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THE INTERACTION OF THE THREE TRADITIONAL HUMOUR THEORIES IN NEIL SIMON'S *BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS*¹

Neil Simon'ın Brighton Beach Memoirs Adlı Oyununda Geleneksel Üç Mizah
Teorisinin Etkileşimi

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Abstract

Humour/laughter is a human entity and activity. It takes place in almost all kinds of social interactions. Most of us cannot help laughing at something funny in our daily routines. Laughter is the fundamental mode of expression common to human beings. From this perspective, Simon is considered one of the most significant playwrights who uses laughter elements skilfully in his works. He is called a "laugh machine". Marvin Neil Simon (1927-2018) was an American playwright, screenwriter, television joke writer, and one of the most popular and successful dramatists commercially and artistically in the history of American theatre. This paper aims to explore how Neil Simon uses three traditional humour/laughter theories: The Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory, and the Relief Theory, in his Brighton Beach Memoirs (1983). It is an autobiographical play and one of Simon's masterpieces in Simon's BB Trilogy. This play is rich enough to explore three traditional humour theories. It deals with one family's survival struggle just before the World War II during the Great Depression. It was a time of hardships for millions of people in the late 1930s. While Father makes all decisions, a passive-aggressive mother is self-sacrificing and manipulates his sons. The study adopts the qualitative analysis research method incorporated into analysis of dramatic texts.

Keywords: Humour, Simon, Brighton Beach Memoirs, The Superiority, Incongruity, And Relief Theories

Öz

Mizah/kahkaha insana dair bir özellik ve unsurdur. Hemen hemen her türlü sosyal etkileşimde gerçekleşir. Çoğumuz günlük rutinlerimizde komik bir şeye gülmekten kendimizi alamayız. Kahkaha, insanlarda ortak olan temel bir ifade biçimidir. Bu açıdan

¹ This study has partly been produced from the MA thesis entitled: "Domestic Realism and Humour in Neil Simon's Selected Plays: *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983), *Biloxi Blues* (1985), *Broadway Bound* (1986).

bakıldığında, Simon gülme unsurlarını eserlerinde ustalıkla kullanan en önemli oyun yazarlarından biri olarak kabul edilir. Simon Amerikan tiyatrosunun "gülme makinesi" olarak bilinir. Marvin Neil Simon (1927-2018), Amerikalı oyun yazarı, senarist, televizyon şaka yazarı ve Amerikan tiyatro tarihinin ticari ve sanatsal açıdan en ünlü ve başarılı oyun yazarlarından birisidir. Bu çalışma, Neil Simon'ın Brighton Beach Memoirs (1983) adlı oyununda üç geleneksel mizah/kahkaha teorisinin nasıl kullandığını ele almaktadır. Üstünlük Teorisi, Uyumsuzluk Teorisi ve Rahatlama Teorisi. Brighton Beach Memoirs otobiyografik bir oyundur ve Simon'ın BB üçlemesindeki başyapıtlarından birisidir. Bu oyun, üç geleneksel mizah teorisini nasıl ele alındığı gösteren yeterince zengin veriye sahiptir. Oyun Büyük Buhran sırasında II. Dünya Savaşı'ndan hemen önce bir ailenin hayatta kalma mücadelesini ele almaktadır. 1930'ların sonlarında milyonlarca insan birçok ekonomik sorunlarla yüzleşmiştir. Oyunda baba tüm kararları verirken, pasif agresif bir anne, kendisini ailesi için feda eder ayrıca oğullarını da sürekli manipüle eden bir figür olarak verilmektedir. Çalışmada dramatik metinlerin analizine bağlı nitel analiz araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mizah, Simon, Brighton Beach Memoirs, Üstünlük, Uyumsuzluk Ve Rahatlama Teorileri

1. INTRODUCTION

Drama is one of the most important genres of literature. Drama fundamentally has two major types: tragedy and comedy. Moreover, these major types are also divided into subcategories. This study deals with comedy, so it is worth defining comedy. The roots of comedy date back to ancient Greek. Actually, the term 'comedy' is an amalgamation of the Greek words "'kômos' or 'kômai', and 'oda', words that reflect comedy's roots in the Greek peninsula. 'Kômos' translates as 'revel', while 'kômai' comes from the word for 'village'". (Stott 2014: 5) Many drama critics claim that drama emerged from the festivals honouring the god, Dionysus. He was the son of Zeus and Semele and a god of nature and fertility. So we could suggest that comedy is actually a rural product with seasonal agrarian fertility rituals.

Comedy is considered to be one of the "longest, most continuous generic tradition in Western literature, tracing its roots back to Aristophanes and Menander, appearing in many different national literatures, surviving centuries of cultural change with its basic conventions stubbornly intact." (Leggatt 1998: 1) Comedy, compared to tragedy, is a good tool to convey the message of the playwright or touch on social problems with the veil of laughter.

Major genres of literature such as poetry, novel and drama are the most useful tools used to express human experiences, sufferings, dilemmas, miseries and joy, so it would not be wrong to claim that literature is our only exit gate to pour out our feelings and continue to live. However, humour is

not a genre but *a style*. It is one of the most commonly used literary devices by comedy writers in their writings. As the sharpest weapon of literary criticism, it is an indispensable instrument for writers and playwrights to rich and colour their style and convey their messages directly to the audience or reader. Humour/laughter is a human entity and activity. It takes place in almost all kinds of social interactions. Most of us cannot help laughing at something funny in our daily routines. Laughter is the fundamental mode of expression common to human beings.

Humour comes from antiquity to the present. It is defined as:

“1 [U] the quality in sth that makes it funny or amusing. 2 [C, U (formal) the state of your feelings or mind at a particular time, 3 [C] (old use) one of the four liquids that were thought in the past to be in a person’s body and to influence health and character.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 2000: 636)

Martin explains the liquids as: “humour denotes the fluids that constitute human body: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile.” (Martin, 2007: 21)

Humour has greatly changed since ancient times. Humour was not utilized to mean funny, and amusing until the eighteenth century to show the deviation from normality. A host of famous philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Bergson, and Schopenhauer tried to answer the question, from a philosophical perspective, ‘what is humour’? Traditionally, the same question has been explored by dramatists as well. In his *Humour and Incongruity*, Clark offers a satisfactory and broad definition of humour. It is as follows:

Humour, it will be said, is a family-resemblance concept: no one could hope to compile any short list of essential properties abstracted from all the many varieties of humour- human misfortune and clumsiness, obscenity, grotesqueness, veiled insult, nonsense, wordplay and puns, human misdemeanours and so on, as manifested in forms as varied as parody, satire, drama, clowning, music, farce and cartoons. (1970: 20)

The philosophers Plato, Kant and Hobbes, wrote about humour and laughter. However, Henri Bergson’s famous work *Laughter* (1900) is considered the first notable work written in this field.

Laughter is too difficult to explain and define. Bergson puts it, “this little problem... has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophical speculation.” (1980:

61) As in line with it, gelotology; the science of laughter, which comes from the Greek word ‘gelos’ means ‘laugh’ or ‘laughter’, focuses on answering such questions: Why do people laugh? How do they laugh? At what or to whom do they laugh? Or, why do we laugh?

Humour causes laughter and brings laughter to our minds, so laughter is the gift of humour. Nesin (1973) states that there is laughter in humour. Humour and laughter are inseparable. If there is no humour, then there is no laughter, either. Humour and its manifestation should be studied to understand a particular society and its people. Since ancient times, laughter has been regarded as a sign of vice and cowardice. To Aristotle, it is a major human trait and essentially belongs to human beings. Stott notes “Aristotle, noting that laughter is exclusive to human beings, believed that an infant could not be considered truly human until it had laughed its first laugh at forty days old.” (2014: 171)

Laughter, as part of the humour, is not only fun and human beings use it to serve their social, psychological and physiological needs. Human beings use how their reaction with laughter to the things they like or see strange or surprising. We could say that the opposite of crying is laughter. From this perspective, it may be directly linked to happiness. However, people do not only laugh for fun and happiness but also mock and condemn others. As in line with it, Bacon remarks “the object of laughter is deformity, absurdity, shrewd turns, and the like.” (qtd. in Gregory:1923:336)

It is worth noting that laughter was not accepted as something positive during ancient times. For instance, Plato, as a most influential critic of laughter, did not regard laughter as a desirable act. In his famous work *The Republic*, he argues that those who govern and occupy higher positions should not laugh because he thinks that laughter is only for ordinary people with physical and mental defects. To him, it is a malicious act, so people with dignity should avoid it as much as possible. (Stott 2014) It is worth noting that incongruity does not always make something funny.

There are three traditional humour/laughter theories: The Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory, and the Relief Theory. The Superiority Theory of laughter basically means that human beings like finding humour in the misfortunes of other people. It dates back to the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle; however, it was coined by modern writers. Morreal, in *Comic Relief*, argues it as following:

If the Superiority Theory is right, laughter would seem to have no place in a well-ordered society, for it would undermine co-operation, tolerance,

and self-control. That is why when Plato imagined the ideal state; he wanted to severely restrict the performance of comedy. (2009: 7)

While the Superiority Theory basically contends that whatever comical is regarded as inferior and laughter is a kind of expression of the sudden realisation of superiority, The Incongruity Theory deals with the formal object of amusement. Kulka, in *The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories of Humor*, argues:

The theory is considered to be particularly well suited to account for the humorous laughter and amusement occasioned by jokes, though it has often been extended to other objects of amusement (comedy, satire, parody, mimic, clowning, trickery, caricature, slapstick, absent-mindedness, folly, etc.). (2007: 321)

Relief theory describes humour by adopting a tension and energy release model. It discusses the basic structures, patterns and psychological processes which cause laughter. It holds that people laugh to express and release their emotions and physical tensions. The relief we get from laughter is amusement and pleasure. It is a useful and natural tool to abate hatred. Laughter serves to reduce the excess of sensitivity and makes society get rid of its burden. Concerning this theory, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced two most important relief theorists: Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud.

Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud saw the triggers of laughter not so much as are cognition of incongruity within scenarios or linguistic formulae, but as a symptom of division and struggle within the self, recognition, as it were, of incongruous selfhood. (Stott 2014: 182)

This is called 'Relief Theory'. It is a fact that Freud's studies on the human psyche and his discovery of the unconscious contributed a lot to the development of this theory. Gregory is another scholar whose views on the relief theory of laughter are also worth mentioning here. His *Some Theories of Laughter* deals with major theories of laughter.

2. SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS ABOUT *BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS* (1983)

Brighton Beach Memoirs (1983), *Biloxi Blues* (1985), and *Broadway Bound* (1986) are semi-autobiographical plays. They are known as Simon's BB Trilogy. It centres on Simon's own life experiences. The trilogy is based on family humour and professional ambition.

Brighton Beach Memoirs, the setting is Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York. The settlers are mostly Irish, Jewish, and Germans. It centres on one family's survival struggle just before World War II during the Great Depression. It was a time of hardships for millions in the late 1930s.

While Father makes all decisions, a passive-aggressive mother is self-sacrificing and manipulates his sons.

The main character, Eugene Morris Jerome, is on the threshold of puberty, sexual awakening, and looking for an identity. It is the first play in the trilogy. It is a two-act play. The major characters are Eugene Jerome, Stanley Jerome, and Kate Jerome. Eugene, as a teenager, is curious about learning a lot about girls, family, relationships, and the upcoming Second World War. He observes life from many perspectives. All his observations are witty and humorous. He talks with his Polish Origin Jewish relatives. He cares for strong family ties and needs for a family. In his *memoirs*, Simon says, "I really made a quantum leap in Brighton Beach as a playwright, because it was the first full-bodied play I had ever written, in terms of dealing with a group of people as individuals and telling all their stories." (1996: 386)

This play got lots of positive reviews from New York critics. However, in an interview with David Richards in 1983, Simon explains his true feelings about Brighton Beach Memoirs:

I feel that if I had died without writing my Brighton Beach Memoirs, well, I would have had a nice legacy as a writer of light comedies. But it would have been incomplete. This play has satisfied me so much that if it were all over right now and I never wrote another play. I'd be quite content.
(Bryer and Siegel (eds.) 2019: 82)

We can say that Brighton Beach Memoirs was one of Simon's masterpieces. As a playwright, it shows how far Simon went in American drama. Even though events are depicted or told through the eyes of the fifteen-year-old boy, Eugene Jerome, it is actually about every character. The characters' stories are integrated with everyone's story in society. Simon explicitly depicts dysfunctional people in this play. To Peter Marks, with *Yonkers* and his Brighton Beach trilogy:

he has added to his canon a series of richly textured plays that not only have contributed to the commercial success that has made him one of the world's richest playwrights but also have yielded a level of acceptance by critics that eluded him earlier in his prolific career. He was pigeonholed for so long as a comedy writer that he had felt slighted by those whom he

believed wrongly consigned his work to some lesser category of art.
(Marks qtd. in Bryer and Siegel (eds.) 2019: 174)

Brighton Beach Memoirs took Simon nine years to write it. It is considered to be one of Simon's most personal plays, and "the naked honesty of its plot and characters resonated powerfully with audiences." (Bryer and Siegel (eds.) 2019: 236) It is one of his plays in trilogy which attracted attention of drama critics.

3. ANALYSIS OF EXTRACTS

EXTRACT 1

BLANCHE. (Stops sewing.) Kate, please. My head is splitting.

KATE. I told that boy a hundred and nine times. (She yells out.) Eugene! Stop banging the wall!

EUGENE. (calls out) In a minute, Ma! This is for the World Series! (back to his game) One out, a man on second, bottom of the seventh, three balls, one strike... Ruffing stretches, Ruffing pitches- (he throws ball) Oh, no! High and outside, JoJo Moore walks! First and Second and Mel Ott lopes up to the plate...

BLANCHE. (stops again) Can't he do that someplace else?

KATE. I will break his arm, that's where he'll do it. (calls out) Eugene, I'm not going to tell you again. Do you hear me? (Act 1, p. 8)

The play's opening scene is in a home with a garden, and four family members are seen. A teenage boy, Eugene plays baseball by throwing it to the house's walls in the garden and narrating his imaginary game as a commentator. He imagines himself as a baseball player whose team competes in the World Series tournament. Baseball creates noise whenever it hits the wall, and this situation annoys the other members of the family who are in the house. Blanche, Aunt Eugene, struggles with a headache due to the noise, and Kate, Eugene's mother, warns Eugene to stop playing. Eugene ignores her warning and continues his imaginary game. When Blanche reiterates her discomfort, Kate humorously responds using superiority theory and warns Eugene again. According to the Superiority Theory, the connections between characters and the audience are set on the surface of binary oppositions in the concept of Laughter Theory. Kate's joke about breaking Eugene's arm awakens superior/inferior feelings inside the audience, leading to a natural reaction, laugh.

EXTRACT 2

EUGENE. (Slams ball into his glove angrily. Then he cups his hand, making a megaphone out of it and announces to the grandstands:) ...

“Attention, ladees and gentlemen! Today’s game will be delayed because of my Aunt Blanche’s headache” ... (Act 1, p. 9)

The sound of Eugene’s baseball game continues to give her aunt a headache. After several warnings from Kate, Eugene stops playing and tells the audience why they stopped playing it. The game is cancelled because it makes Blanche have a splitting headache. Nevertheless, we know that baseball games are not cancelled in actual life conditions as it causes headaches in the audience. A play that could be called off can be bad weather, natural disasters, etc.; however, in the play, the only reason is the headache of Eugene’s aunt. In the light of the Incongruity Theory, these exaggerated differences cause absurdity. The audience is quick enough to catch this absurdity of the situation and reacts to it by laughing.

EXTRACT 3

KATE. (comes out of kitchen with a glass of lemonade and roller skate) A roller skate? On my kitchen floor? Do you want me dead, is that what you want?

EUGENE. (rushes into the house) I didn’t leave it there.

KATE. No? Then who? Laurie? Aunt Blanche? Did you ever see them on skates?... (holds out skate) Take this upstairs... Come here!

EUGENE. (approaches, holding the back of his head) Don’t hit my skull, I have a concussion.

KATE. What would you tell your father if he came home and I was dead on the kitchen floor?

EUGENE. I’d say, “Don’t go in the kitchen, Pal” (Act 1, p. 11)

The Incongruity Theory claims that people tend to laugh when they face unexpected events. Based on the interactions between Eugene and Kate, Eugene's mischief, even if he does not misbehave, ends as he is accused at the end of the conversation. In this scene, Simon creates humour by using an unexpected answer from Eugene accommodated in these mutual interactions. While Kate is trying to explain to her son that the skates in the kitchen can cause an accident, the audience, who expects Eugene to respond to this accident with an understanding, encounters a different answer than they expect. The answer is abrupt to the audience; it leads to humour and laughter among the audience and characters.

EXTRACT 4

STAN. [STANLEY] He tells me to sweep up. He says, for this week I’m the cleaning man.

EUGENE. I can’t believe it.

STAN. Everybody is watching me now, waiting to see what I’m going to

do.

(EUGENE nods in agreement)

...Even Andrew stopped crying and watched. I felt the dignity of everyone who worked in that store was in my hands... So I grit my teeth, and I pick up the broom, and there's this big pile of dirt right in the middle of the floor...

EUGENE. Yeah?

STAN. ... And I sweep it all over Mr. Stroheim's shoes. Andrew had just finished shining them this morning, if you want to talk about irony. (Act 1, p. 24)

In this scene, Stan tells his brother about an event that almost caused him to lose his job that day. A cleaner, Andrew, who works at the same place, slips his brush from his hand during cleaning and spills a can of oil on the table. The spilled oil ruins the three hats on the desk. The boss, who witnesses this situation, says that the money for the hats will be deducted from his salary. Stan, who cannot stay indifferent to the attitudes of his boss, wants to protect the cleaner. On the other hand, the angry boss gets furious and tells Stan that he will work as a cleaner next week. Seeing that the employees at the workplace are witnessing his argument with the boss, Stan cannot stand this pressure and sweeps the dust on the boss's shoes, which he polished in the morning. The boss tries to humiliate him by giving him a worse role in the work. Stan, who does not give in to the boss's humiliation, insults him by dusting off the boss's shoes. As emphasized in the Superiority Theory, people have confident expectations in the face of events, but sometimes they do not get the reaction they want. These reactions also create ridiculous situations, and people laugh at them. In the scene, the audience expects Stan's apology or anger directed at the boss's humiliation, but instead, Stan chooses to humiliate the boss. This unexpected situation arouses the feeling of laughter in the audience.

EXTRACT 5

EUGENE. Oh, God! ...As if things weren't bad enough... and now this! ...The ultimate tragedy... Liver and cabbage for dinner! ...A Jewish torture! ...My friend, Marty Gregorio, an A student in Science, told me that cooked cabbage can be smelled farther than sound travelling for seven minutes... If these memoirs are never finished, you'll know it's because I gagged to death one night in the middle of supper.

(We suddenly hear a crash of broken dishes in the kitchen. EUGENE turns towards the sound, then to the audience.)

You're all witnesses. I was sitting here, right? But I'll get blamed for that anyway.

...

EUGENE&KATE. Come in here and help me! (Act 1, pp. 27-28)

In the above dialogues, it is seen that Eugene complains about the Jewish custom of eating liver and cabbage. He dislikes it, and he exaggerates the smell of the meals so much that he even says that he can die from that smell. Eugene's food exaggeration is so hilarious that it goes beyond the audience's usual reaction. According to the Superiority Theory, people laugh at what they see that contradicts their expectations. Eugene's conflicts with his mother rise again after Aunt Blanche breaks the dishes because of her disease. Eugene turns to the audience and tells them, "You're all witnesses. I was sitting here, right? But I'll get blamed for that anyway." After Kate takes care of Blanche, she calls Eugene to help her in the kitchen. Eugene already knows what will happen to him. He repeats what his mother says. These repeated accusations make Eugene look ridiculous. According to the Superiority Theory, Eugene's repeated charges are humorous for the audience, who feel more fortunate when they compare themselves with Eugene's situation.

EXTRACT 6

KATE. Don't talk like that. Something'll come up. You'll go to temple this weekend. You'll pray all Saturday.

JACK. (smiles ironically) There's men in that temple who've been praying for forty years. You know how many prayers have to get answered before my turn comes up? (Act I, p. 31)

Jack is a father who is responsible for taking care of seven people. He takes care of his family and has to look after his sister-in-law's family. In that scene, Jack talks with Kate about how his boss went bankrupt. He lost his job because his boss went bankrupt. Losing his job creates problems and puts pressure on him as Jack has to think about taking care of his family and fulfilling his responsibilities for seven people to be looked after by himself. As a result of this pressure, he complains about his situation. Kate is aware of his apprehensions; however, she is also aware of those anxieties which make him uneasy. Kate then tries to calm Jack down and advises him to go to the temple and pray. However, Jack humorously mocks her advice. His ironic smile is a representation of the Relief Theory. Jack wants to get rid of the pressure put on his shoulders. Humour seems to be the only exit for him to relieve himself. Humour is the temporal catharsis for Jack. Jack's response to his mother also includes ironic incongruity. Jack ironically states that god accepts the prayers in order, saying that there have been men who have been going to the temple for forty years and praying and that his turn will be late. He also mocks faith and does not take his mother's advice

seriously. The interactions between Jack and Kate go beyond the audience's expectations, and this situation is regarded as an absurd situation by the audience, so they laugh at it. We could say that it suitably suits the Relief Theory.

EXTRACT 7

EUGENE. Larry Clurman is my father's age.

LAURIE. He's twenty.

EUGENE. Same thing... You think he's good-looking?

LAURIE. I don't think *anybody's* good-looking

EUGENE. Larry Clurman? He doesn't even have a chin. His tie comes all the way up to his teeth. (Act I, p. 32)

Eugene's conversation with Laurie is about Laurie's new date. Eugene likes Laurie, so he gets jealous of whomever she is in a relationship with. He then expresses his jealousy by saying, "Now I've got Larry Clurman to contend with." Eugene tries to humiliate Larry Clurman because of his jealousy. In this case, he sees himself as the person who deserves Laurie—seeing himself as superior to other candidates causes him to make fun of them. The audience knows Eugene's jealousy and understands why Eugene mocks Larry Clurman. However, to the audience, it is an adolescent's jealousy that seems insensible to them. They think that he has deficiencies in his character because he makes fun of other people due to his jealousy. This time, the audience feels superior to Eugene because they see the flaws in his character. As a result of this superiority, the audience laughs at his defects.

EXTRACT 8

LAURIE. Eugene! Your father wants us to go to the store

EUGENE. Tell him I'm sick. My stomach hurts.

LAURIE. You don't want any ice cream?

EUGENE. (*thinks*) Ice cream? Wait a minute. (*He sits up, looks out at audience.*) It's amazing how quickly you recover from misery when someone offers you ice cream. (Act II, p.72)

Jack asks Lauri to go to the grocery store with Eugene to buy ice cream. Eugene, who is constantly sent to the market to purchase the needs of the house, makes up an excuse when Laurie says they have to go to the market. Eugene, who loves ice cream very much, does not know they will need to buy it. When Laurie said they were going to buy ice cream, he humorously said, "It's amazing how quickly you recover from misery when someone offers you ice cream." utters the sentence. The realization of humor

in this sentence can be explained by the Superiority Theory and the Incongruity Theory. First of all, according to the Superiority Theory, human beings tend to laugh when they encounter issues that someone else is obsessed with or has a weakness for if they do not have the same or similar problems. In the play, the character of Eugene, as soon as he hears the word ice cream in the sentence, says, "I am sick." The fact that he renounces his excuse causes the audience to realize the main character's weakness for ice cream, which causes the audience to laugh.

The audience witnesses Eugene's character makes excuses for something throughout the play, but he still does these things unwillingly, this time encountering an unexpected event. The main character has again made an excuse not to do a job or go to the market, but this time, because he likes ice cream very much, he puts his reason aside and wants to go to the market voluntarily. People tend to laugh in the face of unexpected actions. In this example, the audience's encounter with a different attitude in the face of Eugene's usual attitude brought the humor to the surface.

EXTRACT 9

EUGENE. I would hate it if my father died. Especially with Stanley gone. We'd probably have to move out of this house.

LAURIE. Well... Then you and your mother could come and live with us.

EUGENE. So if we all end up living together, what's the point in breaking up now?

LAURIE. I don't know. I have to finish reading.

(She goes back to her book. EUGENE gets up and looks at the audience.)

EUGENE. You don't get too far talking to Laurie. Sometimes I think the flutter in her heart is really in her brain. (He crosses out of room, closes door and heads down the stairs. To audience.) ... I went into their bedroom and broke the news about Stanley. The monumental news that their eldest son had run off, probably to get killed in France fighting for his country. My mother said, "Go to bed. He'll be home when it gets cold out"...I couldn't believe it. Their own son. It was then that I suspected that Stanley and I were adopted... They finally went to bed and I waited out on the front steps until it got cold... but Stanley never showed up. (Act II, p. 86)

Blanche, who decided to find a job and begin a new life due to her argument with Kate, wants to leave the house. After Stanley's departure and the quarrel at home, Eugene discusses these matters with Laurie. Laurie believes that all this is because of her father's death. Eugene then starts talking about what would happen if his father died, but Laurie ends the

conversation by stating that she has to read the book. Throughout the play, Laurie appears before the audience in the image of an intelligent girl, so Eugene sarcastically criticizes her by using her illness; heart flutter, to the audience; "You don't get too far talking to Laurie. Sometimes I think the flutter in her heart is really in her brain." Eugene's analogy that Laurie's real problem is not in her heart but her mental health is presented to the audience with a humorous style that reflects the Superiority Theory.

Eugene's humorous analogy provides how superiority theory leads people to laugh. This analogy implies that the conversation is not progressing because Laurie constantly gives rational answers. The concept of superiority, which makes the audience laugh, emerges because the audience realizes that a person who always offers reasonable solutions is obsessed with this issue. They feel superior to people obsessed because they do not have such an obsession.

EXTRACT 10

STAN. Here. It's for you. Don't leave it lying around the room.

(EUGENE starts to open it. It's post card size.)

EUGENE. What is it?

STAN. Open it slowly.

(EUGENE does)

Slower than that... Close your eyes.

(EUGENE does. It is unwrapped.)

Now look!

(EUGENE looks. His eyes almost pop open.)

EUGENE. OH, MY GOD! ...SHE'S NAKED! YOU CAN SEE EVERYTHING!! (Act II, p. 98)

The crises in the house begin to resolve one by one After Stan returns home. Stan, who does not forget his brother Eugene during his days away from home, buys a gift for Eugene in exchange for a money loan a friend owes him. His gift is a poster with a naked woman. When he gave this poster to Eugene, Eugene's reactions to the woman on the poster being naked made the audience laugh. In this extract, it is possible to see the traces of the Incongruity Theory in the reactions that make the audience laugh. In the eyes of the audience, Eugene's interest in the female body catches them throughout the play as a tool of laughter outside the plot.

EXTRACT 11

STAN. It belongs to the guy who owes me two and a half bucks. I can keep it until he pays me back.

EUGENE. Don't take the money. Let him keep it for a while. (ACT II,

p. 99)

Eugene, who examines the poster of the naked woman, reminds him that a friend bought the poster in exchange for a debt he owed him. Fearing that he will lose the poster if the debtor gives the money, Eugene tells Stan that he should not ask for the money back. This situation, which reveals Eugene's adolescence, is observed in the audience as a laugh under the influence of the Superiority Theory. The audience sees itself inwardly superior to Eugene when his obsession with the female body is staged as an obsession since adolescence. Eugene's obsessive behavior triggered laughter in the audience, just as a jester ridiculed himself with clumsiness to entertain the noble class.

EXTRACT 12

KATE. (*yells up*) Eugene! We're all waiting for you!

EUGENE. (*calls down*) Be right there! I just have to write down something. (*He looks at photo again, then picks up fountain pen and his Memoir book and begins to write.*) ..."October the second, six twenty five p.m. A momentous moment in the life of I, Eugene Morris Jerome... I have seen the Golden Palace of the Himalayas... Puberty is over. Onwards and upwards..!" (Act II, p. 100)

In the last scene, which tells about the days when everything was back at home, a humorous approach was captured by both Incongruity and Superiority Theories. Eugene's interest in the female body is a common phenomenon underlying these theories. Eugene, who discovered the female body with the poster brought by Stanley, expresses his situation vaguely, likening it to his discovery of the Golden Palace of the Himalayas. This analogy creates a conflicting effect on the audience because there is no logical connection between the female body and the Golden Palace of the Himalayas. On the other hand, the female body has been the factor that led to laughter as an obsession with the theory of superiority. When he is the only one missing at the table eaten with her family members, her mother calls out to Eugene to join them at the dinner table. Eugene, whose curiosity to see a naked woman's body throughout the play finally ends, begins to write about this situation in memoirs. He happily welcomed this, stating that his adolescence was now over. Observing these sexual desires and obsessions throughout the play, the audience witnesses it one last time at the end of the play. Eugene's weakness for the female body causes the audience to see him as superior to him. As stated in the Superiority Theory; the nature of man lies in the formation of a sense of superiority over those he sees as weak or who have counterproductive attitudes in an event. This feeling

triggers the superior to laugh at the vulnerable.

4. SUMMARY

All in all, we have analysed twelve extracts from *Brighton Beach Memoirs* to observe how Simon utilises three traditional humour/laughter theories in the play. The Incongruity Theory is the most prevalent one observed in the play compared to the other two theories. We can cite the main reason for this that Simon often uses absurd, unusual, unexpected elements, situations, or similes for humor. His sense of humour makes the audience to disagree with the context and the humor element used, and laughter occurs. Eugene, symbolising Neil Simon, mostly represents the Incongruity Theory as he mainly resorts to the absurd and unusual analogies. Interpretations independent of the content of the text are among the most frequently used techniques in similes and reconciliations. While using these techniques, he especially applies contrasting elements.

It has also been determined that the extracts, in which the Superiority Theory is seen, show similarities at three different points. The first is due to the fact that one character sees himself as superior to the other. What causes the feeling of superiority is due to the characters hitting each other's weaknesses on their faces. Another similar situation is when the characters exhibit obsessive and repetitive actions. The characters' obsessive attitudes and behaviours, getting out of control, and repetitive speeches or actions in the face of a passion or desire are similar. The audience, who has the chance to observe this situation directly and therefore feels superior to the character, and they react with laughter to what they witness on stage. The last similarity of the Superiority Theory stems from the audience mocking the subject that is mocked on the stage. In this similarity, the audience makes the mockery by observing indirectly. The situation on the stage is a laughing matter to the audience. The audience is neither ridiculed nor mocked or humiliated because they feel that they are superior to the characters on stage. In all three plays we have observed the Superiority Theory.

The Relief Theory is the least common theory among the laughter theories in the study. The main reason for this is that the inner world of Simon's characters is not mentioned in his plays. We can understand the characters' moods with the help of events or by expressing them. In this study, we can observe that Relief Theory is similar in two subcategories. The first common subcategory; The tension, excitement, and atmosphere of the events in the plot relax the audience and make them laugh. The relaxation occurs when the tension level of the event or a situation that disturbs the

audience. The other subcategory is the feeling of relaxation that comes and triggers laughter in the audience, who watch the play only passively in the theatre when their thoughts are expressed through a character on the stage, and the relaxation triggers laughter. Further researchers may study dramatic texts from the perspectives of humour theories combined with linguistic and stylistic elements.

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Destek ve teşekkür: Çalışmada herhangi bir kurum ya da kuruluşan destek alınmamıştır.

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