

IRONY, SELF-IRONY AND HUMOR
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY JEWISH AMERICAN FICTION

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THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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THEME OF DISSERTATION

The dissertation explores the concepts of irony, self-irony and humor in numerous representative samples of twentieth century Jewish American fiction. Most of all, I focus on self-irony since it is a term occasionally mentioned but hardly ever discussed in literary theories in English whereas it is a word widely used in Hungarian literary criticism and apparently in the neighboring countries, too. Since Jewish American literature is just as much rooted in the Central European as in the English speaking cultures, it offers an outstanding opportunity for the in-depth investigation of self-irony, which I read as a rhetoric response to dilemmas of identity. Accordingly, my paper studies various challenges of identity faced by Jewish American people in course of the twentieth century and gives close reading analyses of literary representations of these issues with special regard to the irony, self-irony and humor in the texts.

STRUCTURE AND MAJOR POINTS

1 INTRODUCTION: TERMINOLOGY

The first chapter is an overview of the field to be explored in the dissertation. In “1.1 The Questions of Self-irony”, I introduce the concept of self-irony understood as a rhetoric response to dilemmas of identity based on the short analyses of five distinguished examples of Jewish American culture: Woody Allen’s film, *Zelig*; the poem “Kaddish” by Allen Ginsberg; Bernard Malamud’s short story, “Angel Levine”; Joseph Heller’s novel, *God Knows*; and the film *Divan* by Pearl Gluck.

The subchapter “1.2 Irony, Self-irony and Humor” surveys the available theories on irony, self-irony and humor in order to clarify in what sense I use these terms in this paper and to locate the concept of self-irony in the terminological field. According to Paul de Man’s essay, “The Concept of Irony”, “it seems to be uncannily difficult to

give a definition of irony” (161) for various theorists’ opinions seem not only disparate but also contradictory. I agree with Candace Lang that it is necessary to distinguish between two substantially different trends in the history of interpretations on irony. In the classical, rhetorical sense, irony means “saying what is contrary to what is meant” (Colebrook 1). However, irony is primarily understood as a highly self-reflective style since the early German Romanticism, especially due to Friedrich Schlegel’s work (Behler 73). In the self-reflectively ironic texts “semantic ambiguities and connotative resonances are to be explored and actualized rather than limited or suppressed” (Lang 5-6). Consequently, I use the word irony in its rhetorical sense, that is as a figure of speech of varying extension, the obvious meaning of which is in conflict with the overall context including not only the whole of the text but the background knowledge of the implied audience regarding the author and the situation as well, thus pointing to the necessity of a second, recognizable, ironic interpretation. “Participant constellation”, that is “the speaker or ironist, the victim or hearer, and the (evaluating) audience” (Barbe 80), is essential here as irony always implies the ironist’s superiority over the butt of the irony. In contrast, self-irony is used in this paper to denote those cases of irony in which the target of the irony is the speaking or writing subject itself, thus rendering both meaning and subject doubtful and fragmented. This authorial gesture of negating or questioning the ostensible meaning without the indication of a clear, translatable “opposite” connotation opens up the text for multiple possible interpretations. While rhetorical irony allows the speaker to gain a superior position over the victim of the irony in a consensual, finite second meaning shared with the audience, self-irony infinitely brings the instability and the split or uncertain nature of the subject in the foreground. Finally, I use the word humor as a general term able to involve those cases, too, in which the identity and position of the speaking or writing subject is of no significance. I rely on Arthur Koestler’s definition, according to whom humor is based on bisociation, the collision, fusion or confrontation of “previously unconnected matrices of experience” (45).

In “1.3 Jewish American Fiction” I outline the scope of the dissertation. In line with Simon N. Herman, I see it “more appropriate to think in terms of a pluralistic Jewish society allowing for a diversity of ‘Jewish *identities*’” (81) yet it seems necessary to draw boundaries for the practical purposes of writing the present paper although admitting their relative arbitrariness at the same time. As a result of contemplating the difficulties of the relevant terms: Jewish, American, fiction and twentieth century, I decide to discuss literary works in English prose by authors who have spent at least a decisive period of their career in the US in the twentieth century producing fiction, on the thematic level of which they acknowledge and address their Jewish heritage. Primarily, I agree with Tresa L. Grauer that “whatever is Jewish about the literature that I have been examining—as well as the fictional authors that it represents—lies in its claim to locate Jewishness within a self-conscious re-visioning of a Jewish narrative tradition (42).

2 THE IMMIGRANT: TRANSFORMATIONS OF IDENTITY

In “2.1 Introduction”, I distinguish between the two meanings of the word: generation in Jewish American literature. The first sense refers to immigrants’ family histories whereas the second meaning belongs to Holocaust literature. The succeeding subchapters in Chapter 2 focus on literary texts representing dilemmas of first-generation immigrants and their descendants, who are compelled to acknowledge the contingency of their views, in the manner of Richard Rorty’s liberal ironist.

“2.2 From the Shtetl to the City” gives analyses of changing social norms represented in the context of family narratives in the following short stories: Abraham Cahan’s “A Ghetto Wedding”; Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “The Little Shoemakers”; Bernard Malamud’s “The First Seven Years”; and Saul Bellow’s “The Old System”.

“2.3 From Religion to Secular Culture” surveys various aspects of Judaism in an American context in the short stories “The

Conversion of the Jews” by Philip Roth; “The Pagan Rabbi” by Cynthia Ozick; “The Magic Barrel”, “God’s Wrath” and “The Silver Crown” by Bernard Malamud.

“2.4 From Yiddish to English” explores the conflicts involved in the transition between the two languages as depicted in the short stories “The Cafeteria” and “The Joke” by Isaac Bashevis Singer’s; and “Envy, or Yiddish in America” by Cynthia Ozick.

The literary texts above explore issues of the assimilation process. Instead of arguing for either the Jewish tradition or the values of the American WASP majority society, they reveal the ambiguities lying within both paradigms as well as the difficulties of individuals trying to realize various combinations of the two. Thus self-irony allows the authors to copiously express both components of the Jewish American identity and the conflicts between them without making judgments in favor of either.

3 THE HOLOCAUST IN JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

Chapter 3 investigates the irony, self-irony and humor present in certain American pieces of Holocaust literature. My aim is to specify what types of themes are addressed by these rhetorical means and what kinds of meanings are conveyed by them. Accordingly, the subchapter “3.1 Introduction: European Survivors and American Contemporaries” concentrates on the specific situation of Jewish American contemporaries of the Holocaust and of survivors and their descendants living the United States, with references to relevant theories of trauma studies.

“3.2 First Generation Survivors” gives the close reading of three short stories: “Eli, the Fanatic” by Philip Roth; “The German Refugee” and “The Loan” by Bernard Malamud. The self-irony of these texts brings in the foreground the often insurmountable difficulties of empathy and understanding as well as the collapse of former paradigms.

In “3.3 Second Generation Survivors”, I discuss Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel, *Maus I-II*. The book self-ironically reveals the embarrassing situation of a survivor’s child, who feels that his identity is defined by a narrative to which he does not have full access. The double plotlines—the father’s experiences before and during World War II and the son’s self-reflections during the period of creating his book—mutually interpret and question each other. Employing the genre of the comics as a traditionally humorous medium and inserting documentary elements in his fiction, Spiegelman constantly reminds the reader of the problematic and distorting nature of artistic representation, and the fact that identity is always constructed.

The subchapter “3.4 Third Generation Survivors” studies the novel *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer, which tells about a third generation Jewish American survivor’s journey to his family’s former homeland, Ukraine. In this case, the book consists of double plotlines, too, both of which are self-ironically destabilized by the unreliability of the narrators and by various games of languages and genres. Featuring two narrators who are the grandchildren of former enemies yet establish a close friendship, “this novel celebrates the redemptive potential of humour” (McDonald 51).

Finally, in “3.5 Holocaust Literature and Metafiction” I revise some of Paul Auster’s narratives: *The New York Trilogy*, *The Book of Illusions* and “Why Write” in the context of Jewish American literature. I propose that many of the ironic and self-ironic elements of these books usually discussed as features of metafiction show remarkable parallels with substantial concerns and corresponding rhetorical solutions frequent in Holocaust fiction.

Each of the narratives in this chapter articulate the doubts of Jewish American people, who feel morally compelled to address the subject of the Holocaust as a decisive part of their identity but are also aware of the fact that they can never fully comprehend and authentically represent it. Therefore the authors self-ironically call the reader’s attention to the uncertainties of identities and of the narratives defining them by the permanent juxtaposition of disparate paradigms

and the playful, parodistic use of genres and other literary conventions.

4 THE DILEMMAS OF MINORITY CONTRA MAJORITY POSITIONS

In Chapter 4 I study Jewish identity reconsidered in parallels with other minorities. In each story, minority position—which is a key component of Jewish American identity—is represented in double contexts as it is embodied not only by the Jewish characters but also by their African American counterparts or Palestinian opponents, or it is repeated, although in a rather different version, by the feminist standpoint.

Karl Shapiro writes in the “Introduction” to his *Poems of a Jew* that Jewish identity has been widely conceived since the Holocaust as the metaphor for oppressed minorities. However, as Efraim Sicher observes in his book on *The Holocaust Novel*, “the appropriation of the Holocaust as a metaphor for universal suffering by emerging minority groups” (xvii) is rather problematic since “[w]hat is not agreed upon is what constitutes legitimate use of the Holocaust” (xvii). Therefore I illustrate these problems by the analyses of several texts built on the metaphoric use of Holocaust literature in “4.1 Introduction: ‘The Jew’ as a Metaphor”. I admit that the picture could be complete only with a study on the representations of these themes by Palestinian, African American and non-Jewish feminist authors as well. However, these works fall out of the scope of the present paper so they could be addressed only in a subsequent analysis.

“4.2 Identity and Politics in the Diaspora and Israel” contemplates on the difficulties of Jewish identities in different political contexts. “The Jewish Experience”—as Joseph Heller self-ironically brings the subject in the foreground of his novel, *Good as Gold*—is essentially different from the point of view of someone living in Europe or in the America, in the Diaspora or in Israel, at the same time all of these perspectives are challenged both by each other

and by their local political contexts. I read two novels addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a Jewish American point of view: *Operation Shylock* by Philip Roth and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon. The dark humor of all the three books exposes the desperate dilemmas of the individual entrapped by the aggression of rival communities.

The situation of Jewish American and African American people facing similar minority issues with very different historical backgrounds but equally aspiring for social integration in the United States has resulted in complicated relationships between the two communities ranging from solidarity to more or less latent conflicts. In "4.3 African American and Jewish American Identities" I explore these issues from a Jewish American point of view in the following texts: E. L. Doctorow's novel, *Ragtime*; Dorothy Parker's short story, "Arrangement in Black and White"; Bernard Malamud's short stories, "Angel Levine" and "The Jewbird" and his novel, *The Tenants*; the novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* by Saul Bellow; and Philip Roth's novel, *The Human Stain*. While Parker unambiguously argues against racial discrimination with sharp irony, all the other authors represent African American characters as both the rival and the fellow victim of their Jewish American counterparts. Exploring the parallel motifs in their fates, these stories self-ironically reveal the limits of the available discourses on ethnic issues while they also rely on the reconciliatory power of humor.

The subchapter "4.4 Female Points of View" interprets two short stories: "Tell Me a Riddle" by Tillie Olsen and "Faith in a Tree" by Grace Paley, and two novels: *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong and *Heir to the Glimmering World* by Cynthia Ozick. The female point of view prevails in all these texts, however, none of the authors address merely feminist matters, they rather juxtapose primarily female concerns and issues of Jewish American identity.

The simultaneous representation of different minorities' parallel dilemmas often results in the self-ironic destabilization of conventional paradigms in both fields.

5 CONCLUSION

To sum up, I argue that self-irony is far from being unique to twentieth century Jewish American fiction, however, it is increasingly present in that corpus due to the numerous challenges of identity predominating the period in question. I propose that self-irony is an adequate and frequently employed narrative strategy in the representation of these challenges because it allows both author and reader to explore the difficulties and ambiguities involved in the simultaneous presence of multiple contexts, preserving the genuine features of each paradigm while calling for their revisions that can point toward individual resolutions instead of misleading overgeneralizations. I recollect in what levels of narratives can irony, self-irony and humor be present from the games played with the author's and characters' identities through the reinterpretations of genres and other literary conventions to the microstructures in the texts. Finally, I suggest further narratives that would be worth investigation from the point of view of self-irony: Isaac's story in the Old Testament; *Lucinde* by Friedrich Schlegel; and a series of books written in the twentieth century by Jewish Hungarian authors.

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