

The Incongruous Self: Facing the Fallibility

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In contrast to humor derived from incongruity between the reader's own expectations and perceptions in Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Agent," post-World War I literature is characterized by a internal incongruity wrought by the characters' own subjectivity. As the period following World War I fostered internal skepticism through recognition of one's fallibility and faulty perspective, the characters' discovery of their own incongruity fuels the transition from external to internal subjectivity in Kingsley Amis' "Lucky Jim" and Graham Greene's "Heart of the Matter." However, the contradiction manifests itself differently in each – via humor in "Lucky Jim" and tragedy in "The Heart of the Matter." More specifically, Lucky Jim's Dixon represents the clash with absurdity through comical outward expression, while Scobie in The Heart of the Matter commits suicide in the face of his own contradiction.

Everyday social interactions generally dismiss nose-blowing as mere banality; in the event of an urgent need for tissue whilst in the company of others, a murmured "excuse me" will generally suffice to gloss over the rather gross interruption. In Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, the protagonist, Dixon, however, transforms this mundane occurrence into a case of "familiar miraculously-sustained blares" erupting from a "large, open-pored tetrahedron" – and the reader sneaks an incredulous chuckle (Amis 86). We as readers are surprised at such a grandiose depiction of an everyday bodily function. Indeed, the discrepancy between how something should be expressed and how it actually is expressed undergirds the humor in *Lucky Jim*.

Similar contradictions fill the pages of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, but the humor in this late 19th century novel is markedly different. While an incongruity between reality and expectation certainly plays a fundamental role in *The Secret Agent*, literature following the mid-twentieth century provokes laughter by invoking a darker contrast: the difference between what we hope to see in ourselves, and the reality within. In contrast to humor from an incongruity between the novel's reality and the reader's expectation in *The Secret Agent*, both *Lucky Jim* and Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* depict characters who face the contradiction within themselves as part of the inward turning of the self so characteristic of post-World War I literature. As the period following World War I fostered internal skepticism through recognition of one's fallibility and faulty perspective, the characters' discovery of their own incongruity fuels the transition from external to internal subjectivity in both novels. However, the contradiction manifests itself differently

in each – via humor in *Lucky Jim* and tragedy in *The Heart of the Matter*. More specifically, Dixon in *Lucky Jim* represents the clash with absurdity through comical outward expression, while Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* commits suicide in the face of his own contradiction.

As incongruity theorists describe humor as the result of contact with contradiction, *The Secret Agent* produces a comical effect by defying the readers' expectation of a detective novel (Kierkegaard 83). Arthur Schopenhauer writes that "[t]he cause of laughter is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (Schopenhauer 52). *The Secret Agent's* utter lack of resemblance to a traditional detective novel creates comedy. Throughout the novel purported to be thrilling, we see very little action. The traditional plot structure is warped: we learn of the explosion indirectly in the middle of the novel, while heavy foreshadowing of Stevie as the victim dulls the ultimate "shock effect." As Anthony Giddens describes modernity as the replacement of a traditional conception of time as intrinsically linked to space with the "universalization of time," the unconventional time structure created by an almost inverted plot produces a comic effect by playing into the irony inherent in modernity: climactic events no longer take precedence via linear progression and instead are represented as underwhelming and tangential. Furthermore, Verloc himself plays with our preconceived notions of a "secret agent." His meeting with Vladimir illuminates his shortcomings as a detective, as Vladimir repeatedly marks upon

his “corpulen[ce]” and his marriage – two characteristics which clash with both the reader’s conception of a spy as an emblem of the incognito and that of an anarchist as a rebel in defiance of traditional institutions (Conrad 14). If a detective novel captures the reader using stealth and thrill, *The Secret Agent* flips the reader’s concept of the detective novel by defining itself in relation to the traditional “other” – an ironic effect that lends itself to humor.

While the reader’s subjectivity produces an incongruity-based humor in *The Secret Agent* through a perceived discrepancy in expectation and reality of the detective novel, the incongruity of post-World War I literature lies in its characters’ own perception of self-contradiction. Paul Fussell argues that World War I – the Great War – marked the turning point in modern culture and literature as the overwhelming irony of the war itself besieged the assurance that characterized British identity, fostering disillusionment with prior norms. Indeed, he points to the nature of war itself as intrinsically ironic because war will always promise a benefit surpassing its cost but, in the face of the havoc wrought by war, fall short of purported goals (Fussell 7). He argues that the World Wars took this irony to an unprecedented scale: “In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot,” while World War II proved rife with disappointing contradiction, such as its locking in Poland’s “bondage and humiliation” in its offer of freedom and air bombings which fueled enemy morale instead of shortening the carnage (7-8). Essentially, the World Wars embodied disillusionment on an international, national, and individual scale.

Furthermore, the World Wars flew in the face of the rhetoric of “progress” that had typified the early twentieth century. As modernity promised the dawn of a new and better age, the disappointment wrought by World War I forced British culture to re-examine this naïve optimism – a re-examination that manifests itself in the inward turning and discovery of incongruity in *Lucky Jim* and *The Heart of the Matter*. Not only did the wars produce mass atrocity, but they also produced mass atrocity in the midst of extreme optimism for the future – an optimism that only intensified the pessimism that would follow (8). This disillusionment crept into the very fabric of language, replacing “high diction” with the underwhelming realism we find in Amis and Greene’s works, as Fussell asserts that the Great War was the first breach of the masses from static and uniform values (21-22). Instead of agreed-upon respect for abstracts like “Glory” and “Honor,” the ab-

surdity of World War I fractured a uniform belief in any dignity and meaning in war. In contrast to the aforementioned optimism of the times, WWI simply did not fit into the linear conception of time, duty, and progress (Fussell 21).

This milieu of skepticism combined with what Giddens describes as reflexivity provoked an inward turning as distrust in abstract values forced inward examination – and the investigators struggled to determine if they liked what they saw (36). According to Giddens, modernity is characterized by an obsession with improvement as a constant influx of information forces self-re-evaluation – and each time incoming knowledge induces a return to examination of the self and of one’s own society, the self and society changes (38). Under constant scrutiny, reflexivity precludes certainty for the modern self – everything can be revised. Even science itself – the idol of the age – is simply supported, not proven (Giddens 39). Thus, incongruity between perceived ideals and the starkly contrasting realities presented by mass violence incurred in the World Wars force an inward turning and a definition by self-abjection that characterize post-WWI literature.

Such painful contradiction complements George Santayana’s assessment of incongruity theory, in which an encounter with absurdity and futility produces humor (92-93). In *Lucky Jim*, this resignation to absurdity characteristic of the post-World War II era manifests itself in Dixon’s comical outward expressions; essentially, internal incongruity provokes external incongruity. Dixon’s first “face,” however, does not have the opportunity to leave his own imagination. When we are first introduced to both Dixon and Welch – certainly an incongruous relationship at best – Dixon “trie[s] to flail his features into some sort of response to humour” (Amis 2). This halfhearted attempt, however, does match what he is really thinking: “Mentally, however, he was making a different face and promising himself he’d make it actually when alone. He’d draw his lower lip in under his top teeth and by degrees retract his chin as far as possible, all this while dilating his eyes and nostrils. By these means he would, he was confident, cause a deep dangerous flush to suffuse his face” (2). Our first experience with Dixon’s sardonic faces, then, remains within the realm of imagination, as he must actively create both an external and internal self – neither his imagined nor outward expression is done without conscious effort. This instance points toward Dixon’s conscious subjectivity and awareness of the discrepancy between the outward and inward as well as the difference between how he *should* express and how he would *like* to

express himself.

Incongruity and futility take multiple forms here. Dixon goes on to speculate upon Welch's qualifications as a History professor – as fitting with his overall disillusionment with the purpose of academia at large – “even at a place like this,” in reference to his own place of employment as well (2). He even wishes that they were actually discussing history and mocks the idea that an onlooker could assume some degree of “intellectual” activity. Instead, he must make a conscious effort to appear engaged and entertained by Welch. Ironically, his mere attempt to appear entertained – via his “flail[ed] ... features” – itself becomes comical in its very absurdity. This introspective and disingenuous display typifies the nature of reflexivity – social actions become calculated, and the very need for their calculation results from a questioning of authority and the purpose of his existence in terms of his career. Furthermore, from a reader's standpoint, the very process of deducing exactly how this face will physically appear requires some degree of imitation – literally bringing the face to life outside of Dixon's imagination. Ultimately, Dixon's cynicism toward Welch and academia as a whole contradicts his position as a professor himself – Dixon mocks the system of which he is a part.

Dixon's “Chinese mandarin's face” is the first to make a physical appearance and once again emphasizes Dixon's cynicism surrounding his own reality. In response to the tone in which Christine agrees that “[i]t might be a good idea” for Dixon to apologize to Mr. Welch, Dixon turns around to “make his Chinese mandarin's face, hunching his shoulders a little” (Amis 68). Dixon's balking at Christine's perceived impudence derives from his complete disregard for Christine and Bertrand, particularly as he has just recollected evidence of Bertrand's affair with Carol Goldsmith (67). He mocks Bertrand as a ridiculous character; thus, criticism from his girlfriend must equally be bogus. Yet her criticism is not without merit – he had indeed rudely left the home of both his boss and host to imbibe at a pub, only to burn a hole in his hosts' bedclothes upon his return (67-68). The idea that Christine – girlfriend of the mildly fantastic son of his laughable employer – could possibly provide a legitimate critique of Dixon's behavior is simply contemptible, and the reader views the expression of this incredulity as humorous.

Likewise, the title “Chinese mandarin” itself is incongruous with the situation. Dixon attempts to imitate an official of the Chinese empire in a British kitchen in the midst of decolonization (Amis 68). By invoking the former might of the “Orient” to mock an impertinent

comment, Dixon jeers at the now-humbled position of his formerly imperial nation. Disillusionment on the grand scale of the World Wars permeates Dixon's cynicism toward personal relationships, his own employment, and his country. As Great Britain faces an identity crisis following World War II, Dixon's own face expresses the deep distrust of the self, provoked by the legitimacy of Christine's – at that point, his perceived inferior's - comment.

While Dixon's feelings toward Christine do develop, he continues to respond to absurdity with comedy. His “lemon-sucking face” makes its debut “in the darkness” of the taxi following Christine's naïve remark that “[h]aving a relationship with an artist's a very different kettle of fish to having a relationship with an ordinary man” (Amis 144). In line with the skepticism of his times, Dixon feels little reverence for the “special needs” of an artist – let alone Bertrand the artist. Scoffing at the “objectively nasty” idea that art could trump relational obligations – or anything really – Dixon challenges the elevation of “beauty” in a manner reflective of the disillusionment following World War I (144). Like history and academia, beauty and art no longer hold a place on the pedestal. After all, the “Glory” and “Honor” for which the Great War was fought has been dismantled, leaving only the bare bones of discontent (Fussell 21). Such an allusion to former notions of grandeur only reminds Dixon of his own role as a British citizen and member of the violent and fallible human race – a reminder tasting as sour as a lemon but comical in its absurdity.

As underwhelming as art, Dixon views the ridiculous trivialities of life with a “mandrill face.” Parting ways with Dixon, Welch struggles to pass through a revolving door: “Welch, his hair flapping, was straining like a packed-down rugby forward to push the revolving door in the wrong direction” (Amis 181-182). Dixon's dry amusement manifests itself in his “allowing his mandrill face full play,” suggesting that his face possesses independent agency (182). Using elevated language that depicts Welch as a “packed-down rugby forward” and then an “anchor in a losing tug-o'-war team,” Amis ironically romanticizes the mundane, which, in effect, only serves to emphasize the numb banality of the situation in the first place (182). Humor ensues. Besides one more example of Welch's general foolishness as a character and professor – and therefore also a reflection of the perceived pointlessness of academia itself – the instance ties into post-WWI modernity's abandonment of hope for progress. The very nature of a *revolving* door contradicts the notion of linear progression, and, to perpetuate the irony, Welch cannot even

rotate in the right direction and only corrects his error with a bump on the head. Dixon's mandrill face, then, is comical for more than simply its unexpected appearance in the text: by imitating a monkey and therefore "the primitive," Dixon points out the fallibility of the so-called "civilized." If "it [is] things like this that k[ee]p [Dixon] going," then Dixon derives his central motivation for life from his amusement by the cyclical idiocy of humanity (182). Having adapted to solely sardonic expressions in the face of absurdity, Dixon settles for his "Sex Life in Ancient Roman face" in his final victory over Bertrand (Amis 264). Concerned that he has limited himself only to "express[ions] of rage or loathing," Dixon cannot express happiness without imitating an adjective as opposed to a noun – an adjective referencing once again a fallen empire (264). Through the very fact that Dixon has only ever "made a face" at ludicrousness in the negative sense, we are reminded that the entire set of circumstances leading even to his success with Christine and his overall departure to London are due to the fact that he simply "ha[sn't] got the disqualifications" (247). As such, the fortuitous and unintentional cause for celebration is through no merit of Dixon himself. Dixon neither deserves nor does he not deserve this happy ending; the very surprising nature of Dixon's success contributes to his internal uncertainty and prevents him from adequate expression. Instead, his face must necessarily be incongruous with the situation. Like all his faces, the "Sex Life in Ancient Roman" face enters the scene completely unexpectedly, further perpetuating the absurd nature of the situation and Dixon's life as a whole. Throughout *Lucky Jim*, Dixon's varied faces represent his awareness of the discrepancy between himself and the way he "should be" and thus produce a comical effect.

While incongruity theory is indeed a persuasive explanation for humor, incongruities in and of themselves are not always funny, and those derived from self-contradiction upon inward turning also can manifest themselves in tragedy. Soren Kierkegaard's assertion that "the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction" encapsulates the difference between incongruity resulting from post-war modernity's reflexivity and that from skepticism in *Lucky Jim* and in *The Heart of the Matter* (Kierkegaard 83). In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie's confrontation with himself as an object – versus an agent – of pity and the consequent discovery of his own fallibility result not in humor but in tragic suicide.

Scobie founding his identity upon service to the needy paves the way for his harsh realization of the poverty within himself. His position as Deputy Commissioner

of Police epitomizes his self-concept as a servant-leader: "[A] hundred men serve under me: I am the responsible man. It is my job to look after the others. I am conditioned to serve" (207). Ironically, his perception of self-importance as derived from his contribution to others' well-being stems from being Deputy Commissioner – not even the actual Commissioner. As Scobie sees his value in being needed, he must dramatize his role as a police officer. Beyond simply his occupation, Scobie's emphasis on leadership blinds him to the reality that he is actually a subordinate and a substitute. This relationship between duty and power permeates every aspect of Scobie's character, as he uses others' neediness to elevate his sense of self-importance.

Such arrogance defines his skewed relationships. Scobie's obsession with responsibility to his family distinct from any genuine affection typifies his marriage, as he asserts that "[i]t ha[s] always been his responsibility to maintain happiness in those he loved. One was safe now, for ever, and the other was going to eat her lunch" (Greene 17). As the "safe" loved one is his deceased child, the implication that security is available only through death not only foreshadows Scobie's ultimate demise but also lends insight into the way in which Scobie views death as the realm beyond responsibility – the product of selflessness. Scobie's delineation of love as inextricable from duty – his "responsibility to maintain happiness" – coincides with Louise's constant accusation that he loves nobody but himself (16). Indeed, when Scobie no longer sees Louise as pitiable, he struggles to love her: "he couldn't tell her the entreaty that was on his lips: let me pity you again, be disappointed, unattractive, be a failure so that I can love you once more without this bitter gap between us" (237). Scobie is incapable of loving on equal ground – he must always be able to look down upon her suffering in order to maintain his position of superiority and, thus, responsibility.

Likewise, his affair with Helen is grounded in her neediness. Helen enters Scobie's life in a state of utter need: escaping death, losing her husband, and evading Bagster's unwanted advances – all the while clinging childlike to her stamp book. When Scobie questions his love for Helen, he ponders his honesty with himself and speculates when he first began lying: "Did my lies really start ... when I wrote that letter? Do I, in my heart of hearts, love either of them, or is it only that this automatic pity goes out to any human need – and makes it worse? Any victim demands allegiance" (Greene 190). Once again, Scobie views both his marriage and his affair not in

terms of love but of “allegiance,” implying almost a sense of martial duty. And a failed duty at that, as Louise and Helen prove to be “contradictory responsibilities” (149). Essentially, by defining his own worth in terms of others’ need, Scobie places himself upon a pedestal – constantly looking down on his victims without genuine love.

This warped view of love translates into Scobie’s conception of selflessness versus selfishness. Because he sees love as a selfless duty instead of something he himself needs as well, Scobie views leaving Helen completely as both the “good” and the selfish option. For Scobie, acting on love is damning; yet to serve truly, he must cast himself aside and thus perpetuate the affair (Greene 203-204). In praying, “O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them,” Scobie cannot reconcile service to God with his marriage and affair (209). This notion of damnation as an act of selflessness, however, conflicts with his eroding control over his victims’ wellbeing. Speaking with Helen, Scobie exclaims that he “can’t bear to see suffering, and I cause it all the time. I want to get out, get out” (216). In addition, he recognizes his failure as protector and bastion of service following Ali’s murder: “[Ali] died because [Scobie] existed” (232). From Louise and Helen to Ali, Scobie causes more pain than protection, and he struggles to face this incongruity between his constructed identity and reality. Likewise, his notion of selflessness versus goodness in light of his conception of God produces a contradiction in his entire moral system: if God mandates pitying others, yet to pity others he must commit adultery, then which is the “right” option? Scobie’s failure both as a servant to the needy and to God chips away at the edifice of his identity.

Alongside the illumination of his incapacity to live up to his purported source of self-worth, Scobie’s carefully construed pride collides with the creeping realization that he himself is in need of pity – a clash producing the internal incongruity ultimately manifesting itself in suicide. As he begins to question his capability as guardian and servant, Scobie does not recognize his reflection in the mirror. He is surprised at the “new unfamiliar look of pity” on the “unreliable face” of a “stranger” and speculates whether he is “really one of those whom people pity” (186). Scobie’s inability to recognize himself illustrates the extent to which his self-perception breaks from reality. As he distinguishes his own self-imposed identity from reality, he sees his own vulnerability at “the heart of the matter” (111). Scobie wonders “[if] one knew . . . the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?” (Greene

111). Ultimately, the “heart of the matter” – that Scobie’s loyalties are inherently contradictory and that his own pedestal is simply an illusion – conflicts with his self-perception. Such a “reality check” coincides with the inward turning of Great Britain following World War I as the once “bastion and benefactor of civilization” is found quite capable of atrocity and senselessness after all. Scobie’s recognition of his own fallibility produces an inescapable conflict – one which he faces using his conception of damnation as selfless. For Scobie, internal incongruity manifests itself in a tragic contradiction – leaving his purported loved ones via suicide is ultimately a continuation of his need to pity them. To save Louise and Helen, he victimizes both them and himself. Scobie ultimately cannot accept being worthy of pity, thus, he chooses a “selfless suicide.”

Departing from incongruity based upon the reader’s subjectivity in *The Secret Agent*, the post-World War I *The Heart of the Matter* and *Lucky Jim* represent a shift in perspective: the modern novel once depicted comparisons with an “other,” while the post-war period forced the modern novel to peek inward. And the inward proves troublesome. Mediated by humor and tragedy, incongruity reigns as preconceived notions of self-identity or hoped-for aspects of self-identity clash with the recognition of one’s own fallibility. In the midst of contradiction, the boundary between comedy and tragedy blurs, leaving behind only internal skepticism and a deep distrust of one’s own capacity as a subject.

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