and between the reader and Jerome-character, who, as it turns out, is also unable to foresee upcoming story outcomes. This act of ‘a secret communion of the author and reader behind the narrator’s back’ (Booth 1961: 300) is, as I discussed in Chapter 4 (4.3.2), is an effect of what Booth defines as unreliable narration. As I suggested before, in humorous fiction unreliable narration is often associated with narcissistic ‘misfit’ protagonists. Jerome’s misfit qualities and his resulting unreliability as a narrator, to some extent, stops him from making correct assumptions about the development of story events – in that way, he is similar to Bertie Wooster, whose self-involvement prevented him from noticing the signs which indicated forthcoming trouble in the match-making episode.

As anticipated by the reader, the scrambled eggs are not a success – ‘all that came out,’ recounts Jerome, ‘was a teaspoon of burnt and unappetizing-looking mess’ (Jerome 1993: 104). While the dramatic irony in the cooking-themed extract was originally created by unreliable narration and speech representation techniques, the following passage shows how even in the absence of such devices, a subsequent mention of cooking can guide the reader’s expectations as to how the story will develop. The extract, in which the characters decide to make Irish stew, is an example of recurrence, as it is structured as a variant of the scrambled eggs event.

Example 36 (b)

It was still early when we got settled, and George said that, as we had plenty of time, it would be a splendid opportunity to try a good slap-up supper. He said he would show us what could be done up the river in the way of cooking, and suggested that, with the vegetables and the remains of the cold beef and general odds and ends, we should make an Irish stew.

It seemed a fascinating idea. [...]

(Jerome 1993: 134)

In the light of the previous cooking endeavour in *Three Men in a Boat*, ‘It seemed a fascinating idea’ is an ominous statement – a cue that trouble is ahead. The choice of words adds to that effect: the modality marker ‘seemed’ conveys a certain hesitancy which introduces an element of doubt to the meaning of the pre-modifier ‘fascinating’, signalling its potential negative connotations in the phrase ‘a fascinating idea’. The slightly threatening sense of ‘fascinating’ will be evident to the reader familiar with the previous occurrence of cooking in the novel, especially since the characters’ intention to cook was presented in a similar way – the sentence ‘It seemed, from his account, that he was very good at doing scrambled eggs.’ from 36 (a), for example, contrasts the hesitant verb ‘seemed’ with the positive adjective ‘very good’ in the same way in which it is done in (b). Another cue which can alert the reader that something may go wrong is the slightly patronising ring to ‘He said he would show us what could be done up the river in the way of cooking’, which can remind the reader about the previous occurrence in which someone’s inflated view of their cooking skills led to disaster.

Apart from signalling impending problems by imbuing the phrase ‘a fascinating idea’ with a mild sense of doom, the sentence ‘It seemed a fascinating idea.’ communicates something else about the situation – despite the previous cooking-related misfortune, the protagonist fails to draw an analogy between the two and therefore has no idea what is about to happen. The reader, who suspects that the event is going to end in failure, experiences suspense on behalf of the characters, waiting to find out how exactly this failure will occur. Comic suspense lies in a combination of this potentially uncomfortable anticipation of a disaster and a more positive expectation to be amused by the surprising detail of the disaster which the author is keeping from us. Jerome-author does not disappoint – while readers have been prepared for the negative outcome of making the Irish stew, they could not have anticipated how badly it would go. ‘Half a pork pie’, ‘half a tin of potted salmon’ and ‘a couple of eggs’ (Jerome 1993: 135) are just a few of the unexpected ingredients that end up in the stew, but the surprise culminates when an appearance of the characters’ dog with a dead water-rat in its mouth leads to ‘a discussion as to whether the rat should go in or not’ (Jerome 1993: 136). While much of the suspense and dramatic irony is provided by recurrence, the humour lies in the writer’s ability to strategically list the unexpected stew ingredients so as to evoke comic surprise which leads to amusement. One of the readers of *Three Men in a Boat* describes this experience of suspense and surprise as a response to plot events as:

[...] you could feel the wrap-up coming, and you knew it would be a surprise.
(Sparrow, 16 Jun 2012)

The use of recurrence is one of the techniques which, by providing readers with cues as to how the story events are likely to progress, allows them to ‘feel the wrap-up coming’. The feeling which accompanies waiting for a narrative resolution (or ‘wrap-up’, as the reader above calls it) is associated with suspense. As it has been argued throughout this chapter, suspenseful story structures are constructed so that even though the reader feels that the outcome of a story event is about to be revealed, the knowledge about what exactly that outcome will be is limited. In the case of humorous narratives like *Three Men in a Boat*, the only thing we know for certain (as the reader above somewhat paradoxically points out), is that it will be a surprise.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the ways in which the presentation of story structures can affect readers’ reactions to plot events in humorous narratives. I outlined a typical comic plot as one which involves exposition techniques which prepare the reader for the occurrence of complications, and which is resolved in a happy ending. I proposed that unfortunate plot events found in comic novels and short stories can be referred to as humorous complications, and that their humorous potential lies in the comic surprise they trigger and the humorous resolution which they lead to once the reader is able to distance him- or herself from the seriousness of the problematic event and ‘reframe’ it as humorous. While the creation of structures based on comic surprise was seen as a technique used to evoke amusement and therefore stabilise our experience of comedy, the section devoted to destabilising cues focused on comic suspense. In it, I outlined some of the mechanisms of readers’ involvement with the plots of narrative texts, the ability to experience suspense being one of them. Comic suspense – a complex humorous response which combines suspense and amusement – was said to be based on a delayed revelation of a predictable outcome. In humorous narratives, it was shown to be used together with comic surprise, and created by constructing hierarchies of knowledge in which readers, characters and narrators were provided with varying degrees of information regarding how the story events would develop. The two techniques which allow for such hierarchies of knowledge to be created discussed here were dramatic irony

(which provides the reader more information about the plot than the characters have) and recurrence (established through repetition of the same story events).

6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the relationship between the language of written humorous narratives and the emotional responses which may be evoked in the process of reading them. My aim has been to investigate the stylistic elements which shape the affective side of humorous narrative comprehension, and to illustrate how such an investigation is possible through a combination of insights from (cognitive) stylistics, various branches of humour studies (including linguistics, psychology and philosophy of humour) and psychological research on literature, film and television. This thesis, consequently, offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the emotional aspects of reading comic narratives – an approach which offers implications not only for the cognitive stylistics of narrative humour, but also for those directions within text linguistics which investigate the intersection of language and emotion more broadly.

In this study of the language and emotion of narrative comedy, I have focused specifically on the emotional experience of the moods, characters and events which constitute the narrative worlds of comedy, and on the ways in which that experience is shaped by the stylistic layer of written humorous narratives. The key to my approach has been the investigation of the full experience of the worlds of humorous novels and short stories, meaning that rather than focusing strictly on those texts' potential to amuse, I have also considered the ways in which humour can be made to coexist with other, non-humorous experiential aspects of narrative comprehension. At the heart of this study, therefore, lies the appreciation that the language of narrative texts allows readers to integrate amusement and other, often negative, emotions. Throughout this thesis, I have explored how the stylistic features of written narratives can be associated with the various, often contrasting, responses that shape our experience of the narrative worlds of comedy.

6.1. Summary

This thesis is based on the premise that our emotional experience of reading humorous novels and short stories is shaped by a range of stylistic cues, that is, those elements of the linguistic layer of the narrative which elicit or signal emotional responses. While many of the cues

found in comic narratives are associated with evoking the positive affective state of amusement, humorous narratives also contain cues which have the potential to trigger more negative emotional responses. Humorous worlds – that is, the narrative worlds of comedy – are therefore said to contain two types of stylistic cue, depending on whether they contribute to our perception of the world as a humorous one or, on the contrary, they trigger responses unrelated to humour creation. Those cues are referred to as stabilising and destabilising cues, and they are classified according to whether they stabilise our experience of humour, or destabilise it by triggering non-humorous emotion. Stabilising and destabilising cues, I suggest, can occur independently and lead to either amusement or a non-humorous, negative emotion in the process of reading a humorous narrative. The experience of a humorous world, however, is said to be based partly on what I call a complex humorous response, which is a blend of amusement and a negative emotion. Complex humorous responses, I argue, are evoked when the two types of cue – stabilising and destabilising cues – are presented simultaneously.

The three central chapters of this thesis have explored the various stabilising and destabilising cues found in comic novels and short stories, suggesting how writers use language to trigger moods, manipulate representations of people and construct event trajectories which affect our experience of humorous narrative worlds in different ways. Following the Introduction (Chapter 1) and the Literature Review of the relevant work in linguistics and psychology (Chapter 2), Chapter 3 (Experiencing Modes and Moods) explores some of the techniques which allow writers to evoke cognitive and affective predispositions towards experiencing amusement in their readers. Those comic predispositions, a humorous mode (a cognitive expectation of humour) and a humorous mood (an affective expectation of amusement), can be stabilised by the use of paratexts which frame the text as a comedy, intrinsically humorous lines which evoke amusement, as well the distancing and downgrading techniques which encourage a detached perspective and a mocking attitude. These humorous predispositions, however, can be temporarily destabilised by the negative emotional charge of what are referred to as dark elements, the appearance of which can lead to such effects as mood shifts, dark humour and blends of humorous and non-humorous moods.

Following from the discussion of moods, Chapter 4 (Engaging with Characters) explores the uses and potential effects of characterisation in humorous narratives. Character humour creation, I argue, relies on manipulations of social stereotypes and the use of humorous stock types. One of those types is the eccentric, disruptive misfit, who becomes a

source of humour particularly when placed in interactions with other characters, leading him or her to cause miscommunication and express impoliteness. While the above characterisation techniques are considered stabilising cues, destabilising comedy is linked to constructing another character type, the sympathetic everyman. It is the everyman who, when placed in awkward social situations, may elicit complex humorous responses based on combinations of amusement and painful self-reflective emotions such as the embarrassment or shame experienced through cringe humour.

Chapter 5 (Reacting to Story Structures), finally, moves from the consideration of comic characters to the investigation of the situations which happen to them. Specifically, it focuses on the techniques which manipulate the presentation of story events in narrative comedy. A typical plot trajectory of a comic narrative is discussed as one which features a comic exposition that prepares the reader for the occurrence of humorous complications which present problematic situations as sources of humour, and which concludes in a happy ending. While the emotion of surprise as a response to amusing story events is said to stabilise the experience of comedy, it is contrasted with the feeling of suspense, which destabilises that experience by introducing a non-humorous state of tense anticipation. Comic suspense, therefore, can be viewed as an experiential feature of humorous narratives, based on a blend of amusement and a more uncomfortable feeling.

The two aspects of stabilising and destabilising the experience of humorous worlds which have been referred to at various stages throughout this thesis are distance and immersion. That is because my approach to the intersection of language and emotion in comic narratives is based on the dichotomy between those stylistic features which provide the distance necessary to perceive the world-based entities as amusing, and those which suspend that humorousness by inviting readers to immerse themselves in the narrative world and become vulnerable to the ‘serious’ emotions incompatible with humour.

6.2. Contributions

This thesis makes a number of key contributions:

- (i) It provides an interdisciplinary approach to humorous narratives, which combines (cognitive) stylistic methods of analysis with research in humour studies (including film and television approaches to comedy) and psychology of

entertainment. Such an integrative approach to readers' emotional engagement with written humorous texts offers a contribution to the cognitive stylistics of comic narratives and other perspectives on discourse which focus on the emotional aspects of narrative processing.

- (ii) It offers an investigation of narrative humour as part of a wider narrative world, rooted in world-based approaches to discourse. Rather than approaching narrative humour in and of itself, this thesis is based on the view of humour as part of a more complex framework (a narrative world), in which the humorousness of particular elements is affected by the qualities of the world-based entities which surround it. By viewing narrative texts as the worlds which they encourage us to build in our minds, this thesis describes the experience of humour in those texts as affected by our immersion in the narrative worlds they create.
- (iii) It explores the range of emotional responses cued by the linguistic layer of written humorous narratives, including amusement, non-humorous emotion and complex humorous responses, which combine the two. The focus on readers' immersion in the narrative worlds of comedy allows for a shift of perspective from those reactions which are typically associated with humour, to those which stem, more generally, from our engagement with the entities which make up narrative worlds. Apart from the humorous emotion of amusement and such non-humorous feelings as sadness, shame or tension, this thesis also discusses the emotional blends which lead to such experiential features of narrative humour as dark humour, cringe humour and comic suspense.
- (iv) Based on an analysis of a number of humorous novels and short stories, this thesis provides a classification of the types of stylistic cue which can be expected to shape readers' experience of humorous narrative worlds. The potential experiential qualities of these cues are discussed with reference both to relevant work in psychology, and to real readers' comments about their emotional experience of the novels and short stories discussed here.
- (v) It offers an application of the relevant approaches to distance and immersion to the study of humorous narratives. While distance is discussed in relation to the philosophical and psychological work on humour which views the receiver's detachment (from ordinary concerns or from the object of humour) as a prerequisite to amusement, immersion is rooted in those emotional approaches to literature, film and television which draw on the idea of readers'/viewers'

metaphorical transportation to narrative worlds in the process of narrative comprehension. This thesis provides a stylistics-based illustration of the way in which distance and immersion can be cued by the linguistic layer of written narratives.

6.3. Further directions

The aim of this thesis has been to provide an account of how stylistic cues may shape our experience of the humorous narrative worlds of comic narratives. While the texts analysed in this study were – with a few exceptions (see 1.3.1) – contemporary novels and short stories written by English and American authors, the hypotheses put forward here are also relevant to other types of narrative comedy. Any related future work on the subject, therefore, could apply the proposed framework to a different range of texts. In order to rectify the cultural bias, for example, narratives from other parts of the world could be chosen for analysis. Another direction would be to place more emphasis on texts written by women, which could perhaps lead to interesting observations regarding their relative choice of humour creation strategies. With regard to the time of publication, an addition of earlier texts would shed light on the development of the comic narrative, adding a diachronic component to the study of the language of humorous narrative worlds. Importantly, novels and short stories are not the only existing types of humorous narratives, and so a potential future direction would be to expand the analysis to texts such as comic plays, television series and films (something which I have addressed in my forthcoming publication on film comedy, Marszalek in press, discussed in 1.1.1).

This thesis concentrates on those texts generally thought of as good examples of comedy (as explained in 1.3.1). Accordingly, it explores the experience of those narratives which leave readers with an overall impression of humour, and in which non-humorous elements are said to destabilise that impression. In a text which is broadly humorous, like P.G. Wodehouse's comic novel *Right Ho, Jeeves*, those elements which are congruent with amusement act so as to stabilise the overall impression of the narrative as comic. In that text, destabilising elements are those which are seen to disrupt that impression and destabilise comedy. In a primarily non-humorous text like Alfred Hitchcock's psychological thriller *Rope*, however, the opposite may be true – it will be the non-humorous elements which

stabilise the text as serious, and the humorous ones which destabilise its seriousness.⁵ Potential future work, therefore, can investigate the ways in which cues that are here referred to as stabilising can have a contrary, destabilising effect in non-humorous narratives. This can be especially interesting in the case of those texts which deal with particularly difficult topics, and in which humour is used either to relieve some of the negative emotional charge of the subject matter, or to lead to other effects which play on the combination of amusement and painful emotion. The use of humour in texts which discuss such highly non-humorous topics as, for example, mental illness or suicide (like Matt Haig's depression memoir *Reasons to Stay Alive*), is an area of potential further research which would develop the notion of complex humorous responses introduced in this thesis.

Finally, this thesis is predominantly a theoretical approach to the emotional experience of humorous narrative worlds, where the stylistic analysis of written narratives is nevertheless supplemented by discussions of relevant psychological research and references to real readers' online comments about their emotional experience of the analysed texts. In order to complement the mainly theoretical insights with empirical findings, it would be possible to conduct reader response studies which focus on real readers' experience of amusement and other emotions in comic narratives. A most suitable approach for this purpose would be a book group/reading group study (e.g. Swann and Allington 2009, Lang 2009, Whiteley 2010 and 2011), in which readers read texts in their own time and share their experiences with other readers in a friendly, naturalistic setting. This approach to collecting reader response data, although it does not provide information about the actual on-line processing of texts, offers an insight into readers' experience of whole, extended narratives, which makes it especially useful to the angle of this thesis.

6.4. Concluding remarks

This thesis has explored the intersection of language and emotion in written humorous narratives. Comic novels and short stories, I have argued, are stylistically structured not only to evoke the response of amusement which is typically associated with humour, but also to trigger a range of other, non-humorous emotions which add to our experience of comic texts. The right balance in mixing the humorous and non-humorous elements which coexist in

⁵ I am grateful to Andrew Goatly for bringing the potential destabilising effects of humorous elements to my attention.

comedy, as one reader of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* points out below, can be said to lie at the heart of the pleasure of reading humorous narrative texts:

Never have I been pulled through the entire spectrum of emotion quite as enjoyably as this, with Heller ingeniously switching tones on a dime with a magician's charm. One moment I was laughing like a fool, and the next I was clenching my jaw with agony at the horrors of the war; thankfully for my taste, Heller leaned more on the comedic/optimistic side.

(Leo, 4 Dec 2011)

The combination of conflicting emotional states triggered by the novel – described by the reader as 'switching tones on a dime' – underlies the approach to the experience of humorous narratives developed in this thesis. Here, these complex, multifaceted experiential features of narrative comedy have been examined stylistically, that is, discussed in relation to the various textual cues which give rise to them. Such an exploration of the language of comic narratives, when complemented by an investigation of the affective aspects of humorous narrative comprehension, provides key observations not only about comedy's ability to pull us through 'the entire spectrum of emotion' in the course of reading, but also about the sources of enjoyment and gratification which narrative comedy offers its readers.

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