
Paula Spencer
or
the Miraculous Transformation of Misery into Joy

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Abstract. Roddy Doyle is one of the authors who has best understood that human existence is an interplay between comedy and tragedy. From his very first novel he has shown that it is possible to deal with the most difficult and harsh situations in a comic way without trivializing them. In spite of the cruel realities being portrayed in his novels, especially after the Barrytown trilogy, hope shines through the clouds of pain. In *Paula Spencer* (2007), the sequel to *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), characters face alcoholism, drug addiction, illness, violence, etc. but the introduction of the comic element or vision prevents melodrama and sentimentalism from entering the novel. Laughter allows Paula to face and transcend her loneliness, her physical and moral pain, her constant need for a drink or, in other words, all those aspects of her life that threaten to crush her. In fact, she has attained the highest level of humour, which is defined by love and compassion.

Key Words. Roddy Doyle, *Paula Spencer*, humour, comedy, ordinary life, transcendence, compassion, contradictions, survival

Resumen. Roddy Doyle es uno de los autores que mejor ha entendido que la existencia humana es una interacción entre comedia y tragedia. Desde su primera novela ha mostrado que es posible tratar de forma cómica las situaciones más difíciles y duras sin por ello trivializarlas. A pesar de las crueles realidades descritas en sus novelas, especialmente después de la trilogía de Barrytown, la esperanza brilla a través de las nubes de dolor. En *Paula Spencer* (2007), la continuación de *La mujer que se daba con las puertas* (1996), los personajes se enfrentan al alcoholismo, la drogadicción, la enfermedad, la violencia, etc. Pero la introducción del elemento o visión cómicos evitan que el melodrama y el sentimentalismo se cuele en la novela. La risa permite a Paula hacer frente y trascender su soledad, su dolor físico y moral, su constante necesidad de beber, o en otras palabras, todos esos aspectos de su vida que amenazan con ahogarla. En realidad ha alcanzado el nivel superior de humor, caracterizado por el amor y la compasión.

Palabras clave. Roddy Doyle, *Paula Spencer*, humor, comedia, vida corriente, transcendencia, compasión, contradicciones, supervivencia.

William Gerhardie affirms that humour “is the most serious quality in literature” (cit. in Craig 1989: 100) and Walter E. O’Connell that “life

is still too important to be taken seriously” (1996: 317). The former is a novelist and the latter a psychologist, but both undermine the

notion that seriousness or tragedy is the hallmark of maturity and profundity while comedy is immature, superficial and trivial. Although Gerhardt and O'Connell belong to different times, they are reflecting a trend which has become predominant in the last decades in different disciplines and scholarly domains: more extensive and sophisticated attention has been paid to humour, laughter and comedy in order to vindicate their relevance and thus reject the idea that comedy is inferior to tragedy. Comedy is capable of dealing with all aspects of our lives, including those that are most important to us, and not merely an escapist genre or a literary mode focused on trifles and trivialities. Charles Chaplin's Tramp is the best example of it: "Chaplin plunged his character into the most difficult social issues of the time: immigration, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, crime, alcoholism, drug addiction, slum neighbourhoods, sweatshops, war – not the conventional themes of situational comedy, let alone the slapstick that dominated early cinema" (Hyers 1996: 7). Chaplin, like Doyle and other artists, showed that it was possible to deal with tragic themes and circumstances without trivializing them or undermining their seriousness. Eric Bentley explains it very well when he affirms that the comic does not ignore pain, but tries to face the pressures of everyday life, the responsibilities of adulthood. The comic artist must have, on the one hand, "a lust for life" and, on the other, "a keen and painful awareness of the obstacles in the path, the resistances and recalcitrances, the trials by fire and water, the dragons, forests and caves that menace us, and the thickets and swamps in which we flounder" (1984: 137). The starting point of both comedy and tragedy is the misery of the human condition and both of them try to cope with it. But whereas tragedy transforms fear into awe, comedy is able to transcend misery in joy. The comic sense helps us cope with the daily difficulty of being and that is why when "we get up tomorrow morning, we may well be able to do without our tragic awareness for an hour or two, but we shall desperately need our sense of the comic" (Bentley 1984: 141).

Like Bentley, Wylie Sypher rejects the idea that tragedy is more profound than comedy, but goes even further by arguing that the most important discovery in modern criticism is that

comedy can tell us many things about our situation that even tragedy cannot. Sypher's starting point is that the political and historical events of the twentieth century have clearly shown that human life is inherently absurd, and comedy, being the logic of the absurd, is better prepared to represent the irrational, the inexplicable, the nonsensical of the human predicament. The comic artist has less resistance than the tragic one to representing what seems incoherent and this explains why comedy touches experience at more points than tragedy: "Nothing human is alien to comedy. It is an equivocal art" (1980: 213). Like Bentley, Sypher emphasises the coping function of comedy: "If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety, or fear can be lifted. Unflinching and undaunted we see *where we are*. This strengthens us as well as society" (1980: 245). We can only transcend evil and error by laughing at them and here the comedian plays a very important role, since he is the one who helps us transcend the imperfections of the world. Neither society nor the individual can be in good health without regarding themselves sceptically and therefore laughing at themselves. But although comedy laughs at the absurdities and contradictions of life, it never despairs of them.

Hyers, for whom humour is a spiritual and moral necessity, has also rejected the idea that the comic mode cannot deal with the fundamental problems that affect men. Like the above-mentioned critics, Hyers emphasises how the comic vision possesses a greater appreciation for the muddiness and ambiguities of human nature: people and circumstances are no so neatly divisible into black and white, light and dark, right and wrong, as tragic heroism has always defended:

The comic hero playfully incarnates the essential contradictions of our natures, and the awkwardnesses and bewilderments of being human. Basic to the various forms of comic heroism is the same thesis – comically understood – that we are creatures of very diverse, and often opposite tendencies. We are suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth, eternity and time, the infinite and the finite, spirit and flesh, rationality and impulse, altruism and selfishness, pride and insecurity, life and death (1996: 60-1).

The comic hero acknowledges that life is

never so logical, organized or structured as we would like it to be. The clown in particular incarnates our tensions, ambivalences and incongruities and does it in such a way that we do not experience them as a tragic contradiction or alienation but as a playful catharsis of paradoxical richness. The clown accepts the manyness of the self and others, destroying all the boxes and badges with which we label our lives and attempt to confine others.

Hyers also praises comedy for dealing with ordinary people and ordinary affairs: "Comic concerns are simple and mundane" (1996: 41). Comedy pays attention to the basic, common concerns of daily life: food, sex, fun, love, family, friends, a good night's sleep. Comedy shows that "Ordinary values are not superficial but basic; ordinary people are not ignoble, but the salt of the earth" (1996: 44). The real hero of our time is the common person who manages to remain relatively sane, simple, ordinary and human.¹ Hyers is thus rejecting the thesis held by theorists from Aristotle onwards that comedy comes after tragedy because, whereas the latter portrays the action of noble and superior people, the former is concerned with common, inferior people and the ordinary, even trivial issues of the marketplace, courtship, home, work. The great virtue of comedy is precisely that it celebrates and reaffirms the unconditional value of life: "When the burdens of life come, and innocence is shattered, comedy still insists on affirming life, renewing life, playing with life, delighting in life, and is not easily overwhelmed" (1996:

1. Hyers reminds us how in ancient Greece the tragedians represented humanity in terms of gods and kings, whereas the heroes created by comedians were always average people or improbable people. Similarly, while Shakespeare's tragedies dwell on the affairs of kings and queens, princes and princesses, his comedies recreate the world of merchants, moneylenders, taverns and bedchambers. Interestingly enough, Sypher and Galligan have expressed the same idea. Thus Sypher affirms that comedy seems to be a more pervasive human condition than tragedy: "Often we are, or have been, or could be, Quixotes or Micawbers or Malvolios, Benedicks or Tartuffes. Seldom are we Macbeths or Othellos" (1980: 206). Galligan, on the other hand, points out how comic heroes tend to lack in heroic qualities: they are women, dreamers, outcasts or shabby artists.

46).² The comic hero, unlike the tragic one, does not believe that the world of the commonplace is dull, boring or trivial, and that in order to give meaning and direction to our lives we have to despise immediate circumstances and search for the marvellous and wondrous outside them: "The comic protagonist is a defender of all those simple basics of life and survival that tend to be spurned by soaring spirits and heroic visions and wild excursions of fancy" (1996: 214). As a matter of fact, the term comedy probably derives from the Greek god Comus, who was not one of the great gods who played a major dramatic role in Greek mythology. In his kingdom, which Hyers describes as "the kingdom of nothing special" (1996: 211), the most lofty and profound values are the ordinary ones: "His province was that of the basic, around-home concerns of life: sexual companionship, begetting children, family welfare, productive fields, and healthy animals" (1996: 209). Comedy, thus, challenges the distinction that tragedy has established between noble and ignoble, superior and inferior, by paying attention to all that has been judged "beneath us" and to those characters who are usually considered of no interest or worth. The comic spirit acknowledges the need the human being has for dreams, hopes, grand imaginings, or, in other words, for moments of escape, but it also emphasises how happier we will be if we learn to rejoice in the familiar, actual world which is our only home: "The essential human problem is to come to terms with that valley, its own marvels and miracles, not just invent more and more ingenious methods of escape" (1996: 212). Comedy is particularly interested in the petty circumstances and typical irritations that define everyday life, transforming them into occasions for enjoyment: "Comedy takes the most common table items of our lives, like bread and wine – items that may also be surrounded by real anguish and suffering – and transforms them into the body and blood of our salvation" (1996: 101-2).

2. Galligan expresses a similar idea when he affirms that comedy as a literary mode "descends dramatically through the varieties of the concrete to reach a rock-bottom reality and there discovers that life is good" (1960: 24).

This last quotation is highly revealing because it emphasises the coping function of laughter. Comedy allows us to see even the darkest and most painful situations in more than one way and thus allows us to transcend disappointment and suffering, ourselves and our circumstances, and the contradictions of our lives. Instead of allowing personal tragedies or dramatic circumstances to destroy us, the comic spirit renews our hope and courage and the will to live. This is why Hyers rejects the tendency amongst critics to classify texts as tragedies or comedies according to plot line and ending. What defines comedy is not a happy ending, but the way in which life is perceived and received. In fact, when a comedy has a happy ending we realize that it is merely a jest, a clever trick: “We know that that is not the way life is, has been, or is ever likely to be” (1996: 162). In comedy there is no need for the miraculous transformation of the beggar into a prince or for magnificent castles and happily-ever-afters: “Its mission is not to annul history or conquer death or obviate suffering but to renew and celebrate life” (1996: 163). In spite of all suffering, evil and defeat, hope is preserved in the comic world. Comedy does not lead to despair or futility over the tensions and problems of our lives, but to the celebration of life and renewal of hope and faith. The comic spirit’s capacity to stand apart from and adjusting to any circumstances is wholly liberating: “The comic is like the child’s toy that is weighted at the bottom and painted with the face of a clown or some humorous character which, however struck down or laid to rest, bobs straight up again” (1996: 166). In fact, if the book of Job can be considered to belong to the comic mode it is not, as some critics have argued, because of its “happy ending” with Job getting back everything that was taken away from him, but because of his attitude when he loses his family and possessions: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21 RSV). Of course, being able to laugh at one’s misfortunes requires a lot of courage and tenacity.³

3. This very same idea is shared by Galligan who argues that the main function of comedy is to sustain hope and that this hopefulness cannot be achieved without quantities of courage.

Marcel Gutwirth agrees with Hyers that no small courage is needed to be able to laugh at ourselves and at the world in spite of its senselessness and absurdity, and emphasises how the ability to distance ourselves from our own predicament makes us wiser:

In the end let it be said: to laugh in the face of folly (our own) and lostness (our own), however wistfully, is to reach for the prize of wisdom, inglorious perhaps, unlikely to win us the crown of a saint or mantle of a guru but secure in the unfazed recognition of the little we are – so much wind, as Montaigne reminds us, but for all that content to make a noise in the world, glad simply to be (1993: 187).

Laughter allows us to recognize our finitude, our contradictions and thus keeps us sane, lucid and humble. One of the virtues of the sense of humour is that it creates a comic perspective that allows us to keep a distance and thus transcend a menacing reality: “Joking in the face of danger is a way of distancing oneself physically, of gaining a purchase on the ambient hostility, of treating it as harmless by fiat” (1993: 124).⁴ That is why the role of the comedian is so important: he has to face the unbearable, making it bearable for us as well as for him. Laughter is an invaluable talisman in man’s life. It allows us to remain sane in the world that threatens us with all kinds of horrors: “Euphoria, as the heightened sense of our well-being, so clearly radiates from a laughing countenance that we have no trouble viewing it as the brief holiday from care that opens a window upon a better, freer existence” (1993: 79).

John Morreall absolutely agrees with Gutwirth that humour is valuable in human life in a way nothing else is. He goes so far as to claim that humour is vital to maintaining a healthy outlook on things, since humour gives us distance and perspective in all kinds of situations and thus frees us from being dominated by them: “In some cases, such as during wartime, humor can become almost a prerequisite of survival” (1983: 104). Thus

4. Gutwirth provides a very good example. During the Second World War many bomb-damaged shops in London put signs on their windows proclaiming “Open as usual”. One particularly devastated store with hardly one wall left standing, worded its sign “More open than usual”.

Viktor Frankl, who experienced the horrors of Auschwitz and Dachau and later incorporated humour into his psychotherapeutic techniques, said the following of life in the concentration camps: “Unexpectedly most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. We knew we had nothing to lose except our ridiculously naked lives ... Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation ... Humor more than anything else in the human make-up can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, if only for a few seconds” (Morreall 1983: 104). The person who has a humorous attitude to life is capable of enjoying the incongruities that pervade our lives and is more realistic in his view of himself and the world.⁵ He is also more humble in moments of success, less disappointed by failure and more accepting of things as they are. Morreall, like most critics already mentioned, emphasises that humour does not ignore suffering or failure and therefore is not based on false hope, but yet “we can always step back a bit to enjoy the incongruity” (1983: 128).

Most of the critics we have mentioned so far have pointed out the presence of benevolence, compassion, etc. in “real comedy”. Already in 1877 George Meredith rejected the idea that the comic writer is hostile to sentiment, tending to spitefulness and making an unfair use of laughter: “You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in their eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes” (1980: 42).⁶ Sypher expresses himself

5. Interestingly enough, Galligan expresses a similar idea when analysing comedy as a literary genre. He asserts that comedy is the most finite, most concrete, least magical, least univocal of literary modes. He argues that comedy’s bias towards realism becomes obvious in its mockery of wishful thinking. Hoping and wishing are positive acts, whereas wishful thinking because of its yearning that the world come to oneself, and on one’s terms, leads only to stagnation, apathy and despair.

6. I have reproduced this quotation by Meredith because critics tend to concentrate on the moralizing or, as Gutwirth calls them, “policing” aspects of Meredith’s theory, forgetting, as Sypher

in similar terms when he affirms that the highest form of comedy is that in which “laughter is qualified by tolerance, and criticism is modulated by a sympathy that comes only from wisdom” (1980: 212). Unfortunately very few writers have achieved this generous perception of life. Hyers agrees with Sypher that the highest level of humour is that in which one is willing to laugh not only at others but also at oneself. Like Sypher, he believes that this level of humour is not easily achieved and would correspond mythically to paradise regained: “It arises out of a sense of acceptance, resolution, and larger harmonies” (1996: 92). Humour is here linked to compassion since it does not laugh at others and their faults, but accepts them in spite of their differences and even devilishness: “It is therefore capable of becoming, in the purest sense, the humor of love. The element of judgment in humor (its iconoclastic function) passes over into mercy” (1996: 92). Humour is thus opened up to sympathy and goodwill and there is merely the desire to share with others something entertaining and enjoyable. This acceptance rather than rejection of the follies and hypocrisies of others frees humour to become the humour of humility and compassion. The distances between people are reduced and softened. In fact, Hyers emphasises how, because of its peculiar vision of life and men, comedy criticizes the virtues of tragedy – courage, loyalty, duty, honour, pride, absolute devotion – that only lead to human destruction, and praises another set of virtues: playfulness, childlikeness, humour, laughter, lightheartedness, meekness, humility, flexibility, moderation, willingness to compromise, sympathy and empathy, generosity, nurturing, affection, love.

The cohesive effect of laughter pointed out by Hyers has also been defended by Morreall, who believes that laughter unites people: “To laugh with another person for whatever reason, even if only at a piece of absurdity, is to get closer to that person” (1983: 115). Sharing humour with others is a friendly gesture since

has clearly explained, that Meredith’s study was a response against nineteenth-century society and its values, and that he assigns to comedy richer values than Bergson, with whom he is always compared. He does not demand, as the French writer does, an insensitivity on the part of the comic writer.

we are showing that we accept them and desire to please them.⁷

Gutwirth formulates a similar idea when he asserts that laughter allows us to “bond and rebond with our fellows in unholy communion” (1993: 58).⁸

We have seen so far how human existence is an interplay of seriousness and laughter and, in fact, some critics have stressed that when we exclude comedy from our lives the door to melodrama and sentimentalism is open. Bakhtin is perhaps one of the thinkers who has best explained it. In ancient culture tragedy did not eliminate the laughing aspect of life but coexisted with it:

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

Randall Craig, who believes that humour is the mode of expressing the contradictory nature of human experience, also affirms that tragicomedy must leave the reader poised between criticism and compassion, detachment and empathy, since an exaggeration of the former would lead to dark humour or the grotesque, and an emphasis on the latter to melodrama and sentimentality. Margaret Drabble expresses it very clearly when asked about the role of humour: “It is a way of coping. One cannot go on feeling deeply grieved about everything in the world. Comedy is one response. Sentimentality is another, the

7. Interestingly enough, feminist critics, who have emphasised how humour has become a subversive weapon in the hands of women, have also suggested that laughter unites women and gives them strength to challenge a society that oppresses them (See Judy Elsley 1992).

8. The fact that Gutwirth uses the term “communion” is very revealing because Hyers uses it as well when describing the context of the highest form of humour: “The context is one of the celebration of life and the communion of laughter and good cheer” (1996: 93).

response of the press” (Wojcik-Andrews 1992: 104). Already in the nineteenth century Meredith formulated the same idea. Meredith, for whom comedy was “the fountain of sound sense” (1980: 14) and the basis of civilization, argues that the sentimentalists are the main enemies of comedy: where there is no comedy melodrama and sentimentalism will flourish. He specifically addresses women to make them aware of the fact that “the comic Muse is one of their best friends” and that they will only equal men in attainment and liberty when comedy is allowed to reign:

They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that, where they have no social freedom, comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place, and a sentimental version of them (1980: 32).

Roddy Doyle is one of the authors who has best understood that human existence is an interplay between comedy and tragedy. From his very first novel he has shown that, as Bentley, Sypher or Hyers have argued, it is possible to deal with the most difficult and harsh situations in a comic way without trivializing them. In spite of the cruel realities being portrayed in his novels, especially after the Barrytown trilogy, hope shines through the clouds of pain. In *Paula Spencer* (2007) the sequel to *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) characters face alcoholism, drug addiction, illness, violence, etc., but the introduction of the comic element or vision prevents melodrama and sentimentalism from entering the novel. Ferguson has underlined this aspect of the book by asserting that “It will aggravate Doyle fans interested in sentimentality but delight those interested in love” (2006: 1-2). *Paula Spencer* is, thus, a clear example of how the comic response to tragic dilemmas is not the hallmark of immaturity and triviality, but the appropriate response to a situation which would otherwise destroy the human being.

Doyle’s comic vision becomes obvious from the very first page of the book. Like the true comedian, Doyle is interested in ordinary people, showing that they are, as Hyers says,

the salt of the earth. Paula, the protagonist, could not be more common and human and, according to the tragic mind, “beneath us”. She cleans houses four mornings a week and does offices five nights. She works really hard and is exhausted by the time she gets back home: “God, she’s tired. She’s been tired all day. Tired and dark” (2007: 2). Her husband died thirteen years ago after beating, kicking, hitting, burning, thumping, raping her for seventeen years. Her body will never allow her to forget her past: “But there’s Charlo. She hated him. Her body is a map of his abuse. She just has to look at the bones in her right hand, or feel her shoulder when she knows it’s going to rain” (135). As a result of so much pain and torture, Paula became an alcoholic, but when the novel starts she has been sober for four months. She knows that her personal battle against alcoholism is a never-ending one, and that is why she works so hard and tries to be busy all the time: only if she is distracted will she be able to defeat her constant urge for a drink. It is a daily victory: “She measures it out in steps. One day at a time, sweet Jesus. Whoever wrote that one hadn’t a clue. A day is a fuckin’ eternity” (200). Sometimes what she calls her “drink-pain” becomes so strong that she finds herself in embarrassing and humiliating situations, like when she looks under her daughter’s bed, hoping to find a bottle or a can: “Paula can’t face it. It’s so fuckin’ horrible. The shame; sweet Jesus” (179).

The main victims of her addiction are her four children:

She’s not sure what teenagers are. They’re probably the sign of a healthy house – a full fridge and teenagers. Hers were all good kids – or absent. They were too good really. Forced to grow up. Teenagers shouldn’t have to wash their mother’s face and hair. They shouldn’t have to peel their own potatoes. They shouldn’t get their first alcohol at home. They shouldn’t be homeless on their sixteenth birthday. Junkies should never be sixteen (48-9).

Christmas for her children was mainly going to the supermarket with a drunken mother who could not even make the trolley go straight, and having a chicken instead of a turkey and four bottles of vodka on the table. She feels guilty for all the pain and suffering she has caused her children. Sometimes the guilt becomes unbearable: “She puts on U2. She

turns it up ... It’ll kill everything – the guilt, her deafness” (272).

John Paul, named after the Pope, was Paula’s first victim. At sixteen he became a heroine addict and left home. Nine years, four months and thirteen days after, he knocks on her door and tells her that he has changed, is clean and is married with two children. The fact that his son lived all this time only four miles away from her and that she did not know about him or the existence of his children torments her: “That kills her. She deserves it. She’s no right to anything, no natural right – she gave that one away. But no one deserves it. It’s savage, ridiculous – they lived four miles away” (51). She knows that something vital has been lost during the years they have been apart and although she deeply loves him – she has counted the years, months and days her son has been away – she does not dare to tell him.

Leanne, her third child, is the one who makes Paula feel guiltier. She is twenty-two and an alcoholic who still wets her bed: “Her fault. Paula’s fault. The whole mess. Most of Leanne’s life” (5). Leanne still lives with her and Paula never stops worrying about her. Paula listens carefully when she comes home in the evening in case she is drunk and falls over; and when Paula hears Leanne on the stairs in the morning, she is frightened of what she is going to see: “The signs, the face. Red, wet eyes and broken lips” (20). Nobody knows better than Paula the effects of drinking and the feelings behind the urge to drink: “The look in the eyes that came straight at Paula, the anger and panic, terror, the whole lot coming at her. It was Paula looking straight back at Paula” (21). She is scared of her daughter because she never knows how she is going to react. Sometimes she can be really violent, even hitting her own mother. But Paula does not love her less for it because she knows that she is responsible for Leanne’s behaviour. She is aware of all she has put Leanne through. How many times did Leanne get between Paula and Charlo in order to protect her “mammy”? How many times did she go to school hungry and wearing old shabby clothes so that “other kids threw twopences at us”? (72). A child whose mother cannot get in time for the Holy Communion of her daughter because she has been drinking or who wakes up to find her mother’s face stuck to her pillow with her vomit, must necessarily show the scars of so

much suffering.

Paula is aware of the fact that her alcoholism has also deeply affected her other two children, Nicola and Jack, although their lives seem to be more “normal” than those of John Paul and Leanne: “Alcoholics can stop drinking but what is there for the children of alcoholics? Is it always too late? Probably” (251). Nicola has apparently a perfect life. She is married with two children and has a good job. In fact, she is always giving her mother all kinds of presents, from a mobile phone to a fridge. She seems to be always in control, capable of dealing with any circumstances. But, as Paula’s guilty conscience admits, Nicola has never really been a child. Being the eldest daughter, she has always looked after her mother, Jack and Leanne: “Nicola reared the younger ones as much as Paula ever did. She picked up Paula and washed her. She fed Leanne and Jack. And after she left she still looked after Paula” (249). Being a mother to all of them, including Paula, has been a great burden for Nicola who can not even share her difficulties with them: “She’s been their mother, and mothers can’t have problems” (131). It is precisely because of this protective role she has played all her life that Nicola is the one furthest from Paula. Nicola does not trust Paula because she thinks she will never change. She is always checking on her, to make sure that she has not started drinking again and this completely destroys Paula: she feels guilty, useless, helpless and hopeless.

Jack seems to be the perfect son. He is a good student, well-behaved and works in a pub to earn some money. Paula is really proud of him and would like to go with him to the cinema or a concert to show everyone “what I’ve done”, “what I’ve produced” (51). But Paula very soon realizes that the only reason why Jack is always on his best behaviour is because he is terrified of doing something that will make his mother drink again: “He looks at the clock. He’s afraid of being wrong. He doesn’t want to upset her. It’s why he’s such a good kid. He’s afraid to be anything else. He’s grown up minding Paula. He’s her slave. She knows it now” (185). Jack knows how hard it is to live with a mother who is sometimes sober and sometimes drunk. He is always checking on his mother. When he comes back from school he looks under the couch for the bottle, the glass, and smells her breath. Only when he is sure that she is sober does he relax.

He has gone through many painful situations, like when he used to wait for his mother outside the pub where he works now: “He stood outside that pub when he was a little fella, waiting for her to come out. He stood in the rain. He often did it. She brought crisps out to him, and Coke with a straw. Like it was a treat. There you are, love. More guilt. On her birthday” (16).

But in spite of so much suffering, Paula has come to terms with her life. She possesses the true comic spirit which allows her to realize that the simple basics of life and survival are the most important ones. Like the comic hero described by Hyers, Paula revitalizes the here and now and really believes that common, ordinary life has meaning and worth. She does not build castles in the air or despises immediate circumstances as dull or lacking in mystery or excitement, but tries to celebrate and enjoy life. She knows that our basic requirements are simple: food, fun, sex, love, family, friends, a moment’s peace, a good night’s sleep. She has learnt that the little things are the important ones:

The new Paula. Bringing a plastic bag. Thinking to bring it, a step ahead. She’s rarely that skint that she can’t afford the 15c bag tax. But she’d never thought of it before, bringing the bag, before she left the house.

Little things (27).

For Paula, recovering from the nightmare of alcoholism, every step forward is a great victory, no matter how tiny that step might be. Thus she feels happy and proud of herself because she is capable of getting up in the morning before Jack and preparing breakfast for him: “Happy days” (19). An apparently trivial action like cooking an omelette for herself and Leanne changes her day completely: “This – this now – is as good as her life has been” (213). For a long time Paula was incapable of even cooking for her children, until one morning she walked into the sitting room and the sight of her children destroyed her:

Nicola was trying to change Jack’s nappy. Really, he was too old for it. He wouldn’t stay still for her. There was a stain under him, on the carpet. Nicola was crying. She couldn’t do it. She was sixteen. Jack had a bit of bread in his hand. Paula saw the mould on the crust and she nearly got sick...She saw Jack’s dirt on Nicola’s jeans and hand. Her head – she remembers; she

can feel the ache breathe in and out. And she saw Leanne. In the corner, pushed back against it, under the window. Big eyes, falling out of her face. Scratching her arms. Staring out, but not at Paula (213-14).

That is why for Paula ordinary values are the important ones, like tasting food for the first time after a long period. Martin describes it very well when he asserts that “*Paula Spencer* is a novel about waking up. It’s about the impact of everyday on someone whose life has been anything but everyday; about the taste and smell and feeling of the things that most people take for granted” (2006). This argument is echoed by Cremins when he affirms that “Again, Doyle resists the easier path by steering the story away from becoming an Irish *Shirley Valentine* (a movie Paula hates) with the heroine going on an exotic vacation and meeting a tall, dark, handsome stranger” (2). In fact in the list she is making with the things she wants to do in the future, there is nothing extraordinary: do the garden, buy a DVD player and a lamp, open a bank account, etc. It is true that, like everyone else, she has her dreams, like spending a year in Australia, but she, who has gone through so much suffering, knows that true happiness can only be achieved through the acceptance and celebration of the circumstances and simple things of everyday life. Thus learning that John Paul does not like milk is not at all irrelevant for Paula, because she knows that people are defined by little things.

And one of the greatest gift that life has given her during these months she has been sober is the possibility of performing as best as she can a role which could not be more “common”, that of a mother: “It’s grand. She lies there. She’s a mother. It’s the job” (11).

When she prepares lentils for Leanne and pours them into what used to be her favourite bowl, she thinks:

Would she remember it? Paula didn’t know. She didn’t care that much. The bowl wasn’t the point. The soup wasn’t even the point. The woman bringing the soup to Leanne, holding the bowl in front of her, not shaking – the woman was the point. She was always there for me. Paula heard some poor junkie talking on the radio a few days before, talking about her mother. She was always there for me. That was Paula (100).

She is happy to perform the apparently trivial tasks of a mother because this is what life is really about: family, friends, work, etc. For her the most precious moments are the ones she spends with her children:

She’s delighted. She’s not sure why. Leanne, Jack. The ice-cream.
It’s a home. That’s the feeling (197).

And when her boyfriend Joe invites her to go to the cinema and she says she cannot because she is going to her son’s, she cannot help thinking that “She loves the sound of that. And it’s happening” (276).

Paula not only recognizes the importance of the commonplace, but delights in life. In spite of having to work hard to support her children, in spite of having to cope with family problems, in spite of having to fight every day against her addiction, she never complains but continually exclaims that life is grand. Of course, there are moments when she would like her predicament to change and not to have to worry so much about everything and everyone, but they do not last long. She immediately remembers what a gift it is to be alive: “She brushes her teeth. The important ones are there. The ones at the front. The missing ones aren’t seen, unless she smiles too wide. Then the gaps appear. She brushes them well. Brushing will bring the gone ones back. She can believe that sometimes. The new Paula. She can believe nearly anything. She’s a bit hysterical. Not now. But sometimes. So happy. Alive” (9-10).

Paula can celebrate life in spite of all her suffering because of her comic outlook on the world. In fact, her ability to rise above her personal tragedies by seeing them in more than one way confirms the coping function of laughter defended by Bentley, Sypher, Hyers or Morreall. She is capable of standing apart from and adjusting to any circumstances and this allows her to face and transcend her misery. Her comic spirit makes it possible for her not be destroyed by her disappointment and thus keep her faith in life. There is no tragic despair or bitterness in Paula, but a sense of hope renewed. Like the child’s toy which, however struck down, bobs straight up again, Paula never gives up, never stops fighting:

What does an alcoholic mother say to her alcoholic daughter? It’s shocking. It’s terrible.

But Paula's not falling down on the ground. She's not running away or pretending it's not there, or screaming and making it worse. All the things she's done before and will probably do again.

I am an alcoholic.

She's facing it (20-21).

She knows that she cannot do anything to change the past and that blaming herself for all her mistakes – marrying Charlo, becoming an alcoholic – will get her nowhere. That is why she tries hard to look ahead and see the bright side of her life, without idealizing it. She knows that she's been left behind, that other people, including her sisters, have been more successful, but "She's grand. She knows how far she's come. She's not ashamed of work" (56). And when she starts feeling sorry for herself and thinks that she cannot go on, she scolds herself and tells herself to look straight ahead: "no loitering – keep going, keep moving" (86). She emphasises again and again that she will do her best and that if she is ever tempted to drink, "She'll be able to deal with it. That's the plan" (136).

Of course, as Hyers, Gutwirth and Galligan have argued, to be able to laugh at our misfortunes and shortcomings requires a lot of courage and, interestingly enough, Paula has a theory about her "bravery" that seems to echo their theories:

Maybe it's age. And it's definitely the drink. She's not sure. Maybe it's the way the brain works to protect itself. It invents a new woman who can look back and wonder, instead of look back and howl. Maybe it happens to everyone. But it's definitely the drink, or life without it. It's a different world. She's not sure she likes it that much. But she's a new-old woman, learning how to live (136).

Paula's problems do not vanish at the end of the novel, but they do not destroy her either because she is capable of taking even the darkest and most painful situation in more than one way. In fact, she twice acknowledges in the novel that both comedy and tragedy coexist in life. Thus, when she remembers how many times she has asked Jack to forgive her and how often she has shifted from being drunk to being sober: "It's fuckin' terrible. And it's funny. She sees that" (158). She repeats the same idea when her friend Rita says that the first sign that showed that the country was changing was the opening of clothes shops for

children: "Jesus, Rita, said Paula. – All I noticed was the price of vodka going up.

She can say that to Rita. She can joke and be serious" (166).

In fact, critics have emphasised the importance of Paula's comic vision of life. Thus Martin (2006) has affirmed that "her gently anarchic sense of humour, her ruthless honesty and the bursting sense of fun that permeates the book scotch any hint of sentimentalism", whereas Evans has pointed out that "Paula's humour is her strength. She looks away, says 'it's grand' but always comes back for that second painful look. There isn't a single note of sentimentality, as Paula advances painfully, one day at a time, in this truthful funny chronicle of recovery" (2006: 2).

Laughter allows Paula to face and transcend her loneliness, her physical and moral pain, her constant need for a drink or, in other words, all those aspects of her life that threaten to crush her. Thus, although alcoholism has been her cross for so many years, she is capable of achieving distance and seeing the comic side of it:

Paula goes into the kitchen. The fridge is there.

You were on the telly, she says.

She feels stupid. Talking to the fridge ... At her worst, her lowest, Paula never spoke to a wall or anything else that wasn't human. And now she's talking to the fridge. Sober, hard-working, reliable – she's all these things these days, and she's talking to the fridge (3).

The woman who makes fun of her birthday cake, "the cake with no alcohol in it" (37), also tells us how once she got sick while she was cleaning a toilet and "[s]he remembers thinking: God. She remembers thinking: that's handy. The good old days" (38).

Poverty has also defined her life and Paula has the guts to laugh at it. When she gets home from work and the only thing she has to eat are cornflakes: "Cornflakes. The secret of the Spencer family's success" (5).

Her work has not made her life easier. It is true that she does not dislike cleaning for other people, but it is obviously a very hard and unsatisfying job. Nevertheless she can see the comic side of it. Thus, when she is hired to clean the place where a concert is going to take place and the person in charge tells her and the African women who are with her to go into the woods, she realizes how risible the situation is:

Jesus Christ, it's a fairy tale for big people.
 She's going to get lost in the woods ...
 She can hear the music now. There's no sign of
 a house made of gingerbread.

...

Paula chooses one line and walks down it. The
 other women are right behind her. She's Mother
 fuckin' Goose (59-60).

Her relationship with her children is also a
 source of great sorrow for Paula. In fact,
 Ferguson has asserted that the essence of the
 novel is "the ceaselessness of her attempts to
 be properly in love with four people – her
 children – who she didn't know before, what
 with being an alco wretch during their
 childhood" (2006: 1). But she has the courage
 to cope with it by means of laughter. She is
 making a list with the names of her children
 and grandchildren and ironically comments:
 "The big, happy family" (77). What really
 torments her is that she has not been the
 mother her children deserved and even in this
 case she is able to achieve some distance and
 see the comic side of it. One day she finds Jack
 listening to a song by Eminem: "She was sure
 the Eminem fella had good reasons for his
 anger. But she wondered about Jack, why he
 was listening to that stuff about killing your
 mother. Not that he wasn't entitled to" (46). A
 month later she watches Eminem's film with
 Jack and describes the scene in the following
 way: "The angry young man, the alco ma. Slim
 Shady is Jack Spencer. And Paula was Kim
 Basinger" (46).

Having failed as a mother really makes Paula
 suffer, but humour allows her to cope with it in
 particular and with her life in general, like the
 day she is listening to the radio and establishes
 a comparison between her predicament and her
 having missed part of what has been said:
 "Something he said about his da being
 abducted by loyalist terrorists. She must have
 missed something – that's her life. It doesn't
 make much sense" (13). She even laughs at the
 ordinariness of her birthday day, which
 symbolizes the whole of her life:

Are you having a nice day anyway?

Ah, yeah.

It doesn't seem that brilliant. Shops and work.

Ah, Jesus, love. I'm forty-eight. I didn't want a
 Barbie.

What about Kent?

Ah now.

She laughs (31).

Maybe one of the reasons why Paula is
 willing to laugh at her harsh reality, and thus
 transcend it, is because she is aware of the fact
 that the absurd, the irrational, are inherent in
 human existence. Paula knows that people and
 circumstances are not so neatly divisible into
 black and white, clever and stupid. She does
 not need the "grand theories" of Hyers or
 Sypher to realize that life is not so logical as
 we would like it to be, but defined by
 contradictions and ambivalences. Paula accepts
 reality as it is and does not experience the
 manysidedness of the self and the world as
 something negative. In fact, she acknowledges
 that there is not just one Leanne, one John
 Paul, one Nicola or one Jack, but many
 Leannes, many John Pauls, many Nicolas and
 many Jacks. She has learnt that people and the
 world are composed of contraries and does not
 fall into despair because of it. She knows that it
 is irrational to go to a methadone clinic looking
 for John Paul and feel "great because they were
 junkies and she was only drunk" (34); that it is
 ridiculous to depict her difficult relationship
 with Leanne as both dreadful and good; that it
 does not make any sense to describe as great
 the scene with "two alcoholic women and a
 teenaged boy, watching women being sliced
 apart and reassembled" (105); that it is
 ridiculous to take only three biscuits from
 Rita's tin – "That's her limit" (134) – when it
 is not hers; etc. But Paula, possessing the true
 comic spirit, does not despair, does not think
 that absurdity is a negative force, but an
 essential part of human nature. She accepts her
 own contradictions, the deepest one of them
 being her feelings of hate and love for her dead
 husband Charlo, the man who abused and beat
 her: "She hated him. She still hates him, the
 bastard, the fuckin' cunt. But she loved him
 too. If he walked in now she'd love him. He'd
 saved her life, just walking in. He'd lift her out
 of this existence" (136).

Significantly, by allowing the story to be
 told from Paula's point of view, Doyle can
 emphasise the inconsistencies and contradict-
 ions that define life. Thus he constantly calls
 attention to the way in which human beings
 tend to mix the serious and the trivial. This
 becomes obvious, for instance, when Paula on
 remembering her big argument with Leanne
 about her being an alcoholic, an incident really
 terrible and painful, interrupts her thoughts to
 reflect on the colour of the tea she is preparing

for herself: “She throws a teabag into the cup. She pours the water onto it. She watches the colour glide out of the bag. Like red smoke. She likes that colour, before all the water turns that way and darkness. It would look great in her hair. Just a splash of it. A streak down the side” (20). And when some time later she has a fight with Leanne, she does not miss the fact, in the middle of hitting each other, that Leanne’s hair needs a wash. Something similar happens when the pain in her back makes her remember the way Charlo used to beat her and she interrupts her chain of thought to look around and consider that she would love to paint the walls. Doyle also exposes the incongruities of life when describing Paula’s relationship with Rita. Rita is one of the few people who knows everything Paula has been through, and the fact that Paula is also aware of the problems Rita has had with her son helps to bring them together: “Paula and Rita can look straight at each other. She admits it. She likes Rita. The biscuits help” (133). It is absolutely ridiculous to like a person because of her biscuits, but this is the way very often the human mind works.

As we have seen, Paula’s acceptance of her fallibility – “She’s human, she’s only fuckin’ human” (45) – liberates her and gives her the necessary perspective to recognize the comic side of her hard life. And, as Hyers has explained, “Those who are able to include themselves in their laughter are also able to include others in their generosity” (1996: 78). There is no rancour or malice in Paula, but an acceptance of others in spite of their faults. This becomes clear in the novel when she asks herself if she is as proud of John Paul and Leanne as she is of Jack and Nicola and realizes that she is the one who has to make the effort to love them as they are: “It’s herself she has to fight against, not Leanne or John Paul. They’re innocent. Leanne doesn’t have to pass any tests. She doesn’t have to do anything. Leanne is Leanne. That’s what Paula has to accept and love. The Leanne she’ll meet later today. Or the Leanne who might not come home. Leanne tomorrow morning. That’s my daughter” (167). Paula has thus attained the highest level of humour, which is defined by love and compassion. Paula loves her family and feels no resentment towards those who in some way or another have hurt her, like her

mother, who never said anything when Paula came home with a black eye or splintered fingers. She is not envious of other people having a better life than hers, like her sisters, who can afford to go on holiday, or her friend Rita, who has a house nicer than hers: “She looks around. The fire, the flat-screen telly, the three-in-one. Rita isn’t boasting, or she doesn’t know she is. She’s just content – Paula thinks. And that’s fine. Good luck to her. She begrudges Rita nothing” (134).

Paula is also capable of feeling sympathy for those people others tend to despise, like the immigrants from Nigeria or Romania, who have come looking for a better life.⁹ She knows that many of them are getting the jobs people like Paula used to have, but there is no resentment in her: “If she stops working, she never worked. She’s never been happy with it, but it’s all there ever was. An all there is. If she doesn’t do it, other people will. She knows, she sees them. It’s why they’re here. Go back to your own fuckin’ country. That’s not her; that’s not Paula. There’s plenty of work” (246). She has no racist feelings and she wishes those from other countries whom she meets the best of luck, like the Nigerian girl on the check-out at the supermarket who has got the job Paula asked for some time ago. She even feels sorry for the Nigerian men who do the cleaning work and try to hide it from others because they feel ashamed: “God love them. Handsome lads. They deserve better” (39).

Because Paula’s humour is mingled with tolerance, compassion, humility, and sympathy, the best moments of her life are those in which she can share her laughter with those who are dear to her, thus proving the cohesive power of laughter pointed out by Hyers, Morreall and Gutwirth. She is aware of the fact that laughter brings her closer to those she loves. One of the happiest moments of her life is when she laughs with her children, since their relationship is always so difficult, and for a few moments all barriers that separate them seem to be down: “Paula laughs. They’re all laughing, all able to look at one another. It’s mad. It’s the best moment of her life. It probably

9. Devlin believes that the fact that Paula is not overwhelmed by the task of integration “is a tribute to her capacity to engage with the modern world” (2006: 2).

is. She looks at Jack and Leanne, still laughing. She can wipe her eyes. It's all fuckin' mad" (185). Laughter also flourishes when Paula is with her sisters Carmel and Denise, creating a unique bond with them. It is interesting to point out that this communion of laughter usually takes place when the three sisters are dealing with problems that deeply affect them, like Carmel having cancer or Denise breaking up with her lover, a married man. Laughter not only brings the three sisters closer, but allows them to transcend their suffering. And it is precisely Carmel, whom Paula refers to as the joker, who always introduces the element of humour when they are together. Carmel refuses to be destroyed by the problems that oppress her, including her breast cancer, and constantly uses humour to transcend them. She always makes jokes about her illness in order to be able to cope with it:

She thinks of Carmel being cut. It's hard to imagine, Carmel asleep, letting it happen. But it's going to happen.

I might bring me own knife, Carmel said, when they were talking, the last time, three nights ago. – It's a very good one.

Stop, said Denise

It is, said Carmel. – You should see what it does to the chicken (234).

Carmel knows that her illness will not vanish, but that she has to accept it and live with it. She prefers not to fall into despair but to use humour to get some distance from her cancer. She does not want to become melodramatic or sentimental about her physical condition, but to try to rekindle hope by perceiving the comic side of her situation. Carmel's avoidance of melodrama becomes obvious during a conversation with Paula:

“Sorry, Paula. You become a bit full of yourself when you're dying. They should cry. But they don't. Carmel nods at the stereo” (241).

As we saw in the theoretical part of this essay, comedy is not necessarily tied to a happy ending. What defines a comic text is not the way it presents and solves the problems, but the way in which it approaches them or, in other words, the way life is perceived. Comedy does not ignore pain or puts an end to all difficulties, but renews and celebrates life. Comedy shows how the human being is capable of adjusting to any circumstances. It is this capacity for transcendence that liberates us and allows us to be grateful for the gift of life in spite of all the problems we face everyday. At the end of *Paula Spencer* nothing extraordinary takes place. Paula's life goes on as usual: she cleans houses, has to fight hard to control her urge for a drink, and her relationship with her children has not changed. But Paula does not expect any marvels because she knows very well that the real miracle of her life is her capacity to enjoy the here and now in spite of the pain and disappointment that define her existence. She knows that the happily-ever-after is merely a fiction: “She keeps falling for it. The happy ending, the Hollywood bit. But this man will never say I love you. Not to Paula. She'll never be able to say it to him. It'll always hang there. She'll always be the beggar” (228-9). Only her acceptance of the present moment and its circumstances will allow her to survive and look forward to the future. In fact, the end of the novel could not be more promising, with Paula celebrating the gift of life: “It's her birthday. She's forty-nine. She bought a cake earlier. It's in the fridge. They'll have it when she gets home” (277).

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