Humour and Handicap in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

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Pro gradu -tutkielmani käsittelee huumoria, joka syntyy minäkertojan vammaisuudesta Mark Haddonin teoksessa *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.* Vaikka sitä ei romaanissa eksplisiittisesti todetakaan, päähenkilö Christopherilla on Aspergerin syndrooma. Aspergerin syndrooma on autistisen kirjon häiriö, joka aiheuttaa ongelmia etenkin sosiaalisessa ja verbaalisessa vuorovaikutuksessa. Siitä huolimatta, että Haddon ei ole pyrkinyt luomaan teoksessaan kattavaa ja täysin todenmukaista kuvaa Aspergerin syndroomasta, hän silti onnistuu antaman häiriöstä uskottavan kuvan niin hyvässä kuin pahassa. Lisäksi tarina kerrotaan täysin Christopherin näkökulmasta, mikä tekee romaanista poikkeavan.

Lähestyn romaanin huumoria tarkastelemalla sitä kymmenen Aspergerin syndroomalle tyypillisen piirteen kautta selvittääkseni, mikä tekee niin surullisesta teoksesta niin hauskan. Keskityn Christopheriin liittyvään huumoriin, vaikka teoksessa esiintyy monia muitakin hahmoja, jotka saavat lukijan huvittumaan. Siinä missä muille hahmoille voi nauraa ilman ristiriitaisia tunteita, Christopherin hahmon sympaattisuus ja naiivius vaikeuttavat hänelle nauramista. Selvitänkin siis kumpi on yleisempää, Christopherille nauraminen, vai myötätunto häntä kohtaan. Lisäksi, koska Christopherissa ilmenee toisinaan myös epäinhimillisiä piirteitä, pohdin myös hänen hahmonsa ihmisyyttä. Tämä pohdinta on oleellista, koska Christopher edustaa ryhmää, jonka jäsenien ihmisarvo toisinaan kyseenalaistetaan.

Teosta on aiemmin analysoitu siinä ilmenevän autismin tai salapoliisikertomuksen piirteiden pohjalta, mutta myös teoksen hienovarainen huumori on huomioitu, vaikka sitä ei ole varsinaiseksi tutkimuskohteeksi aiemmin nostettukaan. Lähtökohdikseni huumorin analyysiin otan huumorin pääteoriat: ylemmyysteorian (the superiority theory), yhteensopimattomuusteorian (the incongruity theory) sekä huojennusteorian (the relief theory). Lisäksi pohdin teoksen huumoria mustan huumorin, ironian sekä tabujen rikkomisen näkökulmista. Etenkin yhteensopimattomuusteoria nousee keskeiseksi romaanissa, sillä vaikka huumorin syntyyn vaikuttavat aina lukuisat tekijät, yleensä on kuitenkin aina tavalla tai toisella kyse siitä, että havaitaan jokin yllättävä epäsuhta. Christopherin häiriö antaa hänelle hyvin omalaatuisen tavan hahmottaa maailmaa, ja siksi teoksen huumori syntyykin usein siitä, että lukijan maailmankatsomus ja Christopherin näkemys eivät ole yhteensopivat. Koska romaaniin on saatu aiheen vakavuudesta huolimatta humoristinen ote, lukija voi kokea moninaiset yhteensopimattomuudet yleensä huvittavina eikä häiritsevinä.

Avainsanat: Haddon, huumori, Aspergerin syndrooma

Contents

1. Introduction

"The hidden source of humor is not in happiness, but in sadness"[1].

A novel about an autistic boy who screams when he is touched, abhors the company of other people, and fails to show and understand emotions, may not strike one as something potentially funny. However, that assumption could not be further from the truth. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a novel of paradoxes, of which the most prominent is the effortless combination of painful sadness and delightful funniness.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, first published in 2003, is the first novel by Mark Haddon, an award winning author, illustrator and screenwriter[2]. Haddon's previous works include books as well as TV and radio shows for children, and therefore it is not surprising that *The Curious Incident*, although aimed mainly at an adult audience, has also been printed in a parallel edition for young adults. The novel has received a warm welcome from both the reading audience and the critics. *The Curious Incident* is an international best-seller that has won several awards, such as the Whitbread Book of the Year (2004), South Bank Show Book of the Year (2004) and Guardian Children's Fiction Prize (2003)[3]. The rights of the novel have been sold to over thirty countries ranging from Iceland to Thailand, and it has won awards also in Japan, Italy and the USA[4].

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[1] Mark Twain cited by Avner Ziv in *Personality and Sense of Humor* (New York: Springer, 1984) 56.

[2] Mark Haddon has won many prizes for his work, including two BAFTAs, a New York TV Festival Gold award and a Royal Television Society award. See http://www.markhaddon.com/CVFrame-2.htm [Accessed 31 January 2008]

[3] See http://www.markhaddon.com/CVFrame-2.htm [Accessed 31 January 2008]

[4] Grand Prix, Sankei Children's Book Awards (Japan) 2004, Premio Boccaccio (Italy) 2004, Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award (USA), 2004. See http://www.markhaddon.com/CVFrame-2.htm [Accessed 31 January 2008]

In addition, the film rights of *The Curious Incident* have been bought by Heyday Films, the makers of the Harry Potter movies[5].

Christopher Boone is the fifteen-year-old first person narrator of *The Curious Incident*, which is a murder mystery story set in a quiet suburban neighbourhood in Swindon, England. Christopher is an intriguing person who likes tight spaces, white noise, prison cells and being on his own. Because he also likes dogs and detective stories, inspired by his highly intelligent idol, Sherlock Holmes, Christopher decides to remove the suspicions about his guilt and find out who killed Wellington, the neighbour's poodle. This resolution leads Christopher to all sorts of trouble, but it also leads to the adventure of his life.

Although it is not explicitly stated in the novel, Christopher has Asperger's syndrome, which is "a neurobiological disorder on the higher-functioning end of the autism spectrum"[6]. Haddon's depiction of an autistic person is considered very authentic and the novel has received an enthusiastic welcome also in the medical circles. It has been said for example that "It is almost impossible to believe author Mark Haddon does not have an autistic spectrum disorder, so sweetly accurate is his insight into what life with autism is like for many"[7].

As Stuart Murray notes, autism, including Asperger's syndrome, "currently occupies a place in the public consciousness that is akin to a phenomenon"[8]. Although movies such as *Rain Man* (1988) and *Mercury Rising* (1998) present autistic characters, "The self-conscious use of autism as a point of focus for narrative texts, or the use of autistic characters

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[5] See http://www.markhaddon.com/CVFrame-2.htm [Accessed 31 January 2008]

[6] "What is Asperger Syndrome?" http://www.aspennj.org/aspergers-syndrome.asp [Accessed 14 January 2008]

[7] Review by Liane Holliday Willey in *Disability & Society*. 20 (2005) 687.

[8] Stuart Murray. "Autism and the Contemporary Sentimental: Fiction and the Narrative Fascination of the Present." *Literature and Medicine*. 25 (2006) 25.

within texts, is relatively recent" (Murray 2006, 27). Despite the fact that *The Curious Incident* has received notable attention because of its unusual narrator, it is by no means the only novel written near the turn of the millennium that has an autistic protagonist. For example Marjorie Reynolds' *The Civil Wars of Jonah Moran* (1999), Kathy Hoopman's *Of Mice and Aliens, An Asperger Adventure* (2001), Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark* (2002) and Gene Kemp's *Seriously Weird* (2003) have autistic main characters[9]. However, what makes *The Curious Incident* stand out (in addition to being written by a man) is the fact that the whole story is told from Christopher's point of view, which gives the novel a unique feel.

Many articles written on the novel seem to, quite justifiably, concentrate on the autism of the protagonist or the fact that it is a detective story. However, none of those who have written about *The Curious Incident* fail to mention the humour in it. Christopher as a protagonist has been described, for example, as being "wonderfully honest, funny and lovable"[10], or as "naive yet knowing, detached but poignant, often funny despite his absolute humorousness"[11].When it comes to *The Curious Incident* as a whole, it has been praised with adjectives such as "stark, funny and original"[12] and labelled as "a comedy about marriages cracking up, about mundane lives, about growing old, about meal-times, TV programmes, about trains with messy toilets" (Greenwell 2004, 282).

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[9] Bill Greenwell. "The Curious Incidence of Novels About Asperger's Syndrome." *Children's Literature in Education.* 35 (2004) 272.

[10] Review by Jackie Gropman. "Adult Books for High School Students" in *School Library Journal*. October (2003) 208.

[11] Review by Kate Washington "Detached Detective" in *San Francisco Chronicle*. 22 June (2003).

[12] Review by Jay McInerney "The Remains of the Dog" in *The New York Times*. 15 June (2003).

To shed some light on the dark reality of life with Asperger's syndrome and to give an idea of the peaceful coexistence of the serious and the comic in the novel, I will next present a list about what Christopher sees as his weaknesses. The list also depicts well the essential features of autism: the severe difficulties in interaction, communication and the extremely deviant and limited behaviour[13]:

> These are *some* of my Behavioural Problems[14]
>
> A. Not talking to people for a long time.
> B. Not eating or drinking anything for a long time.
> C. Not liking being touched.
> D. Screaming when I am angry or confused.
> E. Not liking being in really small places with other people.
> F. Smashing things when I am angry or confused.
> G. Groaning.
> H. Not liking yellow things or brown things and refusing to touch yellow or brown things.
> I. Refusing to use my toothbrush if anyone else has touched it.
> J. Not eating food if different sorts of food are touching each other.
> K. Not noticing that people are angry with me.
> L. Not smiling.
> M. Saying things that other people think are rude.
> N. Doing stupid things.
> O. Hitting other people.
> P. Hating France.
> Q. Driving Mother's car.
> R. Getting cross when someone has moved the furniture.

Even though this list gives a good impression of the stressful impact the condition has on Christopher and his environment, there is something inherently comical about it. It is precisely the tragic setting and the fact that the novel is so sad on the face of it that made me interested in its humour. I wanted to know what can be so funny in such a novel.

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[13] Christopher Gillberg, *Autismi ja autismin sukuiset häiriöt lapsilla, nuorilla ja aikuisilla* (Helsinki: Hakapaino Oy, 1999) 13, my translation.

[14] Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Vintage, 2004) 59-60, my emphasis.

To think of it now, it seems obvious that the comedy in the novel must stem from the same source as the tragedy in it; from Christopher's condition.

"Haddon's achievement is to have written a novel that turns on the central character's difference without making that difference a stigmatising characteristic"[15]. In other words, despite the fact that Asperger's syndrome claims much space in the narrative, Christopher is presented first and foremost as a human being, not merely as a peculiar person with a disorder. Thus, we should not forget that "The core questions of humanity and ontology that surround autism remind us that to think about the condition is *necessarily* to think about the issues of being human . . ." (Murray 2006, 25).

My aim in this thesis is to analyse and discuss the humour in the novel *The Curious Incident of the Night-Time* in connection to typical characteristics of Asperger's syndrome in order to find out what is funny in the sad novel and why, and what is the function of the humour. I will use mainly the major theories of humour, and the incongruity theory in particular, as a tool for my analysis. I will concentrate on the humour that is most prominently connected to Christopher, as he is the one with the handicap, although there are several humorous passages where the source of humour is another character. Furthermore, as the protagonist of the story represents real people in a vulnerable position in the society, and they should not be treated disrespectfully, I intend to find out whether the reader is positioned more often to laugh *at* Christopher or to sympathise with him, or perhaps to laugh *with* him at some other targets. Finally, as Stuart Murray suggests, I also mean to discuss the issues of being human in connection to Christopher's condition and to find out what kind of a representation the novel offers of people with disabilities.

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[15] Review by Alex McClimens in *Learning Disability Practice*. 8 (2005) 24.

2. Theoretical Approaches to Humour

2.1 General Discussion on Different Aspects of Humour

2.1.1 Appreciating Humour

"Humor is not solely amusement; it can bring people closer to each other, embarrass, ridicule, cause to reflect, relieve tension, or put into perspective serious affairs"[16]. Jokes, on the other hand, "are amusement more than anything else, without many pretensions or profound purposes: they are meant to make people laugh and no more" (Kuipers 2006, 2). Despite the fact that jokes are considered a low type of humour and solely amusement, unlike humour in general, many works on humour concentrate on studying jokes and laughter. Although such research is not directly applicable to my own research, it is nevertheless useful, which is already proven by the fact that the above quote on the nature of humour is from a study of jokes. In fact, even the concept of the joke can be flexible and applicable to various situations: "The situations that produce laughter can best be described as jokes, whether they arise accidentally in the course of life or are contrived by man and whether they involve images, gestures or words"[17]. Hence, even the humorous passages in *The Curious Incident* can be referred to as jokes, although they are not jokes in the traditional sense. However, studying humour for whatever purpose and with any terms one wants is by no means easy, since approaching that subject seriously and analytically can kill the very thing one wishes to cherish and understand.

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[16] Giselinde Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke.* Trans. Kate Simms. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006) 4.

[17] Edward L. Galligan, *The Comic Vision in Literature* (Athens, Georgia: The Univ. Press of Georgia, 1984) 6.

To Giselinde Kuipers (2006, 10), "humor is a form of communication, a question of taste, a marking of social boundaries". When it comes to humour being a question of taste, there are numerous factors that affect it, since what people consider funny varies greatly. There are differences in how humour is appreciated "between men and women, between people with different educational advantages, between young and old, and of course differences between people from different cultures and countries" (Kuipers 2006, 1). Therefore, it is difficult to say what is funny from any other point of view than one's own, but I just have to trust my sense of humour to represent a more general view.

Testing and marking social boundaries is at the heart of humour. As Susan Purdie suggests, "funniness involves at once breaking rules *and* 'marking' that break, so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated; yet in transgressing and recognising the rules, jokers take power over rather than merely submitting to them"[18]. Furthermore, as a marker of social boundaries humour is also "a powerful means of pulling people together and in doing this, automatically shutting other people out" (Kuipers 2006, 10). When studying humour, it is a point of interest to find out who are pulled together and who is left out. Because rule transgression is so central to humour, and to the humour in *The Curious Incident* in particular, the subject will be discussed further in connection to other theoretical matters.

"Reality never speaks for itself. Whether we use its events as the basis for humour or for serious discourse depends on the interpretative procedures we bring to bear"[19]. Since no phenomenon is in itself funny, it depends on the people to make it funny, to see it in a humorous light. For understanding this it is best to consider the necessary conditions for humour appreciation/enjoyment.

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[18] Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (New York: Harvester, 1993) 3.

[19] Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988) 54.

The most important condition for humour appreciation is the intellectual ability of the reader[20]and her knowledge of the serious world: "in order to recognize an incongruous situation, we must first be able to recognize a situation of congruity; that is, we must be acquainted with the reality in which stimuli are suited to past experiences and/or logical thought"[21]. This is because if one is not familiar with the normal condition, it is not possible to gain any pleasure from the joke that is mocking it, as "The enjoyment of understanding something is at the foundation of the humorous experience" (Ziv 1984, 76).

Another very important condition for humour appreciation is the mood the reader is in. In fact, the mood is even more important than being smart enough to decode the humorous message, because "in the mental context of ludicrousness, the process that yields laughter need not find the *best* reason to laugh, only the *first sufficient reason*"[22]. Therefore, it is not that important to be able to laugh at the right, intended reason, as long as one can find something to laugh about.

The key to the enjoyment of joking, then, is a humorous mood, because, as Neil Schaeffer also notes, "[laughter] utterly depends upon our already being in a humorous frame of mind and mood" (Schaeffer 1981, 23). In addition to the humorous mood a "ludicrous context", a humorous atmosphere, is needed. Schaeffer stresses the importance of the humorous mood and the ludicrous context in relation to incongruities (discussed in more detail later in this thesis) by writing that "any incongruity can be made laughable in a ludicrous context, and no congruity, not even those occurring in nature, can be made

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[20] Since it is difficult to come up with a term that would be applicable to a variety of humorous situations, the person appreciating the humour will be referred to as the reader, because the person appreciating the humour in *The Curious Incident* is the reader.

[21] Avner Ziv, *Personality and Sense of Humor* (New York: Springer, 1984) 72.

[22] Neil Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 27.

laughable without it"(Schaeffer 1981, 33). Furthermore, "our laughter depends upon a ludicrous context which cues us to the nature of the experience we are about to enjoy and prepares us to receive it and react to it in a responsive manner" (Schaeffer 1981, 17).

According to Giselinde Kuipers, "The setting and the storyteller both play an important role in creating a humorous atmosphere" (Kuipers 2006, 164). In *The Curious Incident* the setting is indeed rather absurd and liable to create a humorous atmosphere: a fifteen year old boy is writing a murder mystery story because he has found the neighbour's pet poodle dead on the lawn in the middle of the night with a garden fork sticking out of it. Moreover, the storyteller's notable pedantry and his mimicking of classic detective stories give his style of writing a humorous touch from the start:

> The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this. (Haddon 2004, 1)

Thus, the humorous atmosphere that is successfully created at the beginning of the novel, not only awakens the reader's curiosity and makes her want to read further, but also keeps the rest of the novel from getting too serious, since "once we begin laughing at a series of ludicrous incongruities we may be made to laugh at anything" (Schaeffer 1981, 18), even though that "anything" might not be considered humorous if it appeared out of this ludicrous context.

The importance of the humorous mood is also stressed by the fact that it is possible that the situation is so "serious or the mood dejected that even the best joke does not come across" (Kuipers 2006, 164). Therefore, the fault is not always in the joke, if it does not seem funny. In my opinion, the humour in *The Curious Incident* is highly mood dependent, and even though Christopher's narration is unusual, it may not manage to appear humorous, or at least not appear so as often as it could, if the reader will not give it the chance.

2.1.2 Laughter vs. Smiling

"[L]aughter is an extremely complex phenomenon that possesses physiological, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects; these aspects cover the entire area of psychology" (Ziv 1984, page X of the introduction). Laughter is generally associated with humour quite deservedly, but it must be noted that laughter is not the only expression of high amusement and enjoyment. Simon Critchley, for example, is an enthusiastic advocate for the importance of the smile as a response to humour: "[smiling] is silent and subdued. The smile speaks, but not out loud. Its eloquence is reticent"[23]. Furthermore, a smile "can mark the beginning or the end of a laugh, but it can also take its place", "it is the smile that is powerfully emblematic of the human, the quiet acknowledgement of one's limitedness" (Critchley 2002, 108&109).

To conclude, smiling as a response to humour, as opposed to laughing, is not a sign of failed joking. On the contrary, humour that causes smiling can be seen as better humour than that which causes convulsive laughter. This is because, as Critchley said, smiling is subdued, and what makes it so is the serious side of the joke. In other words, humour that is unable to make us laugh out loud may well be able to make us think about serious matters, and therefore it can only lift our spirits to the level of smiling.

2.1.3 Comedy and the Comic

Edward L. Galligan reminds us that although comedy as a genre is often funny, it "is never merely funny: it is *about* something". Comedy "concerns those life and death matters that all of us must cope with through most of our lives – sex and dying, aggression and injustice, love and vanity, rationality and sense" (Galligan 1984, page XI of the preface). The genre of comedy is in its "strictest and most restrictive sense within literary history" a form of comic drama which traditionally includes stock character types "in a scenario where some kind of

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[23] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002)108.

problem must be resolved"[24]. Comedies also tend to end happily, usually with a feast or a marriage (Stott 2005, 1), which are thought to represent celebrating life, and especially new life that may follow the happy marriage. The happy ending can also be traced back to the Christian belief of a happy ending in life, as after life comes afterlife in heaven. The term comedy, however, includes much more than this.

According to Galligan, "comedy is a mode of imagination, manifested in all of the forms and ways the imagination expresses itself" (Galligan, page IX of the preface). Andrew Stott's take on comedy is rather similar to Galligan's, and to him comedy, like many other generic definitions, "show themselves to be porous . . . what we call comedy is really humour, a specific tone operating free from generic restraints, which, while not the exclusive property of comedy, is closely associated with it" (Stott 2005, 2). Comedy can also be thought as "a way of describing isolated events or passages within other types of work" (Stott 2005, 3).

Despite the fact that I am so far unwilling to call *The Curious Incident* a comedy, although there are various comic passages, there is one view that makes me doubt my conviction. Aarne Kinnunen divides comedy into three types on the basis of who is having the fun. The first type is double comedy, in which both the characters and the audience are having fun. The two other types are single comedies, in which either the characters or the audience are having fun. It is the third type which is of interest here: the fictive world is serious but the writer presents it so that the audience experiences it as if it were a comedy[25].

When it comes to *The Curious Incident*, this last statement holds true. Christopher's world is a serious place, but still the reader is enjoying herself while reading the novel, which is due to Haddon's skill in creating fiction and the way he makes Christopher

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[24] Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) 1.

[25] See Aarne Kinnunen, *Huumorin ja koomisen keskeneräinen kysymys* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1994) 183.

present his thoughts. If Christopher were a real person, his life would be far from comedy, but in the world of fiction Christopher's thoughts and actions can be seen in a comic light. This type of comedy, where the world of fiction is serious but it is seen as comic, is the most fascinating one, because the source of amusement is not as obvious as it is in the other kinds of comedies. Although *The Curious Incident* has been labelled as a comedy by some writers, I suggest that it is not a comedy as such, though it is comic, but one of those "works with grim implications" that "do not feel like comedy because they limit the mastery of joking" (Purdie 1993, 116).

When discussing the subject of the comic, there is one name that should not be forgotten. Henri Bergson is one of the most frequently cited authors on humour, and many writers after him have based their thoughts on Bergson's work. In *Nauru: tutkimus komiikan merkityksestä* Bergson advises us to pay attention to the fact that the comic does not exist outside the sphere of the purely human[26]. An animal may be comical if it has humanly qualities or a human-like expression on its face, and even a hat can be comical, but only because of the shape a human head has given it (Bergson 2000, 8).

To Bergson, "the greatest enemy of laughter is emotion". To be able to laugh at someone who receives our pity or affection, we have to momentarily "forget our sympathy and silence our pity" (Bergson 2000, 9, my translation). Furthermore, as Bergson states in somewhat poetic language, "Most people might change from serious into comical in our eyes, if we separated them from the music of emotion that accompanies them. In order to fully succeed, comedy requires a kind of anaesthesia of the heart. Comedy is directed purely at the intellect" (Bergson 2000, 9-10, my translation). Contemporary writers, such as Giselinde Kuipers, have also noted the mutual exclusivity of laughter and emotions:

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[26] See Henri Bergson, *Nauru: tutkimus komiikan merkityksestä* (Helsinki: Loki-kirjat 2000) 8.

"The humorous mode blocks other emotions: this non-serious mood combines badly with sympathy or feelings of tenderness, anger, embarrassment or indignation" (Kuipers 2006, 166).

The reader of *The Curious Incident* has to deal with a wide range of emotions as well as sometimes blocking them altogether to create a kind of psychological distance needed for finding the character of Christopher amusing. This becomes evident when thinking about the fact that quoting passages from *The Curious Incident* indirectly sometimes makes them funnier than they would be when reading the novel. To me this is because of the serious side of the book. When reading the novel, the reader is immersed too deeply in the whole range of (serious) emotions, whereas when citing it to someone, or just thinking about a passage that has humorous possibilities, the passage seems much funnier, because the emotions inhibiting the laughter are not present and there is psychological distance to the novel's contents. Thus, "While standing at the appropriate psychic distance from an event, we have a perspective that we cannot have while standing 'close'"[27].

2.2 The Major Theories of Humour

2.2.1 The Superiority Theory

Laughing at Others

The most quoted theorist on the superiority theory of humour is the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. According to him laughter arises from the feeling of "sudden glory" when we realise some "eminence" in ourselves in comparison to the infirmity of others or to the "follies" of our past selves[28]. Charles R. Gruner puts the point more explicitly by

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[27] Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks. "Belief as the Basis of Humor." *American Philosophical Quarterly.* 30 (1993) 332.

[28] Charles R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why we Laugh* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000) 13.

saying that “when we find humor in something, we laugh at the misfortune, stupidity, clumsiness, moral or cultural defect, suddenly revealed in *someone else*, to whom we instantly and momentarily feel “superior” since we are *not*, at that moment, unfortunate, stupid, clumsy, morally or culturally defective” (Gruner 2000, 13).

The feeling of superiority is a fleeting one, but enough to make us feel good about ourselves. The need to feel superior stems from the need to cover up the feelings of inferiority that are “implanted in us from an early age” (Ziv 1984, 7). Humour that can be explained by the superiority theory is regarded as having an aggressive function, since it enables us to vent our feelings of anger and frustration. As direct expression of aggression against “frustrating individuals or groups is not permitted in our society, it generally takes hidden forms”, such as humour, as it “allows us to express aggressive feelings in a socially acceptable way” (Ziv 1984, 10).

Usually it is those in power who wind up as humorous butts (the ones the joke is on) because of the frustration they cause in those who do not have the power to make a change in their life or in the world. As Simon Critchley states, “By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor’s new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed” (Critchley 2002, 11). When directed at the right target, humour may make a difference[29]or at least make the unfair situation easier to bear. But when the situation turns to be one in which it is the powerful laughing at the powerless, humour ceases to work for the good. Unfortunately, even though one wants to believe in the nobility of humanity, “much humour seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society . . . or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider” (Critchley 2002, 12).

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[29] “By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves and can even have a critical function with respect to society.” Critchley, 2002, 10.

Why laugh at the powerless, then? As Alison Ross notes, "In many examples of humour the butt is a representative of a group perceived as inferior in some sense, so it might seem unnecessary to create a sense of superiority over them"[30]. However, even though some representatives of groups do not have power, which is usually considered threatening, they can be perceived as a threat simply because they are different and "they shake the other's sense of security in themselves" (Ross 1998, 55). Thus, even though laughing at the representatives of underprivileged groups is unacceptable, it is somehow understandable as one more sign of our own insecurities.

Although almost anything can be seen as funny in the humorous state of mind and though tastes in humour vary greatly[31], it is generally accepted that "etiquette and social custom requires that we remain respectful and deferential toward death and disability, that we remain solemn and express sympathy" (Gruner 2000, 46). It is also considered that "to laugh at handicaps is an unseemly boundary transgression" (Kuipers 2006, 133-134). Nevertheless, there are numerous jokes about death, and disabilities. Is laughing at these matters always inappropriate? Not when the intention is humorous and not purely hostile and disparaging. Of course, as Walter Nash notes, there are situations in which it is difficult to decipher whether there is a joking intention behind the message, and one might wonder whether "laughter would be a respectable act or the confession of our own moral deformities"[32]. He adds that this infirmity is present every time the "humorous intention has not been formally announced" (Nash 1985, 6).

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[30] Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour* (London: Routledge, 1998) 55.

[31] "What people think is funny – or not funny – is strongly determined by how they were brought up and the company they keep". Kuipers, 2006, 1.

[32] Walter Nash, *The Language of Humour: Style and Technique in Comic Discourse* (London: Longman, 1985) 6.

Susan Purdie states that "Noticing the necessity of identifying a joking intention within the process that produces funniness leads to recognising the essential discursive exchange at the heart of joking" (Purdie 1993, 12). In other words, when we understand that something is intended to be humorous, we can begin to think about what the joke really wants to say instead of merely laughing at it. Usually a joking intention is made known to the audience with the help of cues, but when it is not, we just have to trust our intuition and perhaps take a risk by laughing[33].

Even though laughing at the follies of "the others" seems like a despicable thing to do, it does not necessary mean that we have low morals and a bad taste in humour. As was noted earlier, in order to find anything funny, we have to let ourselves get into a humorous mood, and it is "only within 'the play frame'" that we can "'let it all hang out' and laugh at the 'unfunny' and the unspeakable" (Gruner 2000, 46). In that mood we are able to appreciate absurdities and other deviations from rational thinking.

Neil Schaeffer formulates the phenomenon as follows: "What the ludicrous context does is to suggest that for the purpose of pleasure, and during the extent of the ludicrous event, we may allow ourselves to suspend the rules by which we normally live – the laws of nature, the restrictions of morality, the sequences of logical thought, the demands of rationality – in short, we are encouraged to suspend the internal law of gravity, our seriousness" (Schaeffer 1981, 19). In other words, we do not have to feel embarrassed at laughing at "inappropriate" humour, as it is only the ludicrous context luring us to forget our morals for a brief moment. However, despite the fact that we are made exempt from guilty feelings when laughing at others, this "laughing at others has to be recognized, but it is not to be recommended" (Critchley 2002, 94).

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[33] "Someone who doesn't laugh when others do or laughs when the rest are silent, exposes himself as an outsider: he reveals his lack of awareness of codes, habits and rules. He doesn't belong." Kuipers, 2006, 1.

It should be noted, however, that even though it is considered acceptable to laugh at taboos when they are presented in a ludicrous context, this quality is not completely for the good, since “Humor is most threatening – and therefore quite quickly very attractive – if it breaks through moral or emotional boundaries people cherish” (Kuipers 2006, 166). The non-serious nature of humour can thus be taken advantage of and “hurtful, revolting or offensive jokes” can go further than such serious statements could (Kuipers 2006, 166).

Laughing at Oneself

Laughing at oneself may seem like an odd thing to do, but if we take Freud’s concepts into consideration, then the matter is more intelligible. Simon Critchley explains the situation as such that instead of the super-ego (which strictly controls the ego) we have a “super-ego II”, which he jovially calls “our amigo” (Critchley 2002, 103). In other words, this super-ego II is an allowing agency, it is “a super-ego which does not lacerate the ego, but speaks to it in words of consolation. This is a positive super-ego that liberates and elevates by allowing the ego to find itself ridiculous” (Critchley 2002, 103). So, laughing at oneself is better – and without moral responsibilities – than laughing at others. Against what might be expected, “such humour is not depressing, but on the contrary gives us a sense of emancipation, consolation and childlike elevation” (Critchley 2002, 95). In addition, “It is, in fact, our supreme confidence in the authority of the rule of our sense of morality, our reason, and our instinct for survival that permits us to take these vacations into the luxury of fantasy pleasures” (Schaeffer 1981, 30). Also, “true humour does not wound a specific victim and always contains self mockery” (Critchley 2002, 14).

2.2.2 The Incongruity Theory

"There is no form of literature more unfriendly to rational analysis than the incongruity that causes laughter" (Schaeffer 1981, 12). Be that as it may, but because "virtually every definition of the ludicrous depends upon the concept of incongruity and juxtaposition" (Schaeffer 1981, 6), I just have to take my chances with it.

There has already been some discussion concerning incongruities without an actual explanation of the term. An incongruity is, then, "a perceived juxtaposition of apparently unrelated ideas or things" (Schaeffer 1981, 8). The key words here are "apparently unrelated", since ideas or things that have "absolutely no significant meaning whatsoever when juxtaposed" are not called incongruities, "rather, we treat them as irrelevancies" (Schaeffer 1981, 9). Thus, even though the juxtaposed ideas or things do not at first seem to go together, there is a connection and a hidden meaning, or otherwise they would not be called incongruities.

Simon Critchley explains well what is central also to the incongruity theory: "Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality" (Critchley 2002, 1). Thus, humour is created when we perceive a surprising mismatch between the representation and reality.

Avner Ziv points out that "Incongruity is the basis for understanding the intellectual aspects of humor. It creates some kind of problem, and our curiosity, combined with a desire to activate our intellectual ability, encourages thought" (Ziv 1984, 72). Laughter and delight follow humorous incongruities only if we understand the incongruity as in "some minor way congruous" (Schaeffer 1981, 9) and are then able to solve it[34].

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[34] "Our mental task is to find this slender element of congruity amid the predominating elements of incongruity. When we discover it, we feel satisfaction." Schaeffer, 1981, 9.

If, on the other hand, we refuse to play along and accept the absurdity of the incongruity and are therefore unable to solve the incongruity and left without the joy of understanding, we are only going to be frustrated and think it was a bad joke.

2.2.3 The Relief Theory

The relief theory, also known as the comic relief theory, is considered one of the major theories of explaining humour alongside the superiority and the incongruity theories. The relief theory is based on the notion that after a threat overcome we experience enjoyment and relief. In the comic relief, then, laughter is the result of a sudden release of built-up tension, which usually happens when hearing and solving the punch-line of a joke (See Critchley 2002, 5-6). This ability to release pointless tension has prompted Edward L. Galligan to conclude that "laughter is a necessity as well as a pleasure" (Galligan 1984, 6). In *The Curious Incident* the reader can feel two kinds of relief. On the one hand she finds enjoyable the release of the tension that has been building up in her mind when reading joke-type passages that have a kind of a punch-line, and on the other hand she takes pleasure in encountering anything humorous amidst the more emotionally charged scenes so that the pressure that has been created when identifying with Christopher's suffering can be released.

2.3 Humour as a Defence Mechanism

2.3.1 Black Humour

"Where everything is perfect, there are no tensions, no reason for dissatisfaction, no grounds for criticism or fear – and therefore there is no place at all for humor, particularly black humor" (Ziv 1984, 56). In *The Curious Incident* there is no fear of everything being perfect: different foods touching each other on Christopher's plate make him queasy, metaphors make him dizzy and lots of people and other sources of noise in one place make him curl up in a ball and groan.

When Christopher tells the reader about matters that make her feel uneasy, she can treat the subject as black humour and laugh at it, since “The use of black humor enables a person to defend himself from things that frighten him. Through his laughter at those very things he tries to show himself that he isn’t afraid” (Ziv 1984, 51). Unfortunately Christopher is unable to find comfort in laughter, whereas the reader is given many opportunities to laugh at her own anxieties.

Black humour deals with not only death, but with subjects that arouse fear in general. The effect of black humour is also based on laughter’s recently discussed ability to release tension. This release, in addition to lessening the strength of the fear, “leads to renewed approaches toward these sensitive subjects” (Ziv 1984, 65). One of the virtues of black humour is also the fact that “the opportunity that we are given to laugh at things that are basically frightening or sad protects our mental health. Black humor is an active defence mechanism that helps us to cope with threats and fears instead of surrendering to them” (Ziv 1984, 58). Since “the bitter reality cannot be altered, what can be altered is one’s attitude toward it” (Ziv 1984, 55). Thus, we can choose to suffer, or save our mental health by laughing at what makes us anxious and afraid.

Although black humour is in fact humour and it amuses us, there is a sad element to it, and therefore black humour usually “arouses no real laughter, but only a smile (occasionally bitter), for the pleasure we have in it is combined with distress” (Ziv 1984, 55). According to Avner Ziv, the strength and essence of black humour is “Turning the frightening reality into fantasy, or the frightening fantasy into ridiculous” (Ziv 1984, 58).

2.3.2 Taboos and Humour

The matter of taboos and keeping and crossing boundaries has already been dealt with in passing, but it will be elaborated here.

"Taboo is defined not only as that which cannot be discussed but also that which must be approached solely with appropriate seriousness." However, "It is precisely this obligation of reverence that, at the same time, makes these events excellently suited subjects for more or less clandestine jokes" (Kuipers 2006, 134). Thus, the fact that it is forbidden to laugh at something actually invites us to make fun of it, and "Since it breaches norms, all carnivalesque behaviour, like joking, involves a sensation of release and a mood of rebellion" (Purdie 1993, 126). Although rebellious rule breaking is fun, it is never limitless: "However 'free' people consider themselves, they still draw a line at some point and say: 'That is not funny, but offensive.' It is not so much the topic itself as the treatment of it" (Ross 1998, 66).

Topics that ought to be approached with respect are, in addition to death and disability, for example these: "religion, money, those in power, death, sickness, suffering, disasters and to a certain extent, ethnic difference" (Kuipers 2006, 134). There are taboo topics that invite maltreatment more often than others and as Alison Ross notes, "the most common topics are still sex and excreta" (Ross 1998, 65), although sex has nowadays lost some of its power to shock. Particularly jokes that include bold taboo transgression are liable to produce "'mixed feelings': shocked, but amused nevertheless" (Kuipers 2006, 157).

The taboo material in humour can be either acceptable or offensive, though what is acceptable to some may not be so to others, because "Whether or not the joke touches a boundary or actually transgresses it depends on the audience – after all, not everyone has the same boundaries" (Kuipers 2006, 126). If the presentation of taboo material is fictional and general or uses innuendo, it is acceptable (Ross 1998, 64): "Here lies the pleasure of ambiguity and innuendo: words send thoughts 'in certain directions' but the taboo is not

violated" (Kuipers 2006, 131). In other words, "It's OK to hint, but offensive to say it out loud" (Ross 1998, 65).

If, on the other hand, the presentation of the taboo material is explicit, factual or specific, it is regarded as offensive (Ross 1998, 64). What often transgresses boundaries is aggressive or violent behaviour, or "things referring to personal hygiene and bodily functions: toilet humor and jokes about spit, snot and vomit" (Kuipers 2006, 127). As will be proven later, the taboo material in *The Curious Incident* is rather explicit and specific, which is sufficient cause to label it offensive. However, since the taboo material is fictional and it is toned down by certain factors, it is also acceptable. Therefore, I suggest that the taboo material in *The Curious Incident* is offensive enough to be considered humorous, but still acceptable since it does not go too far. Therefore, "a fine balance has to be established between being funny and transgressing boundaries in order to produce a good joke" (Kuipers 2006, 150).

Sometimes all that is needed to trigger laughter is the mentioning of a taboo word, although, as Susan Purdie (1993, 43) points out, generally it is the recognised violation involved, not the mere thinking of a forbidden object that creates pleasure. Nevertheless, she, too, admits that "small children (and certain adults in certain moods) will find merely *saying* forbidden things funny, when their prohibition is marked and yet the situation is such as to 'allow' them" (Purdie 1993, 43). In fact, what is most important to humour concerning taboo violation, is that we "reproduce the transgression in our minds as momentarily 'permitted'" (Purdie 1993, 13). In other words, we must forget our tight social rules and play along to find taboo humour funny, and, after all, even though laughing at taboos seems like a rebellious act, it in fact only makes the taboos stronger, since "like other ways of formulating taboos, joking helps to establish the bounds of what it is right to think and say, by breaking some rules, but keeping some limits" (Ross 1998, 63).

2.4 Irony

2.4.1 Defining Irony

Although irony is an elusive concept, everybody seems to know what is ironic in a text, for example. In fact, it seems to be the case with all humour that subconsciously we are able to go through all the complicated intellectual procedures needed to understand and enjoy humour, but when it comes to explaining what is funny in a given joke, it is not that easy anymore. Here it is my task to attempt to grasp the concept of irony, which is a type of humour closely related to the novel. Many reviewers of *The Curious Incident* have also expressed the fact that the novel is ironical, by writing for example that "the novel brims with touching, ironic humor"[35], or that it is "filled with quiet but powerful irony"[36].

The traditional definition of irony is "saying one thing and giving to understand the contrary"[37]. According to D. C. Muecke, that definition is old and now replaced by a view in which "Irony is saying something in a way that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations" (Muecke 1982, 31). At the heart of the concept of irony is the fact that this relationship between appearance and reality is "neither an unlikeness nor equivalence but . . . a contrast" (Muecke 1982, 35). In addition, "We enjoy again the curious special feeling of paradox, of the ambivalent and the ambiguous, of the impossible made actual, of a double contradictory reality" (Muecke 1982, 45).

Since it is subtle kind of humour, "in irony the real meaning is meant to be inferred either from what the ironist says or from the context in which he says it" (Muecke 1982, 35). To Walter Nash, "Perhaps the most important concomitant of the ironic utterance, however, is the existence of acknowledged facts and accepted attitudes that provide a kind of

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[35] Review in *Publishers Weekly*. 7 April (2003) 42.

[36] Review in *Library Journal.* January (2004) 49.

[37] D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (New York: Methuen, 1982) 31.

'truth condition' for whatever is proposed" (Nash 1985, 153). Thus, the reader can compare what is said in the novel to this "truth condition" and as a result perceive the possible irony, although in *The Curious Incident* it is not the narrator's irony, but the author's. Furthermore, as one of the most intellectually challenging forms of humour, "irony is only potentially in the phenomenon and is actualized only when the ironic observer represents it to himself or the ironic author presents it to others" (Muecke 1982, 42). However, it should be noted that "while we may legitimately question whether or not something has been said or done with ironical intent, we cannot question anyone's right to see something as ironic" (Muecke 1982, 43).

There are two types of irony that differ on the relationship between "the amused observer of irony and the comic object". The type called the closed irony is "characterized emotionally by feelings of superiority, freedom and amusement and symbolically as looking down from a position of superior power and knowledge" (Muecke 1982, 47). Although this sounds familiar from the discussion on the superiority theory, which is applicable as such to the novel, I suggest that the other approach, the open irony, is more relevant here. Open irony is a concept of irony in which sympathy is "an essential ingredient and no less so than detachment" (Muecke 1982, 50). Hence, it is quite understandable that the irony in *The Curious Incident* has been characterised as *touching*. Moreover, the open irony is "both detached and involved, critical and sympathetic" (Muecke 1982, 50), in a word, paradoxical.

In Muecke's opinion "irony needs 'alazony', which is Greek for braggartism . . . shorthand for any form of self-assurance and naivety" (Muecke 1982, 4). Throughout the novel Christopher "boasts" with his mathematical knowledge as well as other abilities, and keeps telling the reader what various concepts and words mean, as if he knew everything and the reader nothing. However, this clearly is not the case, which brings us to the concept of authorial irony.

2.4.2 Authorial Irony and Involuntary Humour

"One reason for distinguishing between author and narrator is that some texts may present us with a narrator who is subjected to authorial irony or structural irony by being shown to be at some level unreliable – perhaps in terms of her or his ability to understand events or in terms of her or his moral position"[38]. This is true of Christopher, who "has the advantage of a fiercely logical mind, yet he is so rigid that he can't navigate the wider world." (*Library Journal* January 2004, 49). In other words, he is book-wise but not streetwise.

The relationship between the author and the reader could be compared to a situation where people huddle together to "enjoy a good one" in a mood of "conspiratory playfulness" and the one who "gets kidded . . . is usually some third party not present"[39]. So, the author and the reader share information which the character, the third party, does not have, and that lack positions him as the butt of laughter. The authorial irony has to do with superiority in that when a character is subjected to authorial irony and the reader notices it, the reader is bound to feel superior to him and as a result laugh *at* him, and *with* the author.

According to Susan Purdie, there are "two discursive relationships" present in comedy. These are the relationship between the teller and the butt (the one telling the joke, and the object of laughter), which is exclusive, and the relationship between the teller and the audience, which is collusive (See Purdie 1993, 5). When the reader laughs at a character as a result of the authorial irony, it strengthens the bond, the exclusive relationship, between the author and the reader: "Paradigmatically, to the extent that a text is joking, the author position and the Audience [sic] share and affirm their own discursive propriety across characters who

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[38] Martin Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature* (London: Routledge, 2000) 288.

[39] Charles R. Gruner, *Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978) 66.

have enough discursive ability to make it worthwhile to construct them as objects of laughter whose ineptness distinguishes 'them' from 'us'" (Purdie 1993, 89). Hence, when the reader cannot identify with the thoughts of a character, she can seek comfort from the fact that at least the author seems to share her view.

In *The Curious Incident* there are indeed times when the reader is invited to laugh with the author and at Christopher, since Christopher does from time to time inadvertently reveal that he does not fully comprehend the effect he has on his environment, and quite often the reader can see the irony in his naive and self-assured comments. However, as was noted earlier, Christopher can be witty too, although he is not so on purpose, and thus the reader is also given the occasional chance to laugh *with* him[40].

Aarne Kinnunen reminds us that without wide knowledge of "cultural networks of signification" a writer cannot create humour and the reader is not able to laugh at his creations (Kinnunen 1994, 83, my translation). Furthermore, as Kinnunen proposes, humour is for those who are "familiar with the values, customs and traditions, history, ways of thinking and behaving", since, along the lines of Bergson, "humour seems to be a task for the intellect" (Kinnunen 1994, 81, my translation). Thus, it is again highlighted that knowledge and intelligence are needed in order to appreciate and enjoy humour as it was meant to. If we do not have the knowledge the author has assumed the reader to have, and are therefore no wiser than the narrator or character we are supposed to be laughing at, then the authorial irony is lost on us.

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[40] Despite the fact that we quite often laugh at Christopher, we can, as Henri Bergson suggests, let him have fun with us in our imagination and treat him as a companion, rather than as a comic object of laughter. See Bergson, 2000, 136.

Humour creation is divided into voluntary and involuntary, as well as formal and informal humour (See Ziv 1984, 83-84). In *The Curious Incident* the humour is on Haddon's part voluntary and formal, as he has produced the humour "professionally" (meaning that the novel is not an everyday situation in which informal humour is created), and what is funny in the novel is more often than not meant to be so. However, this not a point of any interest. What is interesting is that on behalf of Christopher the humour is very much involuntary, and he stresses the fact by stating at the beginning of the novel that "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them" (Haddon 2003, 10). This comment already is funny for more than one reason: it will prove ironical, since it is a funny book, and there is so much more to humour than just jokes.

Involuntary humour is "created when the person responsible for other people's laughter has no intention to make them laugh" (Ziv 1984, 83). Involuntary humour can be either verbal or visual. Verbal involuntary humour includes slips of the tongue as well as "naive remarks of children, who do not mean to be humorous" (Ziv 1984, 83). Even though Christopher is already fifteen years old and thus an adolescent, he does have a certain childlike air to him due to his condition[41]. His remarks are funny in a similar way to amusing remarks by a child, since both are serious when they say those things[42]. In a way, the fact that Christopher does not intend his speech or his actions to be funny makes everything even more so. This must be because of the irony of it.

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[41] Christopher's interests, for one, are similar to children's: dogs, space, computer games, deep sea life etc. He does not go out of his house except to go to school or to the shop at the end of the street to buy sweets. He also speaks and behaves like a child due to his lack of social skills.

[42] What is central also to the irony in *The Curious Incident* is that "though we see the 'false' is false, it is, and must be, if there is to be irony, represented as true." Muecke 1982, 45.

2.5 Sympathy vs. Distance – Narrative Point of View and Implication

In any other environment than a fictive one, an autistic person, such as Christopher, might seem to the eyes of an outsider emotionally cold and difficult to relate to. Therefore, the best way to understand his behaviour is to get inside his head, which is here achieved by the choice of the narrative device: "the first person narrator projects the reader clearly inside the consciousness of someone in the story giving us the events from a defined observer's position" (Montgomery et al. 2000, 235). This way Christopher becomes a part of the reader's 'in-group', which means that the reader treats him as one of her own people, and this makes it more difficult to laugh at him, whereas the other characters, whose thoughts and feelings can only be read from between the lines, belong to the reader's 'out-group' and are thus more easily made ridiculous in her eyes. In other words, "it is proposed that humour appreciation is facilitated when the respondent feels antipathy or resentment toward disparaged protagonists and impaired when he feels sympathy or liking for these protagonists"[43].

This brings us to another matter connected to the identification with the protagonist, to the concept of implication. Implication is a term used by Susan Purdie, and by it she refers to "any response which carries some sense of being involved with the effects of an utterance" (Purdie 1993, 77). Affective implication, then, is "affective concern for the persons involved" (Purdie 1993, 77). In simpler terms, as the reader is positioned to identify with Christopher with the help of the narrative device, she is also positioned to sympathise, or even empathise with him, and therefore she feels what Christopher feels. Hence, during the more serious sections of the novel the reader feels considerable distress on behalf of Christopher, because "if we have invested imaginative energy in creating a character's

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[43] Dolf Zillmann and Joanne R. Cantor. "A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth". *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications.* Eds. Chapman and Foot. (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1976) 93.

innerness, their strong suffering will feel painful . . . 'as if' it happened to us" (Purdie 1993, 85).

Naturally it takes some time for the reader to get to know Christopher, and the real affective implication begins when she starts to understand his view of the world and starts to like him for who he really is. Hence, at the beginning of the novel the implication involved is ideological rather than affective. This means that in addition to being the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, Christopher receives the reader's sympathy automatically because of his condition, because he is disabled and inhabits a more vulnerable position in the society and sympathising with him is the instinctive and moral thing to do.

However, the implication that stems from Christopher's condition is not straightforwardly positive. As Susan Purdie notes, in our present western culture handicap "is treated as sympathetic and also as alarming; it thus generally evokes both positive and negative affective implication" (Purdie 1993, 84). Thus, Christopher is usually treated by the reader as a real person who is taken seriously and who deserves affective implication, our sympathy, but when his speech or actions go beyond the limit of identification, he will appear alarming, which hinders the feelings of sympathy[44].

Despite the fact that the reader often feels "affective concern" for Christopher, she is also from time to time invited to take up a superior position from which she can look down on him and be amused. But to achieve this, she has to numb her feelings of sympathy, because as has already been quoted from Henri Bergson, comedy requires a kind of anaesthesia of the heart.

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[44] This is the case for instance when Christopher tells that he is afraid that his father will murder him because he killed the poodle Wellington, which is of course an irrational fear. At times like these the father is more liable to earn the reader's affective implication than Christopher.

When we see Christopher in a humorous light, we take part in joking engagement. In joking engagement we keep a certain psychic distance to Christopher, which makes it possible for us to laugh at him. This joking implication is needed as a counterbalance for the affective implication, since “laughter is nothing but an immunization that nature kindly provides for us against feelings of overidentification and sympathy” (Ziv 1984, 55). In fact, although it seems paradoxical, we do not have to choose either sympathy or superiority towards Christopher, since “People are made in such a way that they can enjoy something and its opposite at the same time. The pleasure that stems from superiority does not lessen the pleasure that stems from identification” (Ziv 1984, 64).

3. Analysing the Humour in Connection to Asperger's Features

Autism, Asperger's and *The Curious Incident*

"*The Curious Incident*, as narrated by Christopher, constitutes a genuine, though highly stylized, attempt to present the workings of an autistic mind" (Murray 2006, 37). It has also been noted that in the novel Haddon "continually embeds the characteristics associated with Asperger's syndrome, which results in a subtle yet powerful impact on the reader"[45]. It is true that the novel gives an exhaustive description of a person with Asperger's syndrome, and, as Stuart Murray remarks, "it is impossible not to note that *The Curious Incident* has become ubiquitous as *the* contemporary marker of the details of autistic presence, a fiction that is increasingly read as factual" (Murray 2006, 37). However, we ought to bear in mind that even though Haddon depicts an autistic person believably, the novel should not be read as a clinical work: "The character of Christopher is certainly a global representation of what life with autism can be like, but it should not become yet another stereotype" (Willey 2005, 686). Christopher's difference is then "as much a point about fictional creation as it is about the nature of autism" (Murray 2006, 38). In other words, "It is a story well told, but it is still a story" (Murray 2006, 39).

In addition to having been praised for giving a plausible description of an autistic person, Haddon has also been praised for his ability to write about autism without sentimentality: "the book's humor and lack of sentimentality are rare in a time when disability generally is still discussed either with condescending sympathetic seriousness or is simply wrenched from any account of reality in order to make a story work" (Murray 2006, 39). Before stepping into the realm of humour, some account of Christopher's condition should be given first, since it is the source of most of the amusement in the novel.

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[45] Review by Amy Meck and Cornelia Barrow in *Intervention in School and Clinic*. 40 (2005) 311.

In a nutshell, Asperger's syndrome (sometimes referred to as Asperger Syndrome or AS) is "a severe developmental disorder characterized by major difficulties in social interaction, and restricted and unusual patterns of interest and behavior"[46]. Typically the IQs of the persons with Asperger's vary from normal to very superior, but they "exhibit serious deficiencies in social and communicational skills"[47].

The symptoms of the Asperger's syndrome according to Christopher Gillberg can be summarised as follows (Gillberg 1999, 156, my translation):

- Difficulties in social interaction, which seems to be insignificant to the sufferer
- Extremely all-consuming interests
- Deviance in the meanings and social usage of language:
    - difficulties in coping in a normal conversational situation
    - concrete understanding of speech and words
    - meticulous speech

These features will be dealt with more detail in the following chapters where I discuss the humour of the novel in connection to characteristics of Asperger's syndrome. The humorous passages are divided according to the symptom of Asperger's syndrome that the humour most prominently stems from, but like a joke is hardly ever explicable by only one theory[48], also more than one Asperger's feature could be connected to the humorous passages.

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[46] Ami Klin and Fred R. Volkmar. "Asperger's Syndrome Guidelines for Assessment and Diagnosis." (New Haven, Connecticut: Learning Disabilities Association of America. June 1995) 1.

[47] "What is Asperger Syndrome?" at http://aspennj.org/aspergers-syndrome.asp [Accessed 14 January 2008]

[48] "In every good laugh there are literally innumerable elements, involving relationships within and between the material, personalities and circumstances involved." Purdie, 1993, 4.

3.1 Getting Acquainted with Asperger's

The following examples draw their humour mainly from fairly superficial and innocent sources, although some of the more rule-transgressing material is discussed, too.

3.1.1 Egocentric Conversational Style and Self-assuredness

As was noted in the discussion on irony, irony needs 'alazony', which means self-assurance and naivety. In *The Curious Incident* both features certainly are present. Christopher's naivety will be discussed later, whereas his bragging self-assuredness will be dealt with now.

Individuals with Asperger's syndrome usually have an all-absorbing preoccupation "about which vast amounts of factual knowledge are acquired and all too readily demonstrated at the first opportunity in social interaction" (Klin and Volkmar 1995, 6). Christopher does not have one but many such preoccupations. He is especially interested in maths, space and science in general, and he exhibits his vast knowledge of these subjects throughout the novel, for instance by saying that: "Some people think the Milky Way is a long line of stars, but it isn't. Our galaxy is a huge disc of stars millions of light years across and the solar system is somewhere near the outside edge of the disc" (Haddon 2004, 11).

Christopher's talents are also conveyed by his descriptions of himself and his future plans: "My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,507" (Haddon 2004, 2).
"I think I would make a very good astronaut. To be a good astronaut you have to be intelligent and I'm intelligent" (Haddon 2004, 65). "Next month I'm going to take my A level in Maths and I'm going to get an A grade . . . And after I've taken A level Maths I am going to take A level Further Maths and Physics and then I can go to university" (Haddon 2004, 56&57). He is also confident about getting an A grade from A level Further Maths and A level Physics (See Haddon 2004, 267). That is a lot of As.

One reason for Christopher to boast so much about his amazing talents could be that as a person labelled disabled, he has a strong urge to show the world that he is not stupid, as some people might think, because, as Susan Purdie has noticed, “If our speaking in and of the world is founded on this most basic need to be ‘recognised by the other’, it is not surprising that our sense of personal worth . . . [is] intricately knotted up with others’ recognitions of what we say and think as being ‘possible, right, rational, real’” (Purdie 1993, 169). In other words, despite the fact that Christopher seems to be completely indifferent to what other people think, in the end he, too, finds it important to be recognised by others as a whole, intelligent human being. In this he succeeds, and after his many demonstrations of complicated mathematical and scientific problems that he can solve, the reader has no difficulty in believing that he indeed is not stupid, or at least not in the traditional sense of the word, since there is also such a thing as emotional or social intelligence in the world. But more of that later.

Now, to get back to the humour in Christopher’s constant bragging, in our present western culture, or at least not here in Finland, it is not socially acceptable to boast about one’s abilities, no matter how real they are. In the examples given earlier Christopher is advertising his intellectual superiority by stating for instance that he is intelligent and that he will take demanding exams and get the best possible grade from all of them. Christopher’s continual demonstration of his high intelligence could be seen as a threat to the reader. As Susan Purdie explains, “any person demonstrating competence can be constructed as claiming power and so offering a threat” (Purdie 1993, 61). Christopher’s demonstration of competence and his claim to power offend the reader and thus make her laugh, either for crossing the boundary of what is appropriate social conduct, or in defence, to alleviate the threat by laughing at it. The funniness of these extracts is also connected to exaggeration, since, as Henri Bergson states, “exaggeration is comical when it is constant, and especially when it is

deliberate and systematic" (Bergson 2000, 90, my translation). Christopher's overt confidence in himself is an exaggeration, and therefore funny.

Individuals with Asperger's, especially Asperger children, "seem to find it difficult to understand that other people think and feel" (Gillberg 1999, 158). Christopher reflects on this deficiency by saying that: "when I was little I didn't understand about other people having minds. And Julie [his previous teacher] said to Mother and Father that I would always find this very difficult" (Haddon 2004, 145). This must be the reason for Christopher to keep explaining various words, concepts and facts of the world to the reader. By this he also exposes himself to authorial irony. When it comes to the irony in 'alazony', it precedes the authorial irony in *The Curious Incident* that Christopher self-assuredly claims power by his statements, because only then can there be irony and amusement, as "the more evident the claim to power, the more probable the funniness as a response to their mishap" (Purdie 1993, 61). "This kind of irony, where the false image a character has formed of himself clashes with the image that the work enables the reader to form, is common in novels" (Muecke 1982, 87).

Because of his superior rote memory, Christopher is able to remember a lot of information for example from television and books, but the problem is that because of his condition his is unable to understand that information completely, especially if understanding that information presupposes understanding how the minds of other people work. My first example of the authorial irony in the novel does not exactly have to do with not understanding other people, but it shows the limits of Christopher's knowledge nevertheless. This is how he describes a man at the ticket counter at the Swindon train station: "And he had dreadlocks, which is what some black people have, but he was white, and dreadlocks is when you never wash your hair and it looks like old rope" (Haddon 2004, 189). Christopher actually surprises the reader by knowing what dreadlocks are, and that they are usually associated with black people rather than white, but he betrays his lack of knowledge when he claims that dreadlocks

are the result of never washing your hair. It is true that when you have dreadlocks you do not wash your hair properly, but not washing the hair does not create real dreadlocks. Thus, Christopher's claim to power with false knowledge results in the reader's feelings of superiority. Christopher also amuses the reader with an apt remark about how dreadlocks look like old rope, which they do, to come to think of it.

Now, the next example about Christopher's false claim to power by stating facts has to do with Christopher's attempt to understand other people's motives, which begins promisingly, but ends in an error: "I think people believe in heaven because they don't like the idea of dying, because they want to carry on living and they don't like the idea that other people will move into their house and put their things into the rubbish" (Haddon 2004, 43). On the one hand Christopher is onto something here, but on the other hand he is completely lost as he fails to understand that people do not like the idea of dying because they are afraid of losing their loved ones, not their possessions.

The last example of the authorial irony is Christopher's statement concerning feelings:

> Also people think they're not computers because they have feelings and computers don't have feelings. But feelings are just having a picture on the screen in your head of what is going to happen tomorrow, or next year, or what might have happened instead of what did happen, and if it is a happy picture they smile and if it is a sad picture they cry (Haddon 2004, 148).

Again, there is a grain of truth in Christopher's statement, but most of the excerpt is an amusing oversimplification. Of course we think that we are not computers, and yes, we do have all kinds of images in our heads about the past, the present and the possible future, but I would not call those images feelings. Thus, although Christopher has learned a lot in his life and his superior rote memory helps him on many occasions, he is not a completely reliable narrator when it comes to describing the inner life of other people, which allows the reader to laugh at him and with the author.

3.1.2 Sensitivity to the Environment

Like other people with Asperger's, Christopher is very sensitive to noises, odours and other sensory stimuli. Mostly this will be a cause for tragedy rather than comedy, since he is unable to deal with the magnified stimuli, especially if the environment is unfamiliar to him. As a result he feels terrible, like he did when entering the Swindon train station: "And it was like standing on a cliff in a really strong wind because it made me feel giddy and sick because there were lots of people walking into and out of the tunnel and it was really echoey and there was only one way to go and that was down the tunnel, and it smelled of toilets and cigarettes" (Haddon 2004, 179-180).

Nevertheless, some humour, too, arises from Christopher's sensory sensitivity. The passages I am about to cite are only mildly humorous because the incongruities are rather superficial and because the passages take place in an otherwise gloomy context. However, it is precisely the nature of the context that causes these passages to be at all humorous, since the reader takes every chance there is to relieve the pressure of implicated identification that builds up during Christopher's journey in the unfriendly, strange world he encounters on his way from Swindon to London.

Firstly, when Christopher finally manages to buy a ticket to the train to London, he is not quite happy with what he got: "And then he gave me a little yellow and orange ticket and £3 in coins and I put it all in my pocket with my knife. And I didn't like the ticket being half yellow but I had to keep it because it was my train ticket" (Haddon 2004, 189-190). Although he does not say it out loud, it is implied that Christopher wishes that he could throw away the ticket because it is half yellow, which is ridiculous, because there is an incongruity between the importance of the ticket and the silliness of the reason to throw it away.

Secondly, when he is on the train and hiding from a policeman on a luggage shelf across from the toilet, Christopher thinks to himself that “And then somebody went to the toilet and then they came out again, but they didn’t see me. And I could smell their poo, and it was different from the smell of the poo that I smelt in the toilet when I went in there” (Haddon 2004, 205). This excerpt includes a slight taboo transgression, since it is not socially acceptable to speak about excrement or the smell of it, not even when one uses a childlike word like ‘poo’, although it must be admitted that it is entertainingly absurd that someone should contemplate the different smells of faeces.

Thirdly, when Christopher has arrived at a train station and is looking for a sign that would tell him whether he is in London, all he can see are the signs of a myriad of advertisements, which begin to overpower him. “And then I made my hand into a little tube with my fingers and I opened my eyes and I looked through the tube so that I was only looking at one sign at a time . . .” (Haddon 2004, 210). Imagining him doing this in a crowded place is enough to make the reader laugh from embarrassment, because to make a spyglass out of your hand is such an odd and surprising thing to do in public. In other words, it is behaviour which is incongruous with the normal way of behaving in a place like that. By this move he shows to everyone that he does not fit in, he looks stupid and the reader feels superior to him. But on the other hand, it is admirable that in a situation in which his brain does not function properly, he can come up with a way to cope with the situation. Moreover, even though Christopher himself does not see his act as anything out of the ordinary, it is rebellious to do something that all others will find strange.

3.1.3 Alien View, Perceptiveness

As Stuart Murray notes, "What we might term the "narrative appeal" of autism in cultural texts is that it easily signifies possibly the most radical form of personal otherness. Indeed, it is the *personification* of difference and otherness: a person, just like you or me (so the argument runs), who is in fact nothing like you or me, but rather subject to a condition that supposedly defies logic and understanding" (Murray 2006, 25). Ruth Gilbert shares this view and points out that "Christopher's Asperger's Syndrome always positions him at a distance from that which appears obvious . . . Christopher's emotional dislocation means that he can describe the world around him with remarkable and sometimes startling perception" [49].

Simon Critchley makes an apt remark when saying that "The extraordinary thing about humour is that it returns us to common sense; by distancing us from it, humour familiarizes us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization" (Critchley 2002, 18). Furthermore, when "we are asked to look at ourselves as if we were visitors from an alien environment, to examine terrestrial existence from a Martian point of view . . . we begin to look like outlandish animals, and reasonableness crumbles into irrationality" (Critchley 2002, 35). Thus, with the help of humour we can see our lives from a distance and come to realisations that we would perhaps not come to otherwise, and as a nice bonus, the realisation itself will be humorous and we will be delighted in addition to being enlightened.

Next I will discuss a few extracts from *The Curious Incident* which in my opinion show that Christopher indeed sees the world a bit differently from the rest of us and that he has the ability to make apt perceptions. The first example is about constellations:

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[49] Ruth Gilbert, "Watching the Detectives: Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Kevin Brook's *Martyn Pig.*" *Children's Literature in Education.* 36 (2005) 245.

> People say that **Orion** is called Orion because Orion was a hunter and the constellation looks like a hunter with a club and a bow and arrow . . . But this is really silly because it is just stars, and you could join up the dots in any way you wanted, and you could make it look like a lady with an umbrella who is waving, or the coffee maker which Mrs Shears has, which is from Italy, with a handle and steam coming out, or like a dinosaur. And there aren't any lines in space, so you could join bits of **Orion** to bits of **Lepus** or **Taurus** or **Gemini** and say that they were a constellation called **The Bunch of Grapes** or **Jesus** or **The Bicycle** . . . And anyway, **Orion** is not a hunter or a coffee maker or a dinosaur. It is just Betelgeuse and Bellatrix and Alnilam and Rigel and 17 other stars I don't know the names of. (Haddon 2004, 156-157)

On the pages of the novel where this extract is taken from, there are two pictures in which Christopher has joined the dots of Orion to make an espresso machine and a dinosaur out of them. By looking at these pictures the reader can herself do the brainwork and then realise that what Christopher suggests is indeed the case. This way the reader gets pleasure from the successful intellectual work, because "Intellectual activity that leads to understanding causes enjoyment and satisfaction" (Ziv 1984, 70).

However, this funny and surprising realisation is not the only thing that makes the extract humorous. Firstly, again Christopher's know-it-all style is amusing in its excessive thoroughness and its slightly offensive self-assuredness, which is emphasised by his last comment after explaining the matter comprehensively as he says "And that is the truth" (Haddon 2004, 157). Secondly, there is an absurd incongruity between the names that are printed in bold font: the serious, scientific Latin names of Lepus, Taurus and Gemini clash amusingly with the more ordinary names of The Bunch of Grapes and The Bicycle. Despite its close connection to heaven, Jesus as a name of a constellation brings a touch of taboo breaking into the equation, as a part of the Holy Trinity is compared to grapes and a bicycle, which are very mundane objects.

This is not, however, the first and the only time when the name of Jesus is treated "disrespectfully". As could already be seen in the previous example, "In jokes about religion, the sacred is mixed with the profane" (Kuipers 2006, 135). Another example rather

similar to the one about the constellations is the passage where Christopher tells the reader about his pet subject, mathematics: “if you see someone’s name and give each letter a value from 1 to 26 . . . and you add the numbers up in your head and you find that it makes a prime number, like **Jesus Christ** (151), or **Scooby Doo** (113) . . .” (Haddon 2004, 32). Here the incongruous juxtaposition is the result of the comparison of the son of God to a goofy, animated dog. In other words, it is disrespectful to compare the sacred to the profane, but in this ludicrous context it can be allowed and seen as humorous. Christopher’s tendency to speak about religious matters as if they were the same as any others must have to do with the fact that he believes only in reason and hard facts, and to him Jesus is just a name and as much the figment of someone’s imagination as Scooby Doo.

When the school psychologist, Mr Jeavons, questions Christopher’s logic for thinking that 4 red cars in a row (observed from a school bus) makes a **Good Day**, 3 red cars a **Quite Good Day** and 5 cars a **Super Good Day** and 4 yellow cars in a row make it a **Black Day**, Christopher explains himself like this:

> I said that I liked things in a nice order. And one way of things being in a nice order was to be logical. Especially if those things were numbers or an argument. But there were other ways of putting things in a nice order. And that was why I had **Good Days** and **Black Days**. And I said that some people who worked in an office came out of their house in the morning and saw that the sun was shining and it made them happy, or they saw that it was raining and it made them feel sad, but the only difference was the weather and if they worked in an office the weather didn’t have anything to do with whether they had a good day or a bad day. (Haddon 2004, 31)

This explanation makes Mr Jeavons admit defeat and prompts him to say that Christopher is a very clever boy, to which Christopher comments: “I said that I wasn’t clever. I was just noticing how things were, and that wasn’t clever. That was just being observant” (Haddon 2004, 32). This comment, however, is not a sign of a new found modesty, but a sign of Christopher’s rigid adherence to truth, a feature which will be discussed later.

Again there is the funny realisation that Christopher's habit of deciding whether it is going to be a good day or a bad day is not as incongruous and absurd as it first seems, because he manages to explain his habit in an understandable way. At first we are laughing at Christopher's illogical thinking with Mr Jeavons, but along with Christopher's explanation the tables are suddenly turned and we, like Mr Jeavons, realise that in fact "The object of laughter is the subject who laughs" (Critchley 2002, 14). Thus, we laugh because of Christopher's perceptiveness and at ourselves, both for our illogical habits and for being stupid enough to believe that we would automatically be right and Christopher would be wrong, when in reality we are all as reasonable or as risible.

The last example about Christopher's perceptiveness makes an important point while entertaining:

> All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I'm not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are. I'm meant to say that they have learning difficulties or that they have special needs. But this is stupid because everyone has learning difficulties because learning to speak French or understanding Relativity is difficult, and also everyone has special needs, like Father who has to carry a little packet of artificial sweetening tablets around with him to put in his coffee to stop him getting fat, or Mrs Peters who wears a beige-coloured hearing aid, or Siobhan who has glasses so thick that they give you a headache if you borrow them, and none of these people are Special Needs, even if they have special needs. (Haddon 2004, 56)

As Christopher exposes the politically correct terms of "learning difficulties" and "Special needs" to be open to abuse, the reader realises that in a way we all have learning difficulties and special needs, and are thus not that far from those to whom we so eagerly apply these terms to protect them, even though by that act we secretly wish to exclude them from us. In other words, it is ironic that the terms by which we wish to exclude, include us, too.

In the extract Christopher wishes to be recognised as one of us, or at least not to be regarded as one of them. This is connected to the fact that "groups produce Butts [sic] at local levels . . . Clearly joking is working here to reinforce the constant operation whereby

‘we’ construct our identity by distinguishing ourselves from ‘them’” (Purdie 1993, 132). As Charles R. Gruner points out, “Stupidity seems to be a very popular trait for comic ridicule in ‘out-groups’” (Gruner 2000, 82). He continues in the same breath that “Of course, ‘stupid’ jokes are very versatile, and can be used with numerous butts, depending upon the joke-teller, the audience, and their relationships to the butts” (Gruner 2000, 82). That is to say that stupidity is relative, that what and who is seen as stupid depends on the teller, and there is always someone to be perceived as lower and more stupid than oneself. Giselinde Kuipers notes on the subject of stupidity that “Jokes about dumb groups are seldom painful, actually only when the group that is their butt occupies a vulnerable position in society. . .” (Kuipers 2006, 126).

So, in the example Christopher is “producing butts at local levels” by calling the other children in his school stupid, which is also a taboo transgression, because telling from Christopher’s accounts, those children are severely disabled, and thus should not be ridiculed. However, the transgression is amusing and it does not go too far, since even though those children occupy “a vulnerable position in the society”, in this ludicrous context they are to the reader only faceless strangers and not a part of her ‘in-group’, like Christopher. What is also laughable here is the exposure of the fact that people are so insecure that they feel the need to identify a person (or a group) who is even lower than themselves so that they, too, can enjoy the momentary feeling of superiority.

3.1.4 Naivety, Childlike Innocence

"Because of their naivete, those with AS are often viewed by their peers as 'odd' and are frequently a target for bullying and teasing"[50]. If in real life the naivety of the individuals with Asperger's syndrome makes people to keep their distance, in *The Curious Incident* the opposite is true. Christopher's childlike thinking is endearing and makes the reader lower her defences and sympathise with him even more while entertaining her with the irony in 'alazony'.

As was mentioned in passing (in a footnote) earlier, what gives the reader the impression that Christopher is more like a child than an adult, is the nature of his interests as well as his likes and dislikes. Christopher often tells the reader about his wish to become an astronaut, and also the next example has to do with that. The extract is sweet rather than funny, but it gives a good sense of Christopher's naivety. The reader receives Christopher's account on the matter with mixed feelings, as one often does with naive remarks, since although there is a heart warming element to his wish, the impossibility of it makes it a little painful: "And I would like it if I could take Toby with me into the space, and that might be allowed because they sometimes do take animals into space for experiments, so if I could think of a good experiment you could do with a rat that didn't hurt the rat, I could make them let me take Toby. But if they didn't let me I would still go because it would be a Dream Come True" (Haddon 2004, 66).

Moving on to Christopher's likes and dislikes, here is an example: "And it's best if you know a good thing is going to happen, like an eclipse or getting a microscope for Christmas. And it's bad if you know a bad thing is going to happen, like having a filling or going to France" (Haddon 2004, 260). When reading this the reader can fully agree with

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[50] "What is Asperger Syndrome?" at http://www.aspennj.org/aspergers-syndrome.asp [Accessed 14 January 2008]

Christopher to a certain point, but the rest of the sentences are a humorous incongruity with what was expected. For instance, everybody can agree that having a filling is unpleasant, but when what follows as an even more horrific thing is going to France, the reader can only laugh at the incongruity. However, seeing this incongruity as funny, or perceiving it as an incongruity at all, may depend on the nationality of the reader.

Christopher's reason for not liking France is that all the people there are strangers to him and everybody speaks a language he does not understand, which frightens him. This is of course completely understandable, since the reader knows how hard it is for Christopher to cope even with more domestic surroundings. However, even though Christopher could hate any foreign country for the same reasons, he does not hate France by accident. The author is making fun of the age old neighbouring feud between the British and the French with the inadvertent help of Christopher. In addition, when Christopher's violent dislike of France keeps appearing in the novel in unexpected contexts, it becomes a comical repetition.

Even though Christopher's childlike interests are cute and amusing, they are not always solely so. For instance, when Christopher says "and I knew that it[referring to a smiley]meant 'happy', like when I'm reading about the Apollo space missions, or when I am still awake at three or four in the morning and I can walk up and down the street and pretend that I am the only person in the whole world" (Haddon 2004, 2), the reader is first smiling at the fact that reading about Apollo space missions can be to someone a subject that makes him happy, and then she is slightly disturbed by Christopher's last line. Of course we all like being alone, and walking the silent streets at night can be calming and enjoyable, but it can also be scary and dangerous, and therefore not something to make one happy. Christopher's habit conveys his wish to be completely alone (which becomes shockingly clear later on and which will be discussed in the last chapter), and reminds us that despite his sweet naivety, he is not

completely identifiable with. This sudden change in mood (the reader is first amused then disturbed) is typical of the novel, and the very thing that makes the precious humorous moments count.

As Henri Bergson points out, a person who laughs is at least seemingly good-natured, and there is to him "loveable merriment, which we ought not to look down upon". In addition, "laughter often includes a perceptible, *tension-releasing* trait" (Bergson 2000, 136-137, my translation). I have already brought up laughter's ability to release tension, but here it is not our own laughter that does the trick, it is Christopher's. Since Christopher is a serious boy who likes cold facts and cool logic and rarely finds anything funny, he therefore almost never laughs, and, to reverse Bergson's comment, "if laughter is proper to the human being, then the human being who does not laugh invites the charge of inhumanity, or at least makes us somewhat suspicious" (Critchley 2002, 25). Hence, the reader grows suspicious of Christopher's "humanity" and pressure begins to build up. But when Christopher finally laughs, the tension is released and reader is more than happy to see him exhilarated: "And *the escalators* was a staircase but it was moving and people stepped onto it and it carried them down and up and it made me laugh because I hadn't been on one before and it was like something in a science fiction film about the future" (Haddon 2004, 212). By his rare laughter, which here issues from a childlike realisation, Christopher proves that he is human after all, which is a relief to the reader and she can finally really laugh *with* him.

"Children in jokes are presented not only as humorously dumb but also as shameless and particularly: as sexually naive – a type of uncivilized behavior permitting one to draw on the domain with the largest potential for humor" (Kuipers 2006, 126). Alison Ross acknowledges the connection between sex and humour by saying that "Sex has been a cause for laughter for as long as written evidence exists" (Ross 1998, 66). When it comes to the presentation of sex in *The Curious Incident*, we do not laugh at the mere appearance of the

subject, but at Christopher's complete lack of interest in it, which is incongruous with what was expected.

Despite the fact that Christopher is already fifteen, he is not interested in anything sexual, which makes him as sexually indifferent and ignorant as a child and causes him to appear sexually naive. When, for example, Christopher is looking for his lost book in his father's room, he just casually lists the things he sees there: "I started looking under the bed. There were 7 shoes and a comb with lots of hair in it and a piece of copper pipe and a chocolate biscuit and a porn magazine called **Fiesta** and a dead bee and a Homer Simpson pattern tie and a wooden spoon, but not my book" (Haddon 2004, 116). Hence, if it were any other boy of fifteen, this list would have stopped at the magazine and concentrated on it, but as it is Christopher giving the list, it naturally, and amusingly, goes on without interruption. It is funny that the porn magazine receives from him as little attention as a wooden spoon, and his dry and disinterested description is incongruous with the shame and excitement generally associated with talking about porn magazines.

One of the people with which Christopher is able to have relatively long conversations is the old lady who lives in the neighbourhood, Mrs Alexander. Mrs Alexander is a typical elderly person in the respect that she regards talking about sex as socially unacceptable, and when with Christopher she is forced to do so, she resorts to innocent euphemisms:

> And Mrs Alexander said, 'Your mother, before she died, was very good friends with Mr Shears.' And I said, 'I know.' And she said, 'No, Christopher. I'm not sure that you do. I mean that they were very good friends. Very, very good friends.' I thought about this for a while and said, 'Do you mean that they were doing sex?' And Mrs Alexander said, 'Yes, Christopher. That is what I mean.' Then she didn't say anything for about 30 seconds. (Haddon 2004, 76)

Here Christopher actually surprises both Mrs Alexander and the reader with the fact that he knows what Mrs Alexander is talking about, which shows signs of maturity. However, his choice of verb, 'doing' instead of 'having', puts him back to his usual position as more like a child than an adult. Of course, his view of sex must indeed be mechanically 'doing' it, since he does not understand other people's urge to engage in interaction with others, no matter what the nature of it. However, what is humorous about this conversation is that Christopher bluntly breaks the rules of appropriate social conduct which Mrs Alexander so clearly tries to adhere to.

What is also interesting about the conversation is that Mrs Alexander's long silence implies that she thinks, quite justifiably, that Christopher would be shocked about this piece of news. However, as it turns out, Christopher remains unmoved by the revelation of the fact that his mother was so unhappy in her marriage that she ended up betraying her husband with the man next door. Once again our expectations are proved wrong, which is enough cause to give a dry laugh in disbelief and amazement. Christopher certainly is a curious person.

To finish this discussion of naivety with an example that also combines features from earlier discussion, the next one shows once again Christopher's tendency to explain obvious facts and show off with his fancy vocabulary, while presenting him as touchingly naive:

> Siobhan showed me that you can wet your finger and rub the edge of a thin glass and make a singing noise. And you can put different amounts of water in different glasses and they make different notes because they have what are called different *resonant frequencies*, and you can play a tune like **Three Blind Mice**. And lots of people have thin glasses in their houses and they don't know you can do this. (Haddon 2004, 219)

The reader cannot suppress her feelings of superiority, since Christopher is claiming power by telling facts that everybody knows, and again the "punch-line" proves his lack of knowledge of other people, thus showing the falseness of his claim to power and subjecting him to

authorial irony. However, although Christopher's expressions of naivety cause laughter due to superiority, they bind him and the reader more tightly together by showing both his ignorance and his innocence, which are qualities that expose his vulnerability and enhance the feelings of sympathy.

3.1.5 Explicit, Pedantic Style of Speaking

Pedantic and monotonic speech is a typical Asperger quality (See Klein and Volkmar 1995, 2) and it is very visible in *The Curious Incident*, too. In fact, Christopher's pedantic style is the reason for much of the comic situations within the sad and tense context. Before going into analysis, however, I want to take a brief look at some theoretical issues that were not dealt with in the theory chapter.

Simon Critchley states that "we laugh when a human being or another living being, whose behaviour we imagine we can predict begins to appear somehow thingly or machine-like" (Critchley 2002, 56). This idea of humorous, machine-like rigidity is originally one of Henri Bergson's, as Critchley, too, acknowledges: "The two core concepts in Bergson's discussion of laughter are rigidity (raideur) and repetition. The comic figure possesses, or better, is possessed by un effect de raideur, a certain stiffness or inflexibility which is emphasized through an absentminded, almost unconscious, mechanical repetitiveness" (Critchley 2002, 56). This machine-like behaviour, however, is not solely humorous: "At its humorous edges, the human begins to blur with the machine, becoming an inhuman thing that stands over against the human being. This is why the feeling that often accompanies laughter is not simply pleasure, but rather uncanniness" (Critchley 2002, 56).

That description is easily applicable to Christopher, who is both rigid and repetitive, and sometimes so to a point where this trait becomes uncanny, since he starts to appear more like a machine than a human being. Christopher's close relation to machines is also often present in his descriptions of the workings of his own mind, also, for example,

when he says “And when people ask me to remember something I can simply press **Rewind** and **Fast Forward** and **Pause** like on a video recorder, but more like a DVD because I don’t have to Rewind through everything in between to get to a memory of something a long time ago. And there are no buttons, either, because it is happening in my head” (Haddon 2004, 96). This citation already gives a hint of Christopher’s pedantry, his habit of explaining everything so thoroughly and covering all the angles, as if in anticipation of someone challenging his view and asking him questions about it. Christopher is unaware of his pedantic, monotonic style that causes him to have these machine-like qualities, and as Bergson (2000, 104) has said, everything that is done inadvertently is comical.

Christopher’s monotonic pedantry stands out throughout the novel. To give a typical example of it, when Christopher is in London looking for his mother’s apartment, he thinks to himself “But I didn’t know how to get to 451c Chapter Road London, London NW2 5NG so I had to ask somebody” (Haddon 2004, 228). The form of the address (which is recognisable as having being memorised as such from the cover of the letters from his mother) is an exaggeration already the first time Christopher mentions it, and when he just keeps repeating and repeating it, the exaggeration becomes absurd, and the reader is amused every time Christopher mentions it: “So I got to 451c Chapter Road, London NW2 5NG and it took me 27 minutes . . . “So I sat down on the ground behind the dustbins in the little garden that was in front of 451c Chapter Road, London NW2 5NG and it was under a big bush” (Haddon 2004, 232).

The incongruity of Christopher’s pedantic style and the content of his speech is most prominent when he is citing someone else. In the next example this contrast is even more notable, since Christopher has put his father’s sentences in the form of a list:

> And then I did some reasoning. I reasoned that father had only made me do a promise about five things which were
>
> 1. Not to mention Mr Shear's name in our house.
> 2. Not to go asking Mrs Shears about who killed that bloody dog.
> 3. Not to go asking anyone about who killed that bloody dog.
> 4. Not to go trespassing in other people's gardens.
> 5. To stop this ridiculous bloody detective game. (Haddon 2004, 72)

What Christopher's father originally said is not that humorous, unless one is amused by the mere appearance of crude words. In fact, the words of Christopher's father were somewhat menacing when reading them at the time he said them, because he was very angry and he has power over Christopher, which is threatening. Nevertheless, now that Christopher is only citing his father, there is a safe distance to the original situation, and the words can be seen in a humorous light.

What puts the passage in a humorous light, then, is Christopher's way of reminding himself of what his father said. In other words, there is an incongruity of registers which makes the passage humorous; a list presupposes neutral, detached language, whereas the words Christopher uses are offensive and reflect the intensity of the original situation. In this context, which is such as to allow a humorous view, the repetition of the word 'bloody' becomes comical. In addition, the fact that this angry speech appears again later on in the novel is a funny realisation of repetition. If Christopher had left out the rude words there would be nothing funny about the list, since it is quite normal to make lists in one's head, but what is not normal, and is therefore amusing, is citing someone in your head from word to word, not leaving out the rude expressions. This is because the rude words are an excess, they do not have anything to do with getting the list right, as the only meaning and function they have is that they express the anger of the original speaker.

In addition to citing others meticulously, Christopher also describes people and environments with perception and often painful detail. A milder example of this perceptive, pedantic depiction could be this:

"He was an inspector. I could tell because he wasn't wearing a uniform. He also had a very hairy nose. It looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils" (Haddon 2004, 21-22). After reading this slightly gross simile, the reader feels superior to the poor policeman with excessive nose hair, since having a hairy nose is not a desirable quality. Mentioning such a corporeal matter as nose hair in connection to the man's respectable profession in a way lessens the power of his high position by making him laughable. In this novel the part of the strangers is to be the butts of the reader's laughter, and this laughter is purely hostile, since there are no feelings of sympathy in the way.

Henri Bergson has remarked that as soon as the problems of the body start to interfere in the story, there is reason to fear the comic breaking through (See Bergson 2000, 41). That is exactly the case with *The Curious Incident*, as we were able to see from the previous example about the man with the nose hair, too. The following example gives support to my claim that the taboo material in the novel can be very explicit. Here Christopher is on the train to London and he has to go to the toilet:

> And it was horrible inside because there was poo on the seat of the toilet and it smelt of poo, like the toilet at school when Joseph has been for a poo on his own, because he plays with it. And I didn't want to use the toilet because of the poo, which was the poo of people I didn't know and brown, but I had to because I really wanted to wee. So I closed my eyes and went for a wee and the train wobbled and lots went on the seat and on the floor, but I wiped my penis with toilet paper and flushed the toilet and then I tried to use the sink but the tap didn't work, so I put spit on my hands and wiped them with a paper tissue and put it into the toilet. (Haddon 2004, 201)

This incident is a curious mixture of explicit taboo material and naive vocabulary, which is an amusing juxtaposition. Here Christopher's meticulous self expression has led to humour due to explicitness, a subject which also Simon Critchley has noted. Although Critchley is talking about a completely different joke, his analysis is fully applicable to the toilet example from *The Curious Incident*, too: "The way such humour works is through a play of distance and proximity, where the reader has their nose rubbed in the physical object being described, but

in a manner that is remote and resolutely unsentimental" (Critchley 2002, 45). As was quoted earlier from Giselinde Kuipers (2006, 127), things referring to personal hygiene and bodily functions really transgress boundaries, but here they are toned down by the euphemistic nature of the childish words of "poo" and "wee". Nevertheless, the taboo words do not cease to be offensive and thus are still humorous, because the reader laughs in embarrassment and disgust, in other words, in self defence.

There is also a touch of situational comedy involved, since the incident takes place on a moving train where Christopher, the dare devil, decides to pee with his eyes closed. The reader might also have the humorous realisation that this depiction is analogous with the general view that toilets on trains are filthy and they never work, even though this example may be exaggerating a little in order to be humorous. In addition, it is ironic that when you desperately need something to work (here the tap), it never does.

3.2 Asperger's and Abnormal Speech and Behaviour

Despite the fact that Christopher's monologue descriptions already give a good impression of his often humorous speciality and what could be called social or emotional stupidity, his thinking and his behaviour become more visibly incongruous (with what is considered normal) when he is engaged in a discussion with someone, especially if that someone is a person he does not know, or more importantly, with someone who does not know him. To explain this more thoroughly, when Christopher is talking to a stranger, this stranger is unaware of Christopher's condition[51], and is therefore quite unable to realise what he or she is dealing with, which creates more possibilities for the comic to appear.

[51] "The autistic body, unlike most physically impaired bodies, does not often signal its disabled status." Murray 2006, 29.

In the following chapters I will be discussing the impact that Christopher's condition has on his behaviour and his speech, especially in situations which make the reader see Christopher's lacks as a conversational partner. In addition I will discuss further the side of Christopher which makes the reader doubt his humanity.

3.2.1 Difficulties with "Give and Take" of Conversation

"Comedy characters' emotional ineffectiveness is, of course, braided into their discursive ineptness. Whatever kind of 'utterance' they direct to others is inappropriate because it does not have the effect they intended . . . Whether they speak too much or too little . . . their speaking is 'out of measure'" (Purdie 1993, 80).This is also connected to Grice's maxims and co-operative principle, the essence of which is that the "underlying assumption in most conversational exchanges seems to be that the participants are, in fact, co-operating with each other"[52]. The maxims, on the other hand, are: "**Quantity**: Make your contribution as informative as required, but not more, or less, than is required. **Quality**: Do not say that which you believe to be false or for which you lack evidence. **Relation**: Be relevant. **Manner**: Be clear, brief and orderly" (Yule 1999, 145). Next I will give two examples in which Christopher clearly flouts the maxim of quantity to a comic effect.

This conversation takes place between Christopher and his teacher, Siobhan:

> And after morning break she came and sat down next to me and said she had read the bit about my conversation with Mrs Alexander and she said, 'Have you told your father about this?' And I replied, 'No,' And she said, 'Are you going to tell your father about this?' And I replied, 'No.' And she said, 'Good. I think that's a good idea, Christopher.' And then she said, 'Did it make you sad to find this out?' And I asked, 'Find what out?' And she said, 'Did it make you upset to find out that your mother and Mr Shears had an affair?' And I said, 'No.' And she said, 'Are you telling the truth, Christopher?' And then I said, 'I always tell the truth.' (Haddon 2004, 94)

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[52] George Yule, *The Study of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 145.

Although this conversation is a fairly functional example of a conversation with Christopher, it nevertheless exposes his "discursive ineptness". Here Christopher, as usual, speaks "too little" since his answers are mainly monosyllabic, and he does not "give" anything other than the answer to the explicit question. Hence, Christopher flouts the maxim of quantity by saying less than required, which gives the conversation a comical feel as the shortness of his answers is an exaggeration. In a normal, functional, conversation both parties would work to keep the conversation going, but Christopher just does not care about being co-operative.

An important aspect "typifying the communication patterns of individuals with AS concerns the marked verbosity observed, which some authors see as one of the most prominent differential features of the disorder." Moreover, the individual "may talk incessantly, usually about their favourite subject, often in complete disregard to whether the listener might be interested, engaged, or attempting to interject a comment, or change the subject of conversation" (Kiln and Volkmar 1995, 6). Christopher, too, once he gets going, is hard to stop:

> I was about to turn and walk away when she [Mrs Alexander] said, 'I have a grandson your age.' I tried to do chatting by saying, 'My age is 15 years and 3 months and 3 days.' And she said, 'Well, almost your age.' Then we said nothing for a little while until she said, 'You don't have a dog, do you?' And I said, 'No.' She said, 'You'd probably like a dog, wouldn't you?' And I said, 'I have a rat.' And she said, 'A rat?' And I said, 'He's called Toby.' And she said, 'Oh.' And I said, 'Most people don't like rats because they think they carry diseases like bubonic plague. But that's only because they lived in sewers and stowed away on ships coming from foreign countries where there were strange diseases. But rats are very clean. Toby is always washing himself. And you don't have to take him out for walks. I just let him run around my room so that he gets some exercise. And sometimes he sits on my shoulder or hides in my sleeve like it's a burrow. But rats don't live in burrows in nature.' (Haddon 2004, 52)

At the beginning Christopher is showing signs of improvement when it comes to conversing, as he is willing to "do chatting", although Mrs Alexander still has to do all the work in the conversation, which is a sign of Christopher's difficulty with the process of "give and take".

What Mrs Alexander asks from Christopher, and what he answers do not quite match, which becomes an amusing incongruity. For example when Mrs Alexander asks ‘You’d probably like a dog, wouldn’t you?’ she (and the reader) expects Christopher to answer something like ‘Yes, I like dogs and I’d like to have one.’ Instead, Christopher replies by saying ‘I have a rat’. Of course his answer, too, has some significance, but the answer is not in a form that was expected. However, it gives Christopher the chance to chat about a subject that he is familiar with, although it causes the conversation to turn into a monologue. Christopher’s unrelenting monologue, then, exposes him as a comically inept speaker because he is again flouting the maxim of quantity as he is saying too much, “more than required”. In fact he is saying too much to a point where it becomes an absurd exaggeration. Christopher also flouts the maxims of relation and manner, as it is not that relevant to tell almost everything you know about rats when engaging in a small talk with someone and his monologue is far from being brief. The reader can only pity Mrs Alexander and smile at Christopher’s enthusiasm.

3.2.2 Rigidity, (too) Strict Adherence to Rules

A marked reliance on formalistic rules (See Klin and Volkmar 1995, 5) is an Asperger characteristic, which is connected to what has already been quoted from Bergson through Critchley (2002, 56), that in addition to repetition, also rigidity is at the heart of the humour, often in the form of “a certain stiffness or inflexibility” the comic figure possesses. Christopher, too, relies strongly on rules. It is of course understandable that he needs rules for comfort amidst the chaotic world, but since his rules are so rigid, they make him appear oddly machine-like. In other words, having rules is normal, but having rigid rules is not, since rigidity, as Bergson puts it, is “in contradiction with the inner flexibility of life” (Bergson 20000, 36).

To start with a light example, ironically enough, some of Christopher's strict rules are not that strict at all: "And for afters I had some blackberry and apple crumble, but not the crumble bit because that was yellow too, and I got Mrs Davis to take the crumble bit off before she put it onto my plate because it doesn't matter if different sorts of food are touching before they are actually on your plate" (Haddon 2004, 95). This of course, exposes Christopher to the reader's superiority, since having strict rules that will eventually be bent is unsystematic, and could be seen as a weakness of character.

It is, however, a relief to the reader that Christopher does not always keep his own rules so rigidly, because if he did, his life would be even harder, and that would be harder for the reader, too. The next example shows what obeying rules can do to Christopher, but luckily there is a comic relief at the end:

> The next day I saw 4 yellow cars in a row on the way to school which made it a **Black Day** so I didn't eat anything at lunch and I sat in the corner of the room all day and read my A level Maths course book. And the next day, too, I saw 4 yellow cars in a row on the way to school which made it another **Black Day**, too, so I didn't speak to anyone and for the whole afternoon I sat in the corner of the Library groaning with my head pressed into the join between the two walls and this made me feel calm and safe. But on the third day I kept my eyes closed all the way to school until we got off the bus because after I have had 2 **Black Days** in a row I'm allowed to do that. (Haddon 2004, 68)

It is alarming that such a trivial cause can have such a "momentuous outcome". In other words, there is an ironic contrast (See Muecke 1982, 53) between the cause of Christopher's black days, which is seeing four yellow cars in a row, and the result of them, which is social isolation, starvation and general anxiety. Because of affective implication, the reader feels the stress that the black days cause for Christopher, but luckily she can also feel the comic relief when at the end of the extract Christopher decides to break his rules. Although this rule about the different coloured cars may seem an unnecessary cause for suffering, it is not.

What gives Christopher the boost of confidence to continue his life-altering investigations after a setback is that he sees five red cars in a row, which makes it a super good day, and a day like that is good for taking risks like not obeying your father.

One of the most visible of Christopher's ridiculously rigid rules is to avoid strangers, which, of course, could be seen as a wise thing to do. However, Christopher exaggerates the rule to a comic effect as he stretches it to mean also people who could normally be considered acquaintances or even friends: "And I decided I couldn't go and live with Mrs Alexander because she wasn't a friend or a member of the family even if she had a dog, because I couldn't stay overnight in her house or use her toilet because she had used it and she was a stranger" (Haddon 2004, 161).

It is ironic that when Christopher is deciding where to go to live because he is too afraid to live with his father, he thinks that Mrs Shears, his father's ex-mistress and the owner of the murdered poodle, would welcome him to live with her, and that Mrs Alexander, because she is a stranger, would be a bad choice. In reality Mrs Shears does not want to have anything to do with Christopher, whereas Mrs Alexander is trying hard to become friends with Christopher. Thus, it is a little frustrating for the reader that Christopher rejects friendly people because of his rigid rule. Fortunately, Christopher always manages to relieve the tension by saying something funny, like here he is worrying about using the toilet and thus putting problems of the body ahead of the problems of the soul.

The strictest of the rules which Christopher lives by is honesty. As Henri Bergson has so aptly remarked, "It has been often said that the insignificant flaws of others make us laugh . . . But perhaps the flaw does not make us laugh because it is insignificant, it feels insignificant because we laugh at it" (Bergson 2000, 98, my translation). But more importantly, he continues by saying that "It must be admitted – as painful as it might feel – that we do not laugh only at the flaws of others, but often also at their good qualities"

(Bergson 2000, 98, my translation). In fact, “It would be more difficult to subject to ridicule a flexible flaw of character than an inflexible virtue” (Bergson 2000, 99, my translation). Thus, truthfulness, which is considered a good quality, is in the case of Christopher an inflexible virtue, and it can therefore be made ridiculous, like when Christopher is at the police station and the inspector (with the unnaturally hairy nose) is questioning him:

> He said, ‘So, do you know who killed the dog?’ I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Are you telling the truth?’ I said, ‘Yes. I always tell the truth.’ And he said, ‘Right. I am going to give you a caution.’ I asked, ‘Is that going to be on a piece of paper like a certificate I can keep?’ He replied, ‘No, a caution means that we are going to keep a record of what you did, that you hit a policeman but that it was an accident and that you didn’t mean to hurt the policeman.’ I said, ‘But it wasn’t an accident.’ (Haddon 2004, 22-23)

This is again an example of how Christopher’s rules have a paradoxical nature: on the one hand they help him control his life, but on the other hand they cause him pain and get him into trouble when interacting with strangers who do not know about his condition. Christopher is too truthful for his own good, and it is ironic that the quality Christopher values above all turns against him.

Despite the fact that we might be laughing at Christopher’s hazardous adherence to truth, in the end, as Christopher reminds us, it is not only the likes of him that demand truthfulness: “People say that you always have to tell the truth. But they do not mean this because you are not allowed to tell old people that they are old and you are not allowed to tell people if they smell funny or if a grown-up has made a fart. And you are not allowed to say, ‘I don’t like you,’ unless that person has been horrible to you” (Haddon 2004, 60 footnote 6). Christopher is quite right to mock our unsystematic nature, but he quickly turns the attention from the real subject once again to more corporeal, and hence humorous, matters with the examples he gives as proof of our flawed behaviour.

Imagining Christopher doing all those things he says he is not allowed to is funny because they break the rules of social conduct, and rule breaking is liberating. In addition, it is just hilarious and absurd that someone would want to say to an old person 'You are old' or to someone who has passed gas that 'You farted', as if they did not know it themselves. However, the truth is that if everybody was like Christopher and always told the truth, no matter what, the world would quickly fall apart. Therefore, although we, too, have rules, it is vital that not everybody takes them literally. Unfortunately that is something that Christopher is unable to do, which brings us to our next Asperger's characteristic.

3.2.3 Literal Interpretation of Language

According to Christopher Gillberg, people with Asperger's syndrome have difficulties with understanding symbols and interpreting figures of speech (Gillberg 1999, 160). In addition, they tend to take everything literally and have difficulties understanding implied meanings. Though it makes the life of the sufferer difficult, in *The Curious Incident* this characteristic is an endless source of entertainment, since "A comical impression is created when a figurative expression is deliberately interpreted literally. Or: as soon as we direct our attention to the literal content of a metaphor, the idea it expresses changes into a comical one" (Bergson 2000, 83, my translation). In addition, Christopher's inability to understand metaphorical language leads to comic conversations.

Christopher is a devoted supporter of the simile and a mean opponent of the metaphor. To him metaphors are lies but similes are not, unless they are bad similes. Christopher's apt similes ease the reader's identification with him and his inner life, whereas his encounters with metaphors are very humorous. He says that "I find people confusing. This is for two main reasons. The first main reason is that people do a lot of talking without using any words . . . The second main reason is that people often talk using metaphors" (Haddon 2004, 19).

With the help of a little comic exaggeration the reader can easily see what he means by that, like when he tells us that he does not like proper novels because they contain this kind of material: "'I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus.' What does this mean? I do not know. Nor does father. Nor do Siobhan or Mr Jeavons. I have asked them" (Haddon 2004, 5). Nor do I.

Nevertheless, that may not be the best example of what is humorous about Christopher's bafflement due to non-literal language, since the language in that example is so old and truly saturated with metaphor. What is funny is the realisation that even our everyday speech is filled with words that are incomprehensible to the likes of Christopher. For example when Christopher is listening to a police officer making a call on his radio to his partner "normal" words are scarce: "He said, 'The little bugger just had a pop at me, Kate. Can you hang on with Mrs S while I drop him off at the station? I'll get Tony to swing by and pick you up.' And she said, 'Sure. I'll catch you later.' The policeman said, 'Okey-doke' and we drove off" (Haddon 2004, 11). This is again an exaggeration, but it brings the reader closer to Christopher because she can experience for a brief moment what most conversations sound like to him.

Christopher has real difficulties when it comes to interacting with strangers, because, as was recently shown, they tend to speak using metaphors. To help him with that Christopher has memorised what different figures of speech mean, but even that does not always help:

> And then the policeman looked across at me and said, 'Oh, Christ, you've . . .' And then he put his newspaper down and said, 'For God's sake go to the bloody toilet, will you.' And I said, 'But I'm on the train.' And he said, 'They do have toilets on trains, you know.' And I said, 'Where is the toilet on the train?' And he pointed and said, 'Through those doors, there. But I'll be keeping an eye on you, understand?' And I said, 'No,' because I knew what *keeping an eye on someone* meant but he couldn't look at me when I was in the toilet. And he said, 'Just go to the bloody toilet.' (Haddon 2004, 200)

So, even though Christopher knows what keeping an eye on someone means, he takes it literally and cannot therefore understand the policeman, which adds to the policeman's frustration. Here both the policeman and Christopher are the butts of laughter. Despite the policeman's amusing sarcasm ("They do have toilets on trains, you know"), the reader is laughing at him, not with him, since he is a stranger in the way of Christopher's attempt to get to London and to his mother. In other words, he has the power to cut short Christopher's journey and is therefore threatening.

What makes the policeman laughable is his visible frustration, because as Susan Purdie notes, "Irritation, since it intrinsically suggests an anger that is both excessive to its object and ineffective in its world, is very likely to be comic . . ." (Purdie 1993, 79). The policeman's irritation is indeed ineffective, since it has no impact on Christopher, who is unable to react to the sarcasm. We can then laugh at the policeman's irritation and reduce his power to alleviate the threat. Christopher is the butt of laughter not because of him wetting himself, which is unfortunate and embarrassing, but because of his claim to know what the phrase 'keeping an eye on someone' means and the following realisation that in fact he does not, which is yet another example of "the more evident the claim to power, the more probable the funniness as a response to their mishap" (Purdie 1993, 61).

Here are two rather similar conversations which Christopher has on his journey to London when he has to ask for help for finding his mother's house. In both of them Christopher's inability to understand metaphorical speech complicates the conversation:

> And I said, 'Where is 451c Chapter Road, London NW2 5NG?' And he said, 'You can either buy the A to Z or you can hop it. I'm not a walking encyclopaedia.' And I said, 'Is that the A to Z?' and I pointed at the book. And he said, 'No, it's a sodding crocodile.' And I said, 'Is that the A to Z?' because it wasn't a crocodile and I thought I had heard wrongly because of his accent. And he said, 'Yes, it's the A to Z.' And I said, 'Can I buy it?' And he didn't say anything. And I said, 'Can I buy it?' And he said, 'Two pounds ninety-five. . . . (Haddon 2004, 229)

> And then someone sat behind the window and she was a lady and she was black and she had long fingernails which were painted pink and I said, ‘Is this London?’ And she said, ‘Sure is, honey.’ And I said, ‘Is this London?’ And she said, ‘Indeed it is.’ And I said, ‘How do I get to 451c Chapter Road, London NW2 5NG?’ . . . And the lady said to me, ‘Take the tube to Willesden Junction, honey. Or Willesden Green. Got to be near there somewhere.’ And I said, ‘What sort of tube?’ And she said, ‘Are you for real?’ And I didn’t say anything. (Haddon 2004, 210-211)

These conversations could be seen as “comic ‘mutual misunderstanding’ sequences” (Purdie 1993, 89), since both Christopher and the other party are at a loss with the other in turn. Thus, although the reader hopes that Christopher would succeed in buying a map and finding his mother’s house, it is still amusing when he fails to understand the defensive sarcasm of the other party. On both occasions talking to Christopher is like talking to a computer; if the answer is not understandable and not something already in the database, he asks the same question again, and in this case the replies “No, it’s a sodding crocodile” and “Sure is, honey” do not pass as real answers, which results in comic repetition when Christopher restates his original question.

What is fundamentally humorous about these two extracts is that the conversations are incongruous with how such a discussion ought to go: smoothly and politely. Instead we get bafflement and frustration, rude words and rude silences, and it is all very funny when we do not have to be a part of such dysfunctional behaviour. Witnessing rule breaking is best, since one can enjoy the situation from a safe distance. Obviously also Christopher’s innocent question “What sort of tube?” is amusing. Even though the reader is very aware that Christopher tends to take things literally, the question still comes as a humorous surprise because the word is so familiar to us that the metaphorical meaning has become the concrete one.

3.2.4 Valuing Reason and Logic

This is a feature that I have deduced from Klin and Volkmar's (1995, 5) Asperger's syndrome guidelines, which say that people with Asperger's have "poor intuition and lack of spontaneous adaptation" which are accompanied by (as we have already seen) "marked reliance on formalistic rules of behaviour and rigid social conventions", and, it might be added, a reliance on reason and logic. Ruth Gilbert comments on this characteristic also seen in Christopher as follows: "rules that can be worked out are the logical solution to living in the midst of chaos and Christopher, like his hero Sherlock Holmes, privileges relentless logic over imprecise intuition" (Gilbert 2005, 244). Furthermore, "What might have been perceived as a lack or limitation is thereby rewritten as an alternative and superior way of seeing the world" (Gilbert 2005, 245). Jay McInerney has aptly noted in his review of the novel that "Haddon manages to bring us deep inside Christopher's mind and situates us comfortably within his limited, severely logical point of view, to the extent that we begin to question the common sense and the erratic emotionalism of the normal citizens who surround him, as well as our own intuitions and habits of perception" (McInerney 2003).

Christopher, too, seems to think that his is "the superior way of seeing the world", which he so eagerly wants to show. There are many times when Christopher says that something we do is stupid, and lets us know that his view is the best and the right one. This is, of course, offensive and threatening, and it could make the reader think that 'Who does he think he is?' However, Christopher is so often right, that the reader can only admit it and laugh at the follies of humanity and with Christopher's, who is so perceptive.

Because he is unable to use his intuition, Christopher is determined to show the reader proof of its unreliable nature. Christopher's strongest, and most effective, attack on intuition is introducing the Monty Hall Problem to the reader. Bill Greenwell (2004, 281)

describes the Monty Hall Problem in a simple way and makes a good point about its presence in the novel:

> If there are three doors, behind one of which is a prize, and you select one, you have a one in three chance of being right. If someone opens one of the doors you didn't pick, and shows you there is no prize, should you stick to your original choice or switch? Intuition suggests it makes no difference. Statistics say you double your chances of a prize by switching. This is a particular stroke of genius on Haddon's part, because he puts innumerable readers (this one included) into mental difficulty. Christopher thinks statistics are simple; we don't. We are therefore forced to reverse our roles.

Usually it is the reader who has the innate ability to solve problems that are almost insurmountable to Christopher. In other words, the reader can intuitively read the implied meanings and the non-verbal communication of other people, in the case of this novel, the meaningful sighs, gestures and clothing about which Christopher tells us without understanding them himself. When reading the Monty Hall problem we experience our intuition betraying us, we no longer have the upper hand, and it is Christopher who can look down on us and feel superior. The humbling realisation that we no longer know better than him amuses us and makes us give a nervous laugh, as we are deprived of a major resource, and made to take the position Christopher usually inhabits.

All in all, Christopher's numerous scientific accounts cause me to think that I might be wrong more often than I realise, because I do not have enough knowledge to question his statements. If I did, and I could see that he is wrong, then there would be more situations in which I could confidently laugh at Christopher and with the author, whereas now I am left with the gnawing feeling that my feelings of superiority towards Christopher are perhaps not always justified.

Christopher, on the other hand, does not have such thoughts, he is sure that he is right. He is willing to see stupidity in everybody else, and as Edward L. Galligan notes, "There is no question that stupidity is a prime subject of comic derision, but there is a question whether comedy sees more of it in boneheads or in logicians. All of the great comedies make us pause on the question of the right use of or, better, the right relation with the intellect" (Galligan 1984, 30-31). Even though laughing at stupidity has already been dealt with, it has been about "real" stupidity. Here it is more about the alleged stupidity of scientists, logicians and us so-called normal people. Thus, it is not only the other children at his school that Christopher wants to label as "them", it is actually also us that he wishes to exclude, because we let such unnecessary impediments as emotions get in the way of rational thinking. It is somewhat disturbing that when the reader tries hard to understand Christopher and identify with him, at the same time Christopher tries to push her away by telling how stupid everybody (including her) is. At times like these there is nothing left to do but laugh.

In addition to attacking our reliance on something as unreliable as intuition, Christopher makes fun of our assumed belief in the supernatural and the afterlife, here a preview: "Also Sherlock Holmes doesn't believe in the supernatural, which is God and fairy tales and Hounds of Hell and curses, which are stupid things" (Haddon 2004, 93). Juxtaposing the name of God with words such as "supernatural" and "fairytales" is daring, and therefore humorous in its rebellion.

Christopher somehow manages to bring up death as often as he talks about other taboos, such as excrement, a habit which is of course disturbing to the reader, but which is also very amusing. Before discussing Christopher's take on death and religion, we shall take a brief look at Christopher's view on the supernatural:

> For example, some people believe in the ghosts of people who have come back from the dead . . . Eventually scientists will discover something that explains ghosts, just like they discovered electricity which explained lightning, and it might be something about people's brains, or something about the earth's magnetic field, or it might be some new force altogether. And then ghosts won't be mysteries. They will be like electricity and rainbows and non-stick frying pans. (Haddon 2004, 125)

Here Christopher's usual cool detachment is amusingly incongruous with the eerie subject matter, ghosts. In other words, ghosts could be considered scary, but as Christopher's handling of the subject is so dryly rational, he makes any fear appear ridiculous, which it of course is. In addition to Christopher's detached handling of the matter, there are also other amusing incongruities. For example, the incongruity in the "punch-line" is the sudden appearance of an everyday kitchen tool after the fascinating natural phenomena. Furthermore, the last two lines imply that the non-stick frying pan has been a mystery, which as juxtaposition is nicely absurd, as the larger-than-life meets the plain and ordinary.

Because he relies on reason only, Christopher approaches any subject without anxiety, and therefore to him death is as normal a subject matter as anything and can be brought up at any time. But because to us death is scary, we have to treat Christopher's accounts as black humour and laugh at our anxieties. The reader has to resort to this tension-releasing laughter also when Christopher describes with his usual pedantic detail what happens when someone has died and been buried:

> What actually happens when you die is that your brain stops working and your body rots, like Rabbit did when he died and we buried him in the earth at the bottom of the garden. And all his molecules were broken down into other molecules and they went into the earth and were eaten by worms and went into the plants and if we go and dig in the same place in 10 years there will be nothing except his skeleton left. And in 1,000 years even his skeleton will be gone. But that is all right because he is a part of the flowers and the apple tree and the hawthorn bush now. (Haddon 2004, 43)

Again, the detached style is humorously incongruous with the grim and frightening subject matter, here with death and rotting. Christopher's scientific approach is surprisingly comforting. It is also a relief that Christopher continues his description by telling what happened to his deceased pet rabbit (endearingly named Rabbit), because hearing about the death of an animal is easier than hearing about the death and rotting of another human being.

Although it is usually humorous when Christopher so nonchalantly and so often brings up death in his story, it is also a little abnormal. To give an example, this is when Christopher explains to the reader about the universe expanding and being destroyed: "And even if there are people still in existence they will not see it because the light [of the billions of falling stars] will be so bright and hot that everyone will be burnt to death, even if they live in tunnels" (Haddon 2004, 13). Thus, since Christopher's speaking of death pulls the reader towards negative affective implication, as it is alarming, it is a relief when the sweetness of the last line of the Rabbit example restores the reader's belief in that Christopher does, after all, have a humane bone in him and is therefore still suitable for identification with.

It is all right for Christopher to mock people's belief in intuition and ghosts, because they do not have to do with many people's convictions. But when he ventures to mock a religion, he is on more dangerous ground, which means that to mock these subjects is daring. However, as we have already seen in the examples including the names of Jesus and God, Christopher is not afraid of connecting them to mundane matters. Therefore, it is no surprise that heaven is to Christopher a place for clouds that can be imagined to look like alien space ships, for stars and constellations which can be made to form different images, but not a place where to spend eternity:

> Mrs Peters' husband is a vicar called the Reverend Peters, and he comes to our school sometimes to talk to us, and I asked him where heaven was and he said, 'It's not in our universe. It's another kind of place altogether.' . . . I said that there wasn't anything outside the universe and there wasn't another kind of place altogether. Except that there might be if you went through a black hole, but a black hole is what is called a *Singularity*, which means it is impossible to find out what is on the other side because the gravity of a black hole is so big that even electromagnetic waves like light can't get out of it, and electromagnetic waves are how we get information about things which are far away. And if heaven was on the other side of a black hole dead people would have to be fired into space on rockets to get there, and they aren't, or people would notice. (Haddon 2004, 42)

Death, dead people and religion are matters that should not be handled frivolously, yet here we are imagining dead people being sent to space in rockets. It does not matter whether the reader believes in the afterlife in heaven or not, we all still recognise the taboos as being violated.

To dig a bit deeper, it is, however, liberating to abandon one's normal way of thinking, to suspend the "internal law of gravity", as Neil Schaeffer puts it, and for a while play along with Christopher's suggestion. As with many jokes, also this statement sends thoughts into various odd directions when we allow the impossible to be possible for a moment. As Schaeffer reminds us, "Nothing could be more important in our appreciation of incongruity, and especially ludicrous incongruity, than the process of mental association" (Schaeffer 1981, 7). Here this thought process results for instance in a realisation that Christopher thinks like he does because he is unable to believe in anything that cannot be concretely proved to him, and therefore he does not believe in people having souls. Although, in his rare moments of sentimentality, Christopher does have thoughts that resemble thinking about someone's soul, for instance when he muses the though that Rabbit's molecules would become a part of the apple tree and the hawthorn bush, or that the molecules of the ashes of his cremated mother might be "in clouds over Africa or the Antarctic, or coming down as rain in the rainforests in Brazil, or in snow somewhere" (Haddon 2004, 44).

However, to return to the realisation, since Christopher does not believe in souls, then of course he would think that it is the bodies that have to go to heaven. Then, imagining what Christopher suggests to be the case results in an oddly amusing incongruity where instead of putting our deceased solemnly into the ground in a coffin, we send them into the opposite direction prosaically in a rocket. As Simon Critchley puts it, “The anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or the arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage” (Critchley 2002, 10). Indeed, although we are so accustomed to our social rites that we think them to be the only possibility, with jokes like this we can be made to see that our social practices are only one way of doing things, and potentially as ridiculous as Christopher’s way. If Christopher’s way of getting people to heaven were true, it would be a ridiculously expensive one. However, on the bright side, this way Christopher would get to be an astronaut after all.

In addition to the incongruities and liberating mental association, the humour in the example about the dead in rockets once again comes to include the feelings of superiority. The opportunity for the reader to feel superior to Christopher lies in the fact that it is, in the end, a little childish to think that the only way for people to get to heaven would be by sending their bodies flying in rockets, and that as no one has seen this being done, therefore heaven does not exist.

To summarise, sacred and mundane, metaphorical and concrete are juxtaposed here to a humorous effect. The thoughts that Christopher’s statement stirs up in the mind of the reader are absurd in their impossibility and enjoyable, because they violate the rule that taboos ought to be handled with appropriate seriousness, and not made fun of.

3.2.5 Paucity of Empathy, Insensitivity

"In regard to the emotional aspects of transactions, individuals with AS may react inappropriately to, or fail to interpret the valence of, the context of the affective interaction, often conveying a sense of insensitivity, formality, or disregard to the other person's emotional expressions" (Volkmar and Klin 1995, 5). This description fits Christopher, too, as will be shown shortly. In addition, Christopher has little or no sympathy for other people, not even for the members of his family or his relatives. This, however, brings us to the question of why should we, then, feel sympathetic or empathetic to a person who feels for no one? The answer is that we are invited to sympathise with Christopher because he cannot help the way he is, and, after all, he is a fellow human being and as worthy of our good thoughts as anyone. This positive affective implication of the reader is important, because on the face of it, Christopher's lack of empathy makes him appear somehow cold and less human. But also the joking implication is essential, because if sympathy changes into sentimentality and pity, then something has gone wrong and the final effect is something undesired.

In the next example Christopher is, as usual, only telling how things are, but ends up mocking his grandmother, despite the fact that the capital letter indicates respect: "And Grandmother has pictures in her head, too, but her pictures are all confused, like someone has muddled the film up and she can't tell what happened in what order, so she thinks that dead people are still alive and she doesn't know whether something happened in real life or whether it happened on television" (Haddon 2004, 99). Older people should be spoken of with respect, and hence Christopher's detached mockery breaks the rule and causes amusement.

However, this excerpt sends our thoughts into serious directions, too. It reminds us of the fact that even though we may be inwardly laughing at the poor confused grandmother now, if we live to be as old as she, there is a good chance that we too become

demented and lose our firm grip of what is real. There are not many things as frightening as losing our memory and our control of ourselves and our environment. In fact, we do not even have to become very old to mix reality with fantasy, as our memories can easily become distorted and unreliable. It is, of course, understandable that Christopher, who has a superior memory[53], would regard his grandmother as stupid for not being able to tell what is real. But to the reader his mockery is both a chance for amusement and a disturbing reminder of the evanescence of our control over our own minds and actions.

To give a preliminary example of Christopher's lack of empathy for the person who should receive it most, when Christopher hears from his father that his mother has had to go into the hospital, Christopher appears for a brief moment to be an ordinary child who misses his mother, but as always, this image disappears at the encounter of a humorous incongruity: "'Can we visit her?' I asked, because I like hospitals, I like the uniforms and the machines" (Haddon 2004, 29). What is humorous here, then, is that the reason why Christopher wants to go to the hospital is not his mother, but the hospital itself. This is a disturbing and absurd incongruity, since normally people love their family members and hate hospitals. However, like so many other times in this novel, the incongruity that followed the reader's expectation is followed by an explanation that makes it all congruous again. One cannot but love the way this novel presents the incongruities of the autistic mind and at the same time makes them appear the most natural thing in the world.

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[53] In addition to having an amazing photographic memory, Christopher says that his memory also has "a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack" (Haddon 2004, 96). That of course sounds funny, but is also believable, because smells are strongly connected to memories in the unconsciousness of us non-autistic people, too.

After Christopher has finally found his way to his mother's house and told her what his father had done (he had told Christopher that his mother was dead and hidden her letters from him), she reacts as expected, whereas Christopher does not: "And then Mother said, 'Oh my God.' And then she didn't say anything for a long while. And then she made a loud wailing noise like an animal on a nature programme on television. And I didn't like her doing this because it was a loud noise, and I said, 'Why are you doing that?'" (Haddon 2004, 236).

In the example there is yet another apt simile by Christopher, and the reader can imagine what his mother is doing and feeling, which is a cause for feelings of superiority towards Christopher, since he is so obviously clueless about what is going on. Christopher is comparing his crying mother to a wailing animal, which is humorous, because "What makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human" (Critchley 2002, 29). Christopher's insensitivity is such an exaggeration that it is laughable. It is also amusing that Christopher is breaking the rules that we should treat our parents with respect, and that other people's expressions of sadness should be treated with empathy. However, his insensitivity produces also negative feelings, since it is again a sign of inhumanity.

Now that we have seen how indifferently Christopher treats the sufferings of those closest to him, it is no surprise that he treats people outside his family with equal unconcern: "And some people get aneurysms just because there is a weak bit in their blood vessels, like Mrs Hardisty who lived at number 72 in our street who had a weak bit in the blood vessels in her neck and died just because she turned her head round to reverse her car into a parking space" (Haddon 2004, 36). This is again an example of an ironic contrast, as doing something as ordinary as turning your head while parking a car can lead to something as tremendous as death. Also, Christopher's lack of sympathy for the unfortunate lady is

funny, since it is impolite and also slightly inhuman. However, since the lady is a faceless stranger to the reader and therefore does not receive her sympathy, her absurd accident is humorous, because as Charles R. Gruner points out, “in spite of our capacity for caring”, we still have this “inclination to not give a good goddamn” (Gruner 1978, 84-85).

This last idea is also applicable to those occasions when Christopher talks about the other children at his school, and as we have already seen in some examples, those descriptions are not too PC. Here Christopher is justifying his decision to write a detective story about the murder of a dog: “I also said that I cared about dogs because they were faithful and honest, and some dogs were cleverer and more interesting than some people. Steve, for example, who comes to school on Thursdays, needs help to eat his food and could not even fetch a stick” (Haddon 2004, 6).

We are not laughing at the pitiable Steve but at Christopher’s blunt way of describing a person who is vulnerable and who should therefore be treated with more delicacy. In addition, we are laughing at the daring comparison made between a disabled person and a dog, since, as was recently quoted from Critchley, we laugh when a human being is reduced to the level of an animal or when an animal is elevated to the level of a human. Christopher takes this thought a step further, as at the beginning of the example he is elevating dogs to be better than humans by saying that they are for example more clever and interesting than some people, and at the end of the extract he is reducing Steve to be less than an animal by saying that he could not even do what any dog can, fetch a stick. The result of his statement is the “benign humanity of the animal and the disturbing animality of the human” (Critchley 2002, 36).

What Christopher says about Steve is of course true, (naturally, because he is unable to lie), but we are not supposed to say it. But then, on the other hand, if we think about it, why should we not say it, as Christopher always does to the reader’s amusement.

Moreover, using euphemisms does not help much as long as people think inappropriate thoughts, which is made visible in the novel when Christopher exposes the risibility of political correctness by telling us that "But this [speaking about special needs instead of different disabilities] is stupid too because sometimes the children from the school down the road see us [children from the special needs school] in the street when we're getting off the bus and they shout, 'Special Needs! Special Needs!'" (Haddon 2004, 56).

The ultimate proof of Christopher's insensitivity to and dislike of other people is his favourite dream, which goes on for three pages and ends in the words "And then the dream is finished and I am happy."

> And in the dream nearly everyone on the earth is dead, because they have caught a virus. But it's not like a normal virus. It's like a computer virus. And people catch it because of the meaning of something an infected person says and the meaning of what they do with their faces when they say it, which means that people can get it from watching an infected person on television, which means that it spreads around the world really quickly. And when people get the virus they just sit on the sofa and do nothing and they don't eat or drink and so they die. But sometimes I have different versions of the dream, like when you can see two versions of a film, the ordinary one and the *Director's Cut*, like ***Blade Runner***. And in some versions of the dream the virus makes them crash their cars or walk into the sea and drown, or jump into rivers, and I think this version is better because then there aren't bodies of dead people everywhere. And eventually there is no one left in the world except people who don't look at other people's faces and who don't know what these pictures mean [picture of four "smiley faces" which have different expressions on them]. (Haddon 2004, 242)

It is one thing to talk insensitively about people that you do not actually even know, and to be as insensitive and inhuman as to wish that every non-autistic person in the world was dead. Hence, Christopher's horrific favourite dream, which goes on for three pages, again pulls the reader towards negative affective implication. However, the humour and the naivety of the dream salvage the relationship between the reader and Christopher, and make her regard him as sympathetic.

Most of the humour in the description of the dream is the result of successful intellectual activity combined with incongruity and absurdity. To repeat what Avner Ziv has said about the intellectual function of humour, “The enjoyment of understanding something is at the foundation of the humorous experience” (Ziv 1984, 76). Next I will go through the humorous realisations the reader has while reading the above excerpt.

Firstly, of course the virus is a computer virus, because Christopher likes computers and other machines so much, and this being a dream, it does not matter that people catching a computer virus is impossible, and it adds to the absurdity of the dream. Secondly, when Christopher says that “the meaning of something an infected person says and the meaning of what they do with their faces when they say it” he refers to implied meanings and non-verbal communication. This is a cunning way to infect “normal” people as this way their strength (compared to Christopher and his kind) is ironically turned into their doom while Christopher himself remains immune. Thirdly, when Christopher tells about the virus that “people can get it from watching an infected person on television, which means that it spreads around the world really quickly” he means to imply that people watch too much television, which is an accurate and stinging remark, and it makes us laugh at our flaw.

Fourthly, the four smiley faces with different expressions refer back to page two where Siobhan, Christopher’s teacher and confidant, has drawn him the faces to help him interpret other people’s facial expressions, but as everyone can guess, the “cheat sheet” is not much of a help to Christopher, and he ends up tearing it in frustration. This intratextual reference freshens the reader’s memory about the difficulties Christopher has with non-verbal communication, and adds to the understanding of Christopher’s frustration and therefore to the understanding of his motives for this dream holocaust.

This dream, if anything, makes the reader laugh in self defence. Wishing everybody like us dead is very threatening, which lessens the possibilities to laugh because of superiority, since "when we see someone as wholly *threatening* to us, they also cannot be the object of our laughter" (Purdie 1993, 77-78). Luckily the mirth gained from all those intellectual successes causes the atmosphere to be such as to allow an amused attitude towards the whole dream. Christopher also inadvertently lessens the reader's feelings of anxiety and tension when he brings up *Blade Runner*, although the movie, too, serves as a reminder of another rather dark future for the human race. In other words, the brief change of subject from describing our gruesome ways to leave this world to *Blade Runner* serves as a comic relief, as it is just absurd for someone to have different versions of a dream. In addition, the reader may realise that *Blade Runner* is one of the best known movies that have a director's cut. However, that merry moment does not last long, because Christopher has already moved on to talk about how much more convenient it is if the dead bodies drown in seas and rivers instead of lying around everywhere. These kinds of amusing and serious passages take turns in his dream, which causes the pressure to build up in the reader's mind to be released again in a moment.

Paradoxically, Christopher demonstrating that he has absolutely no empathy for anyone, and the fact that he wishes everybody dead, in a way makes the reader have even more empathy for him. This is because the dream, as horrible as it may be, makes his urge to be alone crystal clear, and because in reality he does not have that luxury, the reader feels his pain. I suggest that on the whole, because of the more threatening parts, the dream shows a side of Christopher which is impossible to identify with, which makes the reader seek comfort from the safe distance of the joking implication. In other words, the reader treats Christopher's accounts as black humour and laughs at what makes her anxious.

However, since the cause for the dream is understandable, Christopher is also seen through positive affective implication. Moreover, as the rest of the dream once again betrays Christopher's childlike innocence[54], which works like a protective shield against negative feelings towards Christopher, the reader is faced with the fact that despite his intellectual abilities, Christopher is still only a child inside. And who could be offended by someone who describes himself and his kind as being "like Okapi in the jungle in the Congo which are a kind of antelope and very shy and rare" (Haddon 2004, 242).

[54] When given the opportunity to do anything in the world in the dream, Christopher chooses things such as being a detective, driving a car, buying things he likes to eat and not going to France. See Haddon, 2004, 243-44.

4. The Special Features of *The Curious Incident*

The Curious Incident is an unusual novel for adults, not only because of its choice of narrator, but also because it has special features that not many other novels have. These features are: footnotes, pictures and "digressions". In addition, the chapters have a curious numbering system (the novel begins with chapter 2, and after 3 comes 5, and after that 7 and so on), but this mystery is solved fairly quickly, as in chapter 19 (8 in reality) Christopher tells the reader that he has numbered the chapters with prime numbers instead of cardinal numbers, because he likes prime numbers and thinks that they are like life: "They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them" (Haddon 2004, 15). Next I will briefly present the above features in connection to humour, and say a few words about the novel being a murder mystery.

When it comes to the footnotes in the novel, they give a comic touch because they are yet another expression of Christopher's pedantic nature. Christopher usually reads books about science and maths, and those books may include footnotes, whereas novels usually do not, and the mere presence of the footnotes is an amusing incongruity. Although the footnotes are interesting, they only add information which has already been thoroughly explained, and are thus an excess, a comic exaggeration.

The various pictures, too, add to Christopher's circumstance. Although the verbal description would often suffice, Christopher has added lots of visual material in his novel. These images fit to the whole and make the book appear just as Christopher would want it; clear and precise. In addition, "Haddon's inclusion of diagrams, timetables, maps, even math problems, extends the normal scope of novel-writing and demonstrates the rich

idiosyncrasies of the autistic brain"[55]. The pictures also often help the reader come to humorous realisations, like with the constellations or the diagram for the Monty Hall problem.

The digressions are chapters that do not happen in real time in the novel, in other words, they consist of Christopher's philosophical pondering and reminiscing and they do not advance the plot. In Simon Critchley's view, "it is the combination of these two contrary motions –progressive and digressive – that is at the heart of humour" (Critchley 2002, 22). He also cites Sterne in a way that fits *The Curious Incident*, too: "digressions are the sunshine, the life and the soul of reading" (Critchley 2002, 22). I have to agree.

At first these digressions seem like the result of normal speech by a person with Asperger's, which is often "tangential and circumstantial, conveying a sense of looseness of associations and incoherence" (Klin and Volkmar 1995, 5). However, on a closer look the transgressions prove to be to the point and closely connected to the real chapters. What these digressions really do, is that they elaborate the character of Christopher and the difficulties with his everyday life by telling the reader about his hopes and dreams, his likes and dislikes, and his lacks and special abilities. The digressions give the novel its unique feel, much of its humour, and make the real plot-advancing chapters understandable.

The digressions also serve as comic relief, as they have a certain safe distance to the real plot, which is often emotionally strenuous to the reader, because she empathises with Christopher's physical and psychological suffering. For example after the emotionally charged chapter where Christopher's father has found Christopher's book and they have had a row and a fistfight, comes the comic relief of the hilarious digression where Christopher has listed the reasons why he hates the colours yellow and brown.

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[55] Review by Charlotte Moore. "Just the Facts, Ma'am." *The Guardian*. 24 May (2008).

The Curious Incident is also a murder mystery, which has got its lengthy title from the Sherlock Holmes short story called the "The Adventure of Silver Blaze". This connects nicely with the fact that Christopher admires Sherlock Holmes and uses the same kind of deductive logic when solving his own mysteries. The other connection between the stories is that in both of them there is a criminal who is known to a dog involved in a nocturnal crime, although the difference is that in "Silver Blaze" the criminal is killed, whereas in *The Curious Incident* it is the dog that gets it[56]. It is somehow endearing (and humorously incongruous) that Christopher's serious murder mystery involves investigating the death of a dog. Nevertheless, realising this intertextual connection gives the reader pleasure due to successful intellectual activity that leads to understanding.

The real mystery in the novel, however, is Christopher, who is "witty though he doesn't understand wit, compelling though he is not compelled to be with others, expressive though he fails to express himself in ways familiar to most, and easily as brilliant as his favourite muse, Sherlock Holmes" (Willey 2005, 686-687). In the end the other mysteries are only a convenient setting for Christopher's journey to the wide world and to himself, which makes *The Curious Incident* also a kind of a rite of passage novel. At the end of the story Christopher has not only successfully solved two mysteries, but also surpassed himself. He is happy and proud of himself, just as he should be.

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[56] See Arthur Conan Doyle. "The Adventure of Silver Blaze." *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories* (London: Chancellor Press, 2000) 235-257.

5. Conclusion

"Mother used to say that . . . Christopher was a nice name because it was a story about being kind and helpful, but I do not want my name to mean a story about being kind and helpful. I want my name to mean me" (Haddon 2004, 20).

This is where both the tragedy and the comedy of Christopher's life ultimately stem from: his complete ego-centrism and his lack of understanding of and interest in other people's thoughts and feelings. It is painful for the reader to witness Christopher living his life in an egocentric bubble, while around him, and because of him, marriages fall apart, people get hurt both physically and emotionally, and many a man has to resort to a drink. Thus, the reader can see the tragedy of the havoc Christopher wreaks with his surroundings, while he remains blissfully unaware of it all.

However, although Christopher feels and causes pain that also the reader senses, his ego-centricity, insensitivity and lack of empathy are the cause for many comic moments in the novel, too. It is amusing that Christopher does not care about being kind and helpful, that he so openly cares only about himself, as well as that he shamelessly declares himself as intelligent, and keeps calling more or less everybody stupid, even Arthur Conan Doyle who has created his idol, Sherlock Holmes. It does not matter whether Christopher is right, which he is, it just is not socially acceptable to behave that way.

The humour that comes from Christopher's neglect of other people's thoughts and feelings could be summarised with the help of Grice's conversational maxims. As the maxims state, we should keep our contribution in interaction as informative as required, as well as truthful, relevant and brief. We should also co-operate with the other party of the conversation, both give and take information.

Since Christopher fails to understand the rules of social conduct also expressed in the maxims, as they presuppose concern for what other people think, he explains everything in a pedantic, thorough manner, and even adds footnotes and pictures to support his accounts. These accounts are in fact truthful, since Christopher is unable to lie, but ironically even that can turn against him and amuse us, which is something he would not wish to do. Christopher is at times too truthful for his own good, as he fails to understand that some things are better left unsaid, although he, too, does sometimes utilise the concept of the white lie. Christopher is also disturbingly explicit in his truthfulness, and usually when he tells how things are, his descriptions are gross and embarrassing. Often this includes excreta and other disgusting side products of the human body. In addition, when Christopher calls the other children at the special needs school stupid and sometimes insensitively compares his fellow students to animals, he is of course only telling it how it is, although that is again something we are not allowed to do.

When it comes to straightforward insensitivity towards other people, it also comes to the question of Christopher's humanity. The subject of humanity has actually to do with two things here. Firstly, the novel is about the general difficulties of being human, about being a young person more than about merely being autistic. Secondly, Christopher's accounts sometimes raise the question of whether he is human. That is to say that Christopher's machine-like rigidity and complete lack of empathy for other people (he does care about animals, though) makes him appear somehow cold and inhuman, which is disturbing for the reader. This is where the limits of identification and positive affective implication are met. Although the reader can on some level understand Christopher's reasons for doing so, it is still too strange, for example, that he rejects people who are nothing but kind to him, like Mrs Alexander, that he is unmoved about the supposed death of her mother,

and that he completely ignores his father's attempts to reconcile with him after Christopher had discovered his deception.

What I mean to say by all this, is that much of the humour in the novel arises from Christopher being indifferent to other human beings, whether it is his narration which flouts all the rules of functional interaction, or whether it is his insensitivity to other people in general. It is all so strange and unusual, and therefore the humour in the novel is the result of a perceived incongruity. This is because the reader has expectations, a "truth condition", like Walter Nash puts it, to which she compares Christopher's accounts, and when these do not match, she finds Christopher's thinking humorous, since the ludicrous context is such as to allow amusement, even due to inappropriate jokes. Hence, the reader is laughing mainly in self defence, since, although it is embarrassing to admit, she is on some level disturbed by Christopher's difference.

As Nash reminds us, "the penalty of all knowledge is the loss of surprise" (Nash 1985, X1 of the preface), and as the reader becomes more familiar with Christopher's way of seeing the world, some of the humorous, incongruous surprises may cease to be such. However, since the humour in the novel stems more from Christopher's profound oddity rather than from surprises, it does not matter how many times one reads *The Curious Incident*, Christopher's look on life is so original that it makes the reader enjoy herself on every read.

In addition to being interestingly and disturbingly odd, Christopher is also someone to identify with. What makes him so is that the characteristics that I have here labelled as characteristics of Asperger's syndrome, can, in fact, be found in all of us to some extent. What makes the characteristics humorous, in addition to their surprising oddity, then, is the fact that in the case of Christopher they are all an exaggeration, which makes them appear comic.

One more factor concerning the humour in the novel is that while our actions are limited by various cultural and social rules that we have internalised, Christopher, despite his many rules, is not restricted by such impediments because he simply does not care about them. As a result, Christopher keeps breaking taboos right and left, and if we permit the transgressions in our minds, we can enjoy the liberating feel of rebellion. Like Charles R. Gruner points out, "the most important function of humor is its power to release us from the many inhibitions and restrictions under which we live our daily lives" (Gruner 1978, 84-85). Looking at life through Christopher's eyes does indeed release us from many inhibitions and restrictions, although at the same time we are made to see ourselves (and our flaws) more clearly.

When it comes to the function of the humour in *The Curious Incident*, as I have mentioned earlier, it is needed as a counterbalance for the painful sadness Christopher's condition causes, and which nothing can be done about. Without the humour the novel would become too heavy to bear, since, although it is fiction, it represents real life with Asperger's syndrome. In addition to this tension-releasing ability, the humour in the novel has also another function.

As Stuart Murray remarks, "disability narratives are full of prejudices that come in the form of well-meaning liberalism" (Murray 2006, 37). Therefore it is of vital importance that Haddon presents Christopher and his condition with the good and the bad, that he does not embellish the condition or leave out the matters that might disturb the reader. It is precisely the honesty of description, presenting both Christopher's sympathetic and alarming side, which makes the novel paradoxical and therefore interesting. In addition, the fact that the reader is given an opportunity to laugh at Christopher like she laughs at everyone else makes him an equal. Thus, Haddon's merit is to have written about autism in a way that gives

a good impression of the sad and serious side of the condition, while the humour prevents unnecessary sentimentality.

As was said, the novel depicts people with disabilities with honesty, which means that the picture is not always beautiful, whether it is about Christopher, or his fellow students at school. Nevertheless, the disabled students are never ridiculed, except when people in the novel laugh at them, but in those cases it is the laugher who is laughed at by the reader, not the special needs students. Of course there are times when Christopher tells about the other disabled children and the reader feels superior to them, but it is troubled superiority rather than amused. Moreover, if the reader finds these descriptions humorous, it is due to Christopher's unnaturally detached attitude.

The superiority that is targeted at Christopher, on the other hand, is a cause for enjoyment for the reader. This happens, for instance, when Christopher shows his lack of knowledge or rules which are self-evident to most people, or when he makes and false claim to power. However, although some of it is due to Christopher's naivety, paradoxically it is his naivety that tones down the feelings of superiority. All in all, the positive affective implication is the strongest in the novel, and although the reader is amused by Christopher, the sympathy she feels towards him prevents her from laughing at him from a distant, superior height.

The Curious Incident is in not in my opinion a comedy because of the affective implication of the reader, although it has a comic tone and comic moments. Moreover, it does not have the defining characteristic of a happy ending, though it does have a hopeful ending typical of Christopher; self-assured but sweet: "And I know I can do this [become a scientist and live on his own] because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything" (Haddon 2004, 268).

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