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More Than Just an Effect: The Comic in British Women's Contemporary Short Stories

1. The Comic and the Short Story – Highlighting Change

Comic writing in recent years seems to have changed its appearance and part of its functions, branching out into genres and topics which do not inherently lend themselves to comic treatment and representation. "Comedy" proper, across a multitude of cultural products, is still valid as a term; one can unthinkingly refer to a novel, a film, or a play as comedy. But there is more. The comic seems to appear more frequently in unexpected contexts; arguably it infests culturally serious locations and topics which in and of themselves do not necessarily give rise to comic treatment.¹ To find the comic in a short story which sets out to be humorous from the start is no surprise. To find the comic in all sorts of contexts and all sorts of themes, and increasingly so after the turn of the millennium, says something about the cultural framework we are living in. Currently the comic is making a strong move towards the centre of attention. A cultural product need not explicitly be labelled as "comedy" to be unabashedly and insistently comic, and it may take the liberty to approach deadly serious issues. This is particularly interesting since, generally, comic productions are still underrated, in the sense that they only slowly come to be trusted with serious topics.

The comic has been the subject of countless analyses over time. Classifying the comic is notoriously difficult, and no approach seems fully satisfactory. In this article, the focus will be on only a few of the many phenomena: first, incongruity, and, related to this, free play with scale and measure. The result of these two often is a conceptual dissonance for the readers, which is pleasurable rather than irritating. The conception of the comic as the result of incongruity ultimately goes back to Immanuel Kant, who, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, notes that the unexpected, or the jolting of expectations, has a gratifying effect on beholders – like the punch-line of a joke, for example. Incongruity is often achieved via a juxtaposition of unlikely or unsuitable elements.² Laughter, according to Kant, is an expression of the realization of incongruity and the concomitant pleasure. One of the advantages of the incongruity approach since Kant is the fact that there is no built-in agenda in the assessment of an incongruity phenomenon. It is hardly possible to explain comic phenomena without their social and political implications, but incongruity approaches usually do not commit themselves as to whether the comic in a particular case is affirmative or subversive. This can be done by a critic using the incongruity explanation but the decision can also be kept open. Several 20th-century critics have broadened Kant's basic definition and also expanded on his terminology, but the incongruity principle itself has remained relatively intact.

A second approach to the comic worth noting for literary interpretation is Henri Bergson's definition of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted on the living"

1 The writer of this paper believes that the comic has always had the tendency to be transgressive and to "bleed" into all conceivable cultural products, habits, and rituals. The increase in this tendency, and the contexts in which it happens, would merit research far beyond the scope of this paper.

2 For a brief overview on incongruity theories of the comic, see Zimmermann (2013, 33-35).

(1980, 84). Bergson's basic idea is that life is a fluid state, and that any society accordingly has to rely on its members to be flexible at all times. This works on a literal level (the human body has to be flexible) and on a metaphorical one (life requires humankind to be flexible). Comic effects are created when a living being behaves like a machine – by repetitive behaviour, or by being unable to accommodate an unexpected occurrence.

Addressing serious matter in a comic way may also bring up thoughts of Sigmund Freud and his theory of the comic as taboo-breaking activity. In his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), he conceives of joke-work as he did of dream-work, which would turn jokes into another kind of social safety valve: the release of pressure brought to the individual through strains and regulations around them by making jokes. This relief theory of the comic can be an angle of approach, but is hardly sufficient on its own. However, Freud's theory certainly provides a convincing explanation for the frequent proximity of the comic to the very serious: conceivably, it can be argued that the more sensitive a subject is, the greater the tendency will be to address it in comic ways.

No matter from which angle one approaches the topic, it is important to note that the comic is not just a decoration or an aesthetic effect – although it can be used for these purposes. The use of the comic most frequently is much more; it has reverberations on the meanings a text can carry, and on its agendas. My interest is with texts which are not necessarily comic at first glance, but have the comic as part of their innermost structure. The short stories which comprise this case study employ the potential of the comic to open up fresh perspectives on difficult and serious topics. Muriel Spark's "The Young Man Who Discovered the Secret of Life" (first published in 2000) and Fay Weldon's "The Site" (2002) are examples by well-established authors with a diverse body of work, with the stories sharing surprising similarities in their sardonic look at life. Both include supernatural elements. Marina Lewycka's "The Importance of Having Warm Feet" (2009) and Jackie Kay's "Not the Queen" (2006) both have women narrators,³ and they ask questions about identity, social positioning, and life in the United Kingdom in the 21st century.

An analysis of comic productions by women can end up in an awkward double bind. Comic literature, while it may be appreciated for its entertainment value, has had to cover a long distance to become a critical subject in its own right. The same can be said about women's writing,⁴ which has a long and partly torturous history towards full critical acknowledgement. In addition to that, women and the comic still seem to be a volatile combination. In many societies and contexts there are social restrictions on how women receive and produce comic effects, many of them still firmly in place. Arguably, comic writing by women is hence marginalized twice over. Nevertheless, the idea that comic literary products by women are *per se* subversive because of the conditions in which they were written may be attractive but is also essentialist as well as unsupported by evidence.⁵

3 So does Weldon's story – Spark is the exception here; her narrator is identified as an author who hears about the protagonist's experiences through letters to her publisher ("her," if we posit a woman narrator, or Spark herself).

4 The notion here is that writing by women is by no means a definable entity or in any way summarily different from men's writing. But women's writing is taken to be bound up in and subject to different social, moral, and political conditions and hence can be located in different areas of experience.

5 Second-wave feminism in particular subscribed to the idea of an inherent subversiveness of women's humour but also did invaluable work in re-assessing the comic in texts by women authors. Criticism on

The current state of the British short story is too diverse to be tied up nicely in definitions.⁶ Liggins, Maunder and Robbins address the irony of the project of trying to define the *British* short story, as any criticism will have to include Edgar Allan Poe and the American tradition (cf. Liggins 2011, 2).⁷ As length, although relative, remains a defining factor, they note that the short story tends to come across as less weighty and important than epic forms (2). In that sense, the short story shares the dimension of being underestimated with women's writing and with comic writing.⁸ Moreover, it has frequently been noted that particularly in the second half of the 20th century, the short story became a space for debating current issues, "particularly popular with women writers and with others who feel in some ways marginalized or not fully secure within their communities" (16). Brosch states that the short story by tradition is concerned with liminality, crises, and transgression processes (Brosch 2007, 23), which is true for all of my examples.

Liggins et al. conclude that, despite its somewhat erratic critical history in the UK, the short story is a form which is alive and kicking, open to experimentation but also used by writers in traditional ways of narration.

The British short story is thus a complex, multiform creature. It is made up of relationships between the material world of the demands of publishing and the marketplace, specific aesthetic schemas and programmes, the conventions of genre and the influence of the writers of other nations. It is a mongrel or, perhaps more kindly, a hybrid, and its names and forms are legion. (Liggins et al. 2011, 5)

2. Mapping Out Comic Territory: Muriel Spark and Fay Weldon

Both Muriel Spark (1918-2006) and Fay Weldon (born in 1931) are British writers of note. Texts working with the comic have been an essential part of their repertoire; they are shapers of traditions in their own distinct ways. For present purposes, two recent examples will come under consideration. Muriel Spark was a critic before she became an acclaimed writer; she has always been firmly identified as Scottish.⁹ Spark is probably best known for her novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), but was also a prolific writer of short stories. Her humour is dark, and her short stories thematically varied throughout her career.¹⁰

Spark's late short story "The Young Man Who Discovered the Secret of Life" is a very short, roughly three-page vignette from the daily life of a workman, "a plasterer's

comic literature by women is rapidly expanding. The introduction by Stetz to her monograph (2001) may provide a good starting point. See also Zimmermann (2013, 39-47) on gendering the comic.

6 As Brosch puts it, "Die short story ist sympathisch resistent gegenüber Definitionen" (Brosch 2007, 9).

7 On the concept of the British short story see Korte (2003, 9-19). Korte analyzes the interplay and interdependence of the various cultural and geographical identities in the UK with regard to the short story.

8 For a linguistic analysis of the comic in short stories see Ermida (2008).

9 Her Scottishness seems to rest largely on her Scottish father and her spending her formative years in Scotland; for a differentiated, personal view on her identity see her interview with Martin McQuillan (2002, 226-27); for the connections with religion – and Spark's conversion to Catholicism – see, for example, Carruthers (2010). For brief biographies see also "Writing Scotland" (2015), and McMillan (2015). Peter Kemp's monograph (1974) still belongs to the most relevant studies on the earlier Spark; see Randisi (1991) on the satirical tradition – however, Spark's comic work to my mind goes far beyond the domain of satire.

10 Spark's "The Black Madonna" (1958) is an early take on migration to the UK, with ethnicity, class, and religious hypocrisy at its centre. Spark is also strong on stories with a supernatural element to them, as in "The Portobello Road" (1958) or "Miss Pinkerton's Apocalypse" (1955); all in *The Complete Short Stories* (2002).

apprentice" (Spark 2002, 254) who keeps encountering a ghost, emanating from a chest of drawers. The short story derives its comic effect largely from incongruity, made visible from the very beginning. "The main fact was, he was haunted by a ghost [...]. But I have been told on good authority that this is absolutely absurd. There is no such thing: plasterers do not have apprentices" (254). The reader is expecting to be told that ghosts do not exist, but instead is confronted with the mundane and potentially irrelevant assertion that plasterers' apprentices do not exist. The narrative has its fun here with the epistemological status of human beings and ghosts. The ghost in Spark's story is a rather snobbish one, as he¹¹ comes from "the top drawer" (255), and hence feels entitled to pass sarcastic comments on the young man's life. He is also jealous of the apprentice's girlfriend. The young man is irritated with the ghost, but soon finds out that the latter is able to predict which horse will win at the races and profits from his advice. When the protagonist gives up his attitude of superiority towards his girlfriend and proposes marriage, the ghost reluctantly vanishes for good. "This quenching of the ghost [the young man reports] is to me the secret of life" (Spark 2002, 256) as he is sure the ghost was after his soul (257). In fact, the ghost seems far too trivial and nagging to be capable of such a project. The story blends the fantastic and the comic; it approximates magical realism in the status it accords to the supernatural.¹² The story imbues an unspectacular, precarious existence and a budding relationship with secrecy and glamour. It is telling that the ghost vanishes with the marriage and ensuing prosperity. The young man goes on to have a good life, successfully "specializing in crazy-paving" (257).¹³

Fay Weldon is still writing and very productive; she is a feminist with a controversial agenda of her own.¹⁴ "The Site"¹⁵ is a story playing with history, the last things, and the individual's role in both. It is a longish piece, allowing itself time to develop the setting and the unnamed narrator, accelerating towards the end towards a surprising dénouement, which comes with the force of a punch line, thus revealing – despite the relative length – the genre's relation with the anecdote. The narrator is a typical Weldonian middle-aged, disillusioned, intelligent woman who is a sculptor. When an ancient Roman grave is discovered on the building site for a shopping mall, the works come to a halt. The archaeologists that are called in turn out to be at the side of the developers, wanting to get the bones off the site so that the construction can continue. The narrator is outraged and calls in the church, "but the bishopric was unmoved" (Weldon 2003, 40) – the skeletons are presumed to be "pagan and [have] nothing to do with the Church" (39). The narrator comes up with an outrageous idea. She tells the "hippie silversmith" Carter Wainwright (42), "My point is, Carter, I said, 'if they

11 The ghost is addressed as male throughout the story.

12 Arguably, the way in which the story plays down the very impact of the supernatural, trifling with the ghost, sets it apart from the Latin American type of magical realism.

13 The top drawer and the crazy paving are good examples of Barreca's (1988) observation of re-literalizations of metaphors in women's comic writing, see below in the analysis of "Not the Queen."

14 See, for example, her interview with Saner (2009) and her homepage, both of which display Weldon's sense of humour, and her pleasure in working against the grain. Weldon's homepage speculates about the year of her death and addresses academics who are in the process of writing studies on her. For a brief biography, see also Patten and Smith (2013). It is an interesting coincidence that Weldon, too, received her university education in Scotland at the University of St. Andrews. Weldon has been frequently criticised for being too economically-minded, as it were (allowing herself to be sponsored by Bulgari for her 2001 novel *The Bulgari Connection*). A case in point is, for example, O'Kelly's introduction to her review of *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide* in *The Guardian* (2002).

15 The collection *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, in which "The Site" appeared, received mixed reviews. See for example O'Kelly, Moore, and the review in *The Scotsman*, all 2002.

found an early Christian cross in this grave tomorrow, they'd have to believe" (43). She takes a small piece of wood from the gravesite, and the two proceed to forge a cross and place it at the site. The press is called in and the British Museum declares the cross to be genuine (44-45). "Priceless, or at any rate in the region of several million pounds" (46). The forgers, after an initial episode of panic, are relieved. The site development goes on but "a service of reconciliation" (47) is held by priests over the graves before the remains are removed. The story ends on a conciliatory note. "I think we will be forgiven for our deceit: we were meant to do what we did" (48). The narrator has never revealed herself as particularly religious, but she does have a pragmatic set of beliefs she lives by.¹⁶

A fake, the story seems to suggest, is quite as good as the real thing if it causes people to behave with dignity. The story delivers sharp digs against venerated institutions and their hypocrisy; the church does not move on behalf of the unknown dead, and the academics put their faith where the money is, with the developers. The question of religion and the basic human right to a burial is at the centre of the text, addressed in a tongue-in-cheek way. Interestingly, Britain's past is presented as multicultural and multi-faith (there is no knowing which religion, if any, the buried people followed), while its presence is largely class-ridden, governed by ruthless economic interests. The story's concerns are implicitly gendered by the fact that it is a woman who brings about change by working quietly and subversively behind the scenes. Additionally, the comic action – a desperate, hasty forgery setting the wheels of the world of high culture in motion – also takes place behind the scenes.

3. Fighting the Cold: Marina Lewycka, "The Importance of Having Warm Feet"

Marina Lewycka, born in 1946, is a British writer of Ukrainian origin. Her literary work – she is mainly known as a novelist – is informed by a double perspective on life in contemporary Britain and the lives of immigrant communities from Eastern Europe.¹⁷ She has a keen sense of the comic and sees herself firmly rooted in the tradition of comic literature, which to her constitutes the "mainstream," as she stated in an interview with Doris Lechner, talking about her second novel.

DL: You place *Two Caravans* within the tradition of English literature with an epigraph from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

ML: ...especially in English comic literature really. Which is, I suppose, the mainstream of English literature. Shakespeare was also a very great comic writer. (Lechner 2010b, 457)

The importance she places on the comic in literary history, and accordingly in her own work, is striking.¹⁸

Lewycka's short story "The Importance of Having Warm Feet" was a donation to a four-volume collection of original stories for Oxfam, which was published in 2009. The story has a striking *in medias res* beginning, a stark image of Napoleon Bonaparte's defeated troupes retreating from Russia in 1812. Marching through the Ukraine

16 Arguably, the story's concern not just with death but with the material consequences of death – decomposition – could open up the text to a Freudian reading of the comic: breaking the taboo of death, providing relief for the readers in the face of their own mortality. The creative construction of historical facts by the narrator could be read as a release of the pressures of a limited human existence.

17 For Marina Lewycka's biography see, for example, Tranter (2008), "Writers. Marina Lewycka."

18 Natalia Feduschak's article in the *Kyiv Post* (2011) also picks up on this pervasive strain in Lewycka's texts. Lewycka herself as quoted above speaks about English literature but it is suggested here that her work is part of the larger context of contemporary British literature.

in the dead of winter, "[t]hey would knock on the doors, and plead, 'For the love of God, give me refuge, mon ami.' The villagers called them 'monamishchiki'" (Lewycka 2009, 107). The dry statement of the French-Ukrainian neologism, coined by the civilian inhabitants for the desperate remains of a great army sets the tone for the story as a whole. The great narratives of the history books are juxtaposed with the everyday life of the common people, who are either never touched by history or at best passed by its straggling remains. The immense loss of life in the French invasion of Russia is stated equally laconically, only to be followed by a private assessment: "Of some 500,000 who had set off to conquer Russia, barely 10,000 made it back to France. And it was all because of unsuitable footwear, my great great-great-grandmother told my great-grandmother, who told my mother, who told me" (107). Effortlessly and briefly, true to its genre, the story sweeps from the wastes of frozen Russia and Ukraine in 1812 to the narrator of the story, presumably located in the present time of the early 21st century.¹⁹ The importance of the right kind of warm shoes and socks, and of keeping one's feet warm in all conceivable situations is a leitmotif in the text.

In flashbacks, the narrator reminisces about her childhood as a Ukrainian girl in Bradford. "The other kids laughed at my sensible shoes and woollen socks. They sniggered at my long plaits, and my funny name, and my brand-new school satchel" (108). The narrator is chosen for the role of the Virgin Mary in the primary school's nativity play and has a hard time as her main bullies play Joseph and the innkeeper. Her mother, however, has different worries. "[...] It's December, and the school hall will be cold. What will you wear on your feet?" (111). As the shoes seem too heavy and unsuitable for the Virgin, mother and daughter decide just on the socks. The teacher takes issue with them, and obediently the narrator takes them off. Some time later, the performance is unexpectedly interrupted: "[...] before the innkeeper could answer, someone burst onto the stage and rushed up to me. In her hands was a pair of grey woolly socks. 'Put them on at once!' my mother exclaimed. 'You'll catch your death of cold!'" (113). Predictably, the innkeeper greets Mary and Joseph with "'My, what a lovely pair of socks'" (114), and the nativity play comes to a halt. "The shepherds laughed. The choir of angels laughed, the three wise men laughed. Even the ox and the ass and the piglet laughed" (114). The text transforms from slapstick to something larger with these sentences. The parallelism enforces the effect of the whole biblical world bursting out laughing: men, spiritual beings, animals. This nativity, staged by young children, is informed by and comes to life with laughter; at the same time, the narrator's mother unwittingly points to the bigger picture: what did Mary and Joseph seek if not shelter and – warmth? Here the socks, lowly everyday objects, are incongruous in the setting of a re-enactment of scenes from the New Testament. The actors and the audience laugh in their appreciation of this incongruity.

"I never forgave my mother for that until her dying day, but on her dying day I forgave her" (115). The story ends with the narrator, who turns out to be in her fifties at the time of narration, at her mother's deathbed. Dying of cancer, her mother complains of cold feet, for her a sign of her impending death. When the daughter puts bed socks on her feet, she remembers the episode and reminds her mother of it. With

19 In her analysis of Lewycka's novels, Lechner makes use of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to describe the passing on of (traumatic) memories through the generations in Lewycka (cf. Lechner 2010a, 438-39). The short story touches briefly on trauma in family history. Puschmann-Nalenz, in her study of representations of the East in recent short fiction, points out the insistent "[p]resence of the [p]ast" in some of her material (Puschmann-Nalenz 2010, 389-95).

hindsight, her mother finds her own action "terrible" (116). "You did everything right,' [the narrator tells her], and kissed her cheek. 'It mattered then, but is doesn't matter now.'" (116). The relationship between the generations is a loving and close one, epitomized by the image of the socks. The narrator stays close to her mother until the end, and the story closes with her beginning her mourning process. "But I was glad, too, that when she stepped out on her last long march into the cold unknown, at least her feet were warm" (116). If you have to die, at least you should be comfortable in the process – unlike the masses of defeated Napoleonic soldiers with whom the short story opened, who are invoked once more with the image of the mother stepping out on a march into afterlife.

In Lewycka's text, the year 1812 is linked to the present time by a (seemingly) insignificant commodity of daily life: footwear. But there is another strand woven into the story linking the past and the present: images of death and dying, and, together with this, the insistence on the human desire for protection for oneself and loved ones. The basics, the story seems to say, are not basic at all. "The Importance of Having Warm Feet" is a condensed narrative imaginatively spanning two centuries and a genealogical line which has proved strong enough to survive into the present time.²⁰ Its humour lies in the juxtaposition of the little and the great, the insignificant and the historic, the spiritual and the corporeal. Laughter itself becomes a focus only briefly but in that brief moment it encompasses the globe. It should be noted that the protagonists of the story are women. Maleness only has fleeting appearances in the image of a retreating army, and in the attribution of the soldiers as Napoleon's. The bullies at the narrator's primary school are also boys. Women are positive characters: the narrator's mother and her teachers. The obsession of the female family members with warm feet and hence appropriate socks (the Bergsonian element in the story) could arguably be read as clichéd: femininity and knitwear go together, with the additional element of caring and nurturing. The humorous tone of the story is a redeeming factor here, as is the conclusion that the women possess an enormous strength: the little Ukrainian girl has grown into a woman who can tell a story and has a very strong bond with her mother. The teachers are the ones who restore order, in the chaotic music lesson as well as in the near wreckage of the nativity play. The text plays with measurements, notions of greatness and smallness, according the same (probably even higher) importance to socks, the comfort associated with them and warm feet as to world history. Lewycka's story effortlessly includes death – the death of masses in an army and the individual death of a loved one – childhood memories and family traditions in a story which insists that the great and the small are both part of the complexities of human life.

4. Who to be in the 21st Century? Jackie Kay, "Not the Queen"

Jackie Kay, a black Scottish writer born in 1961, has been concerned with questions of belonging and identity for most of her writing career, which began with the poem series *The Adoption Papers* in 1991. The greater part of Kay's oeuvre consists of poetry and short stories.²¹ It is interesting that Liggins et al. in their chapter on the contemporary British short story "focus on Scottishness, as the genre has proved particularly malleable in the hands of a new generation of Scottish writers who have been prepared

20 If one likes, the time span is even wider to include the beginning of the Christian era with the staging of the nativity play.

21 See also Tranter (2008), "Writers: Jackie Kay."

to take risks with the parameters and conventions of the form" (Liggins et al. 2011, 247). Kay is one of the most noted practitioners of this generation.²²

Kay's short story "Not the Queen," which came out in her 2006 collection *Wish I Was Here*, is a deceptively light piece on identity and biography.²³ The story outlines the life of a Scottish woman of Drumchapel, Glasgow, who happens to look like Queen Elizabeth II. It is also a doppelgänger story that touches upon the fantastic and upon Freud's uncanny. The focus, however, does not lie on the potentially dark implications of this state of things (enhanced by the fact that the woman is of the same age as Queen Elizabeth). The basic situation is the material of a pure comedy of mistaken identity,²⁴ but like the cliché of a true comedian, Maggie Lockhart is a serious, secretly unhappy person who has spent her life failing to come to terms with her dubious fate.²⁵ Most of all she wants to be taken seriously, which is hard in her position as a striking double of the Queen. Her mindset does not help her to cope. "Maggie didn't have a temperament for teasing; never had been good at being teased, even as a child [...]" (Kay 2006, 109). In this, she is similar to the protagonist of Lewycka's short story, sharing with the latter an insecure childhood. The uncanny intrudes upon the story several times, but is always kept in check by the protagonist's no-nonsense approach. The idea of not seeing yourself but somebody else when you look in the mirror is deeply unsettling but makes Maggie rather irritated and irritable:

Nobody could see her face without thinking of the other one's: not the man or the woman in the street, not the total stranger at the bus stop, not even her own family. And even she had the odd feeling when she glanced in the mirror that she wasn't seeing herself, but the bloody Queen. No, no seriously. (109)

Maggie fails to see what the point of all this might be. She struggles through life as the object of countless stares and the butt of countless jokes, and she is permanently unhappy about her looks. "Maggie couldn't joke about her face; it was no laughing matter. It had ruined her life" (111), and to make it even worse, "Maggie was shy and didn't like talking to strangers particularly [...]" (112). Both are not the best characteristics to accompany her outward appearance. She can lead a quiet life now that she has retired, and she still thinks with horror of her professional life as a wages clerk, when she continuously had to listen to the same kind of tired jokes (114). She is in a good marriage with Charlie, who has always enjoyed being married to the spitting image of the Queen, with the result that over the decades he has committed a series of dreadful blunders towards his wife. Charlie seems to be a balanced and content man, undisturbed by the social pitfalls Maggie has to face on a day-to-day basis throughout their married life. On their wedding night, he tries to joke with her about sleeping with his "very own wee Queen" (115), which makes Maggie jump out of the bed and force the promise out of him to avoid this kind of joke for the rest of their time together. From then on, Charlie has his fun in silence, of which Maggie nonetheless is very well aware. "No many men got to see the Queen naked so they didn't no they

22 It would go beyond the scope of this essay to include the role migration experiences play in Kay's work. A case in point would be "Trout Friday," which uses subtle humour for its unspectacular, friendly depiction of a young woman in search of her place in society in contemporary Britain, see for example Zimmermann (2008, 131-34).

23 On (women's) identity in Jackie Kay's short stories, including darker examples, see Zimmermann (2008).

24 This kind of comedy is part of a very long tradition, going back to Plautus's *Menaechmi* and then Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*.

25 Arguably, she has a telling last name, having locked her heart against positive strategies to cope with her looks, and against her fellow beings who like to make fun of her, but are generally harmless.

didn't" (Kay 2006, 115). Years later, he dares to bring back a mug²⁶ with the Queen on it as a souvenir from London, which also upsets Maggie, who "[...] yanked it off him and put it in the box for the jumble" (114).

Maggie remembers a small, but decisive event when her car broke down twenty years before the time of narration, and the arrival of the AA mechanic brings quite unexpected consolation.

He lifted her bonnet and peered into her engine. "Has anybody ever told you, you're the double of –" "The Queen," Maggie said, cutting him dead. "Aye!" he said. "I'm no kidding but it's a wee bit freaky so it is. Go and look away, will you, while I fix your motor cause you're putting me aff. Jesus, whit a predicament fir ye. An' I suppose this is jist gonna oan and oan. Whit a burden fir ye, hen." It seemed to Maggie that the AA man was the very first person to ever truly understand. (110)

The sentence "Whit a burden fir ye" will stay with her for the following decades. The mechanic's initial reaction to Maggie's looks is not unusual. But then, the complete stranger seems to sense that she does not live comfortably with these looks, but is harassed by them, that they are indeed a "burden," blighting her whole life. The implicit understanding and the consolation the mechanic offers are extremely important to her. The narrative here has a quiet joke on Maggie at the beginning of the passage quoted above. When the mechanic "lifted her bonnet and peered into her engine," the subject matter is Maggie's car which metonymically (by way of *pars pro toto*) turns into Maggie herself. The AA man in fact sees into her inner workings, her mind and soul.²⁷

With hindsight, Maggie believes that in the grand scheme of things her car broke down so that she would not get into a fatal accident, and so that she would meet the mechanic (cf. 111). For her, his blunt statement – a rather meagre consolation, if truth be told – represents an acceptance of her lot she has always longed for but never been given by anybody. "What a burden" is what she from then on often says to herself in front of a mirror (112). Apart from this, Charlie's love and understanding are the only bright lights in a world Maggie has come to see as stupid and rude. Charlie likes to play along when people stare at Maggie. "The big limping swine loved to see her awkward and embarrassed and to take her arm and rush off as if the pair of them were famous" (113). He always walks a bit behind her to defend her against stares and comments if necessary, and once he playfully suggests hiring a bodyguard for her – which Maggie cannot find funny at all (114). Looking the way she does forces Maggie to think about the implications of identity with an intensity she might not otherwise have had. "Everybody knew the Queen. Everybody knew what the Queen looked like. Nobody would ever say to the Queen, 'You are the double of Maggie Lockhart' [...]" (113). Presumably, this is what makes her feel so insecure about herself. She can never be truly herself because there is always someone who is well-known, overshadowing her appearance but also her achievements. No one, Maggie's very life seems to suggest, can compete with the monarch of the United Kingdom and the Head of the Commonwealth.

Maggie has always pretended not to be interested in the Queen in the only gesture of defiance open to her, for instance when a colleague of hers, unfortunately obsessed

26 The text puns on the meanings of "mug" – large cup – and "mug" as a colloquial reference to a face here. The individual person's face, her relationship to her own looks, and the impact one's face can have on one's life are, after all, the central motif of the text.

27 One could possibly read sexual undertones into this particular line – after all, the AA mechanic is the only man who seems to understand Maggie's feelings.

with royalty, keeps talking to her about the Queen: the fact that she never seems to smile, her relationships with her children, and her corgis (cf. 115). But over the years, Maggie finds herself thinking about the Queen rather often. "She couldn't help herself, especially when they were both getting on. Not many people had a double to compare themselves to unless they were identical twins" (115-16). Maggie starts comparisons on how well the two of them age: posture, skin, health. Interestingly, she does not come out of this totally defeated although the Queen seems to win on quite a few points. But then, she has always had advantages over Maggie: "(Mind you, think of all the expensive moisturizers.)" (116). Although Maggie has spent her life nagging about her fate and developing a defensive attitude towards humankind, she is revealed as a likeable and down-to-earth character.

Finally, she reaches the decision to do something about her situation and have cosmetic surgery on her nose to have its appearance changed. She saves her money, going about all the preparations secretly, and takes herself off to London under false pretences. Going through the city in a taxi, however, she starts asking herself questions: "Had she not just been a bit touchy all her life? Couldn't somebody who liked a good laugh have enjoyed herself with the Queen's face?" (119). Now that the decision has been made, she wonders about the meaningfulness of it, and she knows instinctively that liking to laugh is a quality which might be covetable as it can make life easier. The phrase echoes the most famous witty woman character of British literature, Elizabeth Bennet, who "dearly love[s] a laugh" (Austen 1966, 39). The recognition of her true situation comprises the last page of the story Maggie Lockhart has to tell. "[...] had she really suffered?" (Kay 2006, 119). With her decision on surgery made, she is suddenly free to think about her life in a detached manner, and as a consequence can find the comic side of her situation, which so far has eluded her completely. This is what would have helped her beleaguered psyche, her stressful social interactions, had she thought of it earlier in her life. Instead of being a permanent butt of jokes, she could have laughed with people and possibly even turned the tables on them. She realizes she could have found relief in laughter, but as it was, she merely provided comic relief for others. The final decisive factor is the absent Charlie, who is waiting in Glasgow for Maggie's return from the purported visit to her sister: "[...] he'd treated her like his Queen" (119). Here, the word "queen," denoting a factual monarch, is turned into a metaphor. This is a movement between the literal and the metaphorical which Regina Barreca has identified as a technique frequently used in women's humorous writing.²⁸ Maggie comes to realize that she would frighten and hurt her husband if she suddenly came back with a different nose. "He would hit the roof. [...] And then he would probably cry" (119). She remembers the only two occasions in their marriage when Charlie cried: the death of his father, and the World Cup of 1974, when Scotland was knocked out of the tournament by goal difference. To all intents and purposes, she is not willing to be the cause of the third time: "To hell with it. Have the Queen's face and put up with it. Maggie looked out of the black-cab window as it passed Picadilly Circus only to see some people excitedly looking in. She gave them the smallest of waves" (120).

28 Barreca (1988) focuses on the strategy of re-literalizing metaphors and incorporating them into humorous narratives, but as Kay's text plays with the literal and the metaphorical meaning of "queen," going back and forth between the two, Barreca's point seems to be noteworthy here. However, the question of whether this is a strategy preferred by women writers remains open. It certainly strikes the eye in a number of comic texts by women.

These are the last sentences of the short story. At a very mature age, Maggie Lockhart finally comes into her own, accepting her appearance and making the best of it. She can recognize the comic potential of her situation, and hence, the positive side of the bane of her existence can finally be acknowledged and possibly even exploited. Ironically, with her shy, tentative wave, which is a first huge step towards acceptance of her appearance and a willingness to play along with what life has thrown at her, she comes very close to her double without realizing it. The Queen, after all, will always wave in a very restrained, lady-like fashion, which is exactly what Maggie is doing now, at the end of the text, in her taxi.

Jackie Kay's short story relies structurally on diverse variations of the comic, which, however, cannot and should not be divided. Maggie is a Bergsonian protagonist in her insistence on her negative attitude. To the treatment at the hands of others, even friendly and well-meaning people who could be her friends, she reacts stubbornly and always according to the same reaction pattern. The reader feels the need to cringe, torn between pity and exasperation for this protagonist who always has to listen to the same kind of joke and never manages to break out of her offended sulking. To cope with the vicissitudes of life, however, one has to be as pliant and fluid as life itself.²⁹ Probably even more important is the fact that the story is brimming with incongruous moments. Maggie Lockhart is a simple woman in a circumscribed life. Drumchapel, with its housing estates of the 1950s and '60s, is one of the districts of Glasgow, which was often under political debate and became the site of various municipal improvement schemes.

Maggie never mentions living in a difficult part of her native city, but the choice of location makes it clear that Drumchapel and Buckingham Palace could not possibly be further apart. Throughout the text and Maggie Lockhart's life, Queen Elizabeth II is a faraway but pervasive and stable presence. The people around Maggie are interested in the Queen and always read press reports about her. All who get in a word, including Maggie herself, concede that the Queen does not seem to have much fun in life either. Her royalty-obsessed colleague notes her lack of smiles; Maggie assumes that "[i]f you could look into the Queen's eyes for a long time, you'd find that she was shy just like Maggie" (116). The Queen holds Maggie's life and the story together, and presumably she does so with the UK, creating a sense of unity and continuity just by *existing* and performing a set of functions (of which presence is probably the most important). The remote monarch of the Commonwealth is pulled into a Glaswegian suburb and into the daily life of one of its humble inhabitants.

Part of the comic effect comes from the recognition of this insurmountable distance, which nonetheless is constantly bridged by a totally arbitrary twist of fate: Maggie's looks. This leads to deeper questions about social identity: how is it that two women with near-identical faces lead such fundamentally different lives? Implicitly, the text addresses discourses of class and power. The very arbitrariness of Maggie's fate raises the question of whether the distribution of power and social standing is not equally arbitrary. The accident of birth placed Maggie in her specific life; but the same could be said for Queen Elizabeth II, who is a monarch by the same token. The story cannot be called anti-monarchist, but it does ask rather tongue-in-cheek questions about the meaning and consequences of class, and about the state of the nation.

29 In Bergsonian terms, the people who make jokes about Maggie are also comic by themselves because they keep repeating the same kind of observation. However, it can be assumed that quite a few of these people meet Maggie for the first and only time, so they are not necessarily part of a mechanistic repetition. But for Maggie of course it would have to appear this way.

Kay's text also brings up the issue of Scottish identity in relation to a British national identity. The person of the Queen seems to be the only element which brings Maggie's Scottish world and the rest of the UK together, and it comes as a surprise to the reader that Maggie goes to London for her planned surgery. For her, this is as far as she could possibly go: from a Glaswegian perspective, London is a remote place. The Scottish vernacular figures largely when the characters have direct speech, something Kay likes to do, giving many of her texts a distinctive Scottish quality beyond locations and place names.

The third element of the comic structure topicalizes the comic itself. The crucial turning point of the story is Maggie's moment of realization that laughter and a sense of the ludicrous would have made her life so much easier. The short story ends on a hopeful note and the idea that Maggie now will set out to catch up on all the fun and laughter she has missed. Nevertheless, the text is also tinged with sadness since she had to reach her seventies to come to that conclusion.

5. Conclusion

The short stories of this case study rely heavily on incongruity and juxtaposition for their comic effects. The small rests next to the great, and the two together mirror the reality of daily life. The last things and the big questions on personal identity, love, religion, and death, are equally important to a person's outer appearance or choice of footwear. Ghosts get their say as well as flesh-and-blood human beings, and the dead receive a dignified treatment only with the help of some creative action, which fools the authorities and makes fun of them, revealing them as inadequate, if not inhumane. The movement between the historic and the trivial in the stories is an almost telescopic zooming in and out, back and forth, and the ultimate effect is the realization that the trivial is of course not insignificant but loaded with cultural and emotional meaning. By incorporating the comic, the texts can address emotions without being sentimental in any way. The stories' implications and the statements they make would be totally different without the comic perspective on relationships, history, gender, and class. On an additional level, it is also suggested that a sense of the comic may help to cope with the vicissitudes of life. This may be particularly true for women protagonists, but the question remains open of whether the comic releases subversive potential or has a conciliatory effect, enabling the protagonists simply to go on as before. Weldon's protagonist certainly takes subversive action, and Kay's Maggie is about to find new options of behaviour by beginning to appreciate the comic. The texts do not use slapstick, and they are not for laughing out loud, avoiding too explicit appeals to the readers' emotions. It is important to note that – as the work by Muriel Spark and Fay Weldon shows – the use of the comic as depicted here is not a short-lived trend, and has not come out of nowhere. There are traditions at work which seem to converge and become more and more pronounced around the turn of the millennium.

The comic in these texts works as a strategy of representation and narrative structuring of experience. The comic must be allowed to speak about all manner of things, not just about light ones, and not just about itself. It must be allowed to speak about all facets of human experience, and to conceive of the comic just as a means of entertainment and relief (albeit good things in themselves) is a blatant underestimation. The comic is not exclusively a mode or a decorative effect. In many texts, it is constitutive, no matter the topic. Comic texts cannot be taken any more lightly than serious ones. They approach their topics and their agendas with the same kind of intellectual *gravitas* and must be accorded the same kind of cultural importance. Indeed, comic

texts might have an advantage over other kinds by their capacity to sneak in their agenda under the cover of smiles and laughter – which makes them potentially dangerous, speaking for the subversive potential of the comic.

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