# SATIRE AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN JONATHAN COE'S "WHAT A CARVE UP!"

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*Abstract: This paper is intended to provide an analysis on the relationship between satire and identity in Jonathan Coe's contemporary British satire "What a Carve Up!" (1994), focusing on the mechanisms of satire that the writer has employed and exploring the way in which they contribute to the construction of social and individual identities. The analysis will concentrate on the relationship between the Self and the Other, starting from the assumption that the process of constructing one's identity also involves the surrender to the Other. Furthermore, it will follow the three stages of liminality, exploring more thoroughly the second stage: the liminal phase.*

*Keywords: identity, Jonathan Coe, liminality, Otherness, satire.*

## *1. Introduction*

"Difficile est saturam non scribere", said the Roman poet Juvenal around the late first century AD, revealing his eagerness to express his dissent from the corruption and the decadence of the society of his times (Satire I, line 30). From the first satirical works of fiction, the satirists have written not only out of personal indignation, but particularly with a clear sense of ethical concern for the public interest. It has been already acknowledged by the critics that Jonathan Coe's satires deliberately expose the character's frailty in social and personal contexts, aiming to encourage people's need for the stability of the truth by exposing fraudulence or through shattering a deceptive illusion. Besides its diagnostic ability to identify social, ethical and political ills, satire is also related to aspects of identity.

## *2. Rationale*

This paper is intended to provide an analysis on the mechanisms of satire employed in Jonathan Coe's state-of-the-nation novel "What a Carve Up!" (1994), exploring the way in which these mechanisms contribute to the construction of social and individual identities. The investigation will start from the assumption that the process of constructing one's identity also involves the surrender to the Other, and that through the opposition between self and others, satire can influence the formation of social and individual identities.

In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1977) Hegel underlines that identity can merely be defined in terms of binaries, thus The Other is seen as the unknown, the diametrical opposition of oneself. Nonetheless he emphasizes the idea that identity is not merely exclusive and: "to be a One is a universal relating of self to self, and the fact that it is a One, rather makes it like all the others" (Hegel, 1977:73). Bearing in mind that the mechanisms of satire create difference and opposition by defining the satiric object as different instead of reflecting our differences from the satiric object, we may conclude that the satirist and its object are clearly polarized, hence satire becoming active in the process of constructing the meaning of "otherness" and thus of identity.

In "What a Carve Up!", Jonathan Coe explores intimate questions about social and individual identity and illustrate the liminal experiences of a society not trained in how to live in ambiguity or to hold anxiety. Regarding the self-other dynamics, there are two main stances of otherness reflected in the novel: The Other as an alter-ego of the self, and the Other as the external



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world, generally manifested by the social and political reality but also by the illusion of a reality, enforced by the motif of the mirror as a distorted reflection of life.

The concept of the mirror has been thoroughly analysed by philosophers and psychoanalysts like Henri Wallon and Jacques Lacan, who explored in their studies the importance of specular reflection in the construction of the self. Wallon argued that mirrors help children develop a sense of identity. His perspective later on influenced Jacques Lacan, who was specifically interested in the steps in the formation of human identity and personalities. Lacan developed the *mirror stage* studied by Wallon into a concept and defined it as a formative stage for the construction of the Ego, or of the Self, suggesting that the Self is created through the identification with its own image (Julien 1994:29-32). The symbol of the mirror and the concept of mirroring are recurrent in *What a Carve Up!*, embodying the passage to another world, being it the inner world or a different facet of the outside reality.

*3. Satire and the (re)construction of the Self*

The novel is an extremely skilful combination of two narratives. On the one hand, there is the history of the infamous and wealthy Winshaw family, whose members embody some of the main problems England had to confront during Margaret Thatcher's premiership, like the problems in the National Health System, the displacement of the aesthetic values in the art world, or the hypocrisy of the arms trade to Iraq affair. On the other hand, there is Michael Owen's personal trauma, a writer who is offered the deal to pen the official biography of the Winshaws. Therefore Michael Owen, both a character and a narrator, who embodies the authorial consciousness, represents the link between the two apparently different storylines.

At his ninth birthday, Michael receives as a gift from his parents a trip to Weston-super-Mare, but due to the weather conditions he and his family end up going to the cinema and see the 1961 comedy-horror film *What a Carve Up*, starring Shirley Eaton and Kenneth Connor. During that night, Owen develops an unhealthy fixation with the film and particularly with the scene when the beautiful Shirley invites Kenneth to spend the night in her room only for him to run away. The frame with Kenneth turned and staring into a mirror to his reflection and beyond that to Shirley's, is revisited multiple times during the novel, alternatively showing Kenneth or Michael as the protagonist. The mirror, as well as the screen, constitute what Foucault (1967) defined as an in-between space, a liminal, ambiguous space between what is real and utopian and what is located and heterotopian, a place where the psychological merges with the geographical (Foucault, 1984:2). Michael, as the narrator, vividly describes the action displayed on the cinema screen:

> Kenneth turned, and found himself staring into a mirror in which he could see his own reflection, and beyond that, Shirley's. Her back was to him, and she was wriggling out of her slip, pulling it over her head (2008:41).

Nonetheless, the screen becomes a sort of mirror itself, when Michael identifies himself with the protagonist and transfers his existence into a new narrative, in which he remains trapped for more than thirty years:

> I was staring at her too, I suppose, and thinking that I had never seen anyone so lovely, and from that moment it was no longer Kenneth she spoke to but me, my own nine-year-old self, because I was now the person who had lost his way in the corridor, and, yes, it was me that I saw on the screen (2008:42).

The scene when Michael metaphorically steps into the screen could also be regarded as a reference to Cocteau's Orpheus, where the mirror, in this case - the screen, symbolises a passage through another world. In her article "Genre, Repetition and History in Jonathan Coe", Pamela Thurschwell states that "throughout the book, Michael's dreams, desire and destiny, are determined by the movies from "What a Carve Up", to Cocteau's "Orpheus", to "With Gagarin to the Stars"." (Thurschwell, 2006:33). The connection with Cocteau's work is suggested from the first page of Coe's novel, before the prologue, with the quote from the screenplay to Orphée:



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> "Orphée: Enfin, Madame…m'expliquerez vous? La Princesse: Rien. Si vous dormez, si vous rêvez, acceptez vos rêves. C'est le rôle du dormeur" (Cocteau, 1970).

The two works share similarities in terms of the oneiric atmosphere of the plot, as well as the blurred dimension of the characters consciousnesses. The motif of the mirror in Coe's *What a Carve Up!* takes multiple metaphorical forms. On the one hand, it faithfully reflects the plot of the 1961 comedy horror film *What a Carve Up!*, which is why Michael grows into thinking he is inhabiting it; and on the other hand the two storylines presented in the novel mirror each other – the story of the Winshaw family and Michael Owen's story.

The stories from the past still haunt the thirty-eight years old Michael, a damaged and solitary man who, in a certain way, perceives life as another side of the TV screen. His incapacity to function in the present is reflected by his alienation in face of the world events, and his freeze-framing at the moment of unfulfilled adolescent desire becomes a method of survival for him.

After spending his days watching and re-watching the same film, pausing and rewinding several scenes that still obsessed him, Michael's routine is interrupted by the arrival of Fiona, a female neighbour who unconsciously plays an essential role in Michael's destiny and self-discovery. Fiona's presence gradually pushes him out of the haze. Initially, Michael is reluctant and does everything to avoid leaving his concealed inner shelter by interacting with her: "She had piercing and very intelligent blue eyes, eyes which would certainly have held mine in a strong and steady gaze had I not deliberately avoided them" (Coe, 2008:48). His difficulty in communicating with other people is reflected in his incapacity of being able to follow an ordinary conversation. Michael finds himself compelled to ask Fiona to repeat multiple times what she said, but he is still distracted by other minor details, as the fact that she calls him by his first name. This situation astonishes him, mostly because he is not able to remember hers even though they have surely interacted before, as he himself comprehends:

> And I would have listened at this point, I really would, for my curiosity was aroused, apart from anything else, but my brain was spinning, all my senses were in a whirl, because she had used my name, she had actually called me by my first name […] and the funny thing about it was that if she knew my name, then in all probability I knew hers […] and I was so busy trying to put a name to her face, and to put her face into a context where I may have seen it before, that I completely forgot to pay any attention to her […].
>
> 'You haven't been listening to a word of this, have you?'
>
> I shook my head. (Coe, 2008:51)

Michael realises he has not been called by his first name in the past two or three years, because, in fact, he did not interact with any other person in all those years. He had accepted the task to chronicle the history of the Winshaws commissioned by Tabitha, one of the members of the family, but got stuck in the middle of the project and swaddled himself in loneliness. The changes in his personal life, the drastic transition the country itself was suffering, during Margaret Thatcher's premiership, together with the realisation of the fact that he was "dealing with a family of criminals" (2008:88), bewildered Michael and he, somehow, remained stuck in a state of aporia.

The notion of *aporia* was explored by Jacques Derrida in his book *The Gift of Death* (1996), where he defined it as a state of impasse, a state of paralysis where the subject is lost in a set of ideas and cannot find a responsible and right way to go forward (Derrida, 1996:68). The same state of paralysis seems to describe very well Michael's situation, and the character acknowledges it too:

> Dreamer though I was, I did not have the power of Cocteau's Orpheus, who could pass through liquefying mirrors into unimagined worlds. No, I was more like Kenneth Connor – and always would be – forcing myself not to look in the mirror at a gorgeous, terrifying reality disclosing itself only a few inches behind my back. (Coe 211)

Michael remained psychologically trapped in a certain moment in the past, in an "indeterminate existence between two temporal realms", because he could not cope with the reality around him and was not able to find a way to act morally correct. At this point, Coe highlights the dichotomies good and evil, the Self and the Other.



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Michael epitomises the consequences of Margaret Thatcher's regime, as the members of the Winshaw family embody the evils of Thatcherism. By polarising Michael's personal struggling in life with the unpunished atrocities of the Winshaws, Coe establishes a clear distinction between the rulers and the common people, depicting at the same time the broken Britain, with the clear purpose of satirising the current state of the nation, hoping for better. From this point of view, the political system, embodied by the Winshaws, plays the role of the Other, and directly influences the (re)construction of the Self. Michael Owen's immobility and self-entrapment can be regarded as a metaphor for the inability of the English society to understand that the policies of the '80s were leading toward the verge of a disaster.

Michael indirectly blames the Winshaws for most of his sufferings. The scenes with the Brunwin meals produced by Dorothy Winshaw's business are representative to understand how his mind works. He relates his research discoveries about the Winshaws with the consequences the people suffer and further own to his own misfortune.

> The Brunwin […] whose task […] was to use every growth-inducing antibiotic and every yield-increasing pesticide known to man in order to meet the ever more stringent production quotas laid down by Dorothy from her head office at Brunwin Holdings. (218)

The Brunwin company, ruled by Dorothy Winshaw after she married George Brunwin, reflects the dehumanising process of industrialised farming allowed after the deregulations of the sector, during Margaret Thatcher's premiership. The organic farming systems of George have been replaced by the industrialised methods of Dorothy. The opposition between the two processes has a clear satirical purpose and also reveals a nostalgia for the past, not only for Michael's character but for the British society in general. On the one hand, the farm can be associated with Michael's childhood, because it represented the place where he played as a child and where he made the first steps in his career as a writer; while on the other hand the contrast between then and now reveals a criticism of the dehumanised farming practices in the free-market times intended to match the productive criteria. Therefore Michael embodies the shock suffered by the critics of neoliberalism, who could not respond adequately to the new life system which was imposed as dominant.

This problem with Dorothy's farming practices became real and inevitable for Michael only when he had the concrete evidence in front of him, not just the abstract idea he was writing about in the biography:

> I stared at this photograph for some time, while a nasty suspicion began to creep over me. All at once I had the feeling that someone, somewhere, was enjoying a monstrous joke at my expense. And not just at my expense, but at all our expenses. I suddenly took this photograph to be an insult aimed both at myself and at the world in general. I pulled the plastic tray out of the oven and threw it into the bin. It was the last Brunwin meal I ever bought. I remember being hungry that night. (230)

The image on the package reflected a distorted reality, but this time an aestheticized one, for totally unethical purposes. When Michael realises the deregulations in the farming industry may have contributed to his father's death is the moment when he confronted the face of the other and understood that the Other's uniqueness was more real than he, the Self, could have imagined.

> All those years, I see now, my father was clogging his arteries up with saturated fats. He would die of a heart attack, not long after his sixty-first birthday. Does this mean that Dorothy killed my father? (228)

This revelation of the Other's real existence and dynamism is called by Levinas "the epiphany of the face", and the critic explains that the other "bears its own significance, independent of the signification received from the world", it "not only comes to us from a context but signified by itself" (Levinas 2006:31).

Realising that he was "dealing with a family of criminals" (Coe, 88), and without being able to counteract, Michael pauses the development of his project and, soon after that, pauses his own life, as he keeps doing with the film. Michael perceives reality as being another side of the TV screen, a sequence of frames which he can pause, rewind and replay as often as he feels the need to.



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During some of his first interactions with Fiona, Michael has the instinct to point the remote control to her, in an attempt to pause her.

> Fiona carried on talking, I may even have been answering back, but my attention had started to wander and she only regained it by saying something which surprised me very much. 'You can't switch me off,' she said. 'Pardon?' 'You can't switch me off.' She nodded at my hands. I had gone back to the armchair opposite her and without realizing it I had picked up the remote control for the video. It was pointed in her direction and my finger had strayed to the pause button. (56)

Fiona represents, first of all, the element that triggers Michael's awakening and metaphorically pushes him out of his liminal phase. Nevertheless, she is a transitory figure in his destiny and soon she is betrayed by the incompetence of the British National Health System. In this regard, Fiona's role resembles both the heroine and the victim of a classical tragedy. We could therefore say that, following Michael's own way of thinking, as Dorothy could be blamed for the death of Michael's father, so could be Henry for Fiona's tragic ending.

Notwithstanding, Fiona's death brings Michael back to his initial project, it forces him to surpass his own liminal phase. Fiona's death has a symbolic meaning, because it closes the circle opened more than thirty years before.

> He was like that for about five minutes. Then the nurse made him let go of Fiona's hand, and said: 'I think you'd better come with me.' He stood up slowly and took her arm, and they walked off the screen together, to the left of the frame. And that was the last I ever saw of him. As for me, I stayed right there in my seat. I wasn't going to move until Fiona did. There seemed no point in leaving the cinema, this time. (Coe, 368)

This scene connects once again with the myth of Orpheus in Cocteau's work, when Heurtebrise explains to Orpheus that mirrors are the doors through which death goes and comes:

> Je vous livre le secret des secrets, les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la mort vient et va. […] Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans un miroir et vous verrez la mort travailler comme les abeilles dans une ruche en verre. (Cocteau, 58)

With a last explicit reference to Orpheus, Michael claims that:

> It was as if cracks had started to appear in the screen and this awful reality was leaking out: or as if the glass barrier itself had magically turned to liquid and without knowing it I had slipped across the divide, like a dreaming Orpheus. (Coe, 361)

Furthermore, the scene does not reflect a mere returning of Michael's character to the real world, but a split of his personality, also marked by the change in the perspective, using the third person and not the first, to illustrate Michael's thoughts. From that moment on, the narrator does not identify with Michael anymore. Hence, Michael steps out of his narrative, he becomes a mere spectator of the events: "All my life I'd been trying my way to the other side of the screen: ever since my visit to the cinema in Weston-super-Mare. Did this mean that I'd made it at last?" (361). This last realisation, this moment of epiphany pushes Michael to step forward, abandon his liminal phase and reincorporate in the social background he had left, but this time as a different person. Each interaction with The Other, either the Winshaws or his past self, effects Michael's (re)construction of the Self.

As in the case of the film, with the Winshaws he also began as a mere spectator and recorder of the events, but unconsciously became part of the action and, moreover, a key figure in the development of the plot. The reason Tabitha picked him to record her family history was not random. Whilst Michael indirectly blamed Dorothy for the death of the man he considered to be his father, the Winshaws were in fact directly responsible for the death of his biological father. This revelation makes Michael understand that he is, in fact, more engaged in the situation than he had anticipated: 'I thought I was supposed to be writing this story,' he said, 'but I'm not. At least not any more. I'm part of it.' (Coe, 414).

Michael's destiny lies in uncovering the truths about himself that connect him to a mystery he thinks he is detached from. At the beginning, he believes he is approaching the Winshaw family only as a disinterested biographer, but by the end of the story he finds out that Tabitha has actually chosen him for the job, for specific reasons. The representation of Michael Owen's life starts from



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his childhood, portrayed as a sort of pre-Thatcherite arcadia marked by easy sociability, which was subsequently wiped out by the greed, egoism and competitiveness of the market-based society of Thatcherism. Nonetheless, the Winshaws started interfering with the life of Michael Owen even when he was a child. An illustrative example is the fact that Godfrey Winshaw's co-pilot was Michael's biological father, who later on became a collateral victim in the games of power manipulated by Lawrence Winshaw. Hence, tragedy hadn't struck only the Winshaws that night[1]. Throughout the novel, Coe cleverly illustrates how each detail is important for the construction of the plot, and how every movement performed by the system embodied by the Winshaws, as the Other, echoes in the life of the common person, Michael Owen, as the Self.

The last section of the novel mirrors the plot of Frank King's film, which combines farce, comedy-gothic, Greek myth and the prophetic dream. As Anthony Quinn argued reviewing the novel in "The Independent", "the plot becomes a mirror of, and an analogue to, the denouement of the famous film" (Quinn, 23 April 1994). The dream represents a very important symbol in this section, because Michael's life-long nightmare becomes reality, blurring once again the boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, reality and illusion. The motifs of the mirror and the dream are cleverly encapsulated in the passage when Michael discovers that the man that has been haunting his dreams for so many years is nobody else but him.

> Whatever the reason, when I looked at myself in the mirror of the men's washroom later that night, I could scarcely believe what I saw. It was the face which had once been revealed to me in a nightmare more than thirty years ago: the face of an old man ravaged with age and grooved like an ancient carving with traces of pain. (Coe, 365)

In this case, the dichotomy is established between the visible, Michael's face, and the invisible, Michael's past and obsessions. The structure of the Self is not based on identity, but on identification, therefore the Self is defined in terms of the Other, because the Self is constructed by identifying itself with its own image, reflected in a mirror, therefore the Self cannot see itself directly, but only through a reflected image.

The last scene with Michael is constructed by employing once again irony as a mechanism of satire. At the end, when Michael leaves behind the frame of the film "What a Carve Up", instead of achieving his freedom, he gets trapped in his other childhood obsession, repeating Yuri Gagarin's plane accident. Hence, even though he gets past his frozen frame, Michael goes from one repetition compulsion to another. "Life is but a dream" (Coe, 493) is what the protagonist of the novel repeats twice before dying.

Although *What a Carve Up!* ends with a moral closure, meant to be reassuring for the reader, with the Winshaws killed in a symbolic way, reflecting their sins and crimes; Michael's unfair death symbolises the idea that the denounced issues in the social and political system are not yet solved. In 2009, Jonathan Coe reflected on his novel in "Doubtful Statements", acknowledging the issues related to identity and self-awareness of the protagonist, and confessing that:

> My novel now [that is, 2009] feels to me more like the story of a depressed young hero going through a crisis of identity, while being swept along on a current of historical forces towards a destiny over which he has no control. (Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements 3216)

Finally, Vanessa Guignery classifies *What a Carve Up!* as both a postmodern Condition-of-England novel, and a sensitive bildungsroman, as well as a Künstlerroman, with the reader witnessing the development of a writer (Guignery 2016:73). In *What a Carve Up!*, the motif of the mirror is also illustrated through the mirror that the protagonist created around the representation of himself writing, and around the representation of the writer in general, since many times throughout the novel Michael writes passages reflecting himself as if he was holding a mirror to the reader. Moreover, the motif of the mirror is also echoed through the parody of parody, since imitation suggests the reflection of itself.

[1] Reference to the beginning and the ending of the novel: "Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale"



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*4. Conclusion*

Who is Michael Owen after all? He can be the symbol of the common British citizen of the late 20th century, the individual affected by the National Health System deregulations, the man that endures the poisonous food processed in order to meet the ever more stringent production, the victim of the political system under Margaret Thatcher premiership and thus he is the author's weapon in the process of constructing satire. By polarising Michael - the Self - and the Winshaws - the Other -, satire becomes active in the process of constructing individual and social identity.

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