A Freudian study of Humor in Adam Elliot’s clay-animated black comedy-drama film: *Mary and Max*

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Abstract

One of the widespread issues that human beings are constantly in contact with is the use of humor. Although people enjoy listening to or exchanging humorous give-and-takes, they are usually incapable of accounting for humor and its functions. Three general theories have been developed to fulfill this task, which are called Superiority, Incongruity and Freudian Relief Theory. Due to the inefficacy of the first two theories in explaining humor, this paper has chosen Relief Theory as the framework through which the movie *Mary and Max* is analyzed. The study attempts to claim that Adam Eliot, the director and writer of Mary and Max, benefits from humor or joke, (Freud uses these two words interchangeably) in order to criticize his social and

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religious aspects along with the individuals he is acquainted with simply by releasing his suppressed feelings through jokes.

**Keywords:** Humor, Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, Relief Theory, Freud, Mary and Max

1. **Introduction**

Adam Eliot, an Australian film writer and director, produced *Mary and Max*, an animated movie released in 2009. Mary, an 8-year-old Australian girl, and Max, a New Yorker of 44 years of age, are two eponymous characters of the movie whose correspondence, which is based on Eliot’s life, over the course of Mary’s childhood and adulthood constitutes the larger portion of the movie. Moreover, a narrator who interposes their letters and comments on their feeling and opinions and who sometimes sheds light on the facts in the film provides another drive for the progression of the movie. As a movie, *Mary and Max* falls into the category of black-comedy drama film; hence, it is laden with humorous scenes. It is difficult to find a spectator who does not burst into laughter, if not guffaw, while watching this movie. Therefore this article, in the first half, aims at encapsulating succinctly the three famous theories of humor—superiority theory, incongruity theory and relief theory—then it narrows down its focus to Relief theory and among its theoreticians, the priority is given to Freud. The second part of this paper endeavors to spot the existing jokes (Freud used humor and joke interchangeably) in this movie and shows the techniques used in the creation of those jokes in conjunction with the purpose behind them so that it becomes clear to the readers that jokes subsume elements of the unconscious which are revealed by them.

2. **Literature Review**

In her *Autism & Aspergers in Popular Australian Cinema Post 2000*, Katie Ellis shows how marginalized characters who suffer from autism and aspergers are brought to the mainstream of Australian national cinema by films like *Mary and Max* and *Black Balloon*. Ellis holds that, In *Mary and Max*, Adam Eliot tries to visualize Max, who suffers from autism and aspergers, as authentic and real as possible so that he can shed light on the main character, Mary, and “overturn stereotypes and offer some important critiques [1]. In *Animated Outsiders: Harvie Krumpet & Mary and Max*, Dr. Marian Quigley investigates the two animations produced by Adam Eliot and comes to the conclusion that both *Harvie Krumpet* and *Mary and Max* are about down-to-earth people whose flaws bring about their marginalization. Dr. Quingley believes that characters in these movies, on occasions, overwhelm their obstacles by choosing good friends [2].

3. **Humor**

In our daily give-and-takes we sometimes blurt out jokes, trade humorous sayings and swap amusing though occasionally offensive stories and then laugh at them. We do this due to different purposes. Once we might fabricate a joke and laugh at our friend just to make him/her
seem ridiculous in front of the rest of our friends in order to revenge a formerly unresolved spite. At other times our jokes may lack any intentional ulterior motives and be a mere extemporization for the sheer sake of “innocent” laughter. Irrespective of the purpose behind our humor and jokes, we are all of the same opinion that humor is a shared lineament among human beings. Humor is not restricted to one zone on the Earth. People all around the world, from Asia to America, exchange humorous stories and laugh at each other. Nor is it limited to ethnicity; Qazvini people are the butt of humor as people of Rasht are. We are also prone to believe that humor is a human characteristic which is invariably identified with laughter but another question arises here: Is humor peculiar to human beings and not animals? Kate Douglass who is an anthropologist attempts to show in an article that the distinction between animals and human beings based on laughter is a faulty and wanting claim [3]. Even if we concur with Douglass in that animals laugh, we cannot be certain that animal’s laughter is a testimony to their humor. Therefore, as Gotz asserts: On a scale from zero to ten, we have a continuum from the zero of animal laughter… the one of nonhumorous, to the ten of philosophical and theological laughter; from the laugh of the hyena … and of human infant to the laughter of Cervantes, Socrates and the Buddha [4]. To give a sweeping definition of humor is an enterprising task and almost doomed to failure, nevertheless, before explaining three theories of humor, the following definition by Bardon is useful in order to help us have a general understanding of it: Humor is a general term that (in its usual sense) refers either to something intended to cause amusement or to whatever quality makes something amusing….humor is the quality that is the common element in farces, satires, absurdities, jokes, Witticisms, and anything else that may be found to be amusing [5].

4. Superiority and Incongruity Theories

In a Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor, John Morreal names three theories of humor of which Superiority Theory is the first one. The two other theories are Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory [6]. Plato, Aristotle, Quintillian and Thomas Hobbes are among the proponents of Superiority. According to this theory, the cause of laughter is the superiority felt, by the ones who laugh, over other people as Hobbes writes “the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves[5]. It is this “eminency” or feeling of superiority which causes us to laugh at others whom we believe are ridiculous. Despite its attempt at describing Humor, Superiority Theory had a drawback: not all circumstances which give us a feeling of superiority are amusing. For instance seeing a man in a wretched state i.e. a murderer who is going to be executed doesn’t stimulate laughter although we feel superior to the assassinator. So Superiority was supplanted by Incongruity Theory which flourished in the writings of Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and especially Francis Hutcheson. In his book Reflections upon Laughter, Hutcheson maintains that “the cause of laughter is the

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1 Qazvin is the name of a city in Iran
2 Rasht is the name of a city in Iran
bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea.” [5]. Therefore, humor is created out of a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually transpires in a joke; hence incongruity. This feature leads to one of the widespread features of humorous sayings which is called double or multiple meaning. Incongruity Theory, like Superiority theory is not a comprehensive one. The main problem with this theory is the fact that many incongruous situations rather than provoking laughter end in pain, sadness and tears. For instance, the sight of an old man carrying a heavy burden is an epitome of incongruity but does not provoke us to laugh. Instead of laughter we have to find a nook and shed tears. As a result of the two aforementioned theories’ insufficiency in accounting humor, another theory emerged which is called Relief Theory.

5. Relief Theory

This theory became known in the writings of Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. This theory focuses on psychical aspects of humor and asserts that laughter, and by implication humor, is a way of discharging nervousness seemed to be unnecessary. Freud’s term for joking is not confined to “joke-telling,” the recitation of prepared fictional narratives, but subsumes extempore witty comments, bon mot, repartee, etc. and he believes that in all of these, a release of psychic energy occurs. To give a catalogue of jokes’ properties Freud cites excerpts taken from his contemporary philosophers including Theordor Lipps, Kuno Fischer, Theodor Vischer and Jean Paul. He extracts “activity, relation to the content of our thoughts, playful judgment, coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, sense in nonsense, succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward of what is hidden and brevity” as properties of jokes but Freud claims that they are “disjecta membra” which need to be incorporated to make an organic whole [7]. Freud allocated the first chapter of his Jokes to “description of joke techniques-the processes through which jokes are created” [7], which are “joking envelopes” and one source of pleasure, and of purposes of jokes which are another fountain of pleasure. Jokes are divided into two groups in terms of purpose: “innocent jokes” where a joke is considered an end in itself and “tendentious jokes” which are purposeful. Rarely does the former type occur but the latter which is more widespread serves two functions: it is either a “hostile joke” serving the purpose of satire, defense or aggressiveness or an “obscene joke” serving the purpose of exposure [8]. Also Freud believes that “tendentious jokes” are a means of expressing one’s repressed desires and feeling in an innocuous way. If we declare candidly what we have in mind, we will get into trouble and mostly “hostile jokes” aim at authorities or institutions so the safest mode to express our ideas, to Freud, is to cloak it under the guise of a joke [7]. Indeed Freud believes that at least hostile jokes are “valves” through which we release our suppressed desires, feelings or conflicts toward individuals, government, religion and other institutions.
6. Discussion

The movie *Mary and Max* opens in Mount Waverly, a city in Australia, where Mary, the heroine of this animation lives. Mary is a tubby, short and seemingly belated girl whose father works at a tea factory and spends the rest of his time in a barn where he is preoccupied with the taxidermy of the dead birds he finds. Mary’s mother, Vera, is an old alcoholic woman who constantly commits shoplifting. Mary has no friends and wishes to spend more time with her father and mother, but they do not allocate enough time to her. Mary has many questions in her mind some of which are left unanswered. The most fundamental question in her mind is that “where do children come from?” Her mother told her that in Australia children come from beer glasses but Mary finds her answer inadequate, therefore, she decides to write a letter to an American named Max Horowitz, whose name she found in a phone book, and to pose him the same question. Max is an atheist who suffers from Aspergers Syndrom and autism. He lives alone in an apartment with his crippled animals. Max, like Mary, has no friends and to him love is as strange as “a salad sandwich.” He has trouble communicating with other people and the only companion that has ever warmed up his bed is his “hot water bottle.” Over the course of the movie, Mary and Max get friendly and try to help and guide each other through their own letters. During their correspondence some jokes are uttered, which are quite revealing about Mary and Max’s worldviews.

In Mary’s conception of babies’ delivery, an example of a joking technique which is named “condensation with a slight modification” occurs. In this technique two words are incorporated but the alteration in the constructed word is not that much significant? Mary believes that babies come from either “beer glasses” or eggs laid by “rabbirs,” “nuns” and “prostitubes”. Instead of uttering “prostitute” she fuses the words “prostitute” and “tube” to create a new word which is “prostitubes.” In doing so, she changes the third syllable by superseding “b” for “t”, and the resulting word is a condensed form for telling that children are the outcome of a birth given by prostitutes who are considered not human beings but mechanical tools that are used, in Marxist terminology, for their use value. It is interesting to note that in Australia where Mary comes from “tube” also informally means “a can of beer”, which adds another dimension to it because Mary primarily considers beer glasses where genesis begins. Indeed it is Max; Mary’s formerly Jewish but currently atheist friend, who heretofore in the movie explicates to Mary that in America, babies are the products of eggs laid by nuns if you are catholic, by rabbirs if you are Jewish and by prostitutes if you are an atheist. If we accept the second meaning of “tube” it means that Mary prefers her mother’s explanation of origin of babies to that of Max which means that although she seems to regard Max as a sympathetic ear, her unconscious drives do not let her concede to her new friend’s opinion with respect to the issue of child birth. The word “rabbits”, uttered by Mary, has another linguistic resource at its disposal; that is, malapropism, which is the mistaken use of a word in place of a similar-sounding one. Mary uses “rabbits” instead of “rabbirs” inadvertently and it can be taken as an example of “condensation with modification” because she changes the word “rabbirs” into the name of an animal by adding the letter “t”. By doing so she wants to make an attack on Jews whom she
considers not more than an animal, namely a rabbit. Mary’s utterance can be considered an example of “tendentious jokes”. Mary is Adam Eliot’s surrogate self as he himself stated in his interview with Marguerite O’Hara, “Mary was basically me,” and Max is based on his 20-year-old pen pal in America, who is Jewish and atheist [9]. His atheism is mentioned overtly during the movie and it is him who tells Mary where babies come from in America. Max, like Mary, faced the enigma of baby’s origin while he was four. Replacement of the word “rabbits” with “rabbi” by Mary, who is almost the same age as Max when for the first time this question popped into his mind, indicates that Mary’s malapropism is a reflection of Max idea and criticism; that is, although Mary confuses “rabbit” for “rabbi”, it is done vicariously on behalf of Max for it represents Max’s hatred and condemnation of Jews. Furthermore, attack on individuals is not neglected in this movie. Eliot himself stated, “Yes, the people around me inspired these fictional characters. … I can’t just sit down and stare at my computer and think up a character. I have to look at the people around me.” [10] He expressed that there are similarities between Ivy and his Aunty Ethel and one of the garbage collectors are based on his friend Bernie. (ibid) In Mary and Max, an eye-catching instance of attacks on individuals which has the joking technique of “play on words proper” at its disposal crops up when garbage collectors halt in front of Mary’s house while Mary heaves the trash bin to deliver it to the garbage collectors. In the meanwhile, Vera, Mary’s mother, hurriedly exits the building with a bag in her hands and asks; “Hey, fellas, you got room for one more bag?” They respond; “Sure, Mrs. Dinkle. Hop in!” The laughter, here, arises due to a play on the word bag: the first meaning is a flexible container and the second one is an unpleasant or bad-tempered woman [11]. By likening Vera to a plastic bag containing trash, Eliot wants to retaliate one of the wounds that he has in mind since the time of his childhood. Although he never mentions the origin of Vera in his interviews, it is probable that he wants to impale someone, like his mother or girlfriends, in whom he takes no interest. So far, the discussed jokes benefited from verbal resources. There’s another group of joke techniques which Freud calls “displacement”. This technique depends on an unexpected diversion of previously established “train of thought” and it can be free from any verbal plays. An example of this technique occurs in Mary and Max when Max tells Mary about his past experiences. He is in an elevator and there are four other people around him. The ensuing lines are uttered by Max; People often think I am tactless and rude. (Then Max farts) I cannot understand how being honest can be...improper [10]. The displacement is here very conspicuous and the double meaning lies in Max’s avoidance of using the word honest in its common sense which is the quality of being truthful, sincere and unpretentious. The meaning that Max derives from “honesty” is sincerity and to him it does not matter whether this sincerity is positive or negative, constructive or destructive. Readers must have in mind that by making such a funny statement about honesty, Max tries to chastise his society and its norms and the way the majority of people around him behave. By making a humorous joke like this, he tries to tell the spectators that the yardsticks that people deploy in order to arbiter individuals other than themselves are manipulating and that they try to ignore the ideas of minorities. Actually, Max believes that we have to accept people the way they are because asking people to behave in compliance with their
norms is, to put it in Max’s word, “like trying to change the color of [one’s] eyes”. Two other groups of technique which are independent of verbal plays are “sense in nonsense” and “faulty reasoning”. By the former, Freud means that we are catered with something nonsensical and then proceed from its absurdity to a hidden meaning behind it. The latter involves reasoning with a rational façade with an illogical bottom line. Both of these techniques are discernible in Max’s chastisement of people for violating laws, especially regarding smoking cigarettes. Cigarette butts in his opinion are bad because “they wash out to sea and fish smoke them and become nicotine dependent.” This part of Max’s utterance is humorous in that it presents something absurd and nonsense. Everybody knows that it is impossible for cigarette not to extinguish under water, therefore it is absurd, but after contemplating Max’ utterance we will be enlightened by the sense behind it: Max enters into society’s stupidity of scattering butts which leads to deterioration of the environment and its inhabitants by disclosing it through the stupidity of his utterance. After telling this piece of seemingly nonsense, Max retracts his previous claim by confessing that “I’m joking” and proceeds to justify himself. In doing so he points out two reasons: one is the impossibility of a cigarette remaining lit underwater and the other one fish’s depravity of a pocket to keep their cigarette lighters in. Both parts of Max’s justification are good and reasonable apart from the context but the problem becomes evident in that although no one can refute the fact that fishes do not have pockets to carry their lighters, it is a false idea to ascribe this lack to their inability of becoming cigarette smokers. Here Max avails from absurdity and false reasoning to denigrate his society and the existing laws. He knows that it is hilarious to claim that fish will get addicted but he does so to show that although fishes do not have pockets or lighters, youngsters and adults around us have access to such things and are vulnerable to its menaces. Another technique for making jokes is called “representation through opposite”. As the name shows you present the opposite of what you have in mind. To give an example from the movie the following lines recounted by Max are chosen, People like to believe in God because it answers complicated questions like where did the universe come from, [and] do worms go to heaven... and why do old ladies have blue hair? [10]. When you hear the first two lines you expect to hear some intricate questions. The first question satisfies your expectation but the other two questions juxtaposed to the first one ruin your expectation. Hardly anybody does consider future of worm in afterlife or the color of the elderly people as questions worthwhile for consideration. Through the representation of absurd questions which are exactly the opposite of what we envision Max, once more, pokes fun at religion. In fact he maintains that religion is good for nothing and what religious scholars deal with is trifling and worthless. This joke can also be categorized under the “unification” joke technique in which a series of incompatible ideas are patched to each other by using the word “and”. In this case, we expect Max to express three intricate questions. Rather than doing this, he patches two absurd questions to a logical one.
7. Conclusion

Laughter is the best medicine. It is an idiom in which most people, even the sternest ones, believe. It is impossible to imagine a society in which everybody is serious and nobody laughs. Laughter and humor are indispensible parts of our daily life and also mechanisms for maintaining our health. In our interactions, we tend to believe that humorous jokes serve the role of a tool for changing the mood. We usually are inclined not to treat them solemnly and delve the deeper layers of them. Whether we accept it or not, jokes are impregnated with hidden meanings. Sometimes they disclose something about the teller’s opinion regarding an individual. At other times they divulge the teller’s mind with respect to groups and institutions. Adam Eliot’s movie is not an exception. He wants to let us know more about those who are marginalized as a result of the abnormalities, which are ascribed to them. In Mary and Max, Eliot enlightens us on the aspects of the lives of two lonely characters that, although live on two sides of Atlantic, are so similar to each other with respect to their tastes, wishes and desires. These two major characters, in conjunction with the rest of the characters, are based on the real personalities in Eliot’s life so their concern and ideas can be taken as representatives of preoccupations of Eliot and his friends and kinsmen. If Max reproaches religion, it tells us something about either Eliot or his friends’ preoccupations, based on whom Max is modeled. Indeed Jo Flack’s evaluation of Eliot seems to be true. Flack (2009) states that; As his filmography reveals, Elliot does not shy away from difficult subjects. He sees each new film as a blank canvas to fill with original, potent and often taboo content. As each of his films has demonstrated, Elliot is willing to push the boundaries and present audiences with something refreshing and different [12]. But Eliot does not expose us directly to the "taboo content". Instead, he wraps it in jokes. And Finally, Dr. Quingly, as it was mentioned earlier, believes that it is Max and other characters' realization of the value of true friendship that helps them surpass the obstacles. It seems that in addition to this, humor plays a critical role in coping with difficulties. Although Mary and Max are ridiculed by the society, they know that they do not deserve such a mistreatment. As the narrator says, “He [Max] couldn't understand why he was seen as the odd one while everyone else was considered normal.” They finally find a way to express their protests and relieve them that is accomplished through humor.

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