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HUMOR, GENDER, AND SEX(UALITY) IN TEXT AND FILM: INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MEN FROM MARK TWAIN TO LORRIE MOORE

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This article compares *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* (Twain, 1904-1906), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold, 1957), and "You're Ugly, Too" (Moore, 2008) from the perspectives of humor, feminism, and queer theory. It examines how humor interacts with the changing representations of gender and sex(uality) at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the twentieth century; furthermore, it argues that humor is a valuable means of questioning binary patterns, which in this way may contribute to a life of equality-in-difference (my term). I also discuss certain types of comicality, e.g. sarcasm, the results of which can be detrimental or simply conformist. The article concludes that humor can help us to pull down hierarchies, find affinities, and build ethical relations among genders, sex(ualiti)es, and beyond.

KEY WORDS: humor, gender, Twain, Arnold, Moore.

Humor, género y sexo(ualidad) en la narrativa y el cine: increíbles hombres menguantes de Mark Twain a Lorrie Moore

Este artículo compara *Los diarios de Adán y Eva* (Twain, 1904–1906), *El increíble hombre menguante* (Arnold, 1957) y "También eres feo" (Moore, 2008) desde el humor, el feminismo y la teoría queer. Se examina cómo el humor interactúa con las representaciones cambiantes de género y sexo(ualidad) a principios, mediados y finales del siglo xx; se propone además que el humor es un medio valioso para cuestionar patrones binarios, pudiendo conducirnos a una vida de igualdad-en-la-diferencia (mi término). También se evalúan tipos de comicidad, por ejemplo, el sarcasmo, cuyos resultados pueden ser perjudiciales o simplemente conformistas. El artículo concluye que el humor puede ayudarnos a derribar jerarquías, encontrar afinidades y construir relaciones éticas entre géneros, sexo(ualidade)s, etc.

PALABRAS CLAVE: humor, género, Twain, Arnold, Moore.

Gender can be defined as a "culturally shaped group of attributes and behaviors given to the female or to the male" (Humm, 1999: 106), which are not (necessarily) equivalent to those of biological sex. Since (most) women's positions in patriarchy are unequal to those of (most) men, for many feminists the study of gender issues often involves fighting sexism. Conversely, French feminism tends to focus on sexual difference by celebrating women's different way(s) of relating to their bodies, to writing, etc. Decades of scholarly debate have not clarified whether female and male

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differences are ultimately biological or cultural. Even Judith Butler's hugely influential performance theory —"gender is […] constituted […] through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (1990: 191; emphasis in the original)— has been questioned by feminist phenomenologists who argue for the body's material and self-organizing qualities (Braidotti, 2002). With regard to my position in this debate, I believe that what actually matters is not the origin of differences but how we deal with them; thus, instead of turning differences into inequalities, we should respect and indeed celebrate their multiplicity. In addition, these categories need to be interpreted in a context that also embraces ethnicity, social class, etc., which implies a proliferation of genders, sexes, and sexualities.

In the cases to be studied here, Mark Twain proposes that women are not only different from men, but also superior to them; for Jack Arnold, men's alleged superiority is nothing but a mirage, although one which convinces many women to subjugate themselves; meanwhile, Lorrie Moore's protagonist is an intellectual woman who is no longer willing to occupy a subordinate position. All three authors posit two genders, sexes, and sexualities, something which we might interrogate in light of the possibilities that actually exist —transgender, bisexual, etc.—;[1] however, due to the humor in their works, masculinity and femininity are mocked to the point of overthrowing gender stereotypes. Blurring the borders between categories is one of the goals of feminist (Heilbrun, 1982), gender (Scott, 2010), and queer theorists (Hall and Jagose, 2013), whose critical thought challenges, and may alter, the status quo. According to Butler, neither sex(uality) nor gender are (completely) natural, and it is thus possible for a person to adopt different sexes, sexualities, and genders throughout their lives. As we will see, in Twain, Moore, and Arnold, masculinity and femininity —and even sexuality in the case of Moore— are offered to the reader as having fluid possibilities.

Indeed, this fluidity is encouraged by humor, whose very origins can be found in the Latin *umor* or "body fluid" ("Humor"). Humor affords us a different perspective, one which is usually broader, leading us to live differently. For Mikhail Bakhtin, whose dialogical theories underpin the current article, laughter opens the path to carnival, a popular festival which emerged as a form of symbolic rebellion against the domineering control of the Church. During medieval carnivals, a peasant could become a prince, provoking a "temporary suspension […] of [the] hierarchical rank

[1] Theories of sexuality that go beyond heteronormativity are quite recent; among them, queer theory stands out in the sense that it proposes that there is no norm but rather multiple variants, implying that all of us are deviants, that is, queer (Hall and Jagose, 2013). Taking into account the historical contexts of the authors discussed here, one does not expect Twain (1835-1910) or Arnold (1916-1992) to question sexual binarism; in contrast, Moore (1957-) does attempt to go beyond it, as I will show in the following pages.

[that] created […] a special type of communication impossible in everyday life" (Bakhtin, 2000: 10). The possibility of (ex)changing identities is anti-essentialist, giving us the hope that we can shift the order of the world albeit temporarily. In fact, the carnivalesque reversal of categories —as in the female/male binary opposition found in Moore, Arnold, and Twain— is only the first of many steps; next, we need to acknowledge people's differences, and confer equal status on all of them, so that we can begin to enjoy a life forged in dialogical ethics (Bakhtin, 2000), or to live in a world of equality-in-difference (my term). In addition to carnival, humor can adopt other forms, including irony, parody, joke, and satire.[2]

Irony, or saying the opposite of what one means, can equally destabilize order (Hutcheon, 1994). Therefore, it is a very useful strategy for problematizing authority and attacking despotic attitudes: Arnold's shrinking man seems ridiculous when he shouts orders at his wife from the balcony of a dollhouse. In the case of parody, through both imitating and laughing at something, it criticizes the status quo and offers us a new understanding of reality (Holoch, 2012). Through his depiction of Adam and Eve, Twain parodies the established genders, making us lose faith in a stable gender essence. The *Diaries* are also full of jokes, another form of humor considered to be an effective way of escaping social regulations (Freud, 2003), which Twain uses to soften the message of his proposal on gender equality. Satires have been called "demolition projects" (Connery and Combe, 1995: 1), which makes them perfect to interrogate hegemonic structures such as patriarchy. Satire may utilize sarcasm, that is, "sharp, bitter, or cutting expression[s]" ("Satire"), which, as we will see, could be anti-dialogical. Moore uses satire to condemn not only men's but also women's patriarchal attitudes. Her protagonist has a sarcastic-cynical stance, a dangerous liaison which proves that certain types of humor can be utterly noxious.

The following pages analyze the uses of humor and the representations of gender and sex(uality) in three works produced at different moments of the twentieth century: *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* (Twain, 1904–1906), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold, 1957), and "You're Ugly, Too" (Moore, 2008).[3] The diaries, the film, and the short story allow us to examine changes in cultural practices shaped by different conceptions of gender, sex(uality), and feminism. Finally, I will also show that humor is a serious matter, the deeply subversive character of which liberates us from the belief in a single vision of the world by embracing the true plurality of genders, sex(ualities), and beyond.

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[2] Due to limitations of space, I cannot include a theoretical review of humor but must focus on the manifestations of comicality that are most relevant to my study. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that humor genres have managed to adapt to social-cultural changes throughout history (Attardo, 2014).

[3] Hereafter, these titles are abbreviated as *Diaries*, *ISM*, and "Ugly", respectively.

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Humor, gender, and sex(uality) in Twain, Arnold, and Moore

It is not unreasonable to claim that Mark Twain was a feminist, given his creation of female and male characters that "resist, indeed disrupt, gendered expectations" (Morris, 2007: 1). Moreover, Twain was a supporter of female suffrage at the turn of the nineteenth century; in a well-known speech he argued that if women had the right to vote, they would use it to ameliorate "the state of things" (Twain, 2006: n.p.), illustrating the high esteem in which he held them. Yet even such praise can itself be critiqued, in the sense that any consideration of females as superior to males itself relies on a gender hierarchy. Nonetheless, I do not consider that his *Diaries* merely reproduce gender stereotypes (Ayuningtyas, 2011); neither would I support the observation that Twain's feminism in this work is essentialist (Krastins, 2017), apart from one feature, which I will turn to later.

The humorous resource most commonly used in Twain's *Diaries* is parody, including both a parody of the diary genre itself and of its supposed authors: the biblical Adam and Eve. Bakhtin discusses the *parodia sacra* of the Middle Ages that parodied "sacred texts and rites" (1984: 77), a literary genre which Twain's *Diaries* could be continuing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), to parody something or someone implies "imitating [them] […] for comic effect" ("Parody"), which is of course the reason why the *Diaries* reproduce gender stereotypes, although they also go beyond this. That is, the text both replicates and challenges gender conventions in order to laugh at them, which entails a feminist purpose to subvert the world order. The *OED* notes that a parody is "a poor or feeble imitation of something; a travesty;" interestingly, Butler argues that in "imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (1990: 137). Also of interest is that Twain's *Diaries* have been adapted and staged as a play (Birney, 1989), further emphasizing their parody of gender —e.g. Adam and Eve are puzzled by each other's gender features— as well as gender as parody —e.g. acting on stage is necessarily a performance.

A crucial feminist feature of the *Diaries* is that Eve, unlike her biblical namesake, is given a voice to speak by and for herself, a decision that cannot be deemed an act of ventriloquism considering the author's feminist ideology. In the Bible, it is Adam who is given the privilege of naming the creatures of the world; Twain inverts the situation by conferring this role on Eve, because Adam "has no gift in this line" (Twain, 2015: Loc. 351). Thus, although Adam calls their home "GARDEN OF EDEN" (Loc. 113), he eventually accepts the name chosen by her, "NIAGARA FALLS PARK" (Loc. 118), a term that, apart from being funny, renders the well-known biblical couple as ordinary North Americans. By allowing Eve to name the things around her, the author confers on women the power to speak, write, and, by extension, occupy positions of power.

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Eve's eloquence is evident when she warns Adam that she is "not an It" but a "She" and that her name is "Eve" (Twain, 2015: Loc. 128). This comment is more important than it might appear: self-definition is vital for women as a means of escaping the heterodesignation they have experienced throughout history (Beauvoir, 1986); in addition, Eve challenges the ancient patriarchal belief that women are closer to the animal realm than to the human one (Puleo, 1993). Another patriarchal axiom holds that "[w]omen are […] uncreative in generating humor […] [as well as] incompetent tellers of jokes and stories" (Crawford, 1992: 29); moreover, "[w]omen comics, no matter what they look like, have been located in opposition to 'pretty'" (Mizejewski, 2014: 5). Contrary to these assumptions, Twain's Eve is creative, funny, and even beautiful. As an example, her first description of her companion is both a simile and a joke: "It tapers like a carrot. It must be a man" (Twain, 2015: Loc. 323). Do men and carrots taper in a similar way, being wide at the top and narrow at the bottom? Does the reference indicate that Adam's hair is red? Is it a metaphor for the penis? Whatever the case, the incongruity of the comparison makes the reader laugh.

On the one hand, Twain places women above men: apart from being a more interesting character, Eve is more curious, generous, and hardworking. Despite her atypical portrait, the readers of the *Diaries* in the early 1900s —when patriarchal attitudes were widespread— would probably have been more likely to accept the author's ideas given that they are conveyed using humor. Although Adam is at first unenthusiastic, lazy, and "not bright" (Loc. 374), he becomes a very positive character after spending his life with Eve. This indicates that the book's ultimate aim is to portray the female and male genders as equal in value, despite their similarities —e.g. both Adam and Eve are capable of using humor— and differences —though many of these reflect gender stereotypes. Adam's diary entries tend to be practical —"Cloudy to-day, wind in the east, think we shall have rain" (Loc. 99)— while Eve's entries can be both rational —"I am an experiment" (Loc. 291)— and sentimental —"I do love moons, they are so pretty and so romantic" (Loc. 304). Besides, Eve thinks that she is "weak" and Adam is "strong" (Loc. 548) and confesses she "cannot learn to throw straight" (Loc. 369); as for Adam, he likes neither company nor talking, is egocentric, and only learns to use the word "we" thanks to Eve (Loc. 99). This kind of gender representation helped Twain to be understood and respected by his contemporaries; nevertheless, it serves to reinforce binarism and is not desirable in the search for an equality-in-difference world, whose understanding of difference welcomes multiplicity and rejects inequality while striving for true democracy.

On the other hand, the *Diaries* go further than simply effecting a temporary subversion of the hierarchy since, by inviting a carnivalesque exchange of gender roles and characteristics, the reader can perceive them as social constructions. Eve is a *mulier faber* (i.e. a woman maker): she discovers fire; she observes, studies, and tames the animals; she is very proactive and decides to eat the forbidden fruit to gain

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"a fine and noble education" (Loc. 168), a rebellious act that is not punished by the author. As I have already noted, the initially-egocentric Adam transforms into a sympathetic and sensitive man towards the end. The depiction of the couple thus illustrates how we can all behave outside the norms prescribed for our genders, although Eve is more gender-flexible than Adam —e.g. he is unable to look after children.

To return to the biblical apple, Adam's comment about it is humorous: he "was obliged to eat" it "against [his] principles" because he "was hungry" and "principles have no real force except when one is well fed" (Loc. 177). His words aptly point out the materiality of the body, the same issue which materialist philosophers stress must be taken into account when theorizing about identity (from Merleau-Ponty, 1945 to Grosz, 2004). Furthermore, Twain defies the Holy Scripture by giving preeminence to the couple over God, and to the material over the moral. What the author does not call into question is the erotic relation between the two, thus naturalizing heterosexuality. Another problematic idea of the *Diaries* from this perspective revolves around women's supposedly limitless altruism. Twain's praise of the female, especially of her capacity for absolute self-sacrifice, is hardly in keeping with a feminist quest for equality-in-difference, i.e. the realm of (feminist) ethics. Such praise, which in my view is particularly uncomfortable, indeed dangerous, finds expression in the following entry written by Eve: "The Garden is lost but I have found HIM […]. [Adam] is good, and I love him for that, but I could love him without it. If he should beat me and abuse me, I should go on loving him […]. It is a matter of [my] sex […]. I would work for him, and slave over him" (Twain, 2015: Loc. 518). Arguing that women are essentially masochistic or even selfless is unacceptable from a feminist position, since such ideas could be utilized to normalize violence against women; therefore, we might argue that, while employing humor, Twain is being critical of and exposing the reader to her or his own compliance with gender violence, which was widely accepted in the early twentieth century.

Fortunately for Eve, Adam gradually abandons his patriarchal attitudes because of love. We can appreciate this change by looking at his diary entries, from the earliest one, "This new creature with the long hair [Eve] is a good deal in the way" (Loc. 100), to the epitaph he writes for her, "Wheresoever she was, THERE was Eden" (Loc. 554). As for Eve, in the above quotation ("The Garden is lost but I have found HIM") the capitals used on "HIM" should not be interpreted as a reference to God but to Adam. Preferring human love to that of God, Twain is proposing worldly love as our ultimate savior. In fact, after the Fall, Adam and Eve are redeemed in the eyes of the reader —since God is not even mentioned— because of their mutual love, a very brave message at the time. Two of the main topics in the *Diaries*, heterosexual eroticism and the dwindling of the male ego, are also developed in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*.

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The humorous elements of Jack Arnold's 1957 *The Incredible Shrinking Man* seem more obvious to a modern viewer, who may laugh at its old-fashioned optical effects; nonetheless, despite its classification as a horror science-fiction film, it must be underlined that its comicality was already appreciated in its own time ("Rare", 2017). This is perhaps not surprising when we consider that the hero becomes as small as a dwarf, a character that has traditionally belonged to the "culture of folk carnival humor" (Bakhtin, 1984: 4).[4] Thanks to the audiovisual format, humor manifests itself in the tone and gestures of characters, in the shots, and in the aforementioned optical effects, as well as in the dialogues and voiceovers. Filmed just before the beginning of second-wave feminism, *ISM* subtly portrays an old patriarchal fear: if women gain power, men will decline and dwindle. Female power is already suggested as the movie starts, when a thick, sticky, and possibly female mist surrounds Scott Carey (Grant Williams), the same mist which is seen in the opening credits. As Elizabeth Grosz argues: "the female body has been constructed […] as viscosity […] lacking not […] the phallus but self-containment […] like […] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order", including the gender system (2004: 203). After being contaminated by this almost Groszian cloud, which happens to be radioactive, Scott is accidentally sprayed with insecticide by a truck. Doctors later tell him that the combination of the two substances is what has caused him to shrink.

When we first encounter the protagonists, Mr. and Mrs. Carey are sunbathing on a boat. Scott feels thirsty and asks Louise (Randy Stuart) to fetch him a beer. She is reluctant to do so and confronts him: "Why don't you get it? […] Well, so am I [on vacation], my friend […] I am not gonna get you that beer" (Arnold, 1957: 01:39). Her attitude illustrates how some 1950s women may not have been such obedient spouses as Twain's Eve, thus posing a threat to the gender system —let us not forget that many women joined the workforce during World War ii, although they were made to return home afterwards. Scott makes a deal with his wife by promising to "get the dinner" (02:14) and, when she goes to fetch the beer, he blurts out, "To the galley, wench" (02:19), setting the gender hierarchy back on its patriarchal footing. It is when Scott is left alone on the deck that the (mentioned female) mist soaks his body with a glistening slime. From here we can argue that Mr. Carey is punished for forcing his wife to do the kind of tasks that he considers inferior or feminine, and thus we can sense a possible feminist ideology underlying the film. *ISM* also includes clear preoccupations with sexuality. For example, when the protagonist starts to shrink, the Careys go to see a doctor; when they go back to their car following the visit, Scott asks Louise to reflect on their marriage given his new situation: although she promises him

[4] The dwarf is a key character in the satirical tradition (e.g. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*); thus, Arnold's dwarf is also satirized.

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all her love and support, his wedding ring slips from his finger symbolizing a "castration anxiety" (Grant, n.d.) that reappears throughout the film.

In a later scene, Mr. Carey's size has diminished considerably. We find out that he now lives in a dollhouse and makes his own sandals, both of these tasks serving to undo his gender (Butler, 2004) by feminizing it. When Mrs. Carey comes down the stairs to go shopping, he reprimands her for the noise of her footsteps; he then questions her angrily about whether she is going out and, if so, where, and asks her to come straight back. From the dollhouse balcony, his high-pitched voice and tiny gestures are humorous, more so because he is shouting at an apparently gigantic woman. However, the expected carnivalesque reversal of gender roles does not occur: a crouching Louise excuses herself, answers his questions, and agrees to follow his orders. On the one hand, the scene reaffirms the husband/wife hierarchy, as Louise has abandoned the argumentative attitude that she had at the beginning of the film; on the other hand (although ironically), the moment could be seen as pro-feminist, suggesting that, even if women gained power over men, they would not use it against them.

Scott's world dramatically changes when he falls into the cellar and everybody believes he is dead. There he realizes, "I had to reach Louise to survive" (Arnold, 1957: 36:43), which implies a subversive exchange of genders: she appears as the hero(ine) and he as the one in distress. As he keeps shrinking, he improvises a feminine robe for himself, which we might understand as a drag act. Since the basement was used by Louise to sew her dresses, in order to survive Scott cannot but take advantage of her sewing tools, which are traditionally linked to the female sphere.[5] After turning two pins into a sword and a hook, he thinks: "With these bits of metal I was a man again" (1:06:13), which is a deeply ironic moment. The need for an external element to compensate for his lack of a phallus illustrates the castration anxiety mentioned above; furthermore, identifying weapons with masculinity incurs the stereotype of the aggressive male that must be abandoned in order to be both fair to men and train all of us in (feminist) ethics. That is, a society based on equality-in-difference would renounce binary models of masculinity and femininity, while fostering the dialogue between categories.

The movie's climatic moments, which also serve to depict the castration of Mr. Carey, happen when he escapes from the cat and fights with a spider. Although the Careys' feline is male, "[i]n the human mind, cats frequently have a feminine image"

[5] From a feminist stance, it would have been better that Scott had taken the sewing tools much earlier to share the domestic chores with Louise. In 1963, Betty Friedan reported that American housewives were suffering from psycho-emotional problems due to their confinement at home. From my point of view, the separation of the (public/private) spheres, which remains an unsolved issue, is one of the principal reasons for the persistence of patriarchy.

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(Lawrence, 2003: 623), usually associated to their beauty and delicacy; in this case, since the cat is mightier than the man, both the male/female and the human/animal hierarchies are reversed. Nevertheless, and despite the close shots of its jaws, the cat looks more like a big teddy bear than a fierce animal, with the resulting comic effect. The hero's battle with a spider contains even clearer marks of gender and sexuality. Spiders are attributed feminine qualities, in part because they weave (like Mrs. Carey); in classical mythology, the spider has a precedent in Arachne, a very talented mortal who challenged the goddess Athena to a weaving contest: when Athena saw that her own weaving was less beautiful than that of Arachne, she became enraged and turned the latter into a spider. From a feminist perspective, Arachne might stand for a feminist woman (such as the early Louise) who strives for equality-in-difference.[6] Furthermore, the spider's web is also interesting as its spiraling design challenges the West's understanding of progress as linear, that leads to binarism, a mode of thought which Scott will come to reject but only at the very end. In this sense, the protagonist's killing of the spider in *ISM* could be read symbolically as an attempt to eradicate feminism.

It must be added that Scott's struggles with animals begin after his wife leaves him on his own in the house. Since he is now so small and the couple has no children, patriarchy dictates that Louise should have developed some maternal feelings for him and a desire to protect him. In her Kristevan discussion of the film, Barbara Creed links "the monstrous-feminine in the horror film" (1996: 38), the maternal, and the Kristevan abject to explain the patriarchal attempt at pushing women into the category of the other, the non-human. Expanding on Creed's argument, I would suggest that if the spider stands for Mrs. Carey, killing it could be a metaphor for punishing Louise for being a bad mother. As happened with the cat, the spider's short, fat, and clumsy appearance does not provoke fear in today's audience, but rather laughter or a smile. Despite this, the close-up of her jaws, like a kind of *vagina dentata*, seems to be intended to guarantee her phallicity and power. Creed goes further in identifying the spider of *ISM* with the "archaic mother" (57), which "allows for a notion of the feminine that does not depend for its definition on a concept of the masculine […] [thus] signif[ying] woman as sexual difference" (58). I would further contend that, were this treatment of the feminine to be put into practice, we would live in the realm of equality-in-difference, which would make (feminist) ethics possible. Instead, Scott grips a pin like a toreador to penetrate her body and kill her, a deed symbolic of heterosexual intercourse with a fatal outcome for the spider. The

[6] Besides those between women and men, there are "differences" among women that still need to be deemed as such; apart from that, Arachne could be denouncing the inequalities of social class and prestige that also exist between the women working in the political (Athena) and the domestic realms (herself) —another pending task for today's feminism.

sexual and gender hierarchies are therefore inverted again, with the added exclusion of the female, which supposes an ethical regression.

Curiously enough, after killing the spider, the main character changes his way of thinking about the world and its creatures. This epistemological transformation, which only happens after beating the spider —in this case, the female— is symptomatic of the late 1950s male fear of feminism mentioned above. As for Scott's final revelation, the voiceover says: "What was I? Still a human being? Or was I the man of the future? […] That existence begins and ends is man's conception, not nature's. […] [S]maller than the smallest, I meant something, too. To God, there is no zero. I still exist!" (Arnold, 1957: 1:15:30). First, since "man" and "human being" are used as synonyms, we might interpret the passage as urging the humans "of the future" to renounce all privileges. Second, in "nature's" and "God's" conceptions of life there are no radical distinctions (woman-man, animal-human, disabled-abled, of color-white) because the borders between categories blur, *à la* queer theory. The call for a posthuman existence charged with spirituality has been applauded by most film scholars as the ultimate purpose of *ISM*. However, from a feminist perspective, we might recall that this message is voiced by a male after —and only after— eradicating the female; furthermore, from a Bakhtinian-dialogical stance, the ethical message conveyed midway through the film is more palatable: if men do not accept feminism, they will be as laughable as the tiny Scott. Despite all this, the female continues to be born, in both life and fiction, and one such case is the heroine of Lorrie Moore's "You're Ugly, Too".

In its examination of American society through the portrayal of specific individuals, "Ugly" oozes with irony and satire, the favorite forms of humor of postmodern authors (Coletta, 2009). In addition, readers are sunk into a chaotic universe through the use of free indirect style, stream of consciousness, and conversation. The heroine, college professor Zoë Hendricks, can be as humorous as the Eve of the *Diaries*; she is also unwilling to subjugate herself to the male, like Louise in the early part of *ISM*. Regarding comicality, it has been noted that Moore's story "thematizes and questions its own dark comedy" (Chodat, 2006, 43); I would like to extend upon this interpretation to argue that what is to be questioned is Zoë's sarcasm itself: a source of pain for herself and others that eventually leads her to use violence so as to invert the male/female hierarchy; furthermore, her cynicism, another preeminently postmodern characteristic (Bewes, 1997), stops her from building ethical relations.

Originally from the East Coast, Zoë is unhappy teaching at a small college in Paris, Illinois, and for this reason she tries to face life in a humorous, mostly ironic, and even "sarcastic" manner (Moore, 1989: 382). Irony is evident from the very opening of the story: "You had to get out of […] those Illinois towns with the funny names […] Oblong, Normal […] when the Dow Jones dipped two hundred points, [a

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local] paper boasted […]: NORMAL MAN MARRIES OBLONG WOMAN. They knew what was important" (381). These lines are intended to underscore Zoë's thoughts on Midwestern parochialism; nonetheless, the reader could also interpret the newspaper headline as an example of Midwestern humor and that it is silly of the protagonist not to notice it, especially considering that she is a scholar of humor studies. Indeed, Professor Hendricks is writing a book on humor and has a favorite joke, the punchline of which matches the story's title. Her abilities for comicality, however, do not seem enough to help her bear her solitude and the lack of recognition that she encounters at work; in fact, she was hired because the college had been sued for sex discrimination, and it is through this that the text attacks the sexism that predominated in American universities in the 1980s. Apart from sexism, the main themes of "Ugly" are women, men, and the relations between them.

The "almost pretty" image-concerned Zoë Hendricks (381) is around thirty and has no partner in a culture, like the American, where heterosexuality, marriage, and parenthood function together like an unquestionable-truth triad. Since moving to the Midwest, she has lost faith in the idea of becoming engaged to a man, given that she is not a "Heidy with cleavage" (385); that is, she is not the kind of sexy, silly, and docile woman she thinks that men are looking for. The combination of cynicism, loneliness, and "a dark bristly hair [she has] in her chin" (385) leads her to the following reflection: "Perhaps when you had been without the opposite sex for too long, you began to resemble them. In an act of desperate invention, you began to grow your own" (385). Even if her words refer only to physical aspects of men and women, they lead us to ponder the Butlerian, queer idea that the differences between the sexes are forcefully exaggerated by means of gender instruction. Zoë's words also imply the possibility of a third sex, an idea put forth by feminist philosophers in the late twentieth-century (e.g. Fausto-Sterling, 1993). Her lack of confidence in heterosexual unions is such that, half-jokingly, she attributes human infertility to the fact that "two completely different species [are] trying to reproduce" (Moore, 1989: 385). In both quotations, queer critiques of sex and heterosexuality are channeled through humor. From a dialogical stance, Zoë's thought points more specifically at the unconscious need to connect with the other person. The question of whether she is able to achieve equality-in-difference will be considered below.

Whereas the *Diaries* and *ISM* portray marriage as something positive despite the fact that it subjugates women to men, in "Ugly" marriage seems unnecessary: Zoë comments ironically, "I forgot to get married" (385) and tells her sister Evan, "Don't get married" (385). Nevertheless, Professor Hendricks also feels the pressure to marry and have children, not only unconsciously —she treats her house "like a womb" (387), a revealing simile—, but also in her conversations with her family. Hence, she does not reject her sister's offer to meet a male photographer who is "single" (388) when she goes to visit her in Manhattan. Above all, she is excited about leaving the Midwest

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and staying at Evan and her partner's "luxury midtown high rise with a balcony" (382), where she also attends a Halloween party. Will this performative festival surprise us with a carnivalization of genders and sex(ualiti)es in a Bakhtinian or even a Butlerian manner?

Most of the costumes chosen by the guests function as metaphors of their self-identified gender roles. Evan goes as a *hausfrau*, since this is what she has become while living with Charlie, revealing a sort of anti-feminist compliance with patriarchy. Charlie chooses to be a fish, like those in his "tank" (391), proving he would rather slip away from his relationship; in fact, he spends most of the night talking to the "sexy witches" (393), who, like Evan, seem to have assumed their gender roles in a patriarchal fashion. Zoë puts a big bone on her head and goes as a bonehead. Her choice is intriguing for various reasons: first, bonehead can mean "stupid", hence revealing her contempt for her own intelligence, in that it neither makes her happy nor helps her in relationships; second, we can interpret the bone as a huge penis, which might convey the idea that, in a patriarchal society, intelligence does not count unless you are a man; third, a bonehead is a feminist disguise, one which rebels against the sexist canon of excessively provocative clothes that patriarchal consumer culture imposes on females (e.g. the sexy witches). Protesting against the patriarchal reification of women, her outfit is the only one appropriate for a Bakhtinian carnival —where the mask "rejects conformity" and "is connected with […] change" (Bakhtin, 1984: 39).

At the party, Evan introduces her sister to Earl, the photographer she had told her about. His appearance is one of the most amusing scenes of the story because he is dressed as a naked woman. Taken metaphorically, his costume would mean that the best lover for Zoë would be either a woman or a man with woman-like traits, which challenges the binary pattern. However, whereas his disguise suggests a feminist gender-role inversion, it does not subvert the system. Somehow echoing the impermanence of Bakhtinian carnival, Butler writes: "Parody by itself is not subversive" (1990: 176); we only have to think of the large number of straight men who dress up as women in carnival celebrations without this altering the status quo.[7] Considering the complexity of the parody in Twain's *Diaries*, which not only reproduces but also defies gender assumptions, it seems clear that parody needs to be carefully crafted in order to be effective. In "Ugly", Earl's naked-woman outfit reinforces the gender system for two reasons: its female features are caricatured, something which, were it not for carnival humor, would be unacceptable to feminism;

[7] Donald Morton (1996) condemns queer acts of supposed liberation that do not bring about social change. This article also emphasizes the need to pursue critical thought and action in order to transform the social fabric.

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although ironically called Earl ("noble"), the man beneath the clothes has a masculinist way of thinking (unlike Twain himself).

Zoë's and Earl's conversation is the opposite of an ethics-based dialogue —one which would pursue equality-in-difference— not least because he is unwilling to listen to her. For example, he asks her about her favorite joke and, when she has just begun to tell it, he interrupts her to tell his own. There are various reasons for him to behave like this, starting with the patriarchal custom according to which men control and lead conversations; as mentioned above, patriarchy assumes that women are far less funny than men (Mizejewski, 2014); finally, for a person "to make humor, he or she must be given the floor" (Crawford, 1992: 30) and Earl is not willing to cede it to Zoë. By shutting her up, he contributes to maintaining the patriarchal gender hierarchy. In addition, he stops her from telling her doctor's joke by delivering one that is sexist.[8]

Their conversation does not improve after this. When Zoë says that she could be severely ill, instead of sympathizing with her, the photographer changes the subject: "So your sister's getting married [...] what do you think about love?" (Moore, 1989: 399). Feeling annoyed, she tells him about a female violinist who abandoned a successful career to get married and then committed suicide —another warning for women against matrimony. Again, Earl fails to listen, yet he does advise Zoë to wear make-up, which she counterattacks with a sarcastic, apparently homophobic question: "Does the word *fag* mean anything to you?" (400; emphasis in the original). It must be pointed out that her remark attempts to put Earl's own heterosexism right in his face: he presumes that she could only be in a relationship "with a *man*" (397; emphasis in the original) because "love should be like a tree [...] straight" (397). Even though the female character is just reacting to the male's provocations, both demeanors are worthy of criticism: first, reducing one's interlocutor to less than a subject (not listening, insulting, etc.) is a mark of anti-dialogical behavior and cannot help us to reach equality-in-difference; second, her rhetorical question illustrates society's lack of sensitivity with homosexuality in the 1980s; third, feminists have historically warned women (from Arenal, 1869 to Camps, 1998) against trying to be men's equals from below, that is, imitating their worst habits.

Earl then decides to end their conversation by saying: "I just shouldn't try to go out with career women. You're all stricken" (Moore, 1989: 400), a sexist affirmation that can also lead us to reflect on whether (feminist) professional women can be happy within patriarchy. He goes on to tell her how male bugs are kept under control when sprayed with female hormones, once more displaying his closed-minded way of thinking. His account reminds us of Scott in *ISM*, who starts shrinking after being

[8] Zoë's joke is about a "guy who visits his doctor" and learns he has "six weeks to live" (Moore, 1989: 390); when asking for a second opinion, he is told "'You're ugly, too'". In Earl's version, the doctor ends up saying, "'[d]id you see that secretary out front? I finally fucked her'" (395).

caught in a slime that suggests women's supposedly wicked power. This kind of power is put into practice by the professor of "Ugly" at the end of the piece: as the photographer leans on the railing of the balcony, she gives him a shove with the excuse that she "was just kidding" (401). Metaphorically, Moore's protagonist could stand for the feminist desire to kill the model of patriarchal man that Earl constitutes. The fact that there is a balcony offers another wink at *ISM*, when Scott reprimands his spouse from the dollhouse, inviting us to read Zoë as Louise's avenger. It is undeniable that Earl's behavior is reproachable; nonetheless, by pushing him in that frightening way, the heroine is adopting the patriarchal and typically male drive towards aggression and control, and as such is completely at odds with a dialogical and feminist search for equality-in-difference. His naked-woman outfit and her penis-like costume make her action even less defensible, while graphically proving that she is merely reasserting the male/female power structure. In fact, the notion of inviting women to become violent in order to pull down patriarchy, which is now popular in print and on screen, has been condemned by contemporary feminists (Ruthven, 2019).

As I argued regarding the binaries Eve/Adam and Scott-toreador/Louise-spider, situations such as the final joke in "Ugly" simply reorder the gender hierarchy but do not promote equality, and as such are devoid of (feminist) ethics.[9] Furthermore, Zoë's remark, self-conscious though apparently homophobic, makes it clear that, in order to live truly ethically, society must take into account not only the demands of feminism but also those of queer theory and post-colonial criticism. In all, Moore's heroine does not require heterosexual romance to be happy: she requires the love that arises from ethical relations that bring other kinds of humor: joyful, positive, democratic, and even carnivalesque.

Conclusion: Towards a life of equality-in-difference

As seen through the above discussion of the diaries, the film, and the short story, it is possible to suggest a reading whereby feminist characters are praised at the turn of the nineteenth century, feared in the 1950s, and left alone towards the end of the twentieth century. Twain, Arnold, and Moore portray men who shrink, metaphorically or not, in the presence of women, and do so for reasons that both respond to and go beyond the fear of feminism. As implied in *ISM*, the hero's shrinking epitomizes the fact that those with privileges (certain men) should give them up in order to build a truly democratic society. Moore's writing warns women against the anti-feminist mode of

[9] The last line of the story reads: "She smiled at him, and wondered how she looked" (Moore, 1989: 401). Even if Zoë were happy just then, she would be so at the cost of humiliating another person. What is more, she is still concerned with her image, a constant preoccupation throughout the text, which unfortunately proves her (and many women's) compliance with the patriarchal discourse of beauty.

patriarchal romance that requires the kind of female submission represented in Arnold's and Twain's texts. Yet all three authors invite us to ponder problems, challenges, and alternatives relating to gender and sex(uality) in patriarchal societies.

On the one hand, all three works show the subjugation of one gender —Eve renounces having a self, Scott kills the spider, Louise and Zoë are silenced, and Earl is shoved—, thus denying the possibility of achieving equality-in-difference, that is, a truly ethical life. The *Diaries* is the only text that occasionally develops a portrayal of genders as being both different in character (though stereotypically) but equal in value, which clears the path towards the desired ethics. Except for some subtle references in "Ugly" and the very last monologue in *ISM*, the three pieces take for granted that there are only two sexes and two genders, and that these exist in a heterosexual relation to each other; this set of ideas does not reflect the real world, as demonstrated by the exponential rise of queer theory in the last two decades. Human beings, it seems, still have to take the necessary steps to challenge the established binary structures by acknowledging the multiplicity of genders, sex(ualiti)es, and ethnicities; furthermore, we need to adopt truly democratic ways of thinking (e.g. feminism, queer theory, post-colonial criticism, class consciousness) and put these into practice as ethical relations. That is, as Twain, Arnold, and Moore make clear, apart from humor, we also need love (although not necessarily of the romantic type) in order to survive and enjoy life.

On the other hand, the *Diaries*, *ISM*, and "Ugly" all make use of the carnivalesque as a first step to de-essentialize the gender system —Eve acts intelligently and Adam becomes sensitive, Scott admits that he depends on Louise, and Zoë disguises herself as a genderless bonehead. Moreover, carnivalesque humor pulls down —albeit temporarily— stable hierarchies and facilitates exchanges between women and men, further revealing affinities between them —Eve as *mulier faber*, Scott as feminine, and Zoë as comedian. Through comicality, Twain manages to set the feminine above the masculine without making his readers —who allegedly hold patriarchal views— uneasy, and they probably end up laughing along with him. The viewers of *ISM* can use their sense of humor and mock its protagonist, for example, when he presumes he can order his wife around while standing on the balcony of a dollhouse; the movie also hints at how ridiculous it is for a man to be scared of feminism. The humor of Moore's heroine is sometimes too sarcastic to permit her to be happy either with herself or others; the reader may thus feel moved to reject such humor, preferring to rely on comicality as a bridge (and not a barrier) between people.

Finally, the three works examined urge women and men not only to exchange gender roles, but also to cherish our commonalities while being different, e.g.: sensitivity (like Twain's later Adam), respect (as advised at the end of *ISM*), and kindness (as suggested in "Ugly", although against the grain). While blurring gender and sex(uality) definitions, the humor used by Twain, Arnold, and Moore ironically

lets us see the wider picture of diversity, which gives us hope for the creation of a world founded upon equality-in-difference.

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