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ul. Liniarskiego 3

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tel. 0048 85 7457516

✉ crossroads@uwb.edu.pl

🌐 www.crossroads.uwb.edu.pl

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FELIX BAYODE OKE

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Anchor University, Lagos State, Nigeria

ORCID: 0000-0002-8577-224X

EZEKIEL OPEYEMI OLAJIMBITI¹

Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria

ORCID: 0000-0002-5263-0149

The pragmatics of promotional features and discourse strategies in postgraduate school prospectus in Nigeria

Abstract. This paper extends the frontier of research in the marketisation of higher education institution by investigating the pragmatics of promotional features and discourse strategies in the postgraduate school prospectus. The data for the study is the University of Ibadan postgraduate school prospectus (2015 edition) downloaded from the university website (<http://www.postgraduateschool.ui.edu.ng>). Insights were drawn from Bhatia's genre analysis, an aspect of Hallidayian's Systemic Functional Linguistics, for the analysis. The theory accounts for promotional features, linguistic features and discourse strategies in the discourse. Four promotional features: offer, commodification, incentives and clients were marked off by modality, epistemic and deontic linguistic features while strategies of self-promotion, implication, promotional tact and evocation to considerateness are tactfully employed to project the superiority ideology to the prospective students. The study concludes that the academia is no longer solely informative but promotionally oriented.

Keywords: commodification, marketisation, genre analysis, promotional features, evocation to considerateness.

1. Background to the study

Research in higher education institution (HEI) discourses has increased greatly as a result of globalisation, particularly on how universities package their programmes in form of promotional values to showcase what they offer in terms of quality and core values. Recently, attention has been paid to the marketisation of higher education from different perspectives (Bhatia 1993, 2007; Askehave 2007; Brown 2015; Kheovichai 2014;

¹ Corresponding Author. Address for correspondence: Federal University Lokoja PMB 1154 Lokoja, Nigeria. E-mail: opebukola56@gmail.com

Han 2014; Xion 2012) on institution's prospectus, websites and course contents, among others; which have been explored from the perspectives of genre analysis, CDA and educational policy. In Nigeria, to the best of our knowledge, there is little or no attention paid to the discourses of higher education as a market enterprise. The closest studies are on the aspects of abstracts and call for papers in academic genre of higher education discourse (Olaniyan 2013; Odeneye 2014). The current research does not only fill this gap but also extends the frontier of research in the marketisation of education institution by looking at the promotional features and discursive strategies in University of Ibadan postgraduate prospectus. This attempt will unearth the rhetorical features and examine the discourse strategies employed in the postgraduate prospectus as a form of marketisation. Traditionally, the university prospectus is expected to be informationally oriented as it is an academic document, but the promotional dimension projecting the marketisation of higher education has become a paradigm shift to higher education documents.

2. Studies on Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

Studies on higher education institutions abound, especially in international scholarship (Bhatia 1993, 2007; Askehave 2007; Brown 2015; Kheovichai 2014). Some of them are reviewed in this section to situate the present study. Askehave (2007) investigated the impact of marketisation on higher education genres using the international student prospectus. The paper highlighted the practice of marketisation at the level of discourse in higher education. From CDA and genre analysis perspectives, the study described students' prospectus as a highly promotional genre in reflecting the values and forces of free market. Through 'rhetorical moves', Askehave's paper clearly concluded that students' prospectus is used to construct both the image of the university and the students thereby presenting innovative products to demanding clients. The foregoing becomes the footing path for the present study. In his paper, Brown (2015) examined the marketisation of higher education from the policy perspective, where he considered the paradoxes in a market-driven higher education system in the United Kingdom.

Similarly, Kheovichai (2014) packaged a study on marketised university discourse by looking at the synchronic and diachronic comparison of the discourse construction of employer organisation in academic and business job advertisements. The study employed transitivity analysis and modality to point out the discursive construction of organisations in a promotional manner such as businesses, entrepreneurs, service providers and still maintaining their identity as educational institutions. In China, Han (2014) examined the concept of marketisation of public discourse using universities documents. He established through CDA and critical genre analysis that marketisation facilitates the institutional restructuring and transformation of universities in China.

While the studies reviewed above have examined the concept of marketisation in higher education institutions, the concept has not been adequately investigated in the

Nigerian context. Few studies on educational institutions in Nigeria have captured historical, facility, programme and policy related issues (Fafunwa 1970; Ogunu 2000; Ekundayo & Ajayi 2009). Therefore, investigating marketisation phenomenon in higher education institutions in Nigeria becomes significant because such attempt will place Nigerian higher education in the same prestige in analysing the marketing values of education content especially the higher education prospectus.

3. Theoretical orientations

The study draws insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics, focusing on genre analysis as representation of ideological construct. Genre analysis is a multi-disciplinary activity attracting attention from discourse analysts, communication experts and rhetoricians, linguists just to mention only a few. The theory can be defined as typifications of social and rhetorical action (Miller 1984), regularities of stages (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995), goal oriented social processes (Martin 1993:100), consistency of communicative purposes (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993:15). It underscores situated linguistic behaviour. Bhatia (1993: 15) argues that “although much of the work on genre analysis has been primarily motivated by applied linguistic concerns... go beyond such concerns in an attempt to redefine the conventional boundaries of applied linguistics”.

As a model, a generic description is used as a representative, typical, or ideal example of generic construct as input for learners to analyse, understand and to exploit in writing to innovate and respond to novel situations. As a resource, the focus shifts from the textual description as a model to the knowledge of procedures, practices and conventions that make the text possible and relevant to a particular socio-rhetorical context. This is similar to Halliday’s (1975: 32) generic potential, which enables one to make appropriate decisions as to the choice of lexico-grammatical as well as generic resources to respond to familiar and not so familiar rhetorical situations. Genres are given typical names, yet different members of discourse communities varying perspectives on and interpretations of them, which sometimes are contested (Candlin & Plum 1999; Bhatia 1999).

In the literature, two approaches have been identified in genre analysis: textual analysis of genres and the social context or discourse community of genre analysis (Freedman & Medway 1994). In sum, Bhatia (2002:5), in what is considered as the goal of the theory, discusses that genres as forms of consistencies in communicative events, emphasising the amount to which the complexity of the world of discourse affects generic research. She further argued that instead of proscriptive model, generic description should be viewed as a resource for ‘the knowledge’ of procedures, practices, and convention that make the text possible and relevant to a particular socio-rhetorical context. Therefore, the main goals of genre theory are: to represent and account for the seemingly chaotic realities of the world, to understand and account for the private intentions of the author, in addition to socially recognised communicative purposes, to understand how

language is used shaped by socio critical environment and to offer effective solutions to pedagogical and other applied linguistic problems.

4. Methodology

The data for the study is the University of Ibadan postgraduate school prospectus (2015 edition) downloaded from the university website (<http://www.postgraduate-school.ui.edu.ng>). The University of Ibadan, established in 1948, is located in Ibadan, Oyo State Nigeria. It is known as the Premier University, being the first university in the nation and one of the leading universities in Africa. The University postgraduate school is the largest in Africa and the flagship of postgraduate education in Nigeria, as it produces the much required human resources for the entire Nigerian university system. The prospectus is written in English as it targets both Nigerians and foreign prospective students. Only three broad sections of the prospectus were sampled for analysis. They are: introduction, admission requirements and guidelines for filling application forms. These sections were purposively selected with emphasis on both sub-headings and contents because they constitute relevance to the objective of the study. Insights were drawn from genre analysis to drive home the study's objectives. As well, the study adopted descriptive research design to handle the qualitative nature of the research in a discourse-pragmatic approach. This methodology accounts for promotional features, linguistic features and discursive strategies in UIPGSP.

5. Analysis and findings

The analysis interfaced promotional features, discourse strategies and ideological implications as identified in the University postgraduates Prospectus. The promotional features which are captured in advertising genre are similarly identified in academic genre as offer, commodification, incentives and clients. These suggest a blend of academic and advertising genres with a view to promoting the flagship of postgraduate education (as claimed by the UIPG prospectus). Traditionally, university prospectus is expected to be formally informative but due to competitive market, the university employs advertising genres designed to 'sell' the university to potential applicants (Askehave 2007). Hence, the primacy for promotional function in academic genre as a blend of two genres; academic and advertising is important to meet up with contemporary realities. This study identified four promotional features in the sampled prospectus: offer, commodification, incentives and clients. They are discussed in turns.

5. Offer

Offer relates to the presentation of what an organisation or institution does in terms of services or products for the interest of those that would like to have them or use them. Through an offer, buyers manifest a desire to buy whatsoever is packaged by the seller.

In higher education discourse, an institution is seen as the seller of programmes while the students are the buyers. The offer in this regard is presented in different forms and layers to appeal, persuade and convince the buyer of the good product, that is, what the institution wants to offer the prospective students. These stages are presented in the University of Ibadan postgraduate school student prospectus sections on introduction, admission types and application forms. The excerpts below exemplify this.

Excerpt 1

Today, the University has a total enrolment of about 20,000 students shared among different faculties... About 40% of the enrolment is postgraduate students

Excerpt 2

AVAILABLE RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES

(a) Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D), Master of Philosophy (M.Phil), Master of Public Health (M.P.H.), Degree of Master (M.A., M.Sc., M.Ed, LL.M), These are available in the following Faculties and disciplines:

The texts in (1) and (2) describe what the university does and offers the general public. (1) captures what the university is capable of doing, by proudly stating that forty percent of the entire enrolment is postgraduate students. This gives credence to the chances of any interested member of the public in the offer. To specify what the institution offers, the prospectus states the available research degree programmes (ARDP) in (2) above. Two contexts best described the contents of (1) and (2) as offers. They are contexts of education and marketing. These two broad contexts represent two different perspectives but are recontextualised to draw symbiotic relationships of the two perspectives.

In textual analysis of the prospectus, the grammatical aspect focuses on the clausal elements with emphasis on the features of modality. Modality system construes the region of uncertainty that lies between ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Three modal features are exemplified in the text, namely, probability (epistemic), obligation (deontic), and ambivalence (mixing ‘possibility’ with ‘permission’). There are instances of high-affinity epistemic modalities expressed as lexical verbs modals. Also, the deontic modalities expressing obligational meaning of the modal verbs are prevalent. In instantiating modality features in the text, modal operators are used. The entry for this prospectus has some major contents. Specifically, meanings of requirement and obligation and formal lexical realisations are significant to the promotional features. In the entry column, the introduction section orients to providing the applicants with a clear and first-hand information about the university such as founding year, students enrolment, high ranking, etc. The lexical features employed at the clause level provide the applicants with the following:

- i. *that the university is the first higher educational institution in Nigeria (The University of Ibadan **was founded** in 1948...),*
- ii. *that the university operates autonomously outside the University College London in 1962*
- iii. *the number of enrolment geometrically rates 20,000 students with **40%** postgraduate students today,*
- iv. *above all, the high ranking of the university indexed her to be the best in Nigeria and Africa.*

Two promotional features characterise the introductory entry, namely, offer and incentives. The university through the information provided offers the applicants a wide range of opportunities if they apply for any programme. The university explicitly ‘sell’ the name of the school, her achievements and the benefits the applicants stand to gain. Besides, the positioning and arrangement of entries in the prospectus put the ‘buyer’ to read this section first thereby packaging the ‘product’ to meet the desire and demand of the ‘buyer’.

Also, the product, that is, the degree programmes serves as offer from the university. This is based on the academic needs of the applicants for postgraduate studies. This entry, though with phrases and minor clauses, lacks overt or explicit obligatory meanings (*These are available in the following Faculties and disciplines*) as well as backgrounds requirement. The strategy deployed here is self-promotional strategy. This relates to self-evident by stating what one has capacity to do drawing inferences to antecedent. Self-promotional involves self-praise in advertising goods and services and in this case, how the University of Ibadan postgraduate school pontificates achievement as an evidence of what it can offer the potential or prospective students.

5.2. Commodification

This implies the literal transformation of things into commodities. To commodify means to make commercial something that was not thought of as a product; i.e. how they are subjected to monetary value or made available for the public. It is a marketing strategy, a monetisation of different spheres. Here we consider how the university commodifies the programmes it offers: available of research degree programmes- areas of specialisation and admission requirement, method of application; available professional degree programmes, admission to higher degrees and postgraduate degrees and areas of specialisation.

Excerpt 3

APPLICATION FORMS

Requests for application forms into higher degree programmes of the University are normally made every year. The procedure for obtaining Application Forms is available at www.pgschool.ui.edu.ng.

Application forms cost N15,000 for academic programmes and N18,000 for professional programmes. Applicants for the degree of Master and Postgraduate Diploma are to pay an extra #2,500:00 for test of proficiency in English Language.

The text in (3) captures the commodification of the entry criterion which is the application form. As the practice in the context of marketing, the university makes public the prices of application forms for different programmes she offers. The commodities that are on sale here are the application forms thereby blending the contexts of education with context of marketing in order to make money from what the university offers.

The section of guidelines for filling application forms is considered here in the prospectus entry. This section situates the promotional features of commodification in university prospectus. The commodity for sale, that is, the degree programmes is presented as services in monetary form in which applicants/buyers could easily access. The obligational meanings are nominalised (**Requests** for application forms into higher degree programmes of the University **are normally made** every year). The passive verb is agentless with the nominalisation (requests) so that the potential applicants are absent.

With reference to the cost of purchasing the forms, the overt representation of prices for each programme becomes a matter of advertising genre. Instead, the lexical verb 'cost' may be worded to be 'may cost', an explicit obligational meaning with backgrounded requirement by the applicants. Also, the agentless passive verb (*Applicants for the degree of Master and Postgraduate Diploma **are to pay** an extra #2,500:00 for test of proficiency in English Language*) does not present the institution as the agent responsible for collecting the fee as well as conducting the test.

In relation to the modality features, there is a preponderance use of obligation and permission meanings. Instances are:

- i. applicants **WOULD be informed** electronically..., (obligation)
- ii. if the Registrar of an applicant's University **WILL provide** an official copy to the School directly..., (obligation)
- iii. applicants **MUST enclose** along with the application an unofficial or student's copy of the transcript..., (permission)
- iv. applicants **SHOULD make** adequate arrangements with their Registrars to provide transcripts.... (permission)

For the first instance, the subjective obligational meaning is stated explicitly with the use of the modal verb 'would' in example 1 while the use 'must' in example 2 provides the applicants the permission to enclose a student's copy as part of the requirement. This is backgrounded. The strategy of implication (inferring to implicit information) is employed here. It captures how an institution gives implicit information about the

commodities and such can be purchased by the interested customer. The competitiveness of postgraduate academic products by many competitors, informs why any institution for instance will make explicit information about the commodities it offers. This strategy characterises commodification feature advertised to the public; because the success of any money-mediated market is dependent on the functionally specific type of communication.

5.3. Incentives

Incentives are to appeal emotionally to prospective students discursively using rhetoric of corporate advertising. Here we consider benefits programmes highlighted by the prospectus such as workshops, scholarships and so on. The excerpts below explicate the promotional concept as it is practiced in advertisement.

Excerpt 4

In order to encourage postgraduate students endowed with outstanding research potentials to undertake full-time research leading to a PhD of the University of Ibadan, the Postgraduate School has established two schemes, namely:

(a) The University of Ibadan Postgraduate School Scholarship Scheme

(b) The University of Ibadan Postgraduate School Teaching and Research Assistantship Scheme

Excerpt 5

Funding Support to Academic Units for the Publication of Learned Journals; no less than 15 academic journals are supported annually

Within marketing context, incentives are forms of inducements to entice buyers. The university in the context of education adopts the practice of context of marketing to entice members of the public to be interested in its offers amidst other universities who offers similar services in the spirit of competition. Three incentives presented in the excerpts above are postgraduate scholarships, teaching and research assistantship and funding support.

The incentive promotional feature identified under the introductory section of the entry appeals to the applicants/buyers' emotions of what they stand to gain for their choice. Characteristically, there are instances of overt/explicit obligational meanings without requirements from the applicants. In terms of agency or authority, the university presents the applicants with potential benefits by providing funding support and scholarship. Also, their needs are attracted by the provision made and not by what the institution stands to gain. The marketing of products by the university through the instantiation of what the applicants would benefit such as scholarships, workshops and publication outlets puts the university as the service provider. The strategy that characterised this feature is promotional tact. Promotional tact entails schemes put in place by a seller or service provider to encourage, induce and motivate buyers to be interested in the offer

of such institution. It is a packaging tact relating to the penetrative powers of the price system and the spread of analogous relations into every aspect of social life, especially of the customer. The aim is to stimulate customers to take action towards a buying decision.

5.4. Clients

Clients are synonymous to customers, buyers and purchasers. They are individuals who get goods and services from a professional body or an institution in exchange for payment. They are clients in the context of marketing but students or prospective students in the context of education. The excerpts below explicate this further.

Excerpt 6

THE INFORMATION CONTAINED HEREIN IS INTENDED AS A GUIDE TO PROSPECTIVE APPLICANTS FOR ADMISSION. CANDIDATES ARE ADVISED UPON ADMISSION TO CONSULT DEPARTMENTAL AND FACULTY BROCHURES AS THEY RELATE TO THEIR RESPECTIVE PROGRAMMES AND COURSES OF STUDY.

Excerpt 7

*(c) A candidate **MAY** apply to only one department or programme.*

*(d) Applicants **ARE TO UPLOAD** their relevant credentials and **SUBMIT** along with their application electronically*

*(e) **Acknowledgement of Application***

*Applicants **WOULD** be informed electronically (through the e mail addresses provided in the electronically filled Application form) of progress in the processing of their forms. To prevent delays, applicants **SHOULD** make adequate arrangements with their Registrars to provide transcripts before the stipulated deadline.*

The excerpts above represent clients as ‘candidates’, ‘applicants’, ‘prospective students’. These are the ones who patronize what the university offers. The institution offers good value and service to customers. The clients are expressed in the postgraduate school prospectus of the university.

Another section of the prospectus entry is the admission requirements as characterized through the promotional feature of client, that is, the requirements the clients/customers/buyers/prospective students must fulfill before getting admission. In the entry, meanings of obligation and permission are utilized explicitly as exemplified through the obligation and permissive verbs (*Qualified candidates with written evidence of sponsorship **SHALL be given preference** and Graduates of the programme **WILL be equipped to work...***) While the first positioned the clients (applicants) as recipients and the university as under obligation to provide the service, the agent is passive, that is, there is no mentioning of the institution who will give the preferences to the candidate. Another

instance is the second modal ‘will’ with the implicit obligational meaning of who equips the candidates. Emphasis is on the benefits/gains of the clients.

In the same vein, the obligational meanings of modal features extend to that of permission with the permissive verbs of ‘will’. The institution being the implicit agent permits the applicants referred to as beneficiary from the programme in these two instances (*...the applicant **WILL be able** to pursue creditably a programme...* and *Students **WILL also be expected** to register on the University of Ibadan website simultaneously*).

Instances of ambivalence of modal features occur in the entry. The use of the epistemic or probability (*Final selection **WILL be based on** written examination and oral interview of short-listed candidates*) provides the applicants with the knowledge established by the institution on the selection process but backgrounds implicitly the agent (institution) who conducts the examination. Also, the use of possibility (*but with recognised equivalent professional membership **MAY be considered for** admission*) places the applicants in a near-reality of seeking admission without any binding role on the institution. Evocation to considerateness is the strategy that marks off this feature. It connects to the attitude of being customer friendly. It essentialises how service providers or sellers project certain considerations towards their prospective buyers. This strategy marks off how the University of Ibadan Postgraduate school prospectus relates with prospectus students as clients; as such evoking to the nature of being considerate as to encourage them to prioritize the institution over others.

Essentially, the foregoing characterise superiority ideology as the University positions herself better than other universities; thereby making her product the best to be patronised by the general public especially prospective students. This is projected in this “...above all, the high ranking of the university indexed her to be the best in Nigeria and Africa”. Claiming to be the best University in Nigeria and Africa is a way of asserting superiority over universities in terms of what she offers. This ideological construct seems important because of the competitiveness of postgraduate education among Nigerian universities. Therefore, information packaging in showcasing what a particular university can offer prospective students determines the patronage such a university would get eventually.

6. Conclusion

This study has critically identified promotional features as forms of marketisation in academic discourse. The prospectus provides applicants with vital information through the classification or division of entries but this process now manifests high sense of advertisement aptly characterised through the promotional features of offer, incentives, commodification and clients. These are further instantiated by modality features of obligation (deontic), probability (epistemic), and ambivalence (possibility and permission). Proportionately, the discursive promotional strategies of self-promotion,

implication, promotional tact and evocation to considerateness deployed underpin the prominence of careers information on the production of prospectus. The preponderance use of obligational meanings portrays the institution has authority (agent) that provides information on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Also, the entrepreneurial institutional identity through the incentives and offers strategically places the institution as the best choice over others in terms of research and human capacity development.

In sum, the discourse of prospectus genre considered is an admixture of the traditional informationally oriented genre and that of advertising. Through this, the institutional goals and objectives are achieved by giving primacy to the promotional function of advertising which is designed to 'sell' the university to potential applicants even in a competitive market. It also situates the institution on prestige or corporate promotion.

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* * *

Felix Bayode Oke is a doctoral student in the University of Ibadan and a lecturer in the Department of Languages, Anchor University, Ayobo, Lagos State, Nigeria. He has published a number of peer-reviewed articles in his area of scholarship in reputable journals.

Ezekiel Opeyemi Olajimbati (PhD) teaches in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria. He is a member of professional bodies such as Pragmatics Association of Nigeria (PrAN), English Scholars' Association of Nigeria (ESAN) and others. He specialises in children's representation in the media, media studies and political discourse. He has published in reputable journals. His research interest covers pragmatics, discourse analysis, semantics and sociolinguistics.

DANIELA FRANCESCA VIRDIS¹

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2021.32.1.02

University of Cagliari, Italy

ORCID: 0000-0003-2819-3847

Stereotyping Scotland: Groundskeeper Willie's illocutionary acts in *The Simpsons*²

Abstract. This article explores the Scottish character of Groundskeeper Willie in the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons* with a pragmatic and social-psychological approach. It firstly introduces Willie's linguistic and visual features, the sample of three episodes the analysis is based on, Scottish stereotypes in Lindsay's (1997) sociological research, and Searle's (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts (representatives or assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations). Secondly, the turns uttered by the groundskeeper in the sample are classified by applying Searle's taxonomy, and his illocutionary acts are examined in their contexts and compared with the list of national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes compiled by Lindsay. This study demonstrates that Willie's illocutionary acts and the stereotypes they convey depict him as a figure characterised by positive traits; nevertheless, the responses his illocutionary acts are met with not only counter his pleasant aspects, but also ultimately represent the Scottish groundskeeper as a ludicrous victim of his American fellow townspeople.

Keywords: Groundskeeper Willie; *The Simpsons*; Lindsay's (1997) list of national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes; stereotypes; Searle's (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts; pragmatics.

1. Scottish Groundskeeper Willie and national-ethnic stereotypes in *The Simpsons*

Groundskeeper Willie is one of the recurring figures in the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, broadcast by Fox Broadcasting Company from 1989 to the present. Willie is the head groundskeeper at the elementary school of the fictional town of Springfield, in an unidentified state of the United States, which is the main setting of this humorous sitcom (Weinstein 1998; Cantor 1999; Alberti 2003; Brown-Logan 2006 discuss the sitcom in general and, more concisely, the character of the groundskeeper). Willie is

1 Address for correspondence: University of Cagliari, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Humanities, Languages and Heritage, Via San Giorgio 12, 09124 Cagliari (Italy). E-mail: dfvirdis@unica.it

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a hot-tempered middle-aged man, with a nearly savage aspect and demeanour; he has his origins in Scotland, as unmistakably conveyed by his flaming red beard, eyebrows and hair, and by his pronounced rhotic Scottish regional accent (in the Italian dubbed version of the sitcom, Willie speaks with an equally broad Sardinian accent: see Fusari 2007; Tomaiuolo 2007; Barra 2008; Ferrari 2009; Puddu & Viridis 2014).

Willie has been met with an enthusiastic public response, and his figure has had a significant cultural influence on the English-speaking world, so much so that *The Sunday Times* (Turpin 2005) praisingly called him “Scotland’s most famous character”, “an international icon of Scottishness” and “the most instantly recognisable Scot in the world: better known than Billy Connolly or Ewan McGregor, even Sean Connery”. Moreover, in 2002 and in the first months of 2003, one of Willie’s turns, dating back to 1995, became vastly popular in the Anglophone world. In those days, the United States was gearing up to invade Iraq, but France wanted to stop war; therefore, the American media widely employed the groundskeeper’s turn including a negatively evaluative expression referring to the French, namely “*Bonjourrrr, yah cheese-eatin’ surrender monkeys!*” (from the episode “Round Springfield”, code 2F32; see Turner 2005: 54, 327 for further information).

Despite his fame, Willie has a supporting role in the sitcom; given his comparatively small number of appearances and the comic text he features in, his portrayal as a Scot is inevitably stereotypical (see Stangor 2000 for stereotypes and stereotypical representations). As stated by Turner (2005: 327), the groundskeeper “is about as unrestrained as a parody can get. [...] The parody is so over-the-top, in fact, that Willie’s nationality becomes incidental: he’s much more cartoon than Scot”. Gray argues that stereotypes or, more precisely, national-ethnic hyper-stereotypes play a tactical part in the sitcom:

in a rather high risk strategy, *The Simpsons* employs what we could call *hyper-stereotypes*. From Scottish Groundskeeper Willie and Quick E Mart [sic] owner Apu, to the show’s depictions of Japan, Australia, East Africa, Canada, and Brazil in family trip episodes, the show rounds up multiple stereotypes and jams them into one character or episode. The result, although admittedly this is a strategy that passes many by, and hence risks backfiring on itself, is to make the *process* of stereotyping the target, rather than the people themselves. (Gray 2006: 64; original emphasis)

As a result, Gray and other scholars regard the process of stereotyping as one of the essential features characterising the ironic discourse of the sitcom. According to Rodaway,

Diversity is evident within the community of Springfield, yet critical debates about ethnicity are a largely neglected. Two characters particularly stand out here — Willie, the school groundskeeper from Scotland with his absurd hyper-Scottishness, and Apu, the South Asian owner of the Kwick-E-Mart mini-supermarket in downtown Springfield. Each are ironically

constructed as an exotic other but with a critical purchase on mainstream American society and values. (Rodaway 2003: 163)

In this comic sitcom, the American town of Springfield is typified by high ethnic diversity, and the “exotic other” is described as linguistically and visually dissimilar from the other inhabitants. The primary function of diversity and dissimilarity is to criticise the hegemonic worldview and its prevailing tenets, that is to say to analyse and make fun of suburban and small-town America and Americans. In actual fact, it is not only Scotland or South Asia to be depicted as the “exotic other”, but also the United States (see also Beard 2003 for national-ethnic stereotypes in the sitcom).

In this article, I explore Willie’s representation as a Scottish *dramatis persona* and his use of language in the parodistic discourse of the sitcom. My research purpose is to demonstrate that his stereotypical Scottish national identity is constructed not only visually by means of his hair, kilt and bagpipes, but also linguistically and pragmatically by means of his conversational behaviour towards the people living in Springfield (Levinson 1983; Grundy 2008; Verschueren-Östman 2009). To this end, I firstly detect all the groundskeeper’s turns and the illocutionary acts he performs (Searle 1976) in three episodes of the sitcom (“Principal Charming”, code 7F15; “Treehouse of Horror V”, code 2F03; “Treehouse of Horror VI”, code 3F04). Secondly, I match those illocutionary acts with the compatible national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes recognised by Lindsay (1997) in her sociological research. Finally, I prove that these illocutionary acts and the stereotypes they relay contribute to shaping the character of Willie as conventionally Scottish and non-American, consequently as a soft target of ridicule.

2. Willie’s linguistic and visual features and data for analysis

The figure of Willie has not been examined thoroughly in the research articles and books on the sitcom which have appeared so far, including the academic papers at *The Simpsons Archive*³; several observations made by scholars, yet, are pertinent to the aims and scope of this article. With regard to the phonological level and the groundskeeper’s Scottish regional accent, Armstrong comments on the phonological features of the protagonists of the sitcom, and contends that

Dan Castellana [sic] voices such disparate characters as Homer Simpson, Mayor Quimby and Groundskeeper Willie. Despite the astonishing versatility and virtuosity of the voicing artists

³ *The Simpsons Archive* (<http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/>, last accessed December 2020) is a website containing a copious quantity of materials about the sitcom, among which a selection of book excerpts and papers (<http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/misc.html>).

in their mimicry of social-regional accents, it remains true that some accents are produced in a stereotypical way, by exaggerating certain of their most salient features. (Armstrong 2004: 104)

Willie's phonology is hence among those uttered in a talented but preconceived and standardised way; as such, it strengthens his stereotypical portrayal as a Scot. Actually, one of the "felicity conditions" (Austin 1962) of the sitcom and of the performance of its humorous discourse is the fact that the representation of the groundskeeper in particular and of the "exotic other" in general is effective but not realistic.

With regard to the morphological and syntactic levels, the variety of Scottish English spoken by Willie does not show any of the linguistic characteristics distinguished and studied by researchers (to name just a few, Aitken-McArthur 1979; Dossena 2005; Hughes et al. 2005). The lexical level of his regional variety incorporates very few instances of Scotticisms, in line with McCrum et al.'s findings: "the majority of the Scots speak Standard English with a Scottish accent, and write Standard English occasionally flavoured with a word like *loch*, *burn* or *brae*" (McCrumb et al. 1987: 151; quoted in Mazzon 1994: 68). The two lexical Scotticisms *wee* (adjective "small, little") and *haggis* (noun "a dish of Scottish origin") occur in the sample of the groundskeeper's turns cited in the Appendix and investigated in Section 4, to be more exact at turn 2.2. Both Scotticisms are widely-known words in the Anglophone world, and are reckoned to be typical examples of Scottish English. On the one hand, in McCrum et al.'s terms, their presence in the sample flavours Willie's Standard English; on the other hand, they indirectly communicate that his language is not authentic and could be easily imitated, particularly by a skilled voice actor. The two Scotticisms therefore reinforce the argument that the groundskeeper is depicted by the sitcom authors in a stereotypical way and seen by his audience accordingly⁴.

With regard to the discourse level, academic research often refers to Willie's actions in the episode "Homer Badman" (code 2F06) (Cohen 1998; Horowitz 1999; Mullin 1999; Waltonen 2000; Turner 2005). The eponymous *dramatis persona* of the episode and the entire sitcom, Homer Simpson, is unjustly charged with sexual harassment, but is cleared of all suspicion by the groundskeeper. In fact, Willie recorded Homer's supposed harassment for his own entertainment or, as he put it, "My hobby is secretly videotaping couples in cars. I dinna come forward because in this country it makes you look like a pervert. But every single Scottish person does it!". The articles quoted above mostly scrutinise Homer's dependence on television; however, the groundskeeper's hidden spare-time

4 While Willie does not speak actual Scottish English, he utilises a colloquial variety of Standard English. Among other instances, see the informal expressions "Go easy on the wee one" (turn 2.2), "your Da goes gaga" (2.6), "I'm coming to rescue the lot of you!" (2.7 and 2.9); see also the puns "Glad to rake your acquaintance" (3.1), "You've mastered a dead tongue, but can you handle a live one?" (3.5), and "When I'm done with you, they'll have to do a compost-mortem!" (3.13).

activity is also worth commenting on. Firstly, he constantly breaks the law and does not seem to be fully aware of it. Secondly, he maintains that his “hobby” is shared by all Scots and, as such, is characteristic of his country; he thereby mentions a self-stereotype to Homer and the viewers and deploys it to justify his unlawful entertainment.

Finally, with regard to the visual level, for the benefit of those international audiences who might be unacquainted with the Scottish accent and vocabulary, the portrayal of Willie is realised through non-linguistic tools: these include his red hair, eyebrows and beard, and the fact that he often wears a kilt and plays bagpipes. In the hyperbolic discourse of “Treehouse of Horror VI”, one of the three episodes under examination in this article, these visual Scottish qualities are driven to humorous extremes: the groundskeeper is transformed into a number of diverse shapes wearing a tartan pattern, even into a tartan bagpipe attempting to murder Bart and Lisa Simpson while playing Scottish music.

The Scottish character of Groundskeeper Willie figures for the first time in the episode “Principal Charming” (code 7F15, the fourteenth of the second season); the first two episodes focusing on him, though, are “Treehouse of Horror V” (code 2F03, the sixth of the sixth season) and “Treehouse of Horror VI” (code 3F04, the sixth of the seventh season) (Groening 2001-2010). These two episodes are a part of *The Treehouse of Horror Series*, also called *The Simpsons Halloween Specials*: the series is typified by horror, science fiction and supernatural scenes, and parodies these genres. Willie appears in the first segment of “Treehouse of Horror V” and in the second segment of “Treehouse of Horror VI”: the former is based on S. Kubrick’s film *The Shining* (1980), while underlying the latter are W. Craven’s film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the other six films in the series and their main figure Freddy Krueger. “Principal Charming” fleetingly introduces the groundskeeper into the sitcom, but he first takes a leading role and his character evolves only in the two “Treehouse of Horror” episodes and segments just named. Consequently, and notably, Willie, a character looking a stereotypical Scot and speaking a stereotypical Scottish English, is portrayed as a grotesque horror figure practically from his first appearance in the sitcom.

3. Background and methodology

3.1. Lindsay’s (1997) list of national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes

An article by the sociologist Lindsay (1997) presents her research on English stereotypes and Scottish self-stereotypes; it hence lists and explores what Scots themselves perceive as their most broadly shared national-ethnic characteristics. In order to collect her data, this author asked her 220 Scottish respondents to set down what they thought to be the specific characteristics of the English on the one hand, and their own on the other hand. Table 1 shows the characteristics of Scots reported by the respondents and, in descending order, the percentage of respondents reporting each characteristic:

Table 1. Proportion of respondents listing particular characteristics of Scots (adapted from Lindsay 1997: 8)

No.	Characteristics of Scots	Percentage of respondents listing
1	Friendly/Warm/Kind-hearted	63
2	Patriotic/Nationalistic/Proud	29
3	Humorous/Good Fun	17
4	Direct/Down to Earth	12
5	Low Self-Esteem	11
6	Aggressive/Paranoid	10
7	Honest/Unpretentious	7
8	Political/Socialist/Anti-Tory	6
9	Rough/Brash	6

The results emerging from Lindsay’s research suggest that the characteristics of Scots listed by the respondents were both agreeable and disagreeable: “The Scots seemed fairly comfortable and positive about their identity as friendly, warm, down to earth, patriotic, humourous [sic] people. The negative in their self-image was a perceived element of paranoia and low self-esteem, but these were not dominant” (Lindsay 1997: 11) (see Hopkins-Reicher 1997 and Lamont 1997 for further details about Scottish stereotypes). In Section 4, I identify which of these appealing and non-appealing national-ethnic characteristics are expressed by Willie’s turns in the three episodes under examination.

3.2. Searle’s (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts

The groundskeeper’s speech acts in the episodes “Principal Charming” (henceforth PC), “Treehouse of Horror V” (THH V) and “Treehouse of Horror VI” (THH VI) (see Appendix) are classified and investigated in accordance with Searle’s (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts and the five fundamental classes representatives or assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations; the subclasses of illocutionary acts employed in the analytical Section 4 are mine. A number of scholars (to name just one, Levinson 1983: 240) have occasionally found fault with this taxonomy; nevertheless, as asserted by Sbisà (2009: 237), “Searle’s classification of illocutionary acts has been by far the most influential one and has often been taken as a basis for the further investigations of particular areas”.

It has not always been uncomplicated to apply Searle’s taxonomy to Willie’s turns. Firstly, according to this researcher (Searle 1976: 23), “Often, we do more than one of these [basic acts] at once in the same utterance”. Accordingly, all the groundskeeper’s longer utterances have been split up into two or more parts; each of them has

subsequently been attributed the most salient illocutionary act or the one most appropriate to the context. Secondly, and more importantly, the sample utterances included and scrutinised in Searle’s article are explicit performatives and direct speech acts with the syntactic structure “I hereby Vp S”: Vp is the performative verb in the main clause and S is the embedded sentence indicating the propositional content of the utterance. On the contrary, Willie’s turns are usually realised by implicit performatives or indirect speech acts, with no fixed and recognisable syntactic structure or performative verb explicitly mentioned; therefore, the illocutionary acts in the groundskeeper’s turns have been classified and explored, not the syntax conveying them. Finally, Searle’s taxonomy was developed in the mid-1970s to examine spontaneous oral discourse; yet, as far as this is concerned, it has not been problematic to adopt the taxonomy to study the fictional discourse of the contemporary sitcom.

4. Analysis: Groundskeeper Willie’s illocutionary acts

4.1. Declarations

In the three episodes under investigation in this article, Willie utters 18 turns overall, which consist of 49 illocutionary acts; more precisely, as given in Tables 2-6, his turns are constituted by no declarations, 7 commissives, 12 representatives, 14 expressives and 16 directives.

Table 2. Illocutionary act: declaration

No.	Declaration subclass	Description	Turn
1	N/A	N/A	N/A

Of the five basic classes of illocutionary acts distinguished by Searle, declaration is the only one not present in the sample of Willie’s turns (see Table 2). Declaration was defined as follows: “the successful performance of one of its members brings about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality, successful performance guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world” (Searle 1976: 13). Entailed by declaration are an extra-linguistic system of constitutive rules and an extra-linguistic institution — such as the state, private property, the law, the church — where the speaker and the hearer have a special position (Searle 1976: 14). This state of matters does not apparently relate to any *dramatis personae* in any of the three episodes; as a result, the lack of declarations in the groundskeeper’s turns is not prominent from a pragmatic viewpoint, nor does it require interpretation from a conversational perspective.

4.2. Commissives

Table 3. Illocutionary act: commissive

No.	Commissive subclass	Description	Turn
1	Threat	Attempts to kill Bart	3.1
2		Attempts to kill Martin	3.3
3		Threatens parents with killing their children	3.9
4		Threatens parents with killing their children in their dreams	3.11
5	Promise	Promises to rescue Bart and his family	2.6
6		Promises to rescue the Simpson children	2.9
7	Offer	Offers to take Homer home	2.8

The least recurrent illocutionary acts in the sample are commissives (see Table 3), in other words, “those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action” (Searle 1976: 11). Consequently, in the episodes, their communicative function is to relay what courses of action Willie binds himself to; his commissives can be divided into desirable and undesirable actions for his hearers. Desirable commissives are uttered in THH V (the episode parodying *The Shining*), consist of promises to save the other characters’ lives and offers to help them (5-7), and communicate national-ethnic Scottish stereotype 1 “friendly/warm/kind-hearted”. Undesirable commissives are said in THH VI (the parody of the *Nightmare* series), are realised by threats to kill those very characters the groundskeeper wanted to save in THH V (1-4), and express national-ethnic Scottish stereotype 6 “aggressive/paranoid”. The opposite classes of commissives Willie utters and narrative roles he undertakes in THH V and THH VI are accounted for by the distinct plots and activities in the two episodes; however, both desirable and undesirable commissives represent him as a bold and dynamic protagonist putting his life at risk and devoting himself wholeheartedly to a cause, be it worthy or unworthy (see also stereotype 9 “rough/brash”).

In addition, although THH VI is comically founded on the *Nightmare* series, the personality of Freddy Krueger, the *Nightmare* main figure, could not be more dissimilar from Willie’s. On the one hand, in the series the former is a serial killer of children who murdered at least twenty of them and was burnt to death by their angry parents in his

hideout, a boiler room. On the other hand, the sitcom episode describes the grounds-keeper as a quiet worker playing his bagpipes in the school boiler room (national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes 2 “patriotic/nationalistic/proud” and 7 “honest/unpretentious”). When Homer Simpson thoughtlessly makes the boiler explode, Willie also explodes into flame before the schoolchildren’s parents’ disregarding eyes; the parents’ dour carelessness will lead him to take his revenge by killing their children. Although this cannot be held a worthy cause to dedicate oneself to, the circumstances bringing about the murders can in part excuse his wrongdoings and his daring and vigorous manners, finally winning him the affection of the public.

4.3. Representatives

Table 4. Illocutionary act: representative

No.	Representative subclass	Description	Turn
1	Assertion	Asserts that Bart has the supernatural power of “shinning” ⁵	2.4
2		Asserts that Homer has not reached his own world yet	2.8
3		Asserts that he is effortlessly axed	2.9
4		Asserts that Martin has mastered the Latin language	3.5
5	Prediction	Predicts that Bart will return to re-sod the field	1.4
6		Predicts that Bart will see him again soon	1.4
7		Predicts that Homer will go mad and kill his family	2.2
8		Predicts that he will kill Martin	3.5
9		Predicts that he will kill Bart	3.13

⁵ In stylistic terms, “shinning” is a lexical deviation (or neologism) ironically invented by Willie so that the authors of *The Simpsons* will not “get sued” by the authors of *The Shining* (see turn 2.6).

No.	Representative subclass	Description	Turn
10	Description	Describes what he is doing (rescuing the Simpson family)	2.7
11		Describes what he is doing (rescuing the Simpson children)	2.9
12	Explanation	Explains that he has private moments	2.6

Searle (1976: 10) claims that “The point or purpose of the members of the representative class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something’s being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition”. In the three episodes (see Table 4), representatives carry out the communicative function of depicting reality as Willie assumes it is – by means of assertions (1-4), descriptions (10-11) and explanations (12) – or as he assumes it will be – by means of predictions (5-9). Assertions 1-2 and predictions 5-8 are among the groundskeeper’s most noteworthy representatives. Through assertion 1, he shows to be the only *dramatis persona* to have realised that Bart Simpson has the supernatural power of “shinning”; through assertion 2, while Homer is journeying back and forward in time and diverse parallel universes, Willie is the first to let him know that he has not arrived in his own reality yet. With regard to predictions, he utters five in the sample, four of which (5-8) are realised. Three of them (5-7) are important, since they are not fulfilled by him, but by unexpected chains of events; prediction 7 is especially interesting, because it takes place without warning⁶.

Accordingly, in contrast to the other figures in the sitcom, the groundskeeper is represented as significantly connected with the supernatural, or at least as significantly familiar with supernatural and weird circumstances. This trait is not one of the national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes set down in Table 1; it apparently originates from the hyperbolic discourse of the sitcom in general and *The Treehouse of Horror Series* in particular, and is described as a pleasant aspect within the same scripted discourse.

⁶Prediction 9 – Willie will murder Bart – is the only one not to be realised. This is most likely on the grounds that the boy is one of the best-known protagonists of the sitcom and a great favourite with the audience; hence, killing him, although in a parodistic episode, would have made the viewers dislike his murderer.

4.4. Expressives

Table 5. Illocutionary act: expressive

No.	Expressive subclass	Description	Turn
1	Conveying pain	Axed to death when trying to rescue the Simpson family	2.7
2		Axed to death when trying to rescue Homer	2.8
3		Axed to death when trying to rescue the Simpson children	2.9
4		Burning after the boiler has exploded	3.6
5		Burnt to a mere skeleton	3.9
6	Conveying concern	The bus is leaving	3.15
7		Has left his gun on the bus seat	3.15
8		Has lost his shoe	3.15
9	Conveying surprise	Realises that Bart has the supernatural power of “shinning”	2.4
10		Realises that Bart is employing his “shinning” to call him	2.7
11	Conveying satisfaction	Bart has returned to re-sod the field	1.6
12	Conveying anger	Bart has chainsawed part of his hedge maze	2.1
13	Conveying scorn	Disdains the fact that Homer has axed him	2.7
14	Conveying fear	Sinking into the sand	3.14

As far as expressives are concerned, “the illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content” (Searle 1976: 12). Their communicative function is therefore to signal the emotions and sensations Willie experiences (see Table 5): they range from the positive feeling of satisfaction (11), to the negative feelings of pain (1-5), concern (6-8), anger (12) and fear (14), to feelings of surprise (9-10) and scorn (8). The

different subclasses of expressives and their distribution in the three episodes can be accounted for by the narratives of those same episodes, as is the case with commissives scrutinised in Section 4.2. The groundskeeper's sole agreeable emotion (11) is comprised in PC, whereas all his disagreeable sensations occur in THH V and THH VI: they are the consequences of, among other things, being axed to death in all the three segments composing THH V, burnt to a mere skeleton, compelled to pursue a bus, transformed into a lawnmower eventually sinking into the sand, and obliged to handle Homer's madness and Bart's "shinning".

As a result, a foreigner, to be more exact a Scottish immigrant, is depicted as the perfect grotesque and ludicrous victim of the community of Springfield, most of all as a boy's (Bart's) easy target. Willie's identity as a victim is strengthened by the two following facts: 1. Three distinct people, including toddler Maggie Simpson, axe him three distinct times in the same episode, a fact he metadiscursively remarks on (see assertion 3); 2. He first features prominently in *The Treehouse of Horror Series*, where victims are not only acceptable but also required by the horror genre. This portrayal of the groundskeeper as a victim results in the inversion of two national-ethnic Scottish characteristics: stereotype 3 "humorous/good fun", i.e. someone to laugh *with*, is turned into "foolish", i.e. someone to laugh *at*, and stereotype 5 "low self-esteem" is changed into the "low esteem" the Springfield people hold him in.

4.5. Directives

Table 6. Illocutionary act: directive

No.	Directive subclass	Description	Turn
1	Order	Orders Bart to re-sod the field	1.2
2		Orders Bart to keep quiet	2.6
3		Orders Bart not to read his mind at a given time	2.6
4		Orders himself to rescue Bart and his family	2.7
5		Orders Homer to fight him	2.7
6		Orders Homer to carry out his instructions	2.8
7		Orders the Simpson children to be frightened of him	3.15
8		Orders the bus driver to stop for the first time	3.15
9		Orders the bus driver to stop for the second time	3.15
10		Orders the Simpson children to wait for him	3.15
11	Suggestion	Suggests that Bart save his strength	1.2
12		Suggests that he not grow angry with Bart	2.2
13		Suggests that Bart call him when Homer goes mad	2.6
14		Suggests that the Simpson children not give way	2.9
15	Request	Requests the schoolchildren's parents to rescue him	3.6
16		Requests rescue from the sandbox	3.14

In the three episodes, directives are the most frequent illocutionary acts (see Table 6); as such, they strongly characterise Willie's conversational behaviour. The illocutionary point of directives "consists in the fact that they are attempts (of varying degrees, and hence, more precisely, they are determinates of the determinable which includes attempting) by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (Searle 1976: 11). Accordingly, the communicative function of directives is to indicate unambiguously what the groundskeeper wants his addressees to do; underpinning this class of illocutionary acts is Scottish stereotype 4 "direct/down to earth".

The sample incorporates two requests only (15 and 16). By means of request 15, Willie asks the schoolchildren's parents to save his life, but he meets with a refusal, viz. a dispreferred second part in an adjacency pair: it is this declined request which sparks off the whole plot of the second THH VI segment. With regard to suggestions (11-14), they are put forward for the hearers' benefit and, therefore, recall national-ethnic Scottish stereotype 1 "friendly/warm/kind-hearted". Conversely, orders (1-10) are given for the speaker's own benefit, and evoke stereotypes 6 "aggressive/paranoid" and 9 "rough/brash". Suggestions and orders alike contribute to representing the groundskeeper as a self-assured *dramatis persona*, and orders in particular characterise him as forceful: they actually range from directions to children (1-3, 7, 10) to injunctions to adults (5-6, 8-9) and even, comically, to himself (4). In the three episodes, though, Willie's assertiveness is commonly thwarted by his younger and older addressees, who unvaryingly refuse to comply with his commands in linguistic and non-linguistic ways: this brings about the conversational pattern consisting of the groundskeeper's orders plus the other protagonists' dispreferred refusals of those orders. As a result, the repeated occurrence of this pattern reinforces his description as a grotesque victim and a ludicrous figure in the sitcom.

5. Conclusions

This article has presented a pragmatic analysis of Groundskeeper Willie's turns in the three episodes PC, THH V and THH VI by applying Lindsay's (1997) list of national-ethnic Scottish stereotypes and Searle's (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts. As demonstrated in Section 2, at the phonological, lexical and visual levels, the stereotypical depiction of Willie's Scottish national identity and non-American ethnic origins are conveyed by his regional accent, physical appearance and, to a lesser degree, vocabulary. This pragmatic examination has revealed that the groundskeeper's national-ethnic Scottish characteristics are also directly relayed by his illocutionary acts: in fact, they communicate the personal features of his *dramatis persona* in the ironic discourse of the sitcom. In the representative sample of turns and episodes utilised here, Willie's illocutionary acts credit him with positively value-laden personality traits, like fearlessness, knowledge of the supernatural and self-awareness — in Lindsay's words, the Scottish immigrant is

stereotypically friendly, aggressive and rough. Nevertheless, these favourable aspects are countered by the other characters' responses to the groundskeeper's illocutionary acts and by the narratives of the parodistic *Shining* and *Nightmare* episodes he is the protagonist of. These responses and narratives ultimately typify him as a comic and foolish victim of children and adults alike in the American town of Springfield.

How do these findings relate to the research on national-ethnic stereotypes in *The Simpsons* outlined in Section 1? As noted by Gray (2006: 64), Willie's Scottishness is represented as hyper-stereotypical, hence as deliberately hyperbolic and humorous; moreover, Rodaway (2003: 163) observes that his major discursive function in the sitcom is to be a foil for his American fellow townspeople. Several heedless or unsophisticated spectators, yet, may not be conscious that the groundskeeper's representation and function are critical discursive strategies. Accordingly, although within the comic discourse of this parodistic sitcom, the equation of an immigrant, constructed as linguistically and visually different from mainstream American identity and culture, with a ridiculous victim, consistently outsmarted not only by adults but also by children, can actually be, in Gray's (2006: 64) terms, "a rather high risk strategy".

Appendix: Groundskeeper Willie's illocutionary acts in the three episodes

1. "Principal Charming" (code 7F15)

At school. Bart is sodding the playground as punishment.

[1.1] **Bart.** Stupid Principal Skinner. You gotta be kidding me, bugger.

[1.2] **Willie.** Save your strength, lad [**directive: suggestion**]. Eh, there's a whole field for you to re-sod yet, eh eh eh eh eh [**directive: order**].

[Principal Skinner releases Bart.]

[1.3] **Bart.** Well, Willie, you can take it from here. *Throws a sack of seeds at him. Adiós, dude.*

[1.4] **Willie.** You'll be back [**representative: prediction**]! You haven't seen the last of Willie [**representative: prediction**]!

Some days later. Bart is sodding the playground again.

[1.5] **Bart.** *Mumbles a protest.*

[1.6] **Willie.** I told you you'd be back [**expressive: conveying satisfaction**]!

(Groening 2001-2010, Season 2, Episode 14; my transcription)

2. "Treehouse of Horror V" (code 2F03)

First segment. Outside, the camera starts high above a hedge maze and zooms down to Willie watering one part of it. A chainsaw noise is heard.

[2.1] **Bart.** Hey, I found a shortcut through your hedge maze.

[2.2] **Willie.** Why, you little **[expressive: conveying anger]** — *Thinking.* No, no. Go easy on the wee one **[directive: suggestion]**. His father's gonna go crazy and chop 'em all into haggis **[representative: prediction]**.

[2.3] **Bart.** What's haggis?

[2.4] **Willie.** *Gasps.* Boy, you read my thoughts **[expressive: conveying surprise]**! You've got the shinning **[representative: assertion]**.

[2.5] **Bart.** You mean shining.

[2.6] **Willie.** *Sotto voce.* Shh! You wanna get sued **[directive: order]**? Now, look, boy, if your Da goes gaga, you just use that ... shin of yours to call me **[directive: suggestion]** and I'll come a-running **[commissive: promise]**. But don't be reading my mind between four and five **[directive: order]**. That's Willie's time **[representative: explanation]**! [...] *Willie is watching TV in a little house.*

[2.7] **Willie.** Uh oh **[expressive: conveying surprise]**. The little fat boy and his family are in trouble **[directive: order]**. *Runs outside, throws TV in the snow.* I'm coming to rescue the lot of you **[representative: description]**! *Opens door to lodge.* All right, loony, show me what you got **[directive: order]**. *Homer drives an axe into his back.* Aw **[expressive: conveying pain]**, is that the best you can do **[expressive: conveying scorn]**? *Collapses.* [...]

Second segment. Homer arrives home again and opens the door to be greeted by Willie.

[2.8] **Willie.** You're still not in your own world, Homer **[representative: assertion]**. I can get you home **[commissive: offer]**, but you have to do exactly as I **[directive: order]** — Argh **[expressive: conveying pain]**! *Maggie axes him.* [...]

Third segment. Lunch lady Doris catches the children escaping and walks towards them slowly with an eggbeater.

[2.9] **Willie.** Hold on, kids **[directive: suggestion]**! I'm coming to rescue the lot of you **[representative: description]**! I'll **[commissive: promise]** — *Skinner appears and axes him.* Argh **[expressive: conveying pain]**! Oh, I'm bad at this **[representative: assertion]**. (Groening 2001-2010, Season 6, Episode 6; adapted from *The Simpsons Archive*, available at <http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/episodes/2F03.html>)

3. “Treehouse of Horror VI” (code 3F04)

Second segment. In his dream, Bart spots Willie dressed as Freddy Krueger, brandishing a rake.

[3.1] **Willie.** Glad to rake your acquaintance **[commissive: threat]**. *Laughs evilly, and swipes at Bart, who wakes up yelling.* [...]

In his dream, Martin is dressed as a wizard.

[3.2] **Martin.** I am the wondrous wizard of Latin! I am a dervish of declension and a conjurer of conjugation, with a million hit points and maximum charisma. *Spots a blackboard with verbs written all over it.* Aha! “Morire”: to die. “Morit”: he, she, or it dies. *Willie morphs out of the blackboard; Martin gasps.*

[3.3] Willie. “Moris”: *you die* [**commissive: threat**].

[3.4] Martin. *Aah! Runs off.*

[3.5] Willie. *Laughs.* You’ve mastered a dead tongue [**representative: assertion**], but can you handle a live one [**representative: prediction**]? *His tongue shoots out of his mouth, wraps around Martin, and squeezes him. In class, Martin twists and screams, then collapses on the floor. [...]*

Flashback. At school, the flames in the boiler flare up. Willie stops playing his bagpipes to check it out, but the boiler explodes, engulfing him in flames. Willie, burning and shouting, tries to escape, but the doorknob falls off. He then tries to use the fire extinguisher, but it is empty. He breaks out of the boiler room and runs into the classroom, where Principal Skinner and some parents are in a meeting.

[3.6] Willie. *Argh* [**expressive: conveying pain**]! *Help! Please help me* [**directive: request**]!

[3.7] Skinner. *Reproachful.* Willie, please! Mr. Van Houten has the floor.

[3.8] Mr. Van Houten. *Er, I, for one, would like to see the cafeteria menus in advance so parents can adjust their dinner menus accordingly. Burning Willie sits down and waits. I don’t like the idea of Milhouse having two spaghetti meals in one day.*

Willie explodes into flame and screams for a few seconds. The parents turn to watch.

[3.9] Willie. *Aaarrggghhh* [**expressive: conveying pain**]!!! *A mere skeleton.* You’ll pay for this ... with your children’s blood [**commissive: threat**]!

[3.10] Wiggum. *Oh, right. How are you going to get them? Skeleton power?*

[3.11] Willie. *I’ll strike where you canna protect them – in their dreams* [**commissive: threat**]!

His skeleton collapses into ashes, which are magically swept up into a dustpan and deposited in the garbage. [...]

In Bart’s dream, Willie, his giant head atop a fierce tartan lawn-mowing machine, plows through the hedge behind Bart. Bart cries out and runs off while Willie laughs. Seeing the sandbox gives Bart an idea. While Willie looks around for him, Bart takes some clippings of grass lying in garbage bags nearby and sprinkles them over the sandbox, waters them with a hose, then stands with the sandbox in front of him and calls out to Willie.

[3.12] Bart. *Hey, Lawn Boy! You missed a spot! Motions to sandbox.*

[3.13] Willie. *When I’m done with you, they’ll have to do a compost-mortem* [**representative: prediction**]!

Willie shifts himself into high gear and tromps the gas, flying toward Bart and growling. When he hits the sandbox, though, his wheels turn uselessly.

[3.14] Willie. *Argh! Sinky sand* [**expressive: conveying fear**]! *Help me! Help Willie* [**directive: request**]! *Morphs into several different tartan shapes before turning into himself and sinking into the sand. [...]*

Soon afterwards, behind Bart, a giant tartan spiderlike bagpipe with Willie's head on it rises from the sandbox. Both Bart and Lisa get grabbed by Willie, who is playing and sinking into the sand. All seems lost until Maggie appears and blocks Willie's exit hole with her pacifier. Willie tries vainly to pull it out, but he expands gradually until he explodes, raining scraps of tartan all over the place. [...]

The three of them walk out the front door the next morning. A bus pulls up; Willie gets off.

[3.15] Willie. Boo! Hello! Here I am. *Laughs and makes some faces and noises.* **[directive: order]** The bus leaves. No **[expressive: conveying concern]**! Stop **[directive: order]**! I left my gun on the seat **[expressive: conveying concern]**. Hey **[directive: order]**! He starts chasing it, then turns back. Wait here, please **[directive: order]**. He runs off, losing his shoe. Oh, jeez **[expressive: conveying concern]**. A saxophone plays the theme song.

(Groening 2001-2010, Season 7, Episode 6; adapted from *The Simpsons Archive*, available at <http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/episodes/3F04.html>)

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Daniela Francesca Viridis is an Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Cagliari. She is a steering group member of the International Ecolinguistics Association. She is the author of *Serialised Gender: A Linguistic Analysis of Femininities in Contemporary TV Series and Media* (2012), which was awarded the Italian Association of English Studies Book Prize 2013. Her current research interests include ecostylistics and metaphor theory.

LITERATURE

SERCAN ÖZTEKİN⁷

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Kocaeli Univesity, Turkey

ORCID: 0000-0003-1021-8460

Subversion of gender stereotypes in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

Abstract. Victorian sensation fiction strives to go beyond its time through issues and characters that do not conform to nineteenth century social norms. The novels of this genre depict the sensational lives with deceits and crimes which shocked the readers of their time, and they increase the reader's tension with sensational narratives including untraditional matters and portrayals. Along with scandalous and criminal subjects, these works sometimes offer unconventional depictions of femininity and masculinity in the Victorian Age. Accordingly, this paper discusses Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) focusing on male and female characters challenging traditional gender stereotypes. It examines how these novels describe characters rather dissimilar to the ones in the traditional fiction of the era through their cunning, intrigues, and unconventional attitudes with regard to marriage, power, and gender roles.

Keywords: Victorian sensation fiction, subversion, gender, femininity, masculinity.

1. Introduction

The Victorian novel is generally identified by attempts for realistic descriptions of difficult situations in which middle class and urban society struggle, together with portrayals of traditional gender roles. However, some novels, especially of sensation fiction in the 1860s, strive to go beyond their time through issues and characters that do not

⁷ Address for correspondence: Kocaeli Universitesi, Korfez Yerleskesi, Yabancı Diller Yuksekokulu, Atalar Mah. Bağdat Cad. No:83, Korfez/Kocaeli, Turkey. E-mail: sercan.oztekin@gmail.com

conform to nineteenth century social norms. These novels depict the sensational lives with deceptions and crimes which shocked the readers of their time. D. A. Miller states that they represent “the first instances of modern literature”, as they include sensational narratives including untraditional subjects and portrayals (1986: 107). Along with scandalous and criminal subjects, these works offer unconventional depictions of femininity and masculinity in the Victorian Age. Concerning subversions of gender stereotypes, this paper discusses Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) which are among the most prominent examples of sensation fiction. They describe the characters rather dissimilar to the ones in the traditional fiction of the era through their cunning, intrigues, and unconventional attitudes with regard to marriage, power, and gender roles.

As a result of their revolutionary and modern contents compared to strict moral codes of the Victorian age, sensation novels were harshly criticized for being indecent and outrageous. Ross G. Forman points out that the antagonistic critical responses against sensation novels manifest not only male unease about female writers and readers, but also anxieties about unconventional portrayals of gender and marriage in these works (2011: 415). Emily Allen emphasizes “the sensation novel’s shocking and scintillating representation of women and men gone off the rails of proper gender: manly women, effeminate men, and most variants in between” (2011: 401). These novels attempt to shatter the patriarchal order and sexual inequality, which could be seen in the regulations of certain acts that granted women significant rights in the second half of the nineteenth century. Actually, the domestic female ideal started to be challenged before the popularity of sensation fiction. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (or the Divorce Act) for the first time gave neglected or mistreated middle-class women right to sue their husbands for divorce, so they could legally leave their houses where they were supposed to be the ‘angels’. Additionally, the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 allowed women to control their own property and fortune (Allen 2011: 404). Sensation novels reflect on these social transformations and trigger them as well, for they display unconventional matters and question traditional gender conventions and identities.

These works also criticize and deconstruct strict heterosexuality and gender stereotypes of the Victorian period. The terms “homosocial” and “homoerotic” are used in this paper, as there are not obvious same-sex relationships in the two novels studied, but the same-sex desire could be relatively observed in some certain characters. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (1985), defines *homosociality* as any kind of the social bonds between people of the same-sex. However, she mostly applies this term to men due to the control of patriarchal system over unusual relationships between men in order for this system to emphasize heterosexuality. The boundaries between homosocial and homosexual relationships could be blurry, so patriarchal system develops a homophobic language in order to eliminate male

homosexuality. Sharon Marcus, in *Between Women* (2007), an allusion to Sedgwick's work, focuses on the relationships between women in the Victorian age. She accepts Sedgwick's proposition that female homoerotic relationships did not get as much attention as male homoeroticism, and she states that these female bonds need more critical investigation. Additionally, Paul Hammond describes the difference between homoerotic and homosexual: "homoerotic" refers to feelings, but not exactly to sexual acts addressed from one man to another; these feelings may never be set in motion as they would in a "homosexual" involvement (1996: 5). In the works discussed in this paper, these homoerotic overtones can be read as a form of subversion of traditional male and female identities.

2. Subversion of traditional female identity

One of the most important atypical subjects in Victorian sensation fiction is the masculinization of some female characters. It can be recognized more obviously in *The Woman in White* which is one of the earliest examples of sensation fiction with its serialization started in 1859. It starts with the story of a painting teacher Walter Hartright who goes to Limmeridge House to teach Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe, the stepsisters. An heiress to her late father's property, Laura is promised to Sir Percival Glyde who turns out to be after her fortune. Walter Hartright, with Marian's help, traces Sir Percival and his ally Count Fosco to save Laura from her marriage and the stealing of her fortune. Marian Halcombe is described as a masculine and ugly woman in the first scene where Walter meets her. She is an "ugly" lady with "a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw" (24), and this description is maintained through the depiction of her head's contradicting with her "masculine form" (25) and body. This narration goes far even to describe "almost a moustache" (25) on her upper lips, and that makes her masculinity definite once again. This could be regarded as disturbing because she is in striking contrast to usual figures of submissive women which were social constructs in the Victorian age.

In addition to her masculine physical appearance, Marian is also a strong and courageous character compared to figures of traditional women who are generally dominated by male power in Victorian fiction. She is often identified with masculine definitions which stand for transgression of gender identity. As Miller points out, her curious case of having a masculine body "gives all the hints of containing a man's soul" (1986: 125). She is a mentor and protector to Laura at home even after her sister gets married. Rational thinking is embodied in Marian while Laura is incapable of doing anything alone without Marian's help. Marian has a great influence on some incidents throughout the story. In the beginning, she is the one who decides that Walter cannot stay in their house anymore because of his attraction to Laura, and she gets him to leave in a very short time. Laura is saved by Marian after she is kept in the asylum in place of Anne Catherick. As Laura's health is heavily affected by the events, Marian takes an active parental role in her caring. Furthermore, after getting alarmed by the danger of

being found, she moves Laura to another place even though Walter is not there to help them. As observed, Marian's identification on gender terms is vague even when Count Fosco asks, "Can you look at Miss Halcombe and not see that she has the foresight and the resolution of a man?" (291). As Carolyn Dever points out, Marian's gender identity and features are ambiguous, and "her sexuality is also open to interpretation" (2005: 166). Accordingly, her relationship with Laura and her gender identity not conforming to Victorian norms evoke female homoerotic overtones which prevail in the novel.

Homoerotic intimations in *The Woman in White* are strengthened through Marian's masculinity and characterization. Anyone would suspect the peculiarity of the relationship between Marian and Laura because they are depicted as being extremely close to each other despite being totally different in character and appearance. Their intimacy is so apparent that it must have been confusing and inconvenient to the Victorian society. Peter Barry states that homosexual implications can be a metaphorical allusion to the act of exceeding the limits and "resistance to the established norms and boundaries" (2002: 148). Therefore, this issue is dealt with in the novel as a means of being different and unconventional in a very conservative period. The fact that there are no parents in their life, but only an uncle who keeps himself closed in a dark room, implies the idea of freedom for these female characters and their homosocial bonds. They have nothing to limit them and this freedom has possibly made them quite intimate and dependent on each other. In spite of their differences, Marian says "I won't live without her and she can't live without me" (27). This shows their unusual relationship when she talks as if they were two passionate lovers who can't be without each other. Marian continuously indicates her hate for Sir Percival and she describes Laura as her "own love" (171). She does anything for Laura, so she is not afraid of taking risks. Thus, this desire and love for each other suggest more homoerotic overtones rather than mere homosociality in Sedgwick's term.

Marriage does not have any significance to Marian, and she does not have any intention of marrying someone. As Laurel Erickson points out, she breaks away from the predestined life of a single young woman caught in marriage plot (1999: 100). As there is no authority to make her get married to a baronet or a socially higher aristocrat, she takes it for granted to live with her half-sister. Besides, the reader is not presented any hints of her interest in the opposite sex, for she is totally committed to her half-sister. While Marian does not trouble herself about not getting married, her half-sister has to marry Sir Percival due to her promise and loyalty to her dead father. Nonetheless, they promise each other to live together after Laura gets married, and she even gets Marian to "repeat the promise to live with her when she was married" (159). In a totally depressing mode, they spend the night together in the bed before Laura's marriage. The bond between them seems inseparable because Marian is always present in Laura's two marriages, the one with Sir Percival and the second one with Walter.

Marian's attitude and remarks about men represent the unconventionality and refusal of male oppression explicitly:

No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are enemies of our innocence and our peace – they drag us away from our parents love and our sisters' friendship – they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kernel. (159)

Her severe reaction to men and their selfishness could be recognized as a form of rebellion by any attentive reader. With respect to Collins's fiction, Lyn Pykett postulates how society is sometimes "threatened by an 'emasculating' primitive womanly nature, by women who do not know– or who refuse to accept– their assigned place in society; by feminized men, or by coarse brutal masculinity" (2005: 124). Marian is rather conscious about helplessness of her life unlike any other Victorian women who accept to be controlled by men. She considers men as enemies of their freedom and their peace. As there are not any parent figures, she means her sister's love even when she mentions parents' love. A dog in chains as a metaphor for a woman under male control is also quite shocking for the conservative Victorian norms.

Anne Catherick's mother is another significant figure in this regard, though she is not seen much throughout the story. She has been cheated by Percival and made to plot on behalf of him, so she becomes his accomplice. Then, she becomes a threat to Percival, and he is forced to support her financially. Society considers her a fallen woman, and her husband just abandons her because she is believed to have had an affair with Percival. However, she is an arrogant and dominant woman who does not care about what people think of her. She does not cry or beg her husband not to leave her, and she does not try to make people believe that she is not guilty either. She is a significant representative of a non-conformist female in a traditional society.

In a similar vein, Mary E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* tells the story of an unconventional woman and makes a very formidable female character central to a sensational story. While Lady Audley's past, being left with a child by her husband, represents the traditional phase of Victorian femininity, her later marriage with Mr. Audley is her struggle against women's misery caused by male domination. In Natalie Schroeder's words, Braddon's "sensational novels are especially significant today for what they reveal about Victorian women's resistance to conventionally prescribed social norms" (1988: 87). In the novel, Helen Talbot cannot bear anymore being a desperate mother waiting for her husband to come back from Australia. For this reason, she fakes her death and changes her name to Lucy Graham in search for a different life and a rich husband. She gets married to Mr. Audley, a rich but old gentleman. When her ex-husband shows up

with her new husband's nephew coincidentally, she enforces her limits in order not to disclose her secret past.

Like Marian Halcombe, Lady Audley has countless unconventional attributes with regards to her power to achieve what she desires. She is intelligent and brave enough to change her identity and make a new start in her life. Besides, she is fearless when she pushes her former husband, George Talbot, into the well and burns an inn down with the aim of killing the owner of the place. While doing so, she gets help only from another female, her maid Phoebe, not a man. Likewise, Laura receives the greatest support from Marian till Walter gets involved in the case.

Besides unorthodox attributions to her, she is also described as a representation of evil with abundant descriptions in the novel due to her irrepressible anger. Hansson and Norberg state how the relation between her and evil is clear in her portrayal and she is associated with the devil through certain metaphors (446). The "flame in her eyes – a greenish light, such as might flash from [...] an angry mermaid" (347) and the "horrible demoniac force" (351) present her like a monstrous creature. In a way, Lucy reacts against the male dominated Victorian norms by committing bigamy. As these suggest, "women offer a formidable, and frequently insurmountable, challenge to heterosexual male figures in Victorian fiction" (Dever 2005: 171). Lucy cannot wait for a husband whose whereabouts are unknown, and acts for herself in order to have a better life by changing her name and marrying another man.

Furthermore, marriage is a controversial issue in the novel in comparison to traditional social aspects. Lucy gets married only in an attempt to climb socially and have a more comfortable life, most importantly to be free. She regards marriage as a way to freedom because she can get whatever she wants in this way. Mr. Audley does not have any sexual relationship with her; in addition, she does not have passion for that. Homoerotic overtones between Lady Audley and Phoebe raised by Schroeder are not as obvious as in Marian and Laura's relationship. Although Lucy's opposition to Phoebe's marriage to Luke can be associated to their affection, there is another important reason for her refusal. She does not want this marriage because Luke is extremely abusive, and she does not want Phoebe to be oppressed by him. As all these circumstances signify, Lady Audley violates gender, social, and moral codes and she is eventually put into the asylum by a consensus in a patriarchal order (Klein 2008). That also shows how untraditional female characters are not tolerated in Victorian society, which could be related to her demon-like depiction in some parts of the novel.

3. Challenging Victorian masculinity

Together with unusual female characters, male characters are presented as incapable of controlling women and displaying manly features as opposed to expectations. Victorian masculinity is open to interpretation in these two novels because male characters are

deconstructed through their weakness and incapacity. In *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright is usually presented as less capable than Marian and in need of her help. Marian regards Walter as feminine, and often urges him to act like a man: “Don’t shrink under it like a woman [...] trample it under foot like a man” (59). This posits a total contrast between these characters who are supposed to possess social characteristics of their sex. Marian’s statement indicates Walter’s weakness at the same time. He belongs to the lower-middle class, which signifies his weakness compared to financially superior women around him. However, he eventually manages to get married to Laura at the end.

Walter is a socially inferior man to his beloved Laura and undertakes an amateur detective position for the sake of the re-establishment of her identity. When Laura is saved from the asylum, and her social identity and position are assured, Walter gets married to her and becomes the “heir of Limmeridge” (569). It can be inferred that Marian only accepts Walter as Laura’s husband because of his lower social position and fragility. Furthermore, they will also live together and Marian will possibly never get married. In this way, Walter becomes a conduit in their relationship and he will always feel inferior because of their different social status. That means Marian can dominate and control the couple, for Laura is still psychologically and physically weak after all the traumatizing experiences.

Described as a rival to Walter and Marian, Sir Percival is not a very dominant and strong man, as he cannot get Laura to sign a document about using her fortune. Although he is an upper class gentleman, he does not possess virtuous merits and attitudes supposed to be in a so-called aristocrat and educated man like him. He can lose his temper easily for which Count Fosco criticizes him and advises him to be more rational. However, Sir Percival is a representative of fake aristocracy who does not have that virtues belonging to upper class gentility. He cannot even think rationally when it comes to the obsession to keep his secrets hidden. As Ross G. Forman proposes, Sir Percival’s “bullying, bad temper, and disrespect for honor mark him as outside the bounds of appropriate manliness for his class”, and also as opposite to traditional standards of being a gentleman for the middle class readers. (2011: 417). What is more, he is incapable of thinking sensibly and making plans in contrast to Marian whose nerves are strong.

Sir Percival’s ineffectiveness as an unusual aristocrat makes his masculinity and sexuality questionable. Emily Allen describes him as “the novel’s whipping boy of effeminate and hysterical masculinity, the ineffectual patriarch whose malignant selfishness dooms the woman in his charge” (2011: 407). When Laura and Sir Percival come back from their honeymoon, Laura’s depressed mood gives the hints of sexual abuse or Glyde’s indifference to Laura sexually and emotionally. He does not show any affection to Laura, which shows his ambition for financial gain in this marriage. Furthermore, his previous connection to Mrs. Catherick whom he used for creating his fake aristocracy is questionable. Although his attachment to Mrs. Catherick was identified as an

illicit love affair by the villagers, it is later understood that it does not contain sexual matters. Sir Percival uses Mrs. Catherick in order to forge his parents' marriage record to legalise his heirship for his father's inheritance. Thus, he takes advantage of these accusations about him and Mrs. Catherick.

There are two other eccentric male characters in the novel that stand for subversion of masculinity. Philip Fairlie is Laura's uncle and he never gets out of his room because of his illness. He is deliberately described as a fragile and feminized man with no physical or masculine strength. He is totally careless for what goes on about his nieces, and he cannot perform any parental or masculine help for the sisters. Furthermore, Count Fosco is a really flamboyant man with his exaggeratedly polite and effeminate manners. He has a bizarre interest for his birds and flowers, which contrasts with the figure of a masculine gentleman. Although these two men seem socially and financially powerful, they do not have many qualities and features considered to be typical of men. In other words, they do not perform the characteristics of independent and strong upper class gentlemen in their actions and decisions.

In addition to these subversions of masculinity, *Lady Audley's Secret* displays homoerotic overtones between two male characters more obviously than any other sensation novel, and this has often been analysed in queer studies. Gero Bauer highlights the homosocial bonds between George and Robert, and Robert's affection for George is observed in "his eroticised search for his friend" (2016: 158). Moreover, Sedgwick relates homophobia to patriarchal system which dominates not only women but also homosocial bonds between men; that is, it oppresses both women and homosexuality to reinforce male power in society (Sedgwick 1985: 3). Therefore, Mary E. Braddon explicitly challenges the patriarchal order by employing a non-conformist woman and homoerotic bonds between men, both of which were harshly judged in the Victorian age. She depicts uncommon forms of masculinity with a homoerotic relationship and demasculinized men deliberately deconstructing masculinity in order to react against the mainstream Victorian patriarchy and sexual inequality.

Robert Audley, Sir Audley's nephew, functions as an amateur detective to find George Talbo and the secrets of Lady Audley. The things that make him a remarkable character are the homoerotic overtones associated with him and his relationship with George Talbo throughout the novel. In the initial presentation of Robert, he is concurrently depicted as both lethargic and obscurely effeminate. Braddon writes that he is a "handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow of about seven and twenty" who likes "reading French novels" (36). He wears a blue silk handkerchief around his neck and his apartment is decorative, with flowers and birds in cages, which is alike to Count Fosco's extravagant dressing style and interest in birds. Therefore, Braddon forms a connection between Robert's refusal to adjust to strict gender conventions and his flamboyant manner of dress and fondness for French literature, a symbol of sexually immoral material.

Jennifer S. Kushnier emphasizes the significance of Eton College as an implication for the nature of Robert and George's relationship because it is a renowned place of homosexual relationships among young men, and it gives signs "to her readers that this school was instrumental in creating the homosocial-homoerotic Robert Audley" (Kushnier 2002: 62). In addition, Richard Nemesvari indicates that such elite schools for male students "form the homosocial bonds at the heart of British patriarchal power" (1995: 521) by excluding females. Regarding these earlier implications and background about Robert's sexuality, his close relationship with George Talboy is doubtful and questionable. When George Talboy comes back from Australia and learns that his wife has passed away, he meets his friend Robert Audley from Eton College, and they spend about a year together in Robert's place. During their time of being together, Robert endeavours "to act for another" (44) and makes sure of his companion's comfort, becoming the helper "which [...] guided [George] through the darkest passage of [his] life" (477). Additionally, Robert cannot think of a life without George even after his marriage. He always includes George in his dreams about living in a villa where George "shall lie on the deck and smoke while my pretty one plays her guitar and sings songs to us" (40). Hence, George is always present even when Robert is imagining his future wife is entertaining them.

Robert tells Lady Audley, "I had a friend [...] whom I loved very dearly, and since I have lost him I fear that my feelings towards other people are strangely embittered" (153). Here, he obscurely admits his love of a man, which would not be recognized by the Victorian reader. He has resentful feelings toward other people, and he cannot love another person, especially a woman, because of the power of his affection for George. He later bemoans, "Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow [...] or feel so lonely without him? [...] I would freely give up all [...] if [...] George Talboys could stand by my side" (176). The intensity of his emotions could be observed in these words. In the beginning of their friendship, their intimacy and Robert's interest could be related to George's emotional fragility because of his lost wife. Nonetheless, Robert's emotions in this passage imply a stronger bond between the men. When George is lost after his encounter with Lady Audley, Robert is absorbed in thoughts of George and he is "flurried and anxious [...] about his missing friend and [...] walking fast. 'I haven't walked fast since I was at Eton,' he murmured" (90). Robert remembers him in every second after George is lost. Performing a quasi-detective position, he sacrifices his own comfort for the sake of finding his beloved companion. This intimacy between the two men is identical to the strong bond between Marian and Laura in many ways.

Robert's relationship with George's sister Clara also gives the signs of his overwhelming affection for George. Clara's similarity to George prompts Robert to regard her as a companion when they meet because she is "like the friend whom he had loved and lost" (220). It is inevitable to recognize that Robert's emotions for Clara deepen as he observes more of George in her appearance and personality (Kushnier 2002: 68). He

does not have any sexual or emotional intentions for Clara, which hints his devotion to George and his indifference to Clara.

In addition to his eccentric personality, his hatred for women, similar to Marian's hatred for men, emphasizes the complicated nature of his sexuality. His lack of interest in women is very apparent when he says "I hate women [...] They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors" (227). This is very similar to Marian's discontent with the strength and domination of men. Thus, Robert's remarks about women once again suggest that his relationship to Clara is emptied of sexual and emotional content.

Robert complains about "how these women take life out of our hands. Helen Maldon, Lady Audley, Clara Talboys, and now Miss Tonks--all womankind from beginning to end" (258). This explanation by Robert is again comparable to Marian's thoughts on male dominancy and control over women. This could be seen that weaker men could be disturbed by female malevolence just like the degrading effects of patriarchy on women. Braddon subverts the patriarchal order by presenting a female character challenging this authority who could be a disturbing figure as much as men. Robert also states that women "are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex" (227). Robert's comment on the strength of women over men is materialized in the novel. Braddon shows Lady Audley as a stronger woman with her wit and cunningness in order to survive in a material and patriarchal society through several plots and intrigues. After disguising herself as a governess which is one of the few jobs for Victorian women, she can wisely display virtuous features as a way of getting married to Sir Michael Audley.

In addition to Robert, Lucy's second husband, "Sir Micheal is femininized to a certain extent" and is not described as a strong and bad-tempered oppressor (Hansson & Norberg 2013: 445). Sir Michael is entirely reliant upon his younger wife who controls him in all aspects. With his marriage to Lucy, he stops being an independent and powerful aristocrat. In addition, even when Lucy's secrets are revealed, he just leaves home and goes abroad with his daughter. Therefore, both George and Sir Michael seem to be unfortunate victims of female subtlety, while Robert obviously only evades a similar situation as a result of his indifference to women (Klein 2008)

Towards the end of both novels, the subversions of social constructions of gender and sexuality are sustained with unconventional depictions of marriage which include a third person involved. Braddon concludes the novel with George, Robert, and Clara in a "fairy cottage" (478), in spite of no obvious sexual intimacy between the men. Sedgwick explains that these marriages with a third individual use women as conduits to show heterosexual relationships in the eyes of society for the sake of cementing patriarchal order (Sedgwick 1985: 25). Here, the conduit is Clara who unconsciously enables the continuity of Robert and George's relationship. This is very similar to the situation of Walter and Laura and their marriage including Marian as an indispensable part of their

life, as the sisters promised to each other. In a similar manner to Sedgwick's proposition, Sharon Marcus foregrounds the role of heterosexual marriage in securing the homosocial bonds and friendships between women in the Victorian age (2007: 193). The traditional heterosexual marriage faces a challenge through the ambiguous figures of Marian Halcombe and George Talboys. This shows that homoerotic predilections are still maintained in the house under the disguise of a heterosexual marriage. By presenting these marriages in the two novels, they defy conventional understandings of sexuality and marriage in the Victorian age.

4. Conclusion

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* overthrow and reinterpret conventional constructions of gender. Unusual characters like Robert Audley and Marian Halcombe do not conform to the traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity; however, they are not criticized or portrayed as antipathetic characters, which suggests the intention of the writers to subvert these social and sexual conventions (Klein 2008). Marian is never judged and condemned because of her masculinity; in contrast, she is described like a heroine who resolves a lot of troubles in the story. With his quest for revealing the truth, Robert Audley is also a sympathetic character despite his homoerotic predilections. On the other hand, Lady Audley is justified because of having been left alone by her first husband and having no other choice. Moreover, she transgresses moral and social boundaries by committing crimes and climbing socially through marriage. Her being punished and put in the asylum symbolizes the excessive Victorian morality and intolerance for unconventional women.

As observed, *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* are not mere stories of how patriarchy is threatened and overpowered, but they should be recognized as subversions of gender stereotypes. Male characters are depicted as feeble while some women are shown to be strong and they generally control men in addition to merely resisting patriarchy. That is to say, these works complement portrayals of unordinary women with the pictures of peculiar men by defying conventional understandings of femininity and masculinity. Being radical examples of sensation fiction, they make the best of their genre and make a difference in terms of gender and sexuality in a very conventional age. They destabilize sexual and social conventions presenting characters who challenge the perception of what is typical of a certain social class or gender. Consequently, these works transgress gender boundaries and react against mainstream Victorian literary and social traditions by introducing uncommon issues and characters.

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Sercan Öztekin is a Lecturer of English at Kocaeli University, Turkey. He received his Bachelor's Degree from Dumlupınar University, Turkey, the Department of English Language and Literature, and Master's Degree from Granada University, Spain. He obtained his Ph.D. degree in Istanbul Aydin University in 2019. His Ph.D. study is on

Victorian social constructions of crime, criminality, and the legal system with their representations in the novels of Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, and Charles Reade in the 1850s. His research includes Victorian literature and culture, crime fiction, and the history of crime and the police.

KARL WOOD¹

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Kazimierz Wielki University
in Bydgoszcz, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-4042-1307

A window into short- -story construction: Richard Yates' "Builders" and questions of the autobiographical content of his work

Abstract. Richard Yates, most remembered for his *Revolutionary Road* (1961), was also the author of two fine and exceptionally well-crafted collections of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1963) and *Liars in Love* (1981). Yates was a writer of exceptional perception and unflinching clarity, yet some have criticized his work as drawing too heavily on autobiographical content. This article seeks to examine Yates' 1963 story "Builders" to gain insight into this extraordinary author's understanding of the writing process, his use of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical content, and to suggest new approaches for work on this still under-appreciated twentieth century author.

Keywords: Richard Yates, autofiction, self-narrative, short stories

Richard Yates, an author whose name often evokes a vague sense of familiarity, is most often remembered for his 1961 first novel *Revolutionary Road*, accompanied by a sense that this was an important and fine author, yet one who remains on many bucket lists of works to be read, someday, when time permits. This is an improvement over the situation at the turn of the century, when Richard Ford commented that Yates was a kind of "cultural-literary secret handshake" (2000: 16), with his work largely out of print, leading Stewart O'Nan (1999) to remark that "to write so well and be forgotten is a terrifying legacy." Over the past twenty years or so, however, prompted by the advocacy of several of his students, there has been a small renaissance in the appreciation of Yates. His work is again available in print, and a somewhat modest number of studies and academic

1 Address for correspondence: Department of Anglophone Literatures, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, ul. Grabowa 2, 85-601 Bydgoszcz, Poland. E-mail: karlwood@ukw.edu.pl

articles devoted to his work have appeared. Richard Yates as an author is certainly no longer forgotten, at least not entirely. Yet some of the older critiques of Yates as a rather traditional or old-fashioned writer, a realist writing at the dawn of postmodernism have lingered, and his subject matter – generally the less than idyllic lives of white mainstream Americans behind the façade of happiness and fulfilment at mid-century – is not one that is likely to arouse much contemporary literary interest, however unflinchingly insightful (detractors may say gloomy) or masterful Yates’ writing may be.

There is, however, much about Yates’ work that still merits attention today. One such element, which had often been regarded as a flaw in his writing, especially his later work, is that he drew extensively on his own experience in writing fiction. The contemporary rise in interest in the forms of autofiction and life writing, which have called into question the dictum that a work of art must be somehow removed from the writer’s own life, suggests a critical reexamination of Yates. Indeed, for Yates, the use of autobiographical source material was not a mistake or flaw in his work, but rather an intentional means to create not autobiography or memoir but works of art rooted in lived experience.

One can look to many of Yates’ works and find traces of this technique, but none perhaps is better suited than his 1963 short story “Builders”, written for and first published in the collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. The story, likely a story about himself, illuminates Yates’ reflections on learning the art of writing, both as an artist and on the compromises required for publication, something Yates struggled with over the years. When set in the context of Yates’ remarks in interviews and as an instructor, including at the Iowa workshop, an image emerges of an author whose embrace of the autobiographical while seeking to form it into art partially anticipates the forms of autofiction or self-narrative.

“Builders” itself is a well-formed story about an aspiring young writer, Robert Prentice, and his commercial and creative relationship with the well-drawn character of an aspirational New York cabdriver, Bernie Silver. The main narrative of the story begins when Prentice, in need of income to supplement his meager earnings as a financial copy desk writer at United Press, answers a classified ad offering an “unusual free-lance opportunity for talented writer. Must have imagination” (Yates 2001: 143). After meeting Silver, who had “one of the most guileless and self-confident faces [he] had ever seen” (Yates 2001: 143) and hearing his proposition that he ghostwrite inspirational stories for the New York hack driver based on his experiences, Prentice agreed to write one story a week for pay. Silver would then collect these to submit to a magazine like *Reader’s Digest*, with the earnest belief in the fame and fortune that would surely follow. While Silver was full of naïve hope and faith in his vision, Prentice was entirely mercenary, lured by a perhaps willful misunderstanding of how generously he would be paid. In seeking to get the commission, he fought to hide his artistic contempt for his new patron, but

“wasn’t going to let twenty-five bucks get away from me without some kind of struggle” (Yates 2001:148).

This attitude of contempt – we can presume Yates is reflecting his younger self here – is made quite clear in the scene in which the central metaphor and title of the story “Builders” is introduced. Silver tried to make sure that this new candidate for ghost-writer properly understood his ‘take’ on how stories should be written, while Prentice listened on, feigning agreement with his “rapt, toadying gaze” (Yates 2001:149). Silver explained in a confident, self-satisfied tone how stories are built:

“Like building a house?” And he was so pleased with his own creation of this image that he didn’t even wait to take in the careful, congratulatory nod I awarded him for it. “I mean a house has got to have a roof, but you’re going to be in trouble if you build your roof first, right? Before you build your roof you got to build your walls. Before you build your walls, you got to lay your foundation—and I mean all the way down the line. Before you lay your foundation, you got to bulldoze and dig yourself the right kind of hole in the ground. Am I right?” (...)

“So all right, supposing you build yourself a house like that. Then what? What’s the first question you got to ask yourself about it when it’s done?” (...)

“Where are the windows?” he demanded, spreading his hands. “That’s the question. Where does the light come in? Because do you see what I mean about the light coming in, Bob? I mean the—the *philosophy* of your story, the *truth* of it; the—”

“The illumination of it, sort of,” I said, and he quit groping for his third noun with a profound and happy snap of the fingers.

How this central metaphor of story construction relates to the creative process of writing has been discussed by several scholars of Yates in recent years, most convincingly by Kate Charlton-Jones in her monograph *Dismembering the American Dream* (2012). She argues how Yates addresses Henry James’ ‘house of fiction’ metaphor, at once satirizing it and using it as a tool to show how, when poorly understood, such advice leads to worthless formulaic work – such as the stories Prentice will write for Bernie), while also showing how Prentice over the course of the story himself learns how to properly understand the metaphor and find his own authorial voice (Charlton-Jones 2012: 103-104).

Indeed, one can certainly read “Builders” as a kind of artistic coming of age story of the author-in-text character, Bob Prentice (the rhyme with apprentice cannot be coincidental). He begins the story as an aspiring, but failing writer, unable to produce work of his own that lived up to his own internal sense of what would be quality writing. This is accompanied by no small degree of presumptuousness about his own artistic ability (a recurring theme for many of Yates’ characters endowed with meager talent), a self-inflated sense of potential masking an insecure novice writer who has yet to produce

any high-quality work of his own. This is easily read in the contemptuous and yet self-aware tone which Prentice shares with the reader how he responded to Bernie's honest but jejune sentimental vision of the good fiction he would like to see.

Writing such stories for Bernie, however, did not come easily, as Prentice found himself 'wasting time' reading matchbooks and the like, with many false starts, just as if he were trying to produce his own work. The key to overcoming the block came from his wife, who chided him: "You're *trying* too hard." (...) "You're being so insufferably *literary* about it, Bob, it's ridiculous. All you have to do is think of every corny, tear-jerking thing you've ever read or heard. Think of Irving Berlin"² (Yates 2001: 151). Initially taken as an insult, this proved to be the catalyst to get Prentice started. Embracing Bernie's construction metaphor as the road to producing the sought-after sappy sentimentality, "something kind of wonderful happened" (Yates 2001: 151). Convinced of his own artistry while detaching himself from ownership of the text, he allowed himself to freely lampoon the writing or construction process, with *Readers Digest* and Bernie in mind. As he confesses with no small degree of sarcasm, how "I took that little bastard of a story and I built the hell out of it. First I bulldozed and dug and laid myself a real good foundation; then I got the lumber out and bang, bang, bang – up went the walls and on went the roof and up went the cute little chimney on top." (Yates 2001: 151-152). Not to miss the most important element, the light or illumination of the story, Prentice continues, "Oh, I put plenty of windows in it too – big, square ones – and when the light came pouring in it left no earthly shadow of a doubt that Bernie Silver was the wisest, gentlest, bravest and most lovable man who ever said 'folks.'" (Yates 2001: 152).

Prentice clearly found this contemptable, but his client/patron was enthusiastically convinced of his talent for producing just the right kind of work, paying him cash on the spot for the story. The work continued over several months, with Prentice sharing, almost as if confessing, some of the stories he wrote for Silver, including one he "thought was loathsome" in its drippy sentimentality of how Silver saved an elderly man from despair and suicide with a small remark about geraniums, but "Bernie loved it" (Yates 2001: 157). Yet cracks began to appear in the edifice. As Prentice's contempt for himself was reaching a breaking point, the project of writing stories about Bernie (and the hope of a movie to be made) transformed into one of writing hack stories about an up-and-coming local politician. Prentice could do no more and produced a story so contrived

² Yates made several references to Irving Berlin as shorthand for a kind of sentimentality devoid of depth, e.g., his short story "The Best of Everything" was in one draft entitled "All in Clover" (see Bailey 2003:167), a line from the song "Easter Parade" that figures in the story and was later used in his later novel *The Easter Parade*. Song titles and lyrics evidently were something Yates was well familiar with – several people remembering him posthumously recalled his fondness for singing 1940s popular songs and knowing all the lyrics to them (see Berriault et al. 1993).

that even Bernie found it ridiculous. The productive relationship came to an end, with Prentice telling Bernie he had to return to his own, ‘serious’ work.

The end of the story, however, is all about Prentice. Returning to his own work, he begins to discover his own voice, and as the story ends, the author-narrator begins to embrace the metaphor of builders again, with a certain sense of self-irony. As he concludes the tale, telling the reader how, despite the fact that “its very walls are somehow out of kilter; its foundation feels weak” (Yates 2001: 172), he is now “putting on the roof” on the story, we feel a sense of how the author has grown in self-awareness – something quite unusual for Yates’ characters, whose critical flaw is often a lack of insight into themselves. Hack work, however, did not teach him the tools of the trade, so to speak, but rather took his ego down a notch, not teaching him to sacrifice his notions of artistic quality, but rather to let go of his self-inflated belief in his ability to produce such quality. He speaks of his own work, the story which he has just told us, as an edifice, albeit a rickety and poorly built one. Finally, in a shift of tone addressing both the reader and Bernie simultaneously, suggesting perhaps that we might be more like Bernie than we care to think, he concludes:

And where are the windows? Where does the light come in?

Bernie, old friend, forgive me, but I haven’t got the answer to that one. I’m not even sure if there *are* any windows in this particular house. Maybe the light is just going to have to come in as best it can, through whatever chinks and cracks have been left in the builder’s faulty craftsmanship, and if that’s the case you can be sure that nobody feels worse about it than I do. God knows, Bernie; God knows there certainly ought to be a window around here somewhere, for all of us. (Yates 2001: 173)

Letting the light in here seems to be both something desirable and to be avoided at the same time. True craftsmanship – which Yates here implies he may not have achieved – avoids the big, square windows of Bernie’s vision, but at the same time, he seems uncertain of whether or not he has built any of the million possible windows that James would have him provide. Bob Prentice may have learned a degree of humility, which ironically, might help him to unlock his creative potential. Yet we, the readers, are uncertain of the ultimate outcome.

This, however, was not merely a finely rendered portrait of a kind of coming of artistic coming of age story, but strongly reflected Yates’ own experience in a highly autobiographical fashion. Yates’ use of autobiographical content has been a (relatively, for the still understudied author) much-discussed aspect of his work, with some critics finding this to be an essential flaw. For instance, Robert Tower wrote in his review of Yates’ second collection of short stories *Liars in Love* (1981) that Yates’ longer work, including his later novels short stories, appears to lack the ability of his early work “to escape the

prison of an (apparently) autobiographical self” (Tower 1981). This was something the critic was willing to concede had been achieved in Yates’ first novel *Revolutionary Road* and his stories from the 1950s collected in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (work all written prior to “Builders”), suggesting that the ‘decline’ of Yates writing came with the turn to his own lived experience. Others, such as his biographer, Blake Bailey, argue that Yates’ best work can transcend the limitation of his own experience to create works that reach to more universal value, while implicitly accepting the critique that too much autobiographical content can be a flaw (2003: 514-515). More recent work, however, suggests a different view. As Sophie A. Jones has recently argued, “the ostensibly illicit nature of Yates’ use of his experience – usually framed as a concealment of the autobiographical within the fictional – has often been approached by his critics as a problem to be solved” (2017: 88).

The most frequent solution to this has been to rely on Yates’ sense of honesty and integrity as an author. As Kate Charlton-Jones, for instance, has argued in her analysis of Yates’ short story “Saying Goodbye to Sally” that his use of his own life in the writing process was his way of “ensuring that he adhered to the truth of an experience” and “give flesh more faithfully to the emotions those experiences generated. It is primarily the human condition he is illuminating” (2014: 42). As a way of apprehending how Yates “contravenes the pact” (Jones 2017: 87) that would separate autobiography from fiction, Sophie A. Jones proposes the use of Serge Doubrovsky’s term of “autofiction, rather than autobiography” as a “more generative descriptive term for his work” (2017: 93), a conscious blending of elements of both fiction and biography.

Jones’ attempt to rehabilitate the value of Yates’ autobiographical content is clearly a useful contribution. If autofiction, as in Boyle’s characterization, “involves supplying indicators which suggest that the text is an autobiography, whilst at the same time contradicting these indicators by asserting its fictional status” (2007: 18), then the description might fit Yates’ “Builders” and his other more mature works rather well. Thoughts regarding the writing process frame the narrative: it begins with an opening warning that one should never (if one hopes to be published) write about writers, and certainly not in a clichéd manner, and it concludes with the above meditation on the art, all while making clear that this is a story that the fictional author-character protagonist wrote in the first person for the reader to consider.

At the same time, however, Yates’ work only imperfectly meets the criteria of Doubrovskian autofiction. According to Schmitt, autofiction, strictly speaking, in addition to a literary style, must show “a perfect onomastic correspondence between author, narrator, and main character” (2010: 126). This is never the case in Yates’ fiction: some of his characters may have been thinly veiled renditions of himself or his own experience, but never did he explicitly write about himself, whereas autofiction tends to present itself as autobiographical, yet may be partially or wholly fictitious in content. Dix has argued that “[a]utofiction in effect treats the self as a form of archive”, which

could certainly be said of Yates and his work, but in its practice “radically revises the notion of absolute truth, supplementing it with a critical but creative skepticism of all the distortions, digressions and departures that the acts of remembering and narrating entail” and, in fact, represents a “properly theoretical approach to representations of subjectivity and the self” (2017: 83). One might contend that some of Yates’ work might be better characterized as “self-narratives” as Schmitt proposes, somewhere on the spectrum between fiction and autobiography, allowing authors to draw on the “intensity and directness” of their own lived experience while retaining artistic freedom to reshape that material (2010: 130).³

It is not entirely clear how fond Yates himself would have been of such a discussion, however. He was notoriously skeptical of what he felt were too theoretical approaches to writing and to his own work, and resisted categorization. While the comments he made in his final interview before his death in 1992, dismissing “slick” questions with remarks such as “I guess I’m just not smart enough to answer big questions about things like ‘themes’ or ‘purposes’ in my work” (Bradfield 1992: 31), might be dismissed as the curmudgeonly responses of a terminally ill man (Yates was still smoking two packs a day at this point while tethered to oxygen bottles for his ‘touch of emphysema’), they do resonate with other, more detailed and poignant remarks made twenty years before.

In the 1972 interview with DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark for *Ploughshares*, Yates candidly reflects on the writing process and his place within literature. While expressing how he felt the limited quantity of his work made him a bit unqualified to criticize the literary establishment, he then proceeded to do so with relish, saying “Oh hell, I rant and rail against the literary establishment all the time, qualified or not” (Henry et al. 1972: 76). A particular object of scorn were postrealists, whose work he found utterly unpalatable with their “endless supply of witty little intellectual puzzles and puns and fun and games for graduate students to play with” (Henry et al. 1972: 76). For Yates, it seems, the fault of these writers and others was not necessarily form or technique *per se*, but rather when the form became too ‘slick’ (a word he seemed to apply to form-without-substance, an accusation he leveled against some of John Cheever’s work); he seemed to believe that too much emphasis on technique prevents the emergence of real quality work. This he contrasted with the work of Kurt Vonnegut, whom he believed to have been mistakenly regarded as among the cohort of postrealists. As he saw it, in Vonnegut’s best work there was “real fictional meat (...) despite the surface flippancy of his style – real suffering, real passion, real humor – especially in books like *Mother*

³ Self-narration is not unproblematic, either. Schmitt in general presumes that personal experience is shown in an undisguised manner, and yet at the same time offers Henry Roth’s *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, in which all the paratextual signposts suggest fiction (including the name of the narrator), deeper analysis reveals the how autobiographical the tetralogy may in fact be. For more, see Schmitt (2010: 134-135).

Night and Slaughterhouse Five” (which we might add, could perhaps also be regarded as exhibiting elements of autofiction). The objection he had to postrealists was that their work was “emotionally empty. It isn’t *felt*” (Henry et al. 1972: 76).

While it might be difficult to read Yates’ work as Doubrovskian autofiction *sensu stricto*, the author’s own statements and those by people who knew him seem to support Charlton-Jones’ view that he regarded drawing on his own lived experience as a means of keeping himself honest, not in the sense of rendering experience in a factually accurate manner, but rather of reaching for something artistically and emotionally true. Beginning, it seems, with “Builders,” the use of autobiographical content was a vehicle to reach this end. Yates made explicitly clear in the 1972 *Ploughshares* interview that taking on autobiographical material was an experiment he undertook when writing “Builders.” Until that point, he had aspired to follow Flaubert’s ideal of an “omnipresent and invisible” (Henry et al. 1972: 70) God-like author. “Builders” was to be a laboratory, an “experimental warmup” to writing an autobiographical novel. That final product would be his second novel, *A Special Providence*, regarded by both contemporary critics and Yates himself as disappointing.

“Builders,” however, was different. Yates offered his own assessment:

“Builders” (..) was almost pure personal history, with a protagonist named Robert Prentice, who was clearly and nakedly myself. And I think that story did work, because it was formed. It was objectified. Somehow, and maybe it was just luck, I managed to avoid both of the two terrible traps that lie in the path of autobiographical fiction—self-pity and self-aggrandizement (Henry et al. 1972: 70).

Here we can discern two main elements of how in Yates’ view, his story was successful, and by extension, what constituted a successful story for him more generally. Aside from a short 1981 essay in the *New York Times Book Review* about writers he admired, Yates did not leave behind any manifesto or essay explaining his approach to writing. He did teach throughout his career, however, most notably at the Iowa Workshop in the mid-1960s, and remarks made by his friends and former students after his death corroborate his interview statements and provide additional insight into what, for Yates, constituted good writing.

The first level, of course, is that the story was properly formed. This is not necessarily about any particular technique. As he remarked in 1992, “all fiction is filled with technique” [...] “It’s ridiculous to suggest one technique is any more realistic than any other” (Bradfield 1992, 31), but more about the quality of construction, that all elements of the story, every word, is properly placed to ‘do its job’ as it were. Vonnegut in his eulogy of Yates, for instance, spoke of his friend’s writing:

When I made a journey, a forced march, through all his books in preparation for these obsequies, not only did I fail to detect so much as an injudiciously applied semicolon; I did not find even one paragraph which, if it were read to you today, would not wow you with its power, intelligence, and clarity (1993: 14)

The second element, however, reaches for Yates' critique of what he regarded as poor work – too well constructed, “slick,” but “not *felt*.” That feeling, as he had praised Vonnegut for, had to be genuine, real, and true to experience. This is alluded to in the second part of Yates' self-assessment – avoiding both self-pity and self-aggrandizement. The work, even if autobiographical, is not about the author, but about a feeling experienced.

It does seem clear that Yates, especially starting with “Builders” looked to lived experience as the primary source for inspiration. Here, two other memories shared at Yates' New York memorial service in 1993, provide insight into the writer's view on the use of such material. Writer and journalist Susan Braudy recalled how Yates, when pressed about the “nuts and bolts” of one of his two best novels, *The Easter Parade*, he confessed how he had mined himself for the main character, stating with characteristic candor, that the novel “was... actually... well... is... my autobiography, sweetheart. Emily fucking Grimes is me” (1993: 21). The autobiographical continued, together with a certain skepticism toward any insinuation of highfalutin intentional technique. As Braudy complimented Yates on his use of symbolism in the novel, he contradicted, asserting that he simply sought inspiration from life, claiming that he “didn't make up any easy allegory (...) I mean, it was all there lying around [in his life] (...) But I'm the one who saw it” (Braudy 1992: 22).

This ability to see, to discern the interesting in real life and to render it into a well-formed story is what for Yates is the rich fount of material for writing. He was under no illusion that this was an easy task. *A Special Providence*, his first novel-length attempt to do so, proved a humbling experience, revealing his limitations at extending the autobiographical into a longer work of art. As he remarked in the *Ploughshares* interview:

I think it's a right that has to be earned. Anybody can scribble out a confession or a memoir or a diary or a chronicle of personal experience, but how many writers can *form* that kind of material? How many writers can make it into solid, artistically satisfying fiction? (...) you have to be one hell of an artist to bring it off. To *form* it. (Henry et al. 1972: 70-71).

As examples of authors who had done so beautifully, he set the bar high, mentioning Dickens, Joyce, and Hemingway, and of course Proust. And yet, this did not appear to be an insurmountable barrier, even if he at often felt his own work did not measure up. As Maura Stanton recalled how when she was a young beginning writer and student at

Iowa, Yates encouraged her to look into the most ordinary of experiences to seek material for her own short stories. Telling of a mentoring session in Yates's office in which she complained how her simple, midwestern background had given her nothing interesting to write about, she recounts how Yates inspired her to see a beautiful story could be made from the rich material of her own life. After asking her a few simple questions, he learned that she had indeed been in love, "really in love," and that while she had indeed never set foot outside the Midwest, he had been on a simple trip to a modest Minnesota amusement park called Brainerd. Hearing about the performing domestic animals there, he lit up and exclaimed:

"Well, hell." Mr Yates smiled at me suddenly, his whole face lighting up. "There's your story. Don't you see? My God, that's great material."

"What?" I said.

"Those fucking rabbits and chickens and Paul Bunyan and being twenty-two and head over heels in love. Put it all together. What more do you want? I wish I had that much."

I stared at him in amazement. "Write about that?"

"Of course. You've got a thousand interesting things you can write about. Just go for a walk on the ceiling and look down at your life and you'll be amazed." (Stanton 1993: 51).

While Yates' aspiration was clearly to bring the autobiographical to the novel, he still saw the short story as a worthwhile and valuable form, praising the stories of many writers (Flannery O'Connor, among others) And yet, it seems he felt it a secondary form. For instance, as an instructor in Iowa, he compared in class the use of an unreliable narrator. Mentioned as a praiseworthy example was Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," yet with the qualifier that "that was a short story" (as in, 'only'). Singled out for lavish praise was Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, for it sustained the effort over an entire novel (Lacy 2010: 424). That he would see it this way perhaps does not surprise. For Yates as a writer, the short story was a somewhat instrumental medium to hone his skills and –always an issue for Yates– to earn money. Throughout his early career in the 1950s, Yates wrote stories for magazine publication with this very intent, a process which we see in some ways reflected in the learning period reflected in "Builders." The story contains a sweep of thirteen years, starting in 1948, precisely the years when Yates was writing and polishing stories for magazine publication, and ending with work on his first novel in 1961, just as *Revolutionary Road* was nearing completion. In this period, just like Prentice, Yates had in fact also worked for United Press.⁴

4 As to just how autobiographical the content of "Builders" is, beyond the persona of Prentice, is difficult to ascertain. Blake Bailey, Yates' biographer, seems to take this at face value and that Yates actually did answer a classified in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, but provides no direct evidence. A search of the

After a long and tortured period of producing little fiction, but including work as Robert Kennedy's speechwriter, in Hollywood scriptwriting (both material which Yates would mine for his works), and mental breakdowns in the 1960s, in the 1970s Yates began again to write prolifically. In addition to writing three novels in the 1970s, he also returned to the short story, producing the collection *Liars in Love* in 1981. These are longer and richer than the stories of the 1950s, and yet they very clearly follow in Yates' "Builders" approach of mining his life for material to use in writing. What Tower saw as a limitation allowed Yates to produce some of his finest and otherwise most critically acclaimed work, for instance, the story of his sculptor-mother in "Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired" or of his own time in Hollywood in "Saying Goodbye to Sally" (both topics he had tried to address in novels, *A Special Providence* and *Disturbing the Peace* respectively, with less critical success). That Yates would in some ways be more successful in writing a genre he seemed to have felt was a utilitarian tool toward the end of a novel is somewhat ironic, but the stories must have been more than that to the author, for it is clear that he invested a great deal of emotional energy in them as well.

While in "Builders" the contempt the young Yates felt for the likes of *Readers Digest* was quite apparent, this certainly does not mean he was contemptuous of all magazines. He was quite conscious of the placement of his stories, and what that would mean for his reputation. For example, when his first story "Lament for a Tenor" was to be purchased for the then hefty sum of eight hundred and fifty dollars in 1952, Yates (self-conscious artist like Prentice that he was) saw "the depressing aspect of the thing": namely, that *Cosmopolitan* was a 'dead-loss prestigewise" (Bailey 2003: 153). Other, more prestigious magazines, such as *The Atlantic* followed, but his ultimate goal eluded him for his entire career: *The New Yorker*.

What prevented Yates from acceptance by this country club of magazines was not the quality of his work, but rather his strict adherence to his own vision of artistic expression, of what makes a good story. Yates was loath to make compromises to his exactly written work, especially regarding questions of content. One of his finest stories, *A Really Good Jazz Piano* waited nearly three years for publication, as the author refused to modify the grim ending to make it more 'saleable' (in the end he did, and the story sold). When he resumed writing short fiction in the mid-1970s, one of his goals was to achieve his long-held aspiration of publication in *The New Yorker*. It was not to be, however. The trouble lay with editors.

1948 classifieds in the Saturday Review (admittedly, what is available online may not be complete) no such ad can be found. The closest thing to an ad of the kind Prentice responded to is an ad from a young writer with copywriting experience seeking a freelance opportunity, which could suggest a quite different scenario. But the fact is, we do not really know.

While Sam Lawrence at the Atlantic praised Yates' stories of the late 1970s as "magnificent" and "simply marvelous" (Bailey 2003: 508), Roger Angell, the gatekeeper at the *New Yorker* clearly simply did not like his work. The key seemed to be that Angell, unlike many other reviewers, readers and writers, felt Yates' work to be "mean spirited" and "for effect" casting into doubt what others saw as one of his major assets, sincerity. In his final rejection letter, Angell wrote that "it seems clearer and clearer to me that his kind of fiction is not what we're looking for. I mean this without offense, and I wonder if it wouldn't save a lot of time and disappointment if you and he could come to the same conclusion." (Bailey 2003: 508).

Yates had been seen by many reviewers and readers alike as bleak or grim, but this pronouncement of judgement by *The New Yorker* that "his vision of life was *repulsive*" (Bailey 2003: 509) seems to have cut to the bone. Clearly, publication of short stories away from the pages of *Cosmopolitan* and to the urbane *New Yorker* would have meant acceptance for Yates, confirmation in some sense of his 'arrival' in the club. Yet admission might have well been blocked not by faulty craftsmanship or failure to dig the right foundation, but by an artistic integrity that prevented him from building in the kinds of windows that a particular highbrow editor wanted to see.

Yates, then, remained true to his vision of his art, even if it meant that some of his aspirations for his career as a writer went unfulfilled. Seen for much of his later years as a writer whose initial great promise shown in his masterful first novel failed to materialize in subsequent works, he has gained a degree of recognition in recent years as a writer of significance. Yet the success and awareness of *Revolutionary Road* (no doubt propelled also by the film adaptation by Sam Mendes), continues to dominate the view of Yates, comparatively little attention is paid to his later novels and his short stories. Perhaps what had once been seen as a flaw, Yates' use autobiographical themes and content, was in ways ahead of his times, and may in turn become a new and interesting approach to an enriched and more contemporary appreciation of this author's more mature works.

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Karl Wood is on the staff of the Department of Anglophone Literatures in English at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland, where he teaches courses in American Cultural Studies. His research interests and publications have included several shorter works on the work of Richard Yates and on twentieth century US-American culture, as well as work related to transnational spa culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is a member of the Department's team participating in the Horizon-2020 DIGITENS project, an international research consortium on forms of sociability in the long eighteenth century.

BOOK REVIEW

JUSTYNA WAWRZYNIUK¹

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University of Białystok, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0002-7359-0617

**Oppliger, P. A., & Shouse,
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The reason [people make dark jokes] is they are trying to bring a level of humanity—laughter—back to a moment that seems to lack it: tragedy. They're trying to make you, the individual, laugh in your moment of sadness so just for the briefest of seconds, you have a minor moment of respite where you forget how shit things are and you get to have a giggle with yourself. But what that does manifest itself as is... they say fucked-up things.

Daniel Sloss, *Jigsaw* (2018)

Daniel Sloss, a Scottish stand-up comedian, in his opening bit of the Netflix special *Jigsaw* (2018), admits to having “evil thoughts” and proceeds to describe the joy he feels when he imagines a young boy tripping and falling on his face. Although his audience does not share his views, they still laugh at the absurdity, or rather immorality,

¹ Address for correspondence: Faculty of Philology, University of Białystok, Pl. NZS 1, 15-420 Białystok, Poland. E-mail: j.wawrzyniuk@uwb.edu.pl

of the pleasure he describes. Sloss then tries to redeem himself in his audience's eyes and says that "evil thoughts don't make you evil; acting on them does." This stance could be well translated as a perception of dark humor, which, for many, seems to be a significant characteristic of stand-up comedy. Telling dark jokes does not mean a comedian is troubled (or traumatized). Moreover, darkness and trauma can be both causes and results of dark humor.

These points are proven in one of the most recent volumes of the *Palgrave Studies in Comedy* series. *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy*, edited by Patrice A. Oppliger and Eric Shouse, is a collection of articles and essays that look at the darkness of stand-up from both within and outside of the comedy scene. The authors, who include scholars and stand-up comedians, tackle the troubled comic trope and discuss the theories of the stereotype. They explore the lightness and darkness of stand-up comedy from various aspects, often focusing on angles that do not evoke such connotations; the darkness ranges from the "usual" tragic and gruesome themes of death, suicide, and abuse to the surprising, but equally dark, aspects of physical violence, sacrifice, and monotony. Even avid enthusiasts may not be aware of the latter themes.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, with eight chapters, is devoted to the workings of stand-up comedy and its association with dark humor. Scholars examine the darkness using the benign violence theory (McGraw & Warren, 2014) and discuss professional comedians' lives and their connections to dark humor. The second part, with seven chapters, focuses on amateur and lesser-known comedians and their struggles to engage in the stand-up comedy scene.

In the first chapter, Eric Shouse discusses comedians' personal lives, comic stage personas, and acts. He addresses the darkness of death, suicide, and drug addiction in stand-up comedy through the work and biographies of George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and Robin Williams. These "founding fathers of stand-up comedy" are excellent examples of the troubled comedian trope, but the author comes to the conclusion that the darkness comes from different sources and is reflected differently, therefore should not be generalized. In other words, dark humor does not automatically indicate mental health issues or substance abuse.

The second chapter discusses changes that George Carlin had to make in his "I Kinda Like It When a Lotta People Die" bit in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Steven S. Kapica explores how Carlin's approach to the routine allowed for catharsis in a time of tragedy and uneasiness among his audience members. As Sloss says, bringing laughter to a moment of sadness, even with the best of intentions, requires tact and taste, and Carlin was able to do that well in his routine.

The third chapter explores childhood trauma as a reason for and source of comedy and comedic style. Sean Springer takes a close look at Steve Martin's work and its connection to his relationship with his emotionally distant father. He shows how trauma influences

a comedian's choices and how, at the same time, the choices can be an attempt to stand in opposition to the darkness within a comic.

Philip Scepanski, in the fourth chapter, scrutinizes how alcohol addiction and its repercussions can be turned into a humorous monologue. He looks at Craig Ferguson's biography and work and shows that ridiculing celebrities who suffer from addiction and mental health problems is morally questionable at best. This chapter describes the comedic catharsis that comes from a comedian's own "darkness," as opposed to the catharsis analyzed in the second chapter, which was an answer to tragedy happening in the world.

As the editors comment, "whether one agrees with Ferguson's point that it is morally suspect to mock 'vulnerable people,' it is a different question entirely whether doing so should be illegal" (p. 43). In the fifth chapter of this part, Christelle Paré looks at the court case *Mike Ward v. The Quebec Human Rights Commission*. The case and its origins create a sort of paradox of darkness: Mike Ward, a comedian known for his charitable work for and support of physically challenged people, repeatedly made fun of a disabled teenager. Ward claimed that his jokes had a different objective than ridicule. This case and similar ones beg the question of defining the moral and legal limits of stand-up comedy. Notably, if many limitations were imposed, they would eventually take the form of censorship.

In the sixth chapter, Carey Marie Noland and Michael Hoppmann uncover the dark humor of Jim Gaffigan's seemingly clean jokes, which frequently include the glorification of food addiction and morbid obesity. The darkness present in Gaffigan's work is another instance of paradoxical darkness. It becomes more apparent upon scrutiny; the dark layer of his humor is hidden behind the light-hearted jokes. As the authors state, "[t]he interplay of self-deprecation and the dark topic allow him to transform the pain and danger of food addiction into laughter" (p. 238). Noland and Hoppmann use the benign violence theory to illustrate how Gaffigan, as well as Gabriel Iglesias and others, admit to norm violation and make a joke out of it.

The seventh chapter is especially important in the wake of the #MeToo movement. While stand-up comedy scene has come a long way from the "women are not funny" stereotype (Krefting 2014), it is still a male-dominated arena. Female comics are still subjected to sexism and sexual misconduct by male colleagues and audience members. In this chapter, Patrice A. Oppliger and Kathryn Mears use communication theories to examine how humor can be used to cover and uncover immoral behavior. They give the examples of Bill Cosby, Al Franken, and Louis C.K., all of whom behaved inappropriately and were excused by the public for a long time but now have been made accountable.

The last chapter of this part revolves around the topic of mental health. Kathryn Mears, Eric Shouse, and Patrice A. Oppliger explore the work and comic persona of Maria Bamford. In her comedy, Bamford openly talks about being bipolar, and therefore, she successfully opens a discussion of a topic that still may be considered taboo.

The authors question the validity of the benign violence theory (McGraw & Warren 2014) as it might relate to Bamford's work. All in all, she views the darkness of mental illness with a new perspective (or, ironically, in a new light).

As I mentioned before, the first part of the text is made up of contributions by scholars discussing the dark humor in stand-up comedy from the perspectives of philosophical, psychological, and humor research. Here, unsurprisingly, dark humor is associated with death, addiction, terrorism, disability, and child and sexual abuse, topics that are traditionally, and rightfully, "unlaughable." If a convention is broken and jokes do involve these topics, they are considered dark. However, the notion that dark humor originates from dark and twisted minds is a gross simplification of stand-up comedy. What is more, this notion is based on the work of comedian-celebrities, who are a tiny fraction of the vast number of comics on the comedy scene, especially in the United States.

That is why it is even more fascinating that the second part of this book is devoted to lesser-known comedians who treat stand-up more as a hobby than a job (most of them have full-time jobs that allow them to make a living so they can do comedy on the side). It consists of discussions, reports of interviews, and essays with responses coming from scholars and people who have experience in stand-up comedy. As it turns out, the darkness in stand-up is more than tragedy: it can often take the least expected form of perfecting the craft or the passage of time.

In the first chapter of the second part, Sheila Lintott tackles the "troubled stand-up stereotype" and its "mad scientist" origins. The paradoxical darkness of that trope lies in the notion that comedians are thought of as truth-bearing, honest, and sometimes even rebellious, and that their act on stage is the same as their "act" offstage. As a matter of fact, the studies show that most amateur comedians are far from being dark or troubled and that a successful performance requires a lot of time and effort in order to seem effortless and spontaneous. If done right, stand-up comedy looks easy; when something goes wrong, however, the audience's rejection feels very personal.

The next chapter follows the mechanisms of stand-up comedy and defines and highlights the distinction between a person and a stage persona. Edward David Naessens discusses how, in his experience, an audience does not take into account the years of crafting but rather mistakes in an act of the persona of for the comedian's true personality.

The following chapter describes the real and very physical danger of performing comedy. Stand-up comedy is often considered shocking and vulgar in the first place (Brodie 2014), but if fuel is added to the fire in the form of dissatisfied audience members who may be drinking alcohol, the feelings become intensified. Eric Shouse reports on his interviews with stand-up comedians who relate that heckling and threats are widespread reactions but that physical violence (provoked or not) is just as common. A feeling of defenselessness on the part of amateur comedians is an often overlooked dark side of stand-up comedy.

In the following chapter, Blayr Nias tells the story of a drunk audience member who harassed her when she was on stage and sexually assaulted her afterward. Nias reframes the story and changes the perception of her character from a victim to a protagonist, thereby bringing light to the darkness of being a female comic in the male-dominated stand-up comedy scene.

Subsequently, in a powerful essay, “The Ethics of Rape Jokes,” Cait Hogan reflects on the importance of comedy in processing traumatic experiences and how transforming tragedy into comedy takes courage and a certain risk that is hard to calculate. Stand-up comedy’s first and foremost goal is to entertain (Brodie 2014), but this can be done while also being vocal and asking difficult questions. The only caveat may be that the comedian must have an awareness of what can or should not be said so as not to alienate the audience or bring back the trauma for the comedian and audience members. Fortunately, there is a wave of change coming; Hannah Gadsby, Iliza Shlesinger, Daniel Sloss, and many more comedians speak about their experiences of sexism and sexual misconduct openly even though this may affect their connections to the comedy industry. What is more, and paradoxically for comedians, they could not be more serious when speaking about these topics.

The second-to-last story shows the enormous sacrifices that lesser-known comedians have to make to fulfill their dreams of performing for a couple of minutes at a bar full of inebriated people. Louis Bishop gives an excruciatingly detailed description of his work as a mortuary assistant, showing how far an aspiring comedian is willing to go to earn a living and also pursue something that resembles a career in show business.

The final chapter is a stark reminder that comedian-celebrities are a minority who are lucky enough to make money from their hobby; this is not a given for lesser-known comics. Larry Fulford talks about something that an average audience member does not take into account when thinking about comedians: how much time it takes to hone a routine. Stand-up comedy is a heavily one-sided interaction but an interaction nonetheless (Brodie 2014). A comedian cannot perfect a set without an audience, and countless gigs and open mics are needed to do this. The darkness of this aspect is associated with the realization that time must be regularly “wasted” to derive a few moments of joy from doing what a comedian loves. The ultimate darkness, however, comes from understanding that the longer a comedian stands on a stage, the more the hobby turns into a job.

The Dark Side of Stand-up Comedy offers a nuanced yet essential insight into the darkness and workings of the stand-up comedy scene. The editors’ goal was to tackle the oft-repeated trope of the “troubled comedian.” They managed to do so in a way that can be of use not only to scholars but also to regular fans of stand-up comedy. The language and theory supporting the arguments are presented in a clear way that does not require prior knowledge of the humor research field. The main value of the book is its attempt to include and discuss the perspectives of both famous and lesser-known comedians.

Frankly, the latter are underrepresented in the research despite being the majority in the vast industry of stand-up comedy. In conclusion, this collection successfully sheds light on the paradoxical and multidimensional aspect of the darkness of comedy, which is as incongruous as humor itself.

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Justyna Wawrzyniuk is a PhD student and a research assistant at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Białystok in Poland. Her doctoral thesis is a metaphor-led discourse analysis of gender construction in stand-up comedy.

