Humour and Identity in Jewish American Fiction

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No Laughing Matter

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INTRODUCTION

The initial impetus for writing the following book was my fondness of Jewish humour and Jewish American literature in general. Such incentive was reflected in the selection of works written by contemporary Jewish American writers which instantly appear as humorous. Nevertheless, after having studied the role of humour as profoundly as possible, I have learned that humour employed in contemporary Jewish American literature performs as more serious than amusing. Therefore, it is essential to clarify that despite the appearance of the word 'humour' in the title and the content of the book, one should not expect to rely on its entertaining function. On the contrary, as will be shown, humour in contemporary Jewish American fiction performs a serious task and therefore should be taken seriously.

Jewish American literature is recognized as a distinctive part of American literary history. Its development has been the concern of manifold academic research focusing on the historical forces that defined the lives of Jewish immigrants to America, the acceptance or refusal of Jewish religious and cultural heritage and the universality of specific Jewish themes in literary writings. The result of this development is a vast collection of literature reflecting the existence of a particular minority with the imprint of its own voice in the mosaic of multicultural America. However, in an attempt to define Jewish American literature, it has been assumed that there are no clear boundaries that could capture the substance of this literature. Two major publications on Jewish American literature *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (2003) and *Encyclopedia of Jewish American Literature* (2009) do not include one single definition of the term. The definition by Irving Howe that Jewish American literature represents texts which draw on immigrant experience has become less relevant in the last three decades (1977, 5). On the other hand, Aarons argues that "Jewish American literature is still an immigrant fiction because of the complexities of the question of what it means to be a Jew in America" (1987, 381). Other literary critics postulate specific criteria for inclusion, measuring Jewishness by various specifications such as the depiction of particular Jewish themes, religious affiliation, the use of the language or biological or ethnic background of the writer. However, none of the mentioned criteria is capable of delineating the growing and changing body of Jewish American literature as well as the range of the themes it addresses.

Inability to precisely define Jewish American literature is due to the fact that the identity of American Jews is rather elusive, therefore, in order to find specific common boundaries is more than challenging. Tresa Grauer suggests that "definitions of Jewish American literature are clearly inextricably entwined with the terms by which we understand Jewish American identity" (2003, 270). Grauer's proposition is based on the concerns that readers may have about the nature and meaning of identity and those are reflected explicitly in the literature itself. She explains that "our critical questions are often the writers' questions as well: what do we mean by Jewish American identity, anyway? And why should it matter?" (Ibid.). The question of identity is not confined only to Jewish American literature. In postmodern period of shifting borders, transnationalism and multiculturalism, it is eminent that the traditional representations of identity have been changed and replaced. Even though, the three major Jewish American writers from mid-to-late-20th century, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth, all at one time rejected the label "Jewish writer", it is clear that Jewish American literature is particularly concerned with issues of identity and such evidence is abundant in the literature of the last three decades. The commonly accepted fact, that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative is also confirmed by Tresa Grauer who states that "the rich array of literary texts that has emerged over the past twenty-five years should be examined less for its coherence as a body of literature defined *by* an identity as for its focus *on* it (Ibid., 270). Apparently, Grauer is not the only scholar suggesting to search the answers as to what identity is in the textuality. Kugelmass claims that "to this day Jewish textuality – whether religious or secular in orientation – constitutes a collective meditation for a changing and strikingly amorphous entity that focuses on the questions 'Who we are and why?' (2003, 5). He states that "such queries are uniquely poignant for a group that retains national consciousness while existing as a diasporic people with considerable historical depth" (Ibid.). Even though, it is obvious that the issue of identity is a major theme in contemporary Jewish American literature, there has been very little suggesting how to approach it and what particular aspects of Jewish identity are prevalent. Bearing in mind the multitude of possible approaches to Jewish identity the book embarks on hitherto unprecedented proposition which connects Jewish identity and humour.

Jewish humour has always been present in Jewish history and has served as an important mechanism for enacting and communicating Jewish identity. Thus, the idea that the complex issue of Jewish identity may be partly based on the theoretical assumption that the social function of humour is the construction of solidarity and in-group identity, has become the impetus

for this book. The social functions of humour and their relation to identity is approached by multiple theoretical assertions presented in chapter one.

The book focuses on the depiction of the most significant representations of identity in contemporary Jewish American fiction with the emphasis on the role of humour present in selected writings of contemporary Jewish American writers. The main idea of the book is that humour is a strategic textual device which constructs Jewish identity in contemporary Jewish American literature. Secondly, we also suggest that elements of humour present in contemporary Jewish American literature have characteristics of traditional Jewish humour.

The first chapter aims to elucidate the complexity of humour by reviewing the state of research into the topic, its historical development, its definition, and its essential relevance to literature. Humour in literature is usually approached from the perspective of two distinct methodologies. The first perspective deals with particular universalist theories of humour founded by Freud, Bergson, Kant, Hobbes and Bakhtin. Even though these theories serve as a good theoretical basis for a more psychological or philosophical examination of humour, this book will address them only briefly. The second perspective is defended by social scientists and psychologists, who reject the belief that derivations of humour are universal and focus on empirical research and case studies "to understand humour in a specific, individual context" (Steed, 2004, 48). The book particularly emphasizes the importance of context and thus, defends the interpretation of humour based on this second idea.

The second part of the first chapter reviews a number of assertions which classify humour as a social phenomenon and qualify it as a plausible subject of research into identity in literature. Furthermore, this part introduces the notion of Jewish humour, its origins and characteristics. Due to the large differences in the geographical, socioeconomic and cultural conditions of Jewish peoples, the term "Jewish humour" has come to represent a number of distinct meanings; it is possible to speak of Eastern European Jewish humour, Moroccan Jewish humour, Jewish American humour or Israeli Jewish humour. It is therefore, crucial to note that the intention of this book is to discuss Jewish humour based on 19th century Eastern European origins in an American context. While the formal constraints of the book demand that the term "Jewish humour" be employed as an 'umbrella' term, the author remains fully aware of the complexity of the term.

Having examined the general definitions of humour and Jewish humour in particular, chapter three focuses on the development of Jewish American literature with an emphasis on fiction which can be designated as

humorous. However, historical examination of Jewish American literature in terms of employment of humour, would require separate research and most probably a beneficial one, nevertheless, for the purposes of the book it limits itself to a brief historical review.

Although it is problematic to attempt to categorize Jewish people, it should be pointed out that the scope of our research is limited to the largest group of the Jewish American minority – Ashkenazi Jews, or more specifically to authors who share Ashkenazi origin. Such a distinction is necessary due to the multifaceted presence of Jews in America based on their geographical and historical origin. The fourth chapter of the book aspires to explain this issue in a more detailed manner. In addition to discussing the complexity of Jewish identity and ethnicity, this section targets two basic representations of identity such as home and the use of language. Such a discussion is essential, as these particular representations of identity are the most prevalent in the analysed works.

From these discussions of theoretical background, we aim to proceed to the analytical part of the book which contains three chapters dealing with selected fiction reflecting our theoretical findings. These chapters will examine the multilayered novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Absurdistan* (2006) by Gary Shteyngart and the short story collection *There Are Jews in My House* (2003) by Lara Vapnyar, from which, two short stories have been chosen for discussion. The selection of literary texts is based on several aspects as is explained in chapter on selection criteria.

Based on theoretical considerations of identity and humour, the analysis of selected literary texts focuses on the most significant representations of identity and the role of humour. The parameters of analysis include historical and cultural contexts and humorous interaction between the protagonists. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on the means and strategies of conveying humour, and on the interpretation of thematic and functional focus of humour. The aim of the analysis is to prove the initial idea which proposes that humour is a strategic textual device which constructs Jewish identity in contemporary Jewish American literature. In addition, it also tries to demonstrate that humour present in contemporary Jewish American literature has characteristics based in traditional Jewish humour.

CHAPTER ONE

HUMOUR UNVEILED

The following chapter aims to conceptualize briefly the phenomenon of humour from a general perspective, examining the current state of research and a brief historical survey of the term. Such elucidation is necessary in order to proceed to a more particular discussion of humour and its connection to literature. This part also aims to explicate the theoretical assertions of the social functions of humour.

Having conceptualized the basic intricacies of humour and its social functions, this chapter will also discuss the origins of Jewish humour, its definitions and its main characteristics following the historical development of Jewish humour in American literature and culture. The final paragraph of the chapter recapitulates the most significant conclusions. Research into humour is a fairly new field of study. Usually, it is not restricted to one single discipline; it can be applied in a variety of areas, for instance in education, linguistics, management, health, psychology. However, the major part of humour research has historically taken place in the fields of philosophy and literature focusing on the aspect of 'comic'. Today, scholars still have difficulty in defining humour, and it is not the focus of this book to contribute to this discussion or to attempt to fathom humour as such. Yet, in order to provide comprehensive background to the main idea of the book, it is considered indispensable to explain fundamentals of humour and to elucidate some of its complexities. The following paragraph focuses on the state of humour research. Despite numerous attempts to define humour, researchers involved in the theory of humour claim themselves that there is no single satisfactory definition which would be capable of delineating the essence of humour. Croce states that "humour is indefinable like all psychological states" (in Ermida, 2008, 2). Apparently, humour contains too many academic constructions and terminologies to allow it to be placed in one particular universal definition. In order to define humour, researchers stumble across different historical, cultural and sociological perceptions. As English puts it, "there is no utterance that is always and everywhere laughable; there is no universal joke-text" (1994, 6). By way of explanation, humour is an extremely diverse

phenomenon which depends on various approaches; it is, therefore, very difficult to make generalizations about it. This poses a serious problem for humour research, especially when it comes to finding analytical models. Hence, the biggest issue which preoccupies humour researchers nowadays, is the plausibility of the findings of such research; in essence, how can humour be measured and how can the measurements of humour be applied? Rod Martin, a prominent researcher into humour, claims that "rigorous evidence is scarce in humour research" (2007, 331). It is not only the elusiveness of the concept of humour or its lack of plausibility which is the problem; there are several other reasons as to why it is such a challenge to present a scientifically valid and satisfactory definition. The first argument against such a possibility is that humour is such a diverse phenomenon that essentially, anything can be an object of it. Also, humour is dependent on many factors such as age, gender, culture, civilization, social group, and context. Secondly, humour research lacks terminological accord. The evolution of the term has shown what a lengthy process it has undergone; yet, no valid terminological consensus has been reached. The lack of terminological unity reflects the fact that, for many years, humour has been disregarded as a serious academic concept.

Harre and Lamb observe that, until recently, psychologists and other social scientists regarded humour and laughter as "topics either too taboo or trivial for systematic inquiry", and it is only in the last twenty years or so that psychologists have begun to contribute significantly to the base of knowledge on humour (in Roeckelein, 2002, 283). Similarly, O'Connell asserts there is "no comprehensive network of facts about the development and purposes of humour in human existence" (Ibid., 1). Nonetheless, humour research has gained its significance in recent years, mainly in the fields of psychology, medicine and, most notably, in linguistics. Some linguistic models have also been employed in literature, for instance in Leon Rappoport's *Punchlines: The Case of Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humour* (2005), or Neal R. Norrick's and Delia Chiaro's *Humour in Interaction* (2009). Historically, there is a wide array of humour theories which prove the ongoing scientific interest in treating humour as a serious academic concept. Today, humour theories can be grouped into four different approaches.

Superiority theories go back to Plato and Aristotle and were later supported by Thomas Hobbes and Henri Bergson. Briefly stated, the fundamental assertion of superiority theories is that laughter is an expression of superiority, a theory which is nowadays considered as rather limiting conceptualization of humour.

Release and relief theories, proposed by Herbert Spenser and Sigmund Freud, describe humour and laughter as safety valves used to avoid

further escalation, and to release tensions and anxieties stemming from social inhibitors, such as taboos or conflicts. This approach is mainly related to the analysis of jokes.

Conflict/control theories of humour held by sociologists propose that humour serves as an instrument for indirectly articulating otherwise strongly provocative propositions, softening the criticism and thus, avoiding aggression.

Incongruity theories are based in philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Shopenhauer, later developed by Henri Bergson, Arthur Koestler, and John Morreall. The basic notion of incongruity is that humour is created from the combinations of disparate fields which are not usually thought of together.

Paul Lewis suggests that all these theories "are not mutually exclusive but overlap and complement each other; none of them can provide a conclusive and exhaustive explanation for all instances of humour, as all concern themselves with different aspects" (1989, 4).

Another problematic area of applying the theories surveyed above is the nature of the analytical models. While theories which investigate the inner workings of humour such as linguistics, cognitive science and artificial intelligence may use measuring and modelling methods of research, in the field of philosophy, literary studies, sociology, anthropology and media studies, description is used as the primary method of analysis. As was stated in the introduction, humour in the book is researched in a specific individual cultural and historical context and it thus, employs describing methods of analysis. It appears that the more partial research is carried out, the more universal conclusions can be drawn. Paul Lewis emphasizes that "it is time for critics to accept what humour researchers have been saying for the past two decades: the study of parts is necessary before the whole can be understood; indeed, that such a comprehensive book may never occur because the concept of humour is complex: a whole made up of many parts, many variables, many potential topics of inquiry" (1989, 6).

Despite the fact that humour studies are in general an area rather neglected by literary criticism, the growing interest in looking at literary texts from the perspective of humour would appear to prove the opposite. John Lowe argues that "much of the best recent work in humour research has been done by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, rather than by literary critics and ironically, few of these social scientists appear to be familiar with ethnic literature; thus, the texts for their analyses are almost always jokes" (1986, 449). In the field of the Jewish studies, various properties of Jewish humour and their connection to historical development in oppressive social and economic conditions have been discussed notably

by Freud, 1905, Grotjahn, 1987, Janus, 1975, Mindess, 1972 (Davies, 1991, 189). Yet, Lowe's assertion is particularly correct when applied to the study of Jewish literature. Despite the fact that Jewish jokes and the Jewish sense of humour are fairly pervasive themes in humour literature, the research focuses mainly on the analysis of jokes (linguistic or psychological) and lacks coherent interdisciplinary research. Therefore, John Lowe suggests that literary scholars dealing with ethnic humour in American literature "should look outside their disciplines to find important tools and strategies for their analysis" (1986, 449). Lowe's suggestion is that by incorporating the work of folklorists, anthropologists, linguists, sociologists and psychologists into literary studies, "critics can achieve a greater understanding of how the dynamics of ethnic humour shape literature" (Ibid., 451). Researchers into humour acknowledge that the aims and methods of different areas of humour research vary and that various applications of humour can occur. Despite the fact that rigorous evidence in humour research is intangible, it is still possible to use some of the findings as a basis for more contextual research. Before specifying how humour research is conveyed in this book, it is essential to define what humour is.

The Essence of Humour: Definitions, Taxonomy and Historical survey

Having examined the complexity of the state of research on humour, it is now necessary to focus on the existing definitions of humour. As suggested above, there are several distinct aspects of humour, and this can make an exact definition problematic. Paul Lewis contests that "it has become common for researchers to insist that no single formula will ever describe the complex interactions of stimulus, organism and response factors that constitute humour" (1989, 4). Similarly, Saul Steinberg also succinctly emphasizes that "trying to define humour is one of the definitions of humour" (in McGraw, 2011). And yet, the historical development of the term shows that there have been many attempts to do so. Before considering some of the existing definitions of humour, the following paragraphs look at the problematic nomenclature of the term.

Nowadays, as Ruch explains, "two taxonomic systems coexist side by side and, contrary to what happens in other disciplines, they do not meet with a normative usage" (1998, 6). According to his distinction there are two historical nomenclatures of the term. The first stems from the field of aesthetic as studied by philosophers and psychologists where the comic – defined as the faculty able to make one laugh or amuse – is distinguished from other aesthetic qualities, such as beauty, harmony, or tragedy. Ruth

explicates that humour is simply "one element of the comic" as are wit, fun, nonsense, sarcasm, ridicule, satire, or irony (Ibid.). The second terminological system, largely used by current Anglo-American research (as well as is used in everyday language) uses humour as "the umbrella-term" for all phenomena of this field (Ibid.). For the purposes of the book, the term humour is based on Ruch's second terminological nomenclature which is a neutral term and encompasses all types of literary humour which are studied in the analytical part of the book. Having considered the aspect of terminology, the following section briefly reviews historical development of the term humour and subsequently its definitions.

The origins of humour date back to ancient times, most particularly in the early writings of the Greeks (Roeckelein, 2002, 2). Originally, the term referred to any of four bodily fluids that determined human's health and temperament (Ibid.). Hippocrates maintained that an imbalance among the four fluids of humours resulted in pain and disease, and that good health was achieved via a balance of the four humours (Ibid., 11). Even though, the medical etymology lost its significance and is considered irrelevant today, it had contributed a great deal to the usage of the term in psychology and later in other social sciences. Ruch states that in the 17th century the meaning of humour was expanded to include behaviour deviating from social norms, or abnormality in general, and thus, provided the basis for the term's entrance into the field of comic (1998, 8). Towards the end of the 18th century, the French devised the dichotomy between *humeur* and *humour*, distinguishing between the medical or temperamental humour and humour as a "rational mechanism" (Ermida, 2008, 17). It was only in the 17th century when humour slowly began to enter the lexical field of the comic (Ruch, 1998, 9). The next turning point, as Ruch remarks, is "the positive connotation which the previously neutral term acquired" (Ibid.). In the 19th century, this positive meaning received philosophical support (Ermida, 5), for instance, Coleridge claimed that "the humorous consists in a certain reference to the general and the universal" and that humour appears "whenever the finite is contemplated in comparison with the infinite" (Ibid., 7). Likewise, Schopenhauer defended the sublime character of humour, which is often "artistic and poetic", and should not be confused with indiscriminately comic situations (Ibid). Humour – or sense of humour - acquired the status of a cardinal English virtue, together with others such as common sense, tolerance and compromise, thus, becoming an integral part of the English life style (Ibid., 6). As a consequence of the political predominance of the British Empire, the positive connotation of the term 'sense of humour' became definitively rooted overseas, is still surviving nowadays. Ermida concludes that the lexicological evolution of the word "humour", indebted

to various legacies, explains the fact that many authors have sought to define the phenomenon along the scale of the comic. Many attempts at defining humour are, in fact, linked to distinctive taxonomies which suggest limits and differences (2008, 7).

Excellent collection on definitions of humour is presented by John E. Roeckelein who succinctly enumerates various definitions of humour in *Psychology of Humour* (2002). He asserts that in a style and succinctness that seems satisfying in terms of a good balance between modern and ancient approaches, as well as in terms of theoretical and functional aspects, Corsini (1999) defines *humour* as "the capacity to perceive or express the amusing aspects of situations" (Roeckelein, 2002, 22). R. A. Martin defines *humour* as "a rather broad range of phenomena associated with the perception, expression, or appreciation of amusing, comical, or absurdly incongruous ideas, situations, or events" (2007, 45). Alternatively, Ziv defines humour as "a form of communication with an intent to amuse, including special cognitive and emotional characteristics, that causes a physiological reaction" (1998, 9). As this array of definitions show the complexity of humour cannot be delineated by one universal definition, nevertheless, certain illumination can be achieved by exploring functions of humour as the next section attempts.

Social Functions of Humour

Even after narrowing the phenomenon of humour to, for instance, ethnic humour, one stumbles across the same difficulties as noted earlier. Paul McGhee, a psychologist of humour, has stated that "it is preposterous at this point to try to explain cognitive, social, motivational, and physiological aspects of humour within a single system" (1979, 10). The question which arises is how humour can be applied as a theoretical concept if it lacks its own definition. One possible way forward lies in "reassessing the work that has been done in differing fields using varying 'texts', selecting any material that proves useful, even though it may deal with only one group, or only one aspect of humour in general, or a particular aspect of immigration and acculturation" (Ibid., 41). McGhee's proposition functions as the most useful for the partial approach to humour. Taking this proposition into consideration, other possibility is to concentrate on specific aspects or roles of humour. As indicated in the introduction, the basic theoretical assumption in the hyperbook is based on the social functions of humour. Therefore, instead of attempting to fathom the universality of humour definition, the following paragraph concentrates on humour as a social phenomenon which eventually serves the purposes of the book.

Ziv argues that humour, as is consistent with the aspects of any social message, fulfils certain functions; uses certain techniques, has content, and is used appropriately in certain situations (i.e., it covers why people use humour – its functions, how it is transmitted – its techniques, what it communicates - its content, where and when it is communicated – the situation) (1998, 9). Ziv notes that some of these aspects of humour are universal and characterize humour everywhere; others are more influenced by culture (Ibid.). As already explained in the introduction, humour research in the book is based on empirical case studies limited by specific culture, therefore it excludes 'universal aspects' of humour as Ziv suggests. Even though he acknowledges that some aspects of humour may be interpreted universally, he still insists that in order to interpret humour as precisely as possible, one needs to look at its functions. Similarly, to Ziv's reference to functions of humour, Ermida also states that instead of conceptualizing humour into a universal definition, one should consider circumstantial questions, such as "when, how and where does humour take place?", "who produces and receives humour?", "what objectives does it have?" and "what functions – social, interpersonal, ideological, political – does it serve?" (2008, 3). Paul Lewis also asserts that most broadly, if we are going to think precisely about humour in literature, we need to distinguish between its form, content, function and context (1989, 8).

As demonstrated above, humour fulfils certain social functions in order to be examined more precisely. Kuipers maintains that jokes and other humorous utterances are a "form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction and these humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped, and often quite particular to a specific time and place" (2008, 368). The topics and themes about which people joke are generally central to the social, cultural and moral order of a society or a social group (Ibid.). Likewise, Ziv suggests that the social function of humour may be considered as having two aspects: the relationship within a group (involving the social system within which personal acquaintances and interactions between and among group members exist), and social phenomena (involving society as a whole where humour functions as a social corrective) (1984, 41). Moreover, he notes that various aspects of group life (e.g., formation of group atmosphere or character, lessening of tension and narrowing of conflicts, cohesion, hierarchy, and the maintenance of group norms) are connected with one another and appear in an interlocked and dynamic fashion in which the multifaceted phenomenon of humour is an important aspect of each component of a group's life (Ibid.). Lastly, he also suggests that humour and laughter may serve as a tool for correcting, ameliorating, or improving society (Ibid.).

Already cited sociologist Giselinde Kuipers claims that despite the social character of humour, sociology, the discipline which studies society and social relations, "has not concerned itself much with humour" (2008, 368). In her study, "The Sociology of Humour" (2008) she starts her historical examination of social aspect of humour with Sigmund Freud whose first full-fledged theory of humour was developed in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) where he integrated elements of relief and incongruity theory combined with his psychoanalytic theory. While Freud's theories on humour are much disputed, he was the first to systematically address what Kuipers calls "sociological questions about humour", hence his influence on the sociology of humour has been immense (Ibid., 370). Firstly, Freud discussed the importance of social relationships between the teller of the joke, his audience, and (when applicable) the butt of the joke. In other words, he introduced the social relationship into the analysis of humour. More importantly, Freud paid attention to the relationship between "humour and – socially constructed – taboos" (Ibid.). Another early theorist of humour who applied sociological insight to the subject was Henri Bergson. His book *Laughter* (1911) proposed what is today known as the social function of humour. In his view, we laugh at forms of behaviour or thought that are contrary to what is socially expected and accepted (Kuipers, 2008, 371). Likewise, Ziv also maintains that laughter has "a punitive effect aiming at correcting behaviour" (1988, 45). Referring to Bergson, his most relevant observations have to do with the social character of laughter. Bergson describes humour and laughter as essentially social and shared. Laughing at someone, on the other hand, functions as "a means of exclusion, and hence as a social corrective and form of social control" (Kuipers, 2008, 372). After Freud and Bergson and over the course of the twentieth century, a number of approaches emerged that are more or less specific to the social sciences. Perhaps the most succinct note on humour and its social function is given by Werner Sollors who asserts that "comic boundaries can be rapidly created and moved, as communities of laughter arise at the expense of some outsiders and then reshape, integrate those outsiders, and pick other targets (in Lowe, 1986, 441). He continues to theorize that "in all cases the community of laughter itself is an ethicizing phenomenon, as we develop a sense of, we-ness in laughing with others (Ibid.).

More contemporary research on social functions of humour has been carried out by the anthropologist Mahadev Apte. According to his theories, the joking relationships can mark group identity and signal the inclusion or exclusion of a new individual, and consequently, that joking relationships manifest a consciousness of group identity or solidarity (1985, 66). Furthermore, in his book *Humour and laughter: An anthropological*

approach (1985) he discusses humour, ethnicity, and intergroup relations from an anthropological perspective and explores the nature of ethnic humour and its relationship to sociocultural systems but also proposes relevant theoretical concepts; the forms and techniques of ethnic humour; and the sociocultural basis of the text, context, and the function of ethnic humour. Apte maintains that intercultural contacts and interactions have led societies to formulate opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about peoples who are culturally "different"; the "images" developed, in turn, become the bases of "ethnic humour" (1985, 108-148). Probably, the most exciting revelation in terms of ethnic humour and its relation to identity is his definition of ethnic humour as a "type of humour in which fun is made of the perceived behaviour, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity" (Ibid., 140). In the same degree is the significance of the function of humour as a social bond acknowledged by David Viktoroff who states that, "one never laughs alone – laughter is always the laughter of a particular social group" (in Raskin, 303). Viktoroff's assertion of laughter, and therefore humour, as "a communal, social event underscores the notion that humour is a social activity, a social phenomenon" (Ibid.). In sociology, the so-called functionalist approach interprets humour in terms of the social functions it fulfils for a society or social group (Kuipers, 2008, 371). Especially in older studies of humour, functionalist interpretations tended to stress how humour (and other social phenomena) maintain and support the social order (Ibid.). Another view on humour functioning as means of social cohesion was proposed by Coser who states that, "humour not only is a sign of closeness among friends, it is also an effective way of forging social bond" (Ibid., 368). Another connection between humour and its social function is mentioned by Raskin who acknowledges that "the scope and degree of mutual understanding in humour varies directly with the degree to which the participants share their social backgrounds" (in Carrell, 2000, 1). Likewise, in *National Styles of Humour* by Avner Ziv, humour is defined as "a way of expressing human needs in a socially accepted manner" (1988, X).

Nevertheless, it may be also argued that social function of humour can work also in the opposite direction and that humour may be subversive. However, the focus of the book is to emphasize humour´s cohesiveness, even though it would be also interesting to investigate its subversive function.

All the assertions outlined above undeniably acknowledge that humour serves a predominantly social function. Such clarification is fundamental for the hypobook which proposes that humour is a strategic textual device which constructs Jewish identity, as well as the secondary

hypobook which suggests that the elements of humour present in contemporary Jewish American literature share the same characteristics as those of traditional Jewish humour. Having outlined an array of evidence to support that humour bears predominantly social function and is a tool for marking group identity and cohesion, the question of how relevant humour research in literature arises.

Humour and Literature

The importance of context in humour research has already been outlined in the introduction to this book. Nancy Walker points out that "Humour, like all forms of communication, requires context in order to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding, and values, which are subject to evolution from one century or even one decade to the next" (1998, 4). Nevertheless, the underlying question is that of how plausible the literary text is as a subject for humour research.

Clearly, literary discourse as is pointed out in the following paragraphs, has great scope for humour analysis as Van Dijk affirms "it follows the principles holding for any kind of discourse and communication" (1979, 151). Likewise, Stubbs asserts that "it is not adequate to separate analysis of spoken, written and literary discourse, and […] there are interpretive procedures, particularly concerned with the interpretation of ambiguous and indirect speech acts, which are common to both spoken and written literary language" (1983, 213). Isabel Ermida in her study, *The Language of Comic Narratives: Humour Construction in Short Stories* (2008) lists other instances of the plausibility of literary text for humour research. She mentions Petoffi who considers humour on literary level to be a part of sociocultural framework when he states that "the humorous text, as a written object conceived on the linguistic, narrative and literary levels, is part of a context, and that this context, entails shared world knowledge and a certain socio-cultural framework (Ermida, 2008, 138). Petoffi's predication that humour conceived on the literary level is a part of sociocultural framework is supported by Pratt's emphasis that literature, like any other form of verbal interaction, is a "discursive situation in which sender and recipient are virtually, even if not physically, co-present, displaying mutual compromises and obeying conditions of adequacy partly similar to those which preside over non-literary communicative contexts" (1977, 115). Regarding the significance of a context in humour analysis, Pratt affirms that

> Far from being autonomous, self-contained, self-motivating, context-free objects which exist independently from the

> "pragmatic" concerns of "everyday" discourse, literary works
> take place in a context, and like any other utterances, they
> cannot be described apart from that context. More importantly,
> like so many of the characteristics believed to constitute
> literariness, the basic speaker/audience situation which prevails
> in a literary work is not fundamentally or uniquely literary
> (Ibid.).

Both Petoffi´s and Pratt´s assumptions suggest that literary text if focused on a context is plausible for humour research.

The sections above aimed at introducing the phenomenon of humour. It started by reviewing the current state of humour research, explaining the serious problems involved in humour conceptualization due to the elusiveness of the term, the lack of both terminological accord and rigorous analytical models, and also due to the fact that humour research is a fairly new academic subject. The chapter also delineates and defines the main basic theories of humour and the historical development of the term. Consequently, it outlines the scope of research according to which humour possesses an important social function and thus, serves as an important mechanism of "group cohesion" which eventually reflects individual or collective identity. It also develops the basic terminological use of the term for the purposes of this book, which is based on current Anglo-American research, meaning a neutral term which encompasses all types of literary humour. Furthermore, the chapter succinctly defends the plausibility of humour research in literature and states evidence to support this. Finally, the chapter outlines how humour is investigated in the analytical section of the book focusing on the function, form, context, and content of humour.

Conceptualization of Jewish Humour

Now, it is important to focus on the subject of the research as stated in the introduction which is Jewish humour. Before even approaching the subject of Jewish humour in an analytical fashion, it is essential to elucidate what is Jewish humour as demonstrated by the research based on various sources. This part of the book will explicate the survey of publications dealing with Jewish humour, origins of Jewish humour, its definitions and its main characteristics following the historical development of Jewish humour in American literature and culture.

Even though Jewish humour is a well-known concept, it is a relatively recent area of study in terms of academic discourse. Despite the fact that Jewish humour is mentioned in a number of anthologies, collections, essays and studies, the scholarly consideration of the subject has

emerged only recently. To date, only a few serious works have been published which devote scholarly attention to the subject. Incidentally, as already noted in the previous chapter, it is thanks to Sigmund Freud that Jewish humour became the object of research. His famous study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) is still considered to be the seminal publication not only in terms of psychoanalytic approach to humour but also a sociological one[1]. In addition, Stephen J. Whitfield examined characteristics of Jewish humour in his essays "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humour" (1985) and "Towards an Appreciation of American Jewish humour" (2005). Partial research into Jewish humour has been carried out by Avner Ziv who edited two collections of studies *Semites & Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humour* (1993) and *Jewish Humour* (1998). However, since Ziv's main area of study is psychology, most of the essays presented in both books deal predominantly with the psychological or educational processes related to humour. Some literary research concentrating on the use of humour in Jewish literature was carried out by Sarah Blacher Cohen who edited a collection of essays *Jewish Wry*: *Essays on Jewish humour* (1987) which discusses the writings of Sholom Aleichem, Philip Roth and Stanley Elkin among others. Furthermore, many articles and studies have focused on the traditional representations of humour based on Yiddish folktales, anecdotes, and comic types, or even on more contemporary neurotic Upper-West-Side New Yorkers such as those portrayed in Woody Allen's fiction and films. Nevertheless, having researched a number of works over the years, there is a distinct lack of scholarly humour research in the field of literary discourse.

Although, the humour research listed above is by no means exhaustive, it should be asserted that the majority of analytical models examined so far have had Jewish jokes as their main subject matter. The lack of research into the connection of Jewish humour and Jewish literature thus, provides far untapped potential for scholarly investigation. As a consequence, the outcome of the book hopes to provide a small contribution to this field.

With regard to the theoretical scope of research into Jewish humour in general, it is indispensable to look at the conceptualization of the Jewish joke, since it provides a certain theoretical grounding which is essential for the intention of the book. In alignment with the focus of the book, Elliot Oring predicates that, "conceptualizations of the Jewish joke are merely crystallizations of conceptualizations of the Jewish people, their history, and

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[1] Fairly significant study on Jewish humour is Elliot Oring's "Conceptualization of a Jewish humour" (1983) which examines the folkloric and historical contribution to Jewish humour.

their identity" (1983, 267). Oring's connection of humour and identity is furthermore expanded to Jewish history as he maintains: "The notion of Jewish humour will persist as long as there remain conceptualizations that fundamentally distinguish Jewish history and experience from the history and experience of a world of nations" (Ibid.). Another instance of relevance between humour and identity is Stephen J. Whitfield's predication that "humour has become one of the enduring features of communal life, an adhesive that has exhibited about as much staying power as religious belief and that has helped to bind Jews to another; humour has served as an index of both memory and identity" (2005, 34). Both assertions, even though applied only to the humour used in Jewish jokes, support the main argument of the book that humour is indeed one of the reflections of Jewish identity.

What is Jewish humour? Ziv asserts that Jewish humour is humour "created by Jews and reflecting some aspects of Jewish life" (1993, VII). He continues to explain that while encompassing the universal techniques of humour such as incongruity, surprise, local logic, and bisociation, Jewish humour has some particularities distinguishing it from other national or ethnic styles of humour (Ibid.). Asa Berger calls Jewish humour "a survival mechanism of a people always in a marginal position to the societies in which they found themselves" (1993, 75). He emphasizes marginality in his other definition where Jewish humour is not based on the grounds of something peculiarly Jewish, but on "the basis of a particular sociohistorical condition called 'marginality' which is independent of Jewishness in and of itself" (Ibid.). Undoubtedly, the "margins" of society have been the Jewish habitat for many centuries; from a marginal position the individual sees things more clearly and therefore more humorously thus, as Berger concludes, it is "the humorous capacity that allows the placement of oneself in the other's position, to look at oneself critically, and to take all serious matters lightly" (Ibid.).

On the other hand, the development of American ethnic literatures shows that marginality is not entirely exclusive to Jews. Therefore Ziv´s proposition of the "marginality" could be applied to any ethnic humour. Also, Eckardt observes that the world contains many marginal peoples (e.g., African Americans and American Hispanics), but in their contributions to American humour, Jews have become anything but marginalized (indeed, in the United States Jews as a people are less and less marginalized) (1992, 34). Elliott Oring's famous study, "Conceptualization of a Jewish humour" (1983) states that Jewish humour is simply that humour which has been conceptualized as "uniquely, distinctly or characteristically reflective of, evocative of, or conditioned by the Jewish people and their circumstances" (1983, 3). Similarly, to Oring's conceptualization of Jewish humour, another

view is provided by Spalding who asserts that the true Jewish joke "mirrors the history of the Jewish people—it is a reflection of their joy and anguish, their aspirations and defects, and their all-too-brief periods of social stability and economic well-being" (Ibid.). Jewish humour expresses "their age-old desire for a world in which mercy, justice, equality, and understanding will prevail, and it portrays their quest for eternal truths", as Eckardt concludes (1992, 35).

Contrary to all affirmations about the concept of Jewish humour, there are also those who deny the existence of such a concept. For instance, Dan Ben-Amos asserts that Jewish humour is a myth (1973, 113). Likewise, in an article entitled "Jewish Humour" (1973), Allen Guttman says that there is no such thing as Jewish humour, because it cannot be traced to Judaism as a religion, nor can it be traced to the experiences of Biblical Jew. He feels that Jewish humour is rather "the result of a people having left their own country and having to maintain a precarious existence within the larger culture of Christendom" (Ibid., 330). Nevertheless, as will be seen in the analytical section of the book, both Dan Ben Amos' and Allen Guttman's denials of Jewish humour are largely implausible.

Sharon Weinstein surmises that Jewish humour is more than "a comedy of affirmation. It is more accurately a comedy of continuity. To be Jewish is to remember what Jews have seen as well as what they are" (1976, 61).

After reviewing various definitions of Jewish humour from different points of view, probably the most penetrating definition of humour comes from Irving Howe who claims that "strictly speaking, Jewish humour is not humorous. It does not make you laugh uproariously nor does it provoke a carefree guffaw. The usual ingredients of current American humour – stylized insult, slapstick, horseplay, cruel practical jokes - are seldom present in Jewish humour. Rather, it is disturbing and upsetting, its phrases dipped in tragedy" (1987, 19).

If the definitions of Jewish humour mentioned above could be somehow summarized, they all indicate certain similarity since they assume that Jewish humour stems from the historical conditions of Jewish people, their marginality along with their effort to survive and secure continuation. Such humour is certainly based on tragedy or "laughter through tears" characteristics. Most of the definitions outlined above, suggest the vagueness of the concept of Jewish humour, and certainly a similarity can be drawn here with the problematic definitions of humour as examined in the previous chapter. However, in the same way that it was suggested that we search for a universal definition of humour by exploring its separate aspects, this can also be done in the search for the definition of Jewish humour by relating it

to the issue of identity.

Origins of Jewish Humour

In order to elucidate the concept of Jewish humour as accurately as possible, the examination of its origins should be recapped. The following section does not intend to present profound historical investigation into the origins of Jewish humour since that would require separate and rather lengthy research. At this point in our study, it is essential to recognize the underlying aspects of Jewish humour shown from the perspective of its historical development, as many of these aspects reappear in contemporary Jewish American literature.

Basically, as will be outlined below, there are three major propositions as to the origins of Jewish humour. The first argues that Jewish humour dates as far back as the Old Testament**,** whereas the second opinion traces the emergence of Jewish humour to the medieval times of Purim. A third school believes that the roots of Jewish humour are far younger than this, and date back only to the 19th century.

Stora-Sandor carried out research into the development of Jewish humour in her book *Jewish Humour in Literature from Job to Allen* (1984), in which she explores that the roots of Jewish humour can be traced back to the Old Testament. For instance, she links women's evolution in Jewish humour from the original "sinner" Eve, to the modern one, the Jewish American princess (in Ziv and Zajdman, 1993, XI). William Novak and Moshe Waldoks who are the authors of *The Big Book of Jewish Humour* (1981) show how indebted Jewish humour is to religious sources as well as to the minority condition from which such sensibility could so naturally emerge. Similarly, Jules Chametzky also asserts that the sharpening of Jewish wits and powers of perception have taken place over centuries of Talmud study and pilpul (2004, 230). Humour based on Talmudic dialectic as one of the characteristics of Jewish humour is still very much alive in contemporary Jewish American literature. Dauber claims that "other comic sources appeared in medieval times in the Purim plays and the nonsense folktales told orally" (2010). The best known of the latter are the stories of the bizarre Jewish inhabitants of the Polish town of Chelm, gradually known as stereotypes such as *schlemiels, schnorrers, schmendrics*. In late medieval Europe, Purim became the occasion for carnivalesque celebration, including, notably, *Purim spiels* (Ibid.). These plays written in the Yiddish vernacular were often "bawdy and anachronism-filled retellings of the Purim story" (Ibid.). Indeed, as will be shown, the elements of grotesque based on Purim tradition appear in two of the analysed texts.

Likewise, Stephen J. Whitfield in his article "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humour" (1986) also traces the origin of Jewish humour to its religious background. He compares medieval Catholic carnivals with Jewish Purim during which the main source of entertainment was pilpul (1986, 3). The online *Jewish Encyclopedia* defines characteristics of pilpul as "leading to a clear comprehension of the subject under discussion by penetrating into its essence and by adopting clear distinctions and a strict differentiation of the concepts" (Pilpul). The Purim spiel may be the distant ancestor of one emphatic form of American Jewish humour, Whitfield remarks (1986, 250).

In contrast, Irving Howe claims in his 1951 essay "The Nature of Jewish Laughter", that authentic Jewish humour emerges "from the East European *shtetls*, or small Jewish villages, and is best characterized by the stories of Aleichem" (1987, 22). In addition, Chametzky confirms that a great deal of Jewish humour really "dates back only from the 19th and 20th centuries, when the great break from traditional life with its deeply embedded religious and cultural values, and the challenge of modernism, have occurred" (2004, 236). Another confirmation of Eastern European origins of humour or its roots in Yiddish culture is proposed by Ziv who says that "the maintenance of group identity or we-feeling as Jews merged with the outside world was consciously fostered by the founding fathers of Yiddish literature such as Mendele, Aleichem, and Peretz" (1993, 20). Similarly, as Ziv concludes, "while scattered examples of wit and humour may be found in the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, and medieval Hebrew writings, the higher reaches of humour are almost completely absent form Jewish literature prior to Sholom Aleichem's appearance" (Ibid., 13).

The absence of a conceptualization of Jewish humour is supported by Oring's statement that Jewish humour is a "relatively modern invention" (Oring, 1983, 264). The conceptualization of humour that was in some way characteristic or distinctive of the Jewish people begins only in Europe during the nineteenth century as Oring concludes (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Oring does not deny the presence of humour in biblical, Talmudic, and medieval Jewish society but suggests that it held no special place and was not bound up with any national, religious, or ethnic identity (Ibid.,265). On the other hand, he states that the first historical instance of the beginnings of conceptualization of Jewish humour is in 1893 in which Abram S. Isaacs published *Stories from the Rabbis and Rabbinical Humour* with the intention of demonstrating that the Jewish sages were not "mere dreamers, always buried in wearisome disputations, but men who were as much impelled by 'buoyancy' and 'moral cheerfulness' as by intellectual motives"

(Ibid.)[2]. Isaacs´ publication is to our knowledge the first attempt to conceptualize Jewish humour. Robert Rothstein also mentions that "comic texts read in early modern Jewish Eastern Europe reflect those readers' comic conceptual categories: parodies of traditional texts (both scriptural and other), most prominently, but also satire (of internal communal norms and current political events, as well as of Christians, Christianity, and Christian texts), and displays of wit (in riddle tales, jokes, aphorisms, and proverbs" (2010).

 As seen in the discussion above, the origins of Jewish humour are as elusive as its definition. Nevertheless, the historical presence and the development of Jewish humour continue to have an impact on contemporary Jewish humour and consequently on American humour as well. This section has attempted to focus on the historical origins of Jewish humour in order to elucidate the concept of Jewish humour more broadly. As was pointed out at the beginning of this section, the intention was not to provide an exhaustive and profound foundation to the origins of Jewish humour, but instead to underline the main historical aspects of Jewish humour, particularly as many of these are still current in contemporary Jewish American fiction.

Characteristics of Jewish humour

After reviewing definitions of humour and elucidating the origins of humour, the following paragraphs focus on the characteristics of Jewish humour as they have been outlined by various researchers. This section examines characteristics of Jewish humour from the perspectives of psychology, history, and folklore. It also briefly reviews typical narrative and stylistic devices employed in Jewish humour.

        The first scholars to examine Jewish humour in detail were psychoanalysts. They linked the concept of Jewish humour with the notion of masochism which is defined as "psychological phenomenon that derives pleasure from humiliation and self-abuse" (Ziv, 1993, 7). S. B. Cohen also states that Jewish humour is "not only based on the masochistic-like characteristics of the Jews expressed in their self-critical jokes, but it also has been a major source of their salvation" (1987, 4). By laughing at their tragic conditions, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from those conditions and their humour has served as a "balance mechanism for dealing with external adversity and with internal sadness" (Ibid.). In literature, the

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[2] This book can be exclusively accessed online
http://www.archive.org/stream/storiesfromrabb00isaa#page/n0/mode/2up).

masochistic-like characteristics of Jewish humour are designated as self-deprecation. As the analysis demonstrates, examples of this type of self-deprecation, a typical characteristic of Jewish humour, is abundant in contemporary Jewish American fiction. Similarly, Novak and Waldoks (1981) maintain that while Jewish humour may be self-critical and somewhat masochistic, it is usually substantive; that is, it is about something—it is infused with the intricacies of the mind and of logic (in Roeckelein, 2002, 109). Furthermore, they note that Jewish humour, as a form of social or religious commentary, may be sarcastic, complaining, resigned, or descriptive; it tends to be antiauthoritarian, ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy, and is essentially democratic (Ibid.). The democratic nature of Jewish humour can be explained as a sharp self-criticism of its own people.

Howe also predicates that Jewish humour is full of acute social observations. The group "which struggles along on the margin of history is always in a better position to examine it realistically than the group which floats in mid-stream" (1987, 19).

The folklorist, Nathan Ausubel, one of the most popular purveyors of Jewish folklore and humour, comments: "By laughing at the absurdities and cruelties of life they [the Jews] draw much of the sting from them. His [the Jew's] satire and irony have one virtue: you never suspect for a moment that his barbs are directed at you. Don't be surprised if you find a large amount of self-criticism disguised as irony, satire, and caricature" (in Oring, 1983, 270). Another characteristic of Jewish humour is its intellectual character. Historian Stephen Whitfield has identified the Jews´ essentially intellectual character as "the distinguishing mark of their humour" (2005, 40). The tendency towards intellectualization and the employment of mind and logic to humorous ends can be dated back to the early examples of Jewish humour present in Yiddish literature and are particularly evident in the work of Sholom Aleichem.

Elliot Oring characterized the essence of humour of Sholom Aleichem as follows:

> Humour is transcendent when it reflects the unwillingness of the individual to surrender to the impossible conditions of existence and attempts to achieve a measure of liberation from the social, political, economic, and even cosmic forces that remain beyond one's control. Jewish humour is thus conceptualized as transcending the conditions of despair and consequently is distinctive in its reflection of an unperturbed optimism and zest for living. This conceptualization has found its way into numerous popular anthologies of Jewish humour under the slogan of "laughter through tears" or in the characterization of Jewish humour as

fundamentally "philosophical." (1983, "The People of the Joke", 268).

Ziv maintains that the primary manifestation of transcendent, defensive, and pathological characteristic of Jewish humour is in the character of Tevye the Milkman. *Tevye the Dairyman* harks back to the traditions of the medieval Yiddish folktales and the Hasidic legends of the righteous man who is able to transcend his sufferings and whose faith is ultimately vindicated (Ziv, 1993, 17).

Words and texts were focal objects within the Jewish reality of Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe exerted by the Talmud. Such reality is reflected in the employment of so-called Talmudic dialectic. Talmudic dialectic depends to a considerable degree on "questions that are meant to attack or disparage earlier statements, often by reducing such statements to absurdity and the more discursive sections of the Talmud make frequent recourse to an irony and even sarcasm" (Kirschenblatt, 2010). Benjamin Harshav proposes a conversational model of Yiddish communication derived from Talmudic discourse. He claims that "at the communicative level of language accepted by the speaker of a community – Yiddish language and culture internalized and schematized some essential characteristics of 'talmudic' dialectical argument and questioning, combined with typical communicative patterns evolved in the precarious, marginal, Diaspora existence" (in Wirth-Nesher, 1994, 9). Thus, questioning based on Talmudic dialectic shapes the themes and structures of Jewish literature (Ibid.). In common with its Talmudic and rabbinic antecedents, Yiddish humour relies heavily on wordplay, particularly between Yiddish and Hebrew but also between either of these languages and the territorial non-Jewish language (Ibid.). Wordplay as a reflection of Jewish bilingualism is also abundant in the analysed texts.

In terms of narrative and stylistic characterizations of early Jewish humour, the extensive use of monologue should also be mentioned. Unlike Christian conceptions of the relationship between man and God, the Jewish cultural tradition includes a current in which man is viewed as fully entitled to make demands upon and even find fault with God (Ziv, 1993, 72). One-way conversations with God are typical for the character of Tevye the Milkman by Scholom Aleichem, but they are also present in Woody Allen's films. This aspect of Jewish humour can also be found in contemporary Jewish American stand-up comedy.

Another stylistic device frequently appearing in Jewish humour is juxtaposition. The juxtaposition of sacred and profane seems to be the basis of Jewish humour. A sudden shift from a platform of highly philosophical and religious nature is a recurrent element of humour appearing throughout

development of this concept. Lars Ellestrőm defines juxtaposition as follows:

> Juxtaposition or contrast is instances of ironic interpretation similar to antibook, contradiction, paradox, oxymoron, incongruity, incompatibility, and some others. They differ in various ways, but they all imply modes of opposition. Both theoretically and historically, irony and opposition seem to be indistinguishable. In different times and in different theories various basic kinds of opposition have been stressed, most notably, oppositions related to appearance and reality, words and their meanings, affirmation and denial, saying and doing, action and their results. Although terminology has been refined, contemporary definitions also – especially those that are place within linguistic, rhetorical, and semiotic works – try to capture the essential oppositions of irony. The meaning of a text is always a product of an interpretation, and all interpretation also includes a relation between the interpreter and the world (2002, 104).

It is essential to mention juxtaposition as one of the characteristics of Jewish humour since it is a device that emerges throughout the analysis. Ironic depictions of Jewishness in opposition with Gentile identity as well as the juxtaposition of contexts are frequently employed in all analysed texts.

The previous paragraphs briefly examined the characteristics of Jewish humour from various points of view. Its main purpose is to contribute towards a better comprehension of the complexity of Jewish humour as such. Based on the definitions above, it can be concluded that the general characteristics of Jewish humour include self-criticism or self-deprecation; the use of satire and irony, caricature, wordplay is also common, as are the concepts of Talmudic dialectic, juxtaposition, and monologue.