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Reading in the Dark: the Transcendence of Political Reality through Art

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ABSTRACT

In the last three decades scholars coming from the most different fields have defended the positive, regenerating and creative qualities of the comic mode. Laughter is an agent of transcendence, a vehicle for coping with the hardships of life, a valuable talisman which allows us to survive in a world hedged with the threat of every horror and every ignominy. *Reading in the Dark,* by Seamus Deane, is a very clear example of a novel in which humour helps to mitigate the harshness of the difficult and painful situations that are described, so that at the end of the book the spirit of life triumphs over death and sadness. By exploiting the narrator's naivety Deane plays down false sentimentalism and melodrama and prevents the reader from falling into despair.

KEYWORDS: humour; comedy; tragedy; Ireland; narrator; comic hero; transcendence; jester; freedom.

Theorists, from Aristotle on, have classified tragedy with the sublime and beautiful and comedy with the ludicrous and ugly and have argued that of the two, tragedy is assuredly the nobler, wiser and profounder. Nevertheless, in the last three decades this supremacy of the tragic mode has been strongly questioned by scholars coming from the most different fields —historians, philosophers, literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, doctors— who have rejected the characterization of comedy as hostile, scornful, aggressive and derisive and have defended its positive, regenerating and creative qualities. Laughter liberates man from everything

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that oppresses and terrifies him: the sacred, death, supernatural awe, divine and human power, etc. Laughter defeats fear and offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world and realize the relative nature of things. Laughter represents the victory of the future over the past, of the new over the old. Humour is vital in life since it functions as a corrective and complement to seriousness:

> True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism, and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It rectores this ambivalent wholeness. (Bakhtin, 1984: 122-3)

For Bakhtin, as for many other theorists, reality is essentially contradictory and confusing and only comedy can deal with the incongruities of life. For the comic spirit people and circumstances are not neatly divisible into black and white, light and dark, right and wrong. Comedy appreciates the ambiguities of truth and goodness and therefore mixes and confounds all rigid categories and fixed identities. Henry James has given us a beautiful portrait of this "terribly mixed little world":

> No themes are so human as those that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connexion of bliss and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt, so dangling before us for ever that bright hard medal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody's right and ease and the other somebody's pain and wrong. (Cit. in Craig, 1989: 63)

Because of its acceptance of the incongruities and tensions of life, comedy leaves us with a growing sense of freedom and a distinct sense of faith renewed and hope rekindled. A stubborn affirmation of life is implicit in the comic vision as well as a firm refusal to be destroyed. Humour is valuable in giving us distance and perspective in painful situations and thus allows us to face and transcend those moments of anguish: "It endows human nature with the means to turn the corner, perpetually, on the disasters sown in its path by its own freedom from instinctual programmation" (Gutwirth, 1993: 190). Having a sense of humour involves a flexibility and openness to experience which a fundamentally serious person lacks and, therefore, a person with a sense of humour will always preserve a measure of his freedom —if not of movement, at least of thought. He/she will reject the notion of an absolute and indisputable truth and welcome the relativity of prevailing doctrines, beliefs or ideas. Humour does not blind us to the reality of suffering and failure in life "and yet ... we can always step back a bit to enjoy the incongruity" (Morreall, 1983: 128). Thus, laughter is an agent of transcendence, a vehicle for coping with the hardships of life, a valuable talisman which allows us to survive in a world hedged with the threat of every horror and every ignominy. As a matter of fact, the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the writer William Gerhardie and the critic Wylie Sypher, amongst others, have argued that comedy can understand and reflect better than any other genre the absurdity and

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hopelessness of the modern world. Whereas Dürrenmatt says that comedy alone is suitable for a society that is terrified by the atom bomb, Gerhardie goes even further when he states that humour is "the most serious quality in literature" (cit. en Craig, 1989: 100), since it is capable of recognizing and accepting the concatenate and chaotic nature of modern experience. Sypher has expressed himself in similar terms when he explains that the devastating reality of the twentieth century with its world wars, concentration camps and big lies has forced human beings to become aware of the absurdity of life and face the chaos and nonsense of the world. And admitting the irrational and contradictory in our lives implies recognizing that the comic is part of our existence: "For all our science, we have been living through an age of Un-reason, and have learned to submit to the Improbable, if not to the Absurd. And comedy is, in Gautier's words, a logic of the absurd". (197) In an age of disorder, irrationalism and fragmentary lives comedy can represent the human plight better than tragedy: "For tragedy needs the 'noble', and nowadays we seldom can assign any usable meaning to 'nobility'. The comic now is more relevant, or at least more accessible, than the tragic." (201)

Reading in the Dark, by Seamus Deane, is a very clear example of a novel in which humour helps to mitigate the harshness of the difficult and painful situations that are described, so that at the end of the book the spirit of life triumphs over death and sadness. But in order to understand the mastery with which Deane fuses comic and serious narrative to avoid falling into false sentimentalism and help the reader transcend grief, it is necessary to describe first the plot of the novel. This will also allow us to appreciate Deane's brilliant and poetic manipulation of language. ***Reading in the Dark*** is the story of a Catholic family in Northern Ireland whose existence has been destroyed by politics. The novel covers a period that goes from 1945 to 1971 and is told by one of the children who remembers his childhood and adolescence and how throughout these years he tried to reconstruct bit by bit the past of his family, a past that has obviously marked the present, leaving behind it a trail of pain, disappointment and desperation. The narrator gradually discovers that those dearest to him have been trapped in a series of lies which produce deep suffering and a series of truths that cannot be told because they would intensify the anguish. The narrator, a sensitive, shrewd and clever boy, realizes very soon that his father torments himself with the disappearance of his brother Eddie in a big shoot-out between the IRA and the police in 1922. As a matter of fact, when his mother tells him that Eddie is just part of the past, the narrator does not believe her, because he is aware of the fact that the pain that surrounds his family and pierces their heart is closely related to Eddie's death:

> But it wasn't the past and she knew it.
>
> So broken was my father's family that it felt to me like a catasuophe you could live with only if you kept it quiet, let it die down of its own accord like a dangerous fire. Silence everywhere. My father knowing something about Eddie, not saying it, not talking but sometimes nearly talking, signalling. I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from him ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it. (42-43)

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The narrator knows that his father will tell hirn one day the terrible secret that has marked and destroyed his family and, although he is eager for this moment to come, sometimes he would prefer his father to seal his lips, because he knows that the truth will bring hirn more suffering than happiness:

> I knew then he was going to tell me something terrible some day, and. in sudden fright, didn't want him to; keep your secrets, I said to him inside my closed mouth, keep your secrets, and I won't mind. But, at the same time, I wanted to know everything. That way I could love hirn more; but I'd love myself less for making him tell me, for asking him to give me a secret. (46)

And at last the day arrives in which his father decides to tell hirn what he thinks is the truth, but in fact is a great lie, as the narrator well knows, since he has heard the real story from his grandfather. His father, overwhelmed by sorrow and shame, tells his two eldest sons during a visit to a little church that Eddie did not die in the shoot-out, but was killed by his own people because he was an informer. The child knows that his father's life has been destroyed by a false rumour and suffers because he can see his father's pain. He would like to tell his father the real facts, but that would ruin hirn completely. Deane, a great manipulator of language, offers us a beautiful image of the boy's feelings towards his father in those critical moments: "But I couldn't afford to love hirn any more than this, otherwise my face would start to break up into Iittle patches and I would have to hold it together with the strap of my helmet." (135)

As the novel develops the narrator comes to the conclusion that his father must have suspected that the truth was more complex and wounding, that something lay beyond him, but that he never asked anything because he knew that if a great "lie" had destroyed the harmony of his family, the acknowledgment of the truth would close all doors on hope, leaving all those dear to hirn trapped in absolute darkness:

> Maybe it was wise for him, for the whole marriage had been preserved by his not allowing the poison that had been released over all these years, as from a time-release capsule, to ever get to him in a lethal dose. I would have readily died rather than say anything to him, or insinuate anything before her, about that last big mistake that so filled the small place they lived in. (229)

And what is that terrible truth that the narrator's father does not want to know? Simply and tragically, that the police had leaked the false information that Eddie was an informer in order to save the true Judas, McIlhenny, married to Katie, a sister of the narrator's mother. The narrator's mother has always known that Eddie was innocent and McIlhenny guilty, because she was the one who in 1926 warned McIlhenny, the man she had once loved, that he had better leave the country because someone had seen hirn get out of a police car in the small hours of the morning. This explains why McIlhenny disappeared all of a sudden in 1926, leaving his wife pregnant with a daughter, and never came back. As a matter of fact, McIlhenny's vanishing is a real mystery for everybody, including his own wife, who does not understand the decision the young man took many years ago. The narrator's mother is obsessed with this story of the past

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that has marked her family, especially because she is aware of the fact that her husband is tormented by a great lie which she does not dare to refute. Telling the truth would imply admitting that she helped McIlhenny escape, thus rousing not only her husband's, but everybody's rejection and fury. Taking into consideration that the rnost disgraceful thing that can happen to a Catholic family in Northern Ireland is to find out that one of its rnernbers works for the police, more shameful would be the discovery that a Catholic has protected an inforrner. The narrator's rnother has been bearing for rnany years this heavy burden which crushes her, makes it irnpossible for her to breathe and forces her to see ghosts on the stairs of her house.

But the situation becornes more desperate and distressing for the mother when her father tells her that he was the one who ordered Eddie's execution. Her whole world collapses and the reader understands why she prefers her husband to suffer because of a lie, rather than revealing the truth. The narrator's rnother gradually deteriorates and her grieving becornes so inconsolable that she loses all sense of reality and needs medical treatrnent. She whispers to herself and continually cries out "Burning. It's all burning" to refer to her own life which has burst into flarnes, leaving her only the ashes to collect. At night her family will be wakened by voices and will come downstairs to find her sobbing in the backyard, freezing in her hightdress. She weeps all the time and the doctor gives her pills and medicines that only intensify her pain:

> She'd take them and become calmer, but her grief just collected under the drugs like a thrombosis. When it took over, overcoming the drugs, her body shook and her eyes glimmered with tears that rarely flowed but shone there, dammed up in her tear-ducts, dangerous. She was in such pain she could not cry, only wish that she could. (14 1)

The whole family suffers with that inexplicable transformation, since they see how the person they love so much is going away from them. The narrator, who knows the true story because his grandfather told it to hirn, feels irnpotent and would like to find the way to free his mother from the pain of the thorns that are piercing her heart:

> I dreamt of a magic syringe that I could push up into the inside skin of her ann and withdraw, black with grief. and keep plunging it and withdrawing it, over and over, until it came out clear, and I would look up in her face and see her smiling and see her eyes full of that merriment I thought I remembered. (141-2)

But in spite of the medical treatment, the crying and sobbing increase and the family offer her all their love in order to calm down her grief: they touch her, pet her, stroke her hair, hug her, etc. Deane offers us again a beautiful and poetic image of the pain the narrator feels:

> The hairbrush lay in the corner of the kitchen where she must have thrown it. I picked it up and tugged at the strands of her hair caught in the wire bristles, winding them round my fingers, feeling them soften on my skin as though the tightness were easing off them into me. I felt it travelling inside, looking for a resting place, a nest to live in and flourish, finding it in the cat's cradle of my stomach and accumulating there. (143)

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But one day she undergoes a sudden change and her voice becomes clear and young. Through the remarks his mother makes the narrator realizes that she is referring to someone she has loved in the past. although at that stage he still does not know that it is McIlhenny. But what hurts the boy is that dunng this period his mother talks mostly to the younger children, leaving his father, his elder brothers and hirn out of her little confidential bursts. Time passes and one morning the following winter the mother surprises everybody by telling them that she does not need any more pills, since she is better now, although she will never be as she was. For the first time in weeks she prepares dinner and even makes plans about Christmas. She also starts caring about her physical appearance and goes to the dentist to have her false teeth put in. But in spite of the change, the narrator is aware of the fact that behind her new smile the pain is still throbbing:

> **But when I saw her smile, then and ever afterwards, I could hear her voice, creased with sorrow, saying, "Burning, burning," and I would look for the other voice, young and clear, lying in its crypt behind it. But it slept there and remained sleeping, behind her false white smile.** (147)

The mother's startling illness affects the father and ages both of them. Although his physical strength is still immense the long period of crying and sobbing obviously deteriorates him.

We have seen that the truth can be more destructive than falsehood and the narrator's mother is not the only character who experiences this reality. The knowledge of the true story of the family also transforms the narrator's life into a nightmare, distancing and separating him from those he loves most: his parents. He can never look at his father or talk to hirn in the same way because he is betraying hirn by hiding the true facts, whereas his mother feels trapped and exposed by her own son. In a very original way, by writing in Insh all the information he has gathered so that his father cannot understand the text, he has made his mother know that both of them share and know what happened in the past. But the truth instead of uniting them, separates them even more: "I wished I could love her in the old way again. But I could only grieve for not being able to; and grieve the more that she could not love me like that any more either."(217) The narrator becomes aware of the fact that he is distancing himself from his mother and so when his father plays a record at home "it was then as though the music was winding out of me, a lamentation for the loss of her" (219). His mother becomes completely hostile to hirn and when he tries to come near her by bringing her a flower and assuring her that she has not got to worry because he will never say a word, she reacts in a totally indifferent way. The young boy does not realize that what is destroying the relationship mother/son is not the suspicion that he may at any moment tell the whole story, but the fact that his mother cannot bear her son knowing a terrible and shameful truth. It is as if the narrator with his sole presence reminded his mother all the time of the past and, therefore, she cannot forget it or convince herself that it is just the product of her imagination. As a matter of fact, when the child once asks her what she would like for her birthday, she merely answers: "... just for that one day, the seventeenth of May, to forget everything. Or at least not to be reminded of it. Can you give me

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that?" (224). The narrator does not know what to reply and his mother attacks him saying that if he went away she would look properly after his father for once, without the narrator's eyes always fixed on her: "I told her I would. I'd go away, after university. That would be her birthday gift, that promise. She nodded. I moved away just as she put her hand towards me." (224) Those ghosts, those shadows from the past that his mother has always believed to have seen on the stairs have now a proper identity and are not any longer the imaginary product of her anxiety and sorrow: "Now the haunting meant something new to me —now I had become the shadow". (217) Knowing that her son has gathered the truth leaves her trapped in the past, making it impossible for her to go forwards: even if she wanted to erase everything from her memory, she would not be able to, because her son would always be there reminding her of a period of her life that still hurts her. As a matter of fact, the narrator and his mother only find love and peace again when she suffers a stroke and loses the power of speech. It is as if by being trapped in her silence and not being able to use language to refer to what happened years ago that reality had disappeared. Now that she cannot speak and he has promised to seal his lips, "we could love each other, at last, I imagined" (230).

This silence not only makes the reconciliation between mother and son possible, but also brings his parents together. The mother has freed herself from the words that only produce anxiety because their mere utterance implies the admission of a hurtful reality and uses the language of strokes to close the wound opened by a past of betrayals:

> **I imagined that, in her silence, in the way she stroked his hand, smiled crookedly at him, let him brush her hair, bowing her head obediently for him, she had told him and won his understanding. I could believe now, as I never had when a child, that they were lovers. (231)**

The narrator's life is not only marked by the heartbreaking past of his family, but also by the political situation of Northern Ireland. As one of the characters in the novel says, a policeman, the great enemy of the Catholics: "Politics destroyed people's lives in this place" (204). It is really striking the way in which they inculcate in the children's mind from the very beginning an extreme hatred towards the British govemment and the Protestants, that sometimes leads to the distortion of the truth. The narrator already experiences this reality at an early age when he watches a boy killed by a reversing lorry. For months he keeps seeing the accident and the "worst" is that he does not feel pity for the child or the driver, but for the policeman who looked under the lorry and was totally distressed by what he saw: "I felt the vertigo again on hearing this and, with it, pity for the man. But this seemed wrong; everyone hated the police, told us to stay away from them, that they were a bad lot." (11) What is tragic about this situation is that, although the narrator is still very young, he already knows that he must hide his feelings, since it is inconceivable that a Catholic may have any sympathy for a policeman. Therefore, the boy feels greatly relieved when a year later a friend of his tells him that what really happened was that the child was run over by a police car that did not even stop: "As a result, I began to feel then a real sorrow for Rory's mother and for the driver who had never worked since." (12)

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Although the narrator saw everything, he prefers to believe his friend's version of the story, because that way he does not feel that he is betraying his own people, which, as he has been explained nearly from the day he was born, is the worst of crimes.

The narrator learns very quickly that in Northern Ireland religious celebrations are manipulated and turned into political ones, as happens with the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, and that people are not divided into good or bad, but Catholic or Protestant. As a matter of fact, throughout the whole novel he always specifies whether the character he is referring to is Catholic or Protestant, even though she may only be the libranan of the town. The narrator really experiences the hatred and sorrow generated by the political situation in Northern Ireland one day when he is about to be hit and beaten by a gang of six and he decides to throw a stone at a police car that is passing right at that moment. The narrator knows that the car will stop and this will frighten the bullies away. But in his desire to save his skin he is not aware of the consequences that this action will have in a land marked by political fights. The narrator does not know yet that everybody believes that his uncle Eddie was an informer and that the fact that he has tried to be sheltered by the police proves that the whole family is collaborating with the police. This explains why the narrator does not understand the hostile reaction of his parents. His mother asks hirn if he has not got self-respect and pride and his father tells hirn that he should have shown more guts, sense and courage by letting the gang give hirn a few punches. The narrator cannot believe what he is hearing and cannot help answering: "Courage? To get battered? That's just stupidity." (102) The narrator, a child who is free of any kind of prejudices, is just applying the laws of logic, not being aware of the fact that such laws do not work in those places where everyday life has become an absurdity. Obviously, it is totally ridiculous and incongruous for the narrator's parents to prefer their child to be crucified rather than being seen with the police, but in a territory like Northern Ireland where the personal and the political always go together, any mistake can have terrible repercussions. Nobody wants to play football with hirn and when he watches a game and kicks the ball back from the sideline, the player will lift the ball and wipe it on the grass before going on with the game, as if the narrator were a leper. Even his own father is insulted on his account, as if the whole family were a gang of traitors. As the narrator does not any longer know what to do to defend himself from his parents' attacks, he decides to strike back and tells his father that he is not guilty of any crime and that if he wants to blame someone he should blame Eddie and not him. The father cannot repress his anger and hits him, but feels immediately sorry for what he has done, because he knows that behind his son's words lies a great truth. But the narrator, who is only a child, is incapable of forgiving his father's violent reaction and takes revenge by destroying the roses his father looks after with so much care. His father naturally punishes hirn and tells hirn that he does not want hirn to ask hirn more questions and that he had better stay out of his way, but at the same time, he realizes that his love for his son is above the political issues that destroy people's lives:

> I returned upstairs and fell across the bed, still angry, but more horrified, and half-cried, half-cursed myself to sleep. It was getting dark when I woke. Someone had touched me. I opened my eyes a slit, stared at the

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> wallpaper and closed them again as my father bent over me. He kissed my hair. I slowly stiffened, from the toes up. (108)

I explained before how in a land marked by hatred and political quarrel the laws of common sense cannot be applied and this is something the narrator learns not only through the episode I have just described, but also through another event that takes place three years before. In January 1949 the narrator proudly shows his friends a long pistol a young German sailor had given to his father at the end of the First World War. This incident would be of no importance and would pass unnoticed if the political circumstances were different, but we are speaking about a country at war. The narrator explains it very clearly in a sentence not devoid of subtle irony: "But since we had cousins in gaol for being in the IRA, we were marked family and had to be careful. Young as I was, I was being stupid." (27) An informer sees what the children are doing and tells the police about it. Such an innocent action as boasting before your friends about your father's gun has overwhelming consequences. The police go to the narrator's house in order to get the gun and they destroy everything: the linoleum is ripped up, the floorboards crowbarred up, the contents of the tins poured all over the floor of the kitchen, etc. As they do not find the gun, which the narrator has buried in a field, they take the narrator, his eldest brother, and his father to the police barracks where they beat them violently in order to get the truth:

> Then they beat him on the neck and shoulders with rubber truncheons, short and gorged-red in colour. He told them, but they didn't believe him. So they beat us too, Liam and me, across the table from him. I remember the seat and the rage on his face as he looked. When they pushed my chin down on the table for a moment... (28-9)

The narrator cannot sleep at night because of the nightmares he has and every time he sees a light flickering the image of the police car reappears and he feels terrified: "The police smell took the oxygen out of the air and left me sitting there, with my chest heaving." (29)

In order to tell this family story marked by hatred and pain, Deane chooses a narrator who from the very beginning shows himself to be particularly clever and eager to learn. In contrast to other children of his age,.what he most likes about starting secondary school and has him "enchanted" is that he will be reading Latin and French. As a matter of fact, in order to prepare himself for school he tries to read a prose translation of The Aeneid, although he has to leave it because it is too difficult for him. This curiosity, this desire to get more and more knowledge is clearly seen in the essay he writes when he is still at primary school. Instead of writing a story about everyday life and using a simple vocabulary, he prefers to go to the dictionary and choose "... long or strange words I had found in the dictionary —'cerulean', 'azure', 'phantasm' and 'implacable'— all of them describing skies and seas I had seen only with the Ann of the novel." (21) His grandfather, whom he looks after during his illness, very soon discovers that his grandson is a brainy child or, as he says, a "smart boy" (118).

His clevemess and wit make him realize that something terrible has happened in the past

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in his family and that what others tell him is just part of the story and not the whole truth. In this sense, what the narrator does throughout the novel is reconstruct the events in terms of what he has heard, as if he were putting together the pieces of a big puzzle:

> My family's history was like that too. It came to me in bits, from people who rarely recognised all they had told. Some of the things I remember, I don't really remember. I've just been told about them so now I feel I remember them, and want to the more because it is so important for others to forget them. (225)

The narrator knows that many have tried to embellish the story by adding details that are possibly untrue, but he struggles with unflagging enthusiasm to reconstruct the past and not forget those events that must be remembered. For a long time he celebrates all the anniversaries —the deaths, the betrayals, etc.— and, although at the end of the novel he gives us a coherent image of the family story, he is not totally satisfied, because there are still many unsolved mysteries, many questions he should have asked his parents, but that will now remain unanswered.

The narrator of ***Reading in the Dark*** is characterized not only by his curiosity and intelligence, but also by his great sensibility. Throughout the novel we discover a human being capable of feeling sympathy for the pain of others and willing to soothe the sufferings of those he loves. We have already seen several examples of the narrator's sensibility, but there is a particularly beautiful one that takes place when he is just a small child. One night the family are listening to a boxing match on the radio. It is a terrible fight and one of the boxers is being pulverised by the other. The father cannot stand it any longer and starts shouting at the radio "Stop the fight" (227). The fight goes on and the poor loser is driven all round the ring. When everything is over the father says "Brave but stupid" (227), goes out to the backyard, sweeps it, and then enters the coal shed and starts breaking the great shale pieces like mad. Although the narrator cannot understand what is going on, he perceives that his father is in deep sorrow: "I knew I wasn't imagining his sorrow, but I couldn't fathom it." (227) He lies awake all night and when the next morning Brother Collins gives him a blow, because he has fallen asleep in class, he only thinks of his father: "And the blows, when they came, shook in last night's shed and were scarcely felt." (227)

The fact that the narrator is a sensitive, clever person, with an insatiable desire to learn and know more is fundamental in the novel because these qualities lead him to suspect that something terrible has happened in the past and to try to solve all the enigmas. But, although the narrator has brains and is very shrewd, he is first of all a child or an adult who is remembering his childhood and therefore has the naivety and innocence characteristic of his age. Deane uses precisely the narrator's childish comments and thoughts to introduce humour in the novel and thus soothe the wounding reality he is portraying. This is a device that has been used by many authors who, like Deane, have realized that if events are told by a clever and observant child who because of his age is ignorant of the world at large, the way is paved for humour without

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destroying the essential rneaning of the story or rnaking it grotesque.[1]

So, in ***Reading in the Dark*** the rnornents of tragedy and sadness are redeerned by the innocent reasoning of the narrator who thus brightens a sornbre context. We have a clear exarnple of this at the beginning of the book when the rnother, tortured by the past, tells her son to be careful because there is a shadow on the stairs. The situation itself is painful: a wornan who has lost all sense of reality and is trapped in desperation and pain because of certain events that happened a long time ago. Nevertheless, the reaction of the child, who is still ignorant of the world at large, appeases the sorrow and rnakes the reader srnile: "I went down, excited, and sat at the range with its red heart fire and black lead dust. We were haunted! We had a ghost, even in the rniddle of the aftemoon." (6) Instead of feeling terrified or depressed by the nervous state of his rnother, the narrator is delighted not only by having a ghost on the stairs of his house, but also by the fact that against all rules it appears in the rniddle of the afternoon.

Sornething similar happens when his aunt Katie and his rnother talk about McIlhenny who, as we said above, left the forrner when she was only a few rnonths pregnant: "When she said McIlhenny's narne, just that, just his surnarne, she rnade a noise hat sounded like a curse. My rnother drooped her head and Katie just nodded at her, syrnpathetically, though it seerned to me that it was Katie who deserved the syrnpathy."(128) Clearly, it seerns quite ridiculous that Katie has to cornfort her sister for sornething that happened to her, but at that stage of the novel the narrator does not yet know that his rnother was in love with McIlhenny, who left her to marry Katie.

One of the sections of the book that best illustrates how the rnixture of the cornic and the tragic liberates frorn melodrama and false sentirnentalisrn is that in which we are told about the death of the narrator's younger sister, Una, who is only six years old. The whole situation is deeply painful and it affects not only the girl's parents, and especially the rnother, but also the narrator who rnisses his sister. The chapter is titled "Feet" because the narrator hears everything hidden under a table and, therefore, can only see the elders' shoes. This helps to reduce the sadness of the events being portrayed, since the narrator recognizes people by their shoes and deduces what they are doing frorn the rnovernents they rnake:

> They were at the bonom ofthe stairs. All the feet moved that way. I could see my mother's brothers were there. I recognised Uncle Manus's brown shoes: the heels were worn down and he was moving back and forward a little. Uncle Dan and Uncle Tom had identical shoes, heavy and rimmed with mud and cement, because they had come from the building site in Creggan. Dan's were dirtier, though, because Tom was the foreman. But they weren't good shoes. Dan put one knee up on a chair. There was scaffold oil on his socks. (14)

At the sarne time the narrator rnakes his own cornrnents about what is happening and their naivety prornpts the reader's srnile:

[1] Recent examples are ***Paddy Clarke Ha Ha*** *Ha* (1993), by Roddy Doyle, ***Angela's Ashes*** (1996), by Frank McCourt, ***The Orchard on Fire*** (1995), by Shena Mackay, ***The Arizona Game*** (1996), by Georgina Hammick, or *Human Croquet* (1997), by Kate Atkinson.

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> This was a new illness. I loved the narnes of the others —diphtheria, scarlet fever or scarlatina, rubella, polio, influenza; they made me think of Italian football players or racing drivers or opera singers. Each had its own smell, especially diphtheria: the disinfected sheets that hung over the bedroom doors billowed out their acrid fragrances in the draughts that chilled your ankles on the stairs. The mumps, which carne after the diphtheria, wasn't frightening; it couldn't be: the word was funny and everybody's face was swollen and Iooked as if it had been in a terrific fight. But this was a new sickness. Meningitis. It was a word you had to bite on to say it. It had a fright and a hiss in it. When I said it 1 could feel Una's eyes widening all the time and getting lighter as if heliurn were pumping into them from her brain. They would burst, I thought, unless they could find a way of getting all that pure helium pain out. (14)

She was only five, younger than me. 1 tried to imagine her not there. She would go to heaven, for sure. Wouldn't she miss us? What could you do in heaven, except smile? She had a great smile. (15)

A few weeks after, in the middle of the winter, the narrator's mother asks hirn to visit Una's grave and put flowers on it. While he is at the graveyard he thinks he sees Una coming right down the path before him, but he doubts whether to tell his mother about it or not. The conclusion he comes to is really comic: "I didn't know if I would tell or not; that depended on what I was asked. I knew it would upset my mother, but, then again, it might console her to think Una was still about, although 1 wished she wasn't wandering around that graveyard on her own." (18)

One of the most dramatic events of the novel takes place, as we saw above, when the narrator throws a stone at a police car in order to avoid being beaten by a gang of bullies and is rejected not only by his parents, but also by his friends. Again the narrator's childish reasoning makes the reader smile and prevent sadness and despair from pervading the whole episode. So, when the narrator realizes that he is being criticized by everybody because he has been seen in a police car he decides that the "best" thing to do is to run away to Chicago, a city he has heard his father and uncles talk about. It is really absurd and comic for a small child to think of emigrating to a town so far away, but since he does not know anything about distances he believes that Chicago is a good choice. Obviously, the narrator cannot fulfil his plan and has to face his parents, who scold hirn for bringing shame again to the family. The culminating point comes as we saw above, when his father gives hirn a blow, making hirn pay for what others have done in the past. The situation itself is tragic, but what is contradictory is that in such a moment of tension the only thing that seems to worry the narrator is that he will go to bed without dinner:

> "Bed," she said, "bed, right now."
> "But I've had no dinner."
> "Bed, this instant!"
> I fled upstairs. (103)

Months pass and the other children still do not want to play with him. Therefore, his eldest brother, Liam, works out a plan to clean the narrator's image: he must convince a priest to accompany hirn to the police station with the excuse that he wants to make an apology,

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whereas they will tell everybody else that it was the Bishop who sent the priest to tell Sergeant Burke off for all the lies he has told about the child. Clearly, in order to achieve his aim the narrator must first have an interview with the Bishop and persuade him to help him. The meeting with the Bishop is really comic because of the thoughts the child entertains dunng the visit. As soon as he enters the room: "His black coat was well-tailored and sat very well, I thought, against his purple shirt. Shirt? What *was* its name? I had to concentrate." (109) We then see how the narrator reflects on the adequacy of his reactions to what the priest says:

> Here I faltered. Liam had advised me to get tearful at this bit, but there was no problem. I was tearful. My sorrow for myself was ovenvhelming. (111)

> "Yes, Your Lordship, to talk to God."
> He gazed at me for a moment. Although I had tears in my eyes I wondered about that last sentence. Too corny? (111)

The narrator tries to win the Bishop's sympathy by making him believe that he is thinking of devoting himself to the religious life. The Bishop is very surprised because the boy is still too young. Therefore he answers that he will think about it and that they will meet again in a year's time: "I bowed and left. A year from now? A year? Could it go on for a year? I shut my eyes in disbelief." (112) Of course, the Bishop will take such a long time to meditate on the boy's vocation and not on the problem that is troubling him right now and, as a matter of fact, two weeks later he sends Father O'Neill, his right-hand man, to the narrator's house to accompany him to the police station. He is a priest of a very strong character and clear ideas whom we only know through the comments the narrator makes, which contributes to introducing humour and soothing the hardness of the situation:

> "It's more than good of you, Father, to take up your valuable time for a scamp like this one. I'm sure you have other and more important things to do."
> Mistake, Burke, I said to myself. Don't tell O'Neill what he should be doing. Sure enough, O'Neill responded.
> "I've plenty to do, Sergeant, as I'm sure you have yourself. And I'm not privy to all that went on. But His Lordship asked me to come here and listen to this boy's apology for reasons which he said you would well understand but which, in his wisdom, he felt no need to explain to me. So I'm sure it's a minor maner to you, but I don't have more important things to do than serving my Bishop." (114)

The episode has a happy and comic ending because when the other boys ask the narrator why he has gone to the police station with a priest, he not only tells them that O'Neill has told Burke off for all his lies about the child, but goes even further and says that the Bishop is thinking about excommunicating the policeman and that he has even written a letter to the government about Burke's bad behaviour.

The moments of humour produced by the narrator's naivety are not only introduced during the report of sad events, but are scattered throughout the novel, bringing light and hope to the

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story and giving us instants of relief, of transcendence, in the middle of so much suffering. So, for example, the fear the narrator has that an ancient legend might become true makes us smile because of its innocence:

> You sat there and closed your eyes and wished for what you wanted rnost, while you listened for the breathing of the sleeping warriors of the legendary Fianna who lay below. They were waiting there for the person who would rnake that one wish that would rouse thern frorn their thousand-year sleep to rnake final war on the English and drive thern frorn our shores forever. That would be a special person, rnaybe with fairy eyes, a green one and a brown one, I thought, or rnaybe a person with an intent in hirn, hard and secretas a gun in his pocket, rnoving only when he could rnake everythingelse rnove with hirn. I was terrified that I rnight, by accident, rnake that special wish and feel the ground buckle under me and see the dead faces rise, indistinct behind their definite axes and spears. *(56)*

Obviously, the logic of a child is very different from that of an adult because his mind is free from all kinds of prejudices and conventions. So, when he reads his first novel, *The Shan Van Vocht,* a text about the great rebellion of 1798, he demystifies with his comments the traditional image of the brave hero:

> The heroine was called Anne, and the hero was Robert. She was too good for hirn. When they whispered, she did all the interesting talking. He just kept on about dying and rernernbering her always, even when she was there in front of hirn with her dark hair and her deep golden-brown eyes and her olive skin. So I talked to her instead and told her how beautiful she was and how I wouldn't go out on the rebellion at all but just sit there and whisper in her ear and let her know that now was forever and not sorne time in the future when the shooting and the hacking would be over, when what was left of life would be spent listening to the night wind wailing on graveyards and empty hillsides. (19-20)

The interpretation the narrator makes of the text is comic and at the same time exposes the absurdity of human behaviour. The narrator does not understand why the hero is always talking about the future and death instead of enjoying the present moment; he does not comprehend that someone can choose a blind obedience to principles and a tenacious pursuit of aspirations which can only lead to sorrow and vexation. The narrator's attitude to life is fundamental in an article like this that defends the liberating and regenerating character of humour. In *The Spirituality of Comedy* Hyers, for whom "to understand comedy is to understand humanity" (1), argues that whereas the tragic hero exalts virtues such as courage, loyalty, duty, honour, pride, stubborn determination, absolute devotion, which only eventuate in destruction because of their inflexible and closed nature, the comic hero, on the other hand, celebrates and enjoys life and does not try to reduce it to a set of abstract principles. Life is a game, a feast and not work, an obligation or a series of battles that may lead us to death. The comic hero's commitment is to the basic, simple, common events of everyday life that are despised by those who have a heroic and unrealistic view ofthe world. With his peculiar interpretation of *The Shan Van Vocht* the narrator is defending the virtues the comic hero represents: flexibility, humility, humour, generosity, sympathy, affection, etc. With his peculiar reading of *The Shan Van Vocht* the narrator is

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defending the flexibility of the comic hero and the values he represents, such as humility, sympathy, generosity, etc.

At other times humour is generated by the spontaneous behaviour of the narrator and his friends. We have a clear example when the boy goes to the cinema with a group of friends, among them the girl he likes. The movie they choose is a thriller and the comments they make in a loud voice during the showing cannot be funnier. As soon as the film starts one of the boys encourages the others to lay bets on what is going to happen and who is the murderer, whereas others get into a "ferocious" argument about the differences between tea and coffee after watching a scene in which the heroine makes coffee. When someone from the audience starts crying because a woman is going to be killed and nobody warns her, one of the boys shouts: "Hi, Miss, you're going to be killed" (160), which generates the laughter of some of the people in the cinema. At the end they discover that the killer is the heroine's father and the reaction of one of the girls again makes the audience laugh: "'Her da?' squealed Sheila in disbelief. 'He wouldn't kill his own daughter.' 'ANIMAL!' she roared at the screen. The people around us laughed." (160).

It is not only the behaviour of the narrator's friends that gives humour to the whole episode at the cinema, but the attitude of the narrator towards his "beloved". When one of the boys tells a joke in a loud voice and Irene does not get it, the narrator gives so much importance to her reaction, as if it were something unforgivable, that we cannot help smiling: "A pang crossed my stomach. She didn't get ***thut?"*** (159). In spite of Irene's "serious imperfection", the narrator is still attached to her and, as a matter of fact, uses Irene to measure the extent to which he is overwhelmed by the film's ending: "I was horrified. I forgot Irene." (160)

Although children lack the prejudices of the adults, they nevertheless share with them certain hesitation to talk about a series of topics, among them sex. One of the most comic scenes takes place when the school's Spiritual Director, Father Nugent, summons the narrator to his room in order to explain him "the facts of life". If the boy is nervous, the priest does not seem any calmer. As a matter of fact, the poor narrator is toasting because, although it is a warm day, Nugent has a fire blazing to create a cosy atmosphere. In spite of the priest's desire to make the child feel comfortable, as soon as he starts explaining "the facts of life" the narrator becomes so confused and embarrassed that he nods all the time appreciatively like a puppet, although he hardly hears or understands what the priest is saying. This generates a lot of comic moments, especially when the narrator becomes aware of the fact that the priest has asked him a question and he, instead of answering, is just moving his head up and down:

> He was looking at me questioningly. He must have asked me something. I changed my expression to try to look quizzical, raising my eyebrows and widening my eyes.
>
> "Do you?"
>
> Bereaved Christ's mother, do I what? What do I do? Should I pretend to faint from the heat? Would someone not knock at the door? In total gratitude, I heard him go on before I could get my tongue off the roof of my mouth. (152)

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At other times we smile at the child's reactions to the priest's explanations. So the narrator does not think that it is very delicate of Nugent to remind him that he was bom of his parents: "This I knew, but didn't think it mannerly to say so in any raucous fashion." (150) Nevertheless, when Nugent says that he is going to explain the act of sexual intercourse, the narrator's face brightens and his curiosity lights up because what he has heard so far seems improbable: "It sounded like a feat of precision engineering, one I could never quite associate with what the Church called lust, which seemed wild, fierce, devil-may-care, like eating and drinking together while dancing to music on top of the table." (150) But, although Nugent tries to clarify the narrator's doubts, sometimes his comments just generates the narrator's confusion because he does not understand what the priest is talking about. We find a clear example when Nugent uses the term "appetite" to refer to sex and adds:

> "You know that phrase––about appetite?' asked Father Nugent.
> I looked at him, appalled. Was this something I was supposed to know?
> "It's Shakespeare, I believe. One of the plays."
> Theplays. I had thought there was only the one, The *Merchant of Venice*, which we were reading and rehearsing in third year. This man was ready for the asylum. Soon I would be too. (155)

One of the reasons why the narrator cannot follow the priest's explanations is because he uses Latin words that he cannot comprehend and which leave him in a state of total bewilderment:

> "When the enlarged penis enters the vagina. seed is emitted."
> Emitted? Holy Christ, emitted? He-mit-it? He-mid-it? What word was that? I forced my voice out.
> "He what?"
> Father Nugent paused, eyebrows raised. "He...?
> Then he caught on.
> "Oh, emitted. From the Latin, *emittere*, to send out. The seed is sent out."
> This puzzled me. It seemed a very distant procedure.
> "You mean he sends it to her?" In what? I wanted to ask. An envelope? In a wee parcel? What, in the name of Christ, was this nutcase talking about?
> "In a sense. The more technical word is 'ejaculated'."
> Oh, from the Latin, I knew he would say, as he did. Thank you, father. Now he's throwing it out, like a spear. And semen is the Latin for seed. Do you have to know Latin to do this? (151)

The poor narrator asks himself how his parents have been able to perform the sexual act without a good grounding in Latin roots and comes to the conclusion that the sacrament of marriage gives you this knowledge spontaneously.

Another device that Deane uses to introduce humour in the novel is to make the narrator reproduce what he has heard the eldest saying. The same words that pronounced by the latter would sound serious and sad, when repeated by a child who would not usually used such terms, seem totally incongruous. So, for example, he finishes the story of priest who tried to perform

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an exorcism but failed because the devil came back again, with the following statement: "You could never be up to the devil" (10). A small child would never reach that conclusion and it is obvious that he is just repeating what others have said before.

We have a similar case when the narrator tells us that on one occasion his mother saw his father's mother, long dead, and adds: "My mother had a touch of the other world about her. So people would say." (51) But we find the best example when the narrator decides to explain the story of his great-uncle Constantine, "the sole family heretic" (116), who abandoned his religious faith after reading Voltaire, an author forbidden by the Catholic Church, and because of it went blind:

> Then he went blind. became ill and caved in by being restored to the bosom ofthe Church before he died. The blindness was a judgement and a warning, we were told. Thank God he had heeded it, but no wonder, for his sainted mother, Isabella —or Bella, for short— had worn out her knees praying for his soul. Lord, she was the happy woman when he died, escorted into heaven by the Last Sacraments and wee Father Gallagher from the Long Tower parish.... (117)

A child would never use expressions such as "restored to the bosom of the church" or "Lord, she was the happy woman". but he is repeating the facts exactly as they were told to him by the adults and this is why humour impregnates the whole extract.

So far we have seen the different ways in which Deane exploits the narrator's naivety to play down false sentimentalism and melodrama and prevent the reader from falling into despair. With its commitment to life comedy emerges as a liberating and positive force that helps us survive and face the small and big dramas of our lives. The comic mode allows us to see the most painful situations from a different perspective and thus becomes one of the most valuable weapons human beings have to transcend grief.[2] The narrator's parents illustrate this reality very well, but in different ways. Although the father is tormented by the fact that his brother Eddie was an informer, he tries to overcome his pain and not destroy the life of those he loves most. And in this struggle to face everyday life and win the battle against despair the father does not give up one of the elements that can help him transcend his grief: humour. We find a clear example the day he takes his two sons to the church to tell them what he thinks is the truth about

[2] It is important to point out that humour is a subject that in the last decades has fascinated psychologists and psychiatrists and attracted agood deal of interest in terms ofwhat humour is, how it works, and how it might be used for therapeutic purposes. Thus, Martin, Kuiper, Olinger and Dance in their article "Humour, Coping with Stress, Self-Concept, and Psychological Well-Being" have argued that humour is linked with a more positive orientation towards self, more positive and self-protective cognitive appraisals in the face of stress and greater positive affect in response to both positive and negative life events. On the other hand, well-known psychologists such as Walter E. O'Connell, Harvey Mindess or Viktor Frankl have proved the usefulness of laughter as a therapeutic agent by helping patients utilize their sense of humour as a means of dealing with painful emotions and situations. The case of Frankl is particularly revealing, since he survived Auschwitz and Dachau and fully understands the liberating power of laughter: "Unexpectedly most of us were overcome with a grim sense of humor. We knew we had nothing to lose except our ridiculously naked lives.... Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation.... Humor more than anything else in the human make-up can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, if only for a few seconds." (Cit. in Morreall, 1983: 104)

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Eddie. When they go into the church and the narrator and his brother Liam kneel down and start praying in awkwardly devotional attitudes, the father exclaims: "'Oh, c'mon, don't make a meal of it,' he laughed, 'you can pray as well without trying to look like little saints.'" (132) The important thing here is that, although it is a moment of great pressure, the father is capable of distancing himself from what is happening and seeing its comic side. The narrator's father also shows a great capacity for accommodation and flexibility one day when he is playing cards with his brothers-in-law and one of them starts joking about such a painful topic as Eddie's and McIlhenny's disappearance. Instead of becoming hostile or reserved, as if the telling of a joke were an affront to the past, the father decides to participate in the general laughter, thus showing that everyday life has not got just one reading and that in face of painful and serious facts it is possible to adopt a comic perspective without trivializing them:

> Why did McIlhenny not come back or at least send for his wife and child? Those skyscrapers in Chicago are so high, said Dan, you could drink a bottle of whiskey on the top floor and you'd have a hangover before you were halfway down —even ifyou used a parachute. They all laughed and cut the cards again.... (38-9)

The narrator's mother, on the other hand, is incapable of distancing herself from the past that is destroying her and has got trapped in her suffering. Humour has disappeared from her life; nor does she tolerate it in others. So, when one of her brothers says that the good thing about Sergeant Burke's sons becoming priests is that at least no more Burkes will be bred, and another answers: "I wouldn't bet on that.... They just won't carry the name, that's all" (195), everybody but the narrator's mother laughs. It is obvious that the police have made life very hard for her and her brothers, but whereas the latter use humour to transcend their sorrow, the former is only capable of seeing life from that absolute seriousness that plunges her into the blackest despair and fear. It is not a question of trivializing the terrible events of the past, but of getting hold of the lifebelt of humour in order to try to cope with all that intimidates us, as the mother's brothers do. Hyers has explained it very well: "... humour is not irreverent or irresponsible, but a moral and spiritual necessity. Without humor we become something less, not more, than human. We become not more divine but more demonic." (74) The narrator himself becomes aware of his mother's hostility and excessive seriousness when he promises her to get distinctions in every subject, but gets a pass in Art:

> When I got nine —with a pass in Art— she asked what happened to the promise of ten. I told her I broke it. I was joking. She was not.
>
> "So you did. So you did," she replied. (215)

Of course, humour is not going to solve the mother's problem, but it can help her to get out of this dark prison in which she has locked herself.

There is a character who is vital in *Reading in the Dark* not only because he exerts a

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decisive influence on the narrator's life, but because he fulfils the role of the jester and, therefore, incarnates to perfection what Hyers calls the comic spirit. According to Hyers one of the main functions of the jester was to close the door to absolutism and dogmatism, which were the product of a serious and tragic vision of life. This comic figure not only made kings laugh at themselves, but allowed others, indirectly, to laugh at them: "They provided a comic restraint to the inherent possibilities of royal power and authority." (111) Through the jesters rulers were deprived of their sacred character and permitted to be what they really were: human beings like any one else, who participated in the frailties and follies of the human condition. Kings were able to view reality from a perspective other than the official and thus preserved both their sanity and humanity. Hyers emphasizes that the jester mocked not only political but also spiritual kingdoms and, as a matter of fact, Jesus "... was a fool's Messiah, a donkey-deliverer, a jester to the political and ecclesiastical kingdoms of earth" (119). His entrance into Jerusalem was absolutely demystifying, riding not in a steed-drawn chariot of power and glory but on a simple donkey.

The main function of the jester was, then, to profane the categories and hierarchies with which we want to capture and domesticate reality. The jester refused to take any human pretensions or demarcations with absolute seriousness: "Hence, the neat patterns of rationality and value and order with which we organize and solidify our experience are confused and garbled. Sense is turned into nonsense, order into disarray, the unquestionable into the doubtful." (129) The jester did not fit into the established conventions or structures and through his foolishness he has given us a great lesson of wisdom.[3]

The jester was the great truth-teller, the only one who dared tell the king the truth. Hyers explains that the jester enjoyed such a freedom of action and speech because the social distance between him and the king was so great —like that between child and adult— that his comments would never constitute a threat to royal authority and power. Therefore the jester could deal with the king directly and straightforwardly, whereas the others, including the king himself, had to adapt themselves to the protocol of the court.

For Hyers the jesters, who fulfilled such an important role in ancient, medieval, and renaissance societies, are now comic actors, comedians, clowns, mimes, cartoonists, poets and artists, circus performers, sideshow attractions, or residents of state asylums. This reference to mental hospitals is very significant, because there is a character in ***Reading in the Dark,*** Joe, who, although a patient and not a doctor, clearly incamates the figure of the jester. Behind his mask of foolishness Joe shows a wisdom that many sane people would like to have.

Crazy Joe is the "oficial lunatic" of the town and his grotesque aspect and behaviour seem to confirm it: "Sometimes his false teeth shifted in and out; sometimes he seemed unaccountably close to tears; mostly, he beamed fiercely, clanking the railings with his walking

Enid Welsford has expressed herself in similar terms in her book The Fool: His *Social and Literary History* (1935). Welsford claims that the fool has played an important role in literature and history not because "the fool is a creator of beauty, but (rather because he is the creator) of ... freedom". The fool is "not only physically, but morally and spiritually resilient" and for this reason he consoles us because he shows "that Death is a hoax and that the whole world does not bear the tree on which (a clever fool such as) Marcolf can be hanged" (cit. in Pollio and Edgerly, 1996: 216).

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stick or stomping it on the ground for emphasis. His head swung back and forth endlessly." (83) He is regularly consigned for periods to Gransha, the local asylum, where he is beaten by the male nurses or plunged in baths of freezing water when he irritates them in any way. This explains why every time he comes out again instead of feeling better and calmer he seems more disturbed and upset. But the worst thing is that Joe is not just another lunatic whose family, from time to time, put him into the asylum because of his violent attitude, like when he pulls books from the shelves in the library and throws them on the floor, but a man who is conscious of his madness and suffers considerably as a result:

> To live with this condition of his was, he said, the great connubium of his infelicity —the condition of being sane married to the condition of being mad; the knowledge that he was mad married to the knowledge that he was sane; knowing that he was harmless but that his condition made others harmful. And people thought he wasn't married! He was as unhappily married as anyone he knew. (212)

Joe does not live in a world of fantasy, but is aware of his own reality, his limitations and contradictions, and does not mind laughing at himself:

> I was a young man, then. Not so mad then, I think, but on my way, on my way. (192)

> "I'm off," he announced, "and when I see you again, you'll be a lot older. But I'll be the same age as I ever was."
> He tapped his forehead with his finger, beaming at me.
> "Eternal youth. The secret of the insane." (193)

It is obvious that Joe is not totally sane and, as a matter of fact one moment he is crying remembering his days in the asylum and the next starts smiling again. But what is really important is that many of statements he makes throughout the novel reveal great insight and a knowledge of the world as well as deep wisdom. When Joe behaves in a violent way in the library and throws the books on the floor, what he is doing is attacking the way in which they are used by fanatics to impose their ideas, as happens in Northem Ireland, where ererybody uses religion as the excuse to carry out the most barbarous and inhuman atrocities: "That's a good one, religious prejudice. He should have lived here, then he'd have seen...." (189) Nobody in their right mind would dare to tell a truth like this, but since Joe is "mad" he is free to describe reality as it is. In a country where religion is the beginning and end of people's lives Joe has even got the courage to question God's existence: "'God's only excuse is that he does not exist,' ... Isn't that a good one..." (188). Joe says these words one of the times he comes out of the asylum and, taking into account the way in which he is treated in the mental hospital, his statement, although shocking for a believer, makes much sense. Joe, like the jester, questions and profanes established conventions and destroys the division that men and women set up between madness and sanity, showing how absurd human judgement can be.

But Joe does not only undermine categories and hierarchies; he has very important

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information about the narrator's family and especially about his mother. He was the one who saw McIlhenny get out of a police car and told the narrator's mother about it. She immediately wamed her brother-in-law that his cover was blown and advised hirn to leave the country to avoid being executed by his own people. Joe is the only one, together with the narrator's mother, who knows these facts and throughout the years he has been faithful and has kept the secret. But when he meets the narrator and realizes that he is trying to reconstruct the past, joining all the pieces together, he decides to show hirn the way to follow: "It was Crazy Joe who almost completed the story for me." (188) In other words, the man who is rejected by everybody because he is just a poor lunatic who does not know or understand the world around hirn is the one who opens the narrator's eyes and makes hirn realize what happened in the past. What is really interesting about Joe is that instead of telling his young friend the events straight away, he wants hirn to think for himself and deduce the truth with the help of the clues he gives him: "His aim was, he said, to give me a little of the education I so sorely lacked but at least had the decency to want." (83) As a matter of fact, Joe's "speeches" are full of questions, conundrums and stories about women who became animals, through which he tries to arouse the narrator's curiosity and make hirn draw his own conclusions. In spite of his madness Joe realizes that the narrator is a clever and shrewd boy and therefore wants to help hirn exploit his mental capacity:

> "... I want to teach you something. But do me one favour. Repay me by not always being such a young idiot. Don't spend your life as a pupil. It's insulting. You're always running around like a dog, sniffing at the arse of every secret, a dirty habit. Copulate if you must. Get it over and done with. Then grow up. Now, let my arm go. I want a rest." (189)

He frequently uses terms such as "little savage", "idiot" or "stupid" to refer to the narrator, because, although everybody thinks he is a fool, a lunatic, he is wise enough to know that he has before hirn an uncut diamond that if polished adequately will shine like gold.

In his ***Anatomy of Criticism*** Northrop Frye argues that comedy is the mythos of spring and therefore contains the basic elements of death and resurrection, whereas tragedy has got trapped in the vision of the heroic death. This explanation is perfectly applicable to ***Reading in the Dark,*** a political, but not a propagandistic novel, in which in spite of the hatred, the lies that cause pain and the truths that destroy, life triumphs over death and love over resentment. It is precisely this capacity to transcend what is merely political and recreate in a poetic style a human drama which transforms ***Reading in the Dark*** into a universal work of art.

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