

**Representing and Constructing Englishness — A Study on**  
*Fawlty Towers* **and National Identity**

**University of Tampere**  
**School of Modern Languages and**  
**Translation Studies**  
**English Philology**  
**Pro Gradu Thesis**  
**March 2005**  
**Katariina Niiranen**

## Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b><i>Checking in at Fawlty Towers</i></b> .....	<b>2</b>
1.1.	<b><i>Fawlty Towers as a Situation Comedy</i></b> .....	<b>6</b>
1.2.	<b>“Ah, more strikes...” — The Historical and Social Context</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b><i>Theoretical background</i></b> .....	<b>15</b>
2.1.	<b>Imagining the Community — Ideas of a Nation and National Identity</b> ..	<b>17</b>
2.2.	<b>Formation of Englishness</b> .....	<b>27</b>
2.3.	<b>Popular Culture, Comedy and Humour</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b><i>What Are You Laughing At? Methods of Comedy</i></b> .....	<b>39</b>
3.1.	<b>Farce, Incongruity and Dramatic Irony at Work</b> .....	<b>39</b>
3.2.	<b>Playing with Language — Verbal Comedy</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b><i>Representing the Nation Through the Family</i></b> .....	<b>52</b>
4.1.	<b>The Major — “Drunken old sod”</b> .....	<b>53</b>
4.2.	<b>Sybil and Polly — the Strong Caretakers</b> .....	<b>56</b>
4.3.	<b>Manuel — Cheap and Keen to Learn</b> .....	<b>60</b>
4.4.	<b>English Characteristics and Basil as the English Gentleman</b> .....	<b>64</b>
4.5.	<b>Sexuality Shaping Nationality</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b><i>Other Nationalities in Fawlty Towers</i></b> .....	<b>84</b>
5.1.	<b>The Function of Stereotypes</b> .....	<b>85</b>
5.2.	<b>The “Other” Guests — German, French and American</b> .....	<b>88</b>
5.3.	<b>Sexuality, Race and the Self</b> .....	<b>104</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b><i>Checking Out from Fawlty Towers</i></b> .....	<b>113</b>
	<b><i>Works Cited</i></b> .....	<b>122</b>

## 1. Checking in at *Fawlty Towers*

“This is typical, absolutely typical...of the kind of... (shouting) ARSE I have to put up with from you people. You ponce in here expecting to be waited on hand and foot, well I’m trying to run a hotel here. Have you any idea of how much there is to do? Do you ever think of that? Of course not, you’re all too busy sticking your noses into every corner, poking around for things to complain about, aren’t you. Well let me tell you something – this is exactly how Nazi Germany started, you know. A lot of layabouts with nothing better to do than to cause trouble. Well I’ve had fifteen years of pandering to please the likes of you and I’ve had enough. I’ve had it. Come on, pack your bags and get out!”<sup>1</sup>

*Fawlty Towers* is one of the best-loved British television situation comedies and the character of Basil Fawlty (John Cleese), who runs a hotel with his wife Sybil (Prunella Scales), is famous for his rudeness, pretentiousness and quirkiness. The quote at the beginning is from an episode, where Basil is shouting at his guests because they are (justifiably) unhappy about the service in the hotel. When some other hotel manager would humbly accept the complaints and pursue for improving the service, Basil, on the contrary, is outraged by the “trouble causing” and “nosy” clientele at his hotel. Not only does the show amuse the audience because of its farcical and witty plot, but much of the laughter arises from irony and self-ridicule when laughing at Basil’s undertakings. There is, indeed, something that is essentially British in Basil Fawlty’s character. The show has gained almost a cult reputation both in Britain as well as outside of Britain<sup>2</sup>. It is known and loved by many viewers today as well, even though it was written and first broadcast in the 1970s. Perhaps it has something to do with nostalgia, but as critics have noted, the mid 1970s were “the Golden Age of British Comedy” and that comedy, in

---

<sup>1</sup> John Cleese and Connie Booth, “Waldorf Salad”, *The Complete Fawlty Towers* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001) 242.

<sup>2</sup> In a poll conducted by The British Film Institute in year 2000, members of the TV industry voted *Fawlty Towers* as number one of British television programmes (see “The bfi 100” <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tv/100/>). Even though there were a short list of a hundred programmes, and there have been many popular programmes since *Fawlty Towers*, the show that was twenty-five years old still gained the majority of votes.

fact, “represents some of the very best of British TV”<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, a situation comedy like *Fawlty Towers* is part of the cultural heritage of Britain, and as a product of popular culture it offers a representation of British society as well as people living in that society.

In the thesis my intention is to focus on the question of national identity in relation to *Fawlty Towers* and the ways in which it represents and either constructs or deconstructs national identity and Englishness. Does it work to construct a common sense of a national identity or does it perhaps disrupt the ideological view? What kind of representation of Englishness does it portray? How does it construct Englishness? The Brit is conventionally portrayed as a white, middle-class male, such as Basil Fawlty in the series. How do issues of race, class and gender relate to the construction of national identity and how are they manifested in the show? As a situation comedy, humour is closely intertwined with the representation of Englishness and nationality in general. How does humour work in the series; can laughing at the general traits of a Brit disrupt the conventional views and bring change? Or, conversely, does laughing together exclude “Others” and enforce the boundaries of the English community? One of the recurrent themes in the series is nationality, which is usually discussed through stereotypes of different nationalities. Using stereotypes is a common method for comedy to produce laughter, but nevertheless they are often considered as negative typifications of different (social) groups and usually entail the use of power by the dominant group in society. Therefore analysing different stereotypes of nationalities offers an important aspect to the subject. One of the main characters is the Spanish waiter Manuel, who can be considered as the “Other” in the hotel community. Other nationalities are portrayed as visiting guests at the hotel, such as Germans. In the

---

<sup>3</sup> Dick Fiddy and Phil Whickham, “Comedy and Variety”, *British Film Institute*. 6 March 2005. <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tv/100/articles/comedy.html>>.

analysis I intend to discuss the way in which Englishness is constructed in relation to other nationalities. Is exploiting stereotypes just an “innocent” comic method or does it always entail ideological power structures?

Products of popular culture have not always been in favour of academic research, but as entertainment and pleasure began to form a larger part of people’s lives, academics have recognised the importance of popular culture as part of cultural studies. I too believe that as part of people’s lives works of popular culture affect the way people think about themselves and adopt attitudes to different things in their environment. Doing research on a television situation comedy that is almost thirty years old might seem trivial, as well as pondering upon questions of national identity at the time of the fragmented post-modern identity<sup>4</sup>, when there is an abundance of different identities one can choose from. In addition, one could argue that doing research on national identities is old-fashioned since the world is turning into a “global village”, where national boundaries, space and time do not exist as strictly defined as they used to. However, in (popular) culture there is a strong tendency to use concepts, stereotypes and ideas of the characteristics of different nationalities and they still flourish in people’s everyday discussions and patterns of thinking. In addition, the melting of national boundaries has seen an upsurge of nationalistic movements, which proves that national identities are still prevalent in people’s thinking even though personal identities are not necessarily based on one’s national origin. *Fawlty Towers* has also been very popular both in Britain and outside of Britain, and therefore the representations it offers have spread widely in the Western media. What is more important though, is that as a cultural and historical product it provides an interesting material to work with since it is one of the most popular (comic) works of British popular culture as well as a cultural

---

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a short history of identity", *Questions of cultural identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE, 1996) 18-36.

“reflector” of society of its time. It does say something about the cultural atmosphere of the 1970s even though it may not always be consciously intended. These are the main reasons why I believe doing research on the subject today is still relevant and important.

My intention is to focus on the context of the 1970s, even though analysing the series in the context of today might be a fruitful subject as well, since nowadays the series functions as a nostalgic reference to the “good ol’ days” (see above). However, I cannot free myself from my own cultural background and context, and as I am reading the show today, I am necessarily somewhat affected by the time gap between the first broadcast and the viewing of the show today. Especially one has to consider how interpretations may be different because of the time gap. For example as humour is intertwined with culture, it is also somewhat time-specific, and because *Fawlty Towers* is almost thirty years old, its methods of comedy may and do differ from the comedies of today. Nevertheless, my intention is to locate the show into its “authentic” context as far as possible. It should be noted, however, that even though placing the analysis into a context is necessary, I will not get too involved in political discussion because the main interest is in the textual analysis. Therefore, the focus lies on the analysis of the characters and different nationalities in relation to the construction of national identity, as well as on the methods of comedy. Before turning to questions of the context of the 1970s I will introduce *Fawlty Towers* and take a brief look at how it functions in the genre of situation comedy. There are altogether twelve episodes of *Fawlty Towers*, of which the first series was first broadcast in 1975 and the second series in 1979. In the analysis, however, I will concentrate on seven episodes and use the remaining episodes as supporting material. The episodes that I will focus on include “A Touch of Class”, “The Wedding Party”, “Gourmet Night”, “The Germans”, “Waldorf Salad”, “The

Psychiatrist” and “Basil the Rat”. The focus will be on the televisual aspect, but the examples of the dialogues are taken from the original scripts published as a book<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.1. *Fawlty Towers* as a Situation Comedy

*Fawlty Towers* is written by John Cleese and Connie Booth, who both perform the parts of two main characters in the series. Connie Booth plays Polly, who works as a waitress in the hotel. She is the “rational” one in the working community, meaning for instance that she is very rarely laughed at, whereas the other main characters often are. John Cleese plays the main character Basil Fawlty, who, in a few words, embodies the soul of the show with his brilliant acting.<sup>6</sup> The first series of *Fawlty Towers* consisted of six episodes and was broadcast in 1975 on BBC2 and the second series, also entailing six episodes, was broadcast in 1979. The first series did not enrapture the large audience, but by the time the last episode was broadcast, the viewing numbers had risen dramatically. The show has won a number of awards as mentioned, of which the first include the 1975 British Academy Award for Best Comedy Series, and John Cleese was awarded the Royal Television Society Programme Award in 1976.<sup>7</sup>

*Fawlty Towers* is set in Torquay (also known as “The British Riviera” as Basil notes), where the hotel “Fawlty Towers” is run by a British couple Basil and Sybil Fawlty. The main characters, in addition to Basil, Sybil and Polly, include Spanish Manuel (Andrew Sachs), who has come from Barcelona to work in the hotel. Manuel is a small and lively character with dark hair and moustache, and his poor English skills often cause confusion and laughter. There are also characters that are staying guests at the hotel and appear in most of the episodes, namely the old Major Gowen (Ballard

---

<sup>5</sup> John Cleese and Connie Booth, *The Complete Fawlty Towers* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> John Cleese is well-known from the *Monty Python* team, who were famous for their quirky humour and ridiculing the British way of life, society and people in the 1960s and ‘70s.

<sup>7</sup> A booklet in *Fawlty Towers* series 1&2, DVD (BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2001).

Berkeley) and the two old ladies Miss Tibbs (Gilly Flower) and Miss Gatsby (Renée Roberts). Other characters in the show are composed of visiting guests of the hotel.

*Fawlty Towers* as a situation comedy follows generic conventions. Its formal organisation follows the typical construction: it is (or was) broadcast weekly, lasts half an hour, has a limited number of characters and does not usually involve changing sets (i.e. scenes are usually shot inside the hotel, or when outside, mostly in the front yard)<sup>8</sup>. The narrative of *Fawlty Towers* is also similar to most forms of popular fiction. As Janet Woollacott argues, “[t]he narrative [of popular fiction] offers to the readers or the viewers a transformation of the initial equilibrium through a disruption and then a reordering of its components”. In playing with a disturbance, process and closure, genres construct “particular temporal sequences” as Woollacott notes. Situation comedies, however, set up temporal sequences in laughter, whereas for instance thrillers structure the narrative with suspense. In situation comedy, the tension of the narrative derives from the “wit with which two or more discourses are brought together in the narrative” and the tension is released through laughter, where the pleasure in situation comedy resides in.<sup>9</sup>

The circular plot can be found in the episodes of *Fawlty Towers* as well. Each episode contains the same main characters and the narrative draws its essence from the visiting guests. Usually the situation closes off where it first started at, and especially in the humiliation of Basil. For example in “A Touch of Class” Basil is attempting to attract a better class of clientele, but ends up being fooled by a thief who is impersonating a lord, and as a result Basil manages to scare away the real aristocratic

---

<sup>8</sup> Janet Woollacott “Fictions and Ideologies: The case of situation comedy”, *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer & Janet Woollacott (Milton Keynes & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986) 196.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 199-200.

customers that he so wished to welcome into the hotel. In “Gourmet Night”, Basil wants to arrange a nice gourmet dinner and invites “the cream of Torquay” into their hotel. Unfortunately, the new cook (who is Greek), falls in love with Manuel who rejects him. To relieve his heartache, the cook drinks too much and is thus unable to cook the gourmet dinner. In the end, the gourmet night turns out as a disaster and Basil will not receive the respect he was seeking for. In “The Germans”, the hotel receives a group of German guests and as Basil tries to be as polite and discreet as he can and “not to mention the war”<sup>10</sup>, he ends up imitating Hitler and walking with goose-steps, thus both hurting his guests’ feelings as well as making a fool of himself.

In “Waldorf Salad” there is an American who wants a Waldorf salad. As it is already late, the American guest pays extra for the cook to stay. The cook cannot stay, but Basil keeps the money anyway and tries to make the salad himself with poor results. Basil’s plot is revealed and in the end Basil gets to hear that “Fawltly Towers” is the worst hotel ever. By way of defending himself, he verbally assaults his guests for “sticking their noses” everywhere and complaining about everything (see the quote at the beginning). In “The Psychiatrist” Basil tries to “expose” his male guest for bringing a date to his room for the night (which is not allowed in the hotel). However, in the course of things, he unintentionally harasses a young female guest and makes Sybil angry. In the end, he cannot prove that the guest has done anything inappropriate, but as usual, Basil is again the butt of the joke. In “Basil the Rat” the visiting health inspector is appalled by the state of the hotel’s kitchen and orders it to be cleaned before the next day when he will arrive again. Basil hears that Manuel has a pet rat (although Manuel believes it is a Siberian hamster) and at the fear of being closed down, Basil orders the pet rat to be taken away. However, Manuel disobeys Basil and keeps his pet in the shed.

---

<sup>10</sup> Basil keeps telling Polly not to mention the war to the German guests, but of course he himself cannot avoid the slips of the tongue.

The rat escapes just when the health inspector arrives in the hotel and the episode ends with a farcical chase of the rat.

The narrative in all these episodes is independent, but it follows the same basic pattern of two discourses: one comes from the guests or other “outside” element, and the other from Basil’s attempts at trying to improve his status. As Mick Bowes notes, in many sit-coms “entrapment” is a popular theme, by which he means that characters are confined by their class, social position, gender, marital status or even by themselves<sup>11</sup>. This describes Basil’s situation quite well, as he pursues to escape for instance the trap of class in many episodes. The two discourses are then connected together into a closure that usually entails humiliation of Basil and a return to the initial situation. In this respect, there is hardly any progress in the narrative and the viewer already knows the likely outcome when watching the show. But as Woollacott notes, “the anticipation of the inevitable” brings as much pleasure to the viewer as the tension of not knowing the outcome<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik argue, the situation comedies’ narrative relies on circularity and the viewer is even encouraged to “forget” the events of the preceding episodes<sup>13</sup>.

Umberto Eco discusses this aspect of entertainment products’ narrative in his article “The Myth of Superman”, where he calls this lack of progress as a “redundant message” of the iterative scheme in the narrative<sup>14</sup>. He argues that people receive pleasure from the non-story and indeed “hunger for redundance” in entertainment. This hunger, he claims, is due to the load of information people receive from everywhere

---

<sup>11</sup> Mick Bowes, “Only When I Laugh”, *Understanding Television*, ed. Andrew Goodwin, and Gary Whannel (London & New York: Routledge, 1990) 129.

<sup>12</sup> Woollacott, 202.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 235.

<sup>14</sup> Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman” (1972), *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Postmodernism*, ed. Robert Con Davis (New York and London: Longman, 1986) 330-344.

else in contemporary society so that narratives with redundant messages offer “the only occasion of true relaxation”<sup>15</sup>. This way he justifies the need for escape entertainment and states that enjoying reading *Superman*, for instance, should not perhaps be frowned upon. It should be noted here that escape entertainment has actually been acknowledged as a subject of research since Eco’s article (1972). Eco also points out that the pleasure for the viewer derives often from following certain features of the main characters that the viewer is already familiar with. This aspect is clearly present in *Fawlty Towers*, where much of the pleasure for the viewer derives exactly from watching Basil Fawlty’s gestures, rude behaviour and the way in which the situations always go somehow wrong.

Another important point about situation comedies is that the family usually operates as the framework for the series, as Neale and Krutnik point out. The family can either be a nuclear family or a “surrogate” family network. What are important, though, are the “principles of unity, allegiance and obligation”<sup>16</sup>. As Neale and Krutnik argue, “the regular setting and the regular characters are bonded together into a repeatable unity, with the structure of the sit-com representing an activity of ‘communalization’, reaffirming the stability of the group and the situation”. Communitality is vital here, and Neale and Krutnik continue to argue that just as television in general, the sit-com invites the viewer as part of its own ‘family’. Therefore, the situation comedy and television in general “are concerned with reaffirming cultural identity, with demarcating an ‘inside’, a community of interests and values, and localizing contrary or oppositional values as an ‘outside’”<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 341.

<sup>16</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 239.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-2.

In *Fawlty Towers* the community is composed of a “surrogate family” of the working community, and even though it would seem that there are continuous discrepancies between the members of the community, they are nevertheless bonded together by principles of allegiance and obligation; that is by marriage, and the business of running a hotel. The division between inside and outside is highlighted by the hotel staff and the visiting guests, who often represent values that do not belong to the inside community, or reversely, represent something that the inside community is lacking off. Nevertheless, the idea of communality is vital both for the genre of situation comedy and for the representation of national identity. I will return to these ideas later in the analysis, but now it is time to place the show into its historical and social context.

## 1.2. “Ah, more strikes...”<sup>18</sup> — The Historical and Social Context

When analysing a cultural product it is important to take the social and the historical context into account, as well as the researcher’s own position. My views as a Finnish female undergraduate may differ from those of a regular British television viewer, but I would not hold my different background against my argumentation. For instance Jeffrey Richards argues that “[i]t is a truism that foreigners are best able to define the true character of a nation”<sup>19</sup>. This idea is applicable in two senses: firstly, my subject position as a “foreigner” doing research on English national identity may give the desired distance to the analysis. Secondly, the idea is used in *Fawlty Towers* as well, although in a different sense, in that it constructs Englishness in relation to foreigners (Manuel and different nationalities as visitors). This idea will be one of the main themes in the thesis and it will be discussed later on. *Fawlty Towers* has generally been considered as a critique towards the conventional idea of Englishness. This tradition

---

<sup>18</sup> ”A Touch of Class”, 6. The Major is reading a newspaper and commenting about the events to Basil.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to ‘Dad’s Army’* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 3.

was already under way with the *Monty Python*<sup>20</sup> group, who have become popular for its quaint sense of humour and satirical mockery towards British institutions and values.<sup>21</sup> *Fawlty Towers* conforms more easily to generic and televisual conventions than the works of the *Monty Python* team, and it is not as anarchic in nature as *Monty Python* was in its time. Partly this is due to the generic differences, because for instance *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was a sketch show, in which the short time of the sketches allowed more opportunities for “anarchistic humour”, than the relatively tight conventions of a more realistic situation comedy (for instance a plot is needed and it is restricted by time, same characters and same setting appear in each episode). However, *Fawlty Towers* still does offer possibilities for resistant reading of the conventional image of the English and in the analysis part I will go further into details about the ways in which the series might deconstruct the status quo. By resistant reading I am referring to the way cultural texts can be read “against the grain”; they can work against certain ideologies, like national identity in this case. The idea of resistant reading derives from feminist studies, and it is often used in cultural studies when analysing different texts and possible interpretations they offer.

The 1970s was a time of unrest and discontent in the post-war Britain. The economy was declining and the level of unemployment was rising. The standard of living was deteriorating after the affluent sixties and society was “marked by race discrimination and racial tension” as Arthur Marwick notes. Racial minorities often

---

<sup>20</sup> The *Monty Python* group consisted of John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. Their television series *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was broadcast between 1969- 74 on BBC1. After the television series they produced a few films together, such as *The Life of Brian* (1979) and *The Meaning of Life* (1982).

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Mikko Lehtonen, ”Miehen identiteettikriisi 1900- luvun jälkipuoliskolla: Monty Pythonin lentävä sirkus”, *Pikku Jättiläisiä: Maskuliinisuuden kulttuurinen rakentuminen* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1995) 146 – 178.

failed to receive jobs, which again intensified race divisions.<sup>22</sup> The tension in society was also increased by many workers and trade unions going on strike. After World War Two the former colonies of Britain (such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) had gained independence, and Britain suffered from losing its great Empire, which again affected its decreasing of global economic power. Both the economical importance as well as the symbolic meaning of the lost Empire had a great effect on the sense of community. The events after World War Two as well as the problems of the seventies had an effect on the nation and the national identity, which was reflected in the cultural products of its time.

After World War Two, when the former colonies of the British Empire had struggled to find their own identity, the British were facing the time when they needed to redefine and strengthen their sense of a national identity. The 1950s was a time for “healing the wounds” resulted from the loss of Empire by representing English heroes and heroines in the English cinema, which worked to strengthen the sense of a strong, unified nation.<sup>23</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, conservative values and middle-class ideals were dismissed and it was time for more radical discourses. As Richards notes, in the 1960s there was a small but influential body of films that were “sexually liberated, politically radical and socially committed”<sup>24</sup>. These alternative discourses gave way for a more liberated social atmosphere, where the loss of Empire and national identity could be discussed in a more direct manner. It was also possible to address these issues through humour, as enough time had passed from World War Two and the surrounding events. It could then be argued that Basil Fawlty and his hotel represent the “faulty” society that resulted partly from the delayed realization of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London: Penguin Group, 1982) 184- 201.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Richards, 128- 146.

<sup>24</sup> Richards, 147.

collapse of the British Empire and its decreasing global political power as well as from the socio-economic situation in Britain in the 1970s. Just as the visitors were discontent with the service in “Fawlty Towers”, the British were unhappy about the state of affairs in their society. In the 1970s British society was moving from a more or less homogenous conservative society into a multicultural, heterogeneous society as people were immigrating to Britain from the former colonies. The hotel of “Fawlty Towers” could then be seen as a symbolic home of the nation, where things are continually in disarray and the management appears to be chaotic. I aim to argue that *Fawlty Towers*, as a product of popular culture, offers a representation of British society and thus has cultural influence and significance. It can be seen as constructing the collective memory of a nation and therefore enforcing the sense of a national identity. Although on the other hand, it can also be argued that *Fawlty Towers* actually works to deconstruct the conventional idea of the Brit by for instance laughing at the general traits of a Brit and making Basil Fawlty the “butt of the joke”. In other words, by working with the concept of nationality and offering a representation of the British society and of the members of the society, it not only reflects its time but also works to modify the sense of Englishness. Before going into the analysis, however, I will introduce the theoretical background of the thesis.

## 2. Theoretical background

The theories I will be applying are mainly from the field of cultural studies, where I would place my thesis as well. It should be noted that most of the theories are actually younger than the object of analysis itself, and therefore one cannot think that the writers or producers of the show have necessarily been aware of the different implications of the show that I will be dealing with, but as interpreting a text (be it televisual or literary) is bound to be somewhat subjective, I do not see too much of a danger in applying different, new theories. On the contrary, I believe they may even give delightful new aspects to older texts such as *Fawlty Towers*.

Before introducing the theories, I wish to clarify a few concepts that will be closely dealt with in the thesis. Firstly, the concept of *representation* is essential. It has been a popular term within cultural studies. For instance Stuart Hall provides quite an extensive account of the work of representation, of which I will only introduce the basic ideas. As Hall contends, the dictionary definition of *representation* involves both depicting something as well as symbolizing or standing for something.<sup>25</sup> In the theories of representation both these aspects are prevalent, but the construction of meaning is perhaps most essential. In a few words, representation is a signifying practice, as Stuart Hall notes. Language is a fundamental representational system within which we produce meanings. Meaning, on the other hand, does not “inhere in things, in the world -- [but it is] constructed, produced” as Hall argues.<sup>26</sup> The representation of Englishness is thus composed of different meanings that are constructed in different discourses. How we interpret representation, depends to some extent on the viewer. Therefore, it is important to note one’s own subject position when analysing representations, and

---

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation”, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: The Open University, 1997) 16.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 24.

especially this has been a subject of discussion in feminist studies, but I believe is not as relevant in my research. Representation is also closely connected to questions of power. Who or what has the power to determine the kind of representations we encounter? What kind of power structures does a representation entail? Does it for instance favour one social group over another?

*Ideology* and *discourse* are terms that are associated with representation. The concept of ideology lies here on the Marxist notion of ideology, according to which the groups that have power over production have control over the means of production and the ideas that circulate in society<sup>27</sup>. The dominant classes make the ideological relations appear as natural so that the “real” conditions of existence remain blurred. *Discourse*, on the other hand, defines the topics and the way in which a topic is discussed, as well as the conduct of oneself. At the same time it also narrows down the topics and the different ways to discuss them. Meaning is therefore “constructed within discourse”<sup>28</sup>. There are problems in the Marxist notion of ideology, but the basic idea of the concept is relevant when discussing national identity. National identity can be seen as an ideological discourse; as a dominant discourse of a white, middle-class and masculine identity. National identity is usually presented as something that is a natural part of one’s life, and the discourse directs the behaviour of the citizens for instance with national rituals (national celebrations et cetera). The representative of a nation is often a white man, even though in reality there is variation according to race, class or gender in the nation’s inhabitants.

The concept of identity has also been much debated in Anglo-American cultural studies. Today the discussion evolves mainly around the post-modern identity,

---

<sup>27</sup> Hall 1997, 347-8. See also Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1970) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: NLB, 1971) 152-5.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, as cited in Hall 1997, 44.

which has been thought of as “a production” by Stuart Hall, who argues that as a production, forming of an identity is never complete, but “always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representations”<sup>29</sup>. Hall connects the formation of identity to cultural representations, which is my aim as well. However, national identity could be seen more similar to the idea of a modern identity, which has been considered as something solid and stable, and according to Zygmunt Bauman’s metaphor, “a pilgrimage”, which implies that at the end of the road, there is “the truth”<sup>30</sup>. National identity, similarly, has been considered as fixed, given and antique and something that is an essential part of one’s personal identity. However, as Hall argues, identity is subject to transformation and different cultural identities can be constituted in and through representations. In the thesis I will not concentrate on the formation of identity as such or think about it as a personal identity, but rather connect identity to representation and consider national identity as a common, collective identity that is given different meanings and characteristics in cultural representations. In the following chapters I will introduce aspects of the formation of a nation and national identity in more detail, relying mainly on Benedict Anderson’s ideas of a nation.

## **2.1. Imagining the Community — Ideas of a Nation and National Identity**

‘Nation’ is often defined by territory and language, but also by history, culture, education, ceremonies, myths, rituals and different narratives that bind the citizens together<sup>31</sup>. Often the general assumption is that nations are antique, when in fact the

---

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. John Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) 222-3.

<sup>30</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a short history of identity”, *Questions of cultural identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE, 1996) 18-36.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Hall 1990, 226 or Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Group, 1991) 14.

modern sense of the word derives only from the eighteenth century<sup>32</sup>. As E. J. Hobsbawm notes, objective criteria for defining nation or nationhood is quite impossible to find and the criteria that are often used (language, ethnicity, territory et cetera) are themselves shifting and ambiguous, which, in turn, are good for propagandist purposes, that is for convincing people something to be the “truth” on very ambiguous grounds. Hobsbawm argues that nation, then, should be analysed from all of its dimensions, namely from political, technical, administrative and economic aspects, and also from “below”, meaning the assumptions, hopes, interests and needs of ordinary people<sup>33</sup>. Anthony Smith makes a similar note, arguing that nation has both “external” as well as “internal” functions. According to Smith, external functions are territorial, economic and political, in other words elements that are connected to the nation *state*. Internal functions, on the other hand, are more interesting for the purposes of my thesis. Internal functions of the nation include the “socialization of the members as ‘nationals’ and ‘citizens’”, in other words bonding the individuals socially by providing a variety of shared values, symbols and traditions.<sup>34</sup>

As Anthony Smith notes, national identity is “perhaps the most fundamental and inclusive” of all the collective identities we have today<sup>35</sup>. It is a collective, common identity that socializes the members of a society into a nation. National identity is “multi-dimensional”, as already noted, and it cannot be reduced to one single element, as Smith observes<sup>36</sup>. In my research, I do not intend to tackle the question of national

---

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 3, and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (1983, London: Verso, 1991) 11.

<sup>33</sup> Hobsbawm, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 143.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 14.

identity and nation in all their “dimensions” since it would be too large of a subject for my intentions. Rather, I aim to focus on the “internal” aspects of a nation and more specifically on *Fawlty Towers* as a cultural product, which can be considered as one narrative in the vast amount of narratives in British culture. In the same way that narratives are constructed, nation can be seen as constructed as well, even though it is usually presented as something natural and antique. *Fawlty Towers* can be seen as a narrative that socializes the individuals into members of a nation and offers them tools for defining and locating themselves. At the same time it also offers tools with which the citizens of a nation can modify and reconstruct the conventional image of a national identity.

Benedict Anderson’s ideas about the nation as an imagined community have been quite influential, wherefore I think it is beneficial to introduce the basic ideas behind his argumentation. As already mentioned, ‘nation’ is a modern concept. Anderson traces the origins of a nation back to the cultural transformations in the eighteenth century, which included the decline of the power of Latin that resulted in the decline of the religious community, the decline of sacral monarchy, the Reformation and the spread of vernaculars as official and print-languages. Print-capitalism was important in bringing new ideas of mass readership and simultaneous consumption. The novel and the newspaper were new forms of representing the “imagined community” — the nation. People were able to read papers and novels in their own languages, and reading them concurrently with others even though not in the same space, enabled people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others, which, again, formed a new sense of a community.

Print-capitalism, then, was the new medium for building a community, just as visual media are nowadays. Anderson contends that print-languages laid the basis for

nationalism by for instance giving a new fixity to language. Language was given the image of antiquity, which is also central to the idea of the nation. Language also suggests “a special kind of contemporaneous community”; for instance singing the same tunes and lyrics in national anthems entails an experience of simultaneity (cf. reading a newspaper). The nation, as an “imagined community”, is then imagined through language according to Anderson<sup>37</sup>. Language has indeed been vital in the idea of a nation and forming the sense of community. As Anderson notes, language is “not an instrument of exclusion, rather it is inclusive”<sup>38</sup>. In other words, being able to express oneself in the same language as others enforces the sense of community. Even though Anderson argues that language does not exclude, I would disagree to some extent, since for instance in *Fawlty Towers* language is used to mark different nationalities and exclude “others”. In this way language does function both ways.

Nations can today be imagined without linguistic communality because the idea of a nation-state is a norm as Anderson notes (for instance there can be many vernaculars within a nation), but the idea of a nation still lies firmly in today’s language. According to Anderson, the cultural products of nationalism (poetry, prose, music, arts) express the love for a nation in many ways. The love for a nation is rooted in the vocabulary, which uses idioms that refer to something to which one is naturally tied to, for instance the vocabulary of kinship (*motherland, patria*) or that of home. The language of these cultural products builds a “nation-ness [that] is usually assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-era”, things that one cannot choose.<sup>39</sup> Homi K. Bhabha has edited an essay collection *Nation and Narration*, which draws from the ideas of Anderson connecting the language of literature to nation-building. Bhabha

---

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, 144-6.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 134.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 134- 143.

notes that the purpose of *Nation and Narration* is “to explore the Janus-faced<sup>40</sup> ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of a nation”. In the book there are different analyses of literary texts, which discuss this ambivalence of a nation through looking at the performativity of language in the narratives of the nation.<sup>41</sup> Literature can be considered as an ideological tool for constructing a shared sense of a nation today as well, but especially in the eighteenth century literature was connected with the ideology of the ruling class. Terry Eagleton argues that literature, in fact, *is* an ideology. Eagleton contends that in the eighteenth century literature did not only express certain social values, but “it was a vital instrument for their deeper entrenchment and wider dissemination”. Eagleton continues that the growth of English studies in the nineteenth century was due to the diminishing power of religion. Literature, therefore, came to provide a similar discourse of truth and beauty for the nation’s citizens. It also carried on the cultivation purpose, the spreading of the ideological values of the ruling class.<sup>42</sup> Therefore literature has indeed been vital in the (ideological) formation of a common sense of a nation and shared values, customs and habits of the citizens.

What is also common to “nation-ness” is the idea of a “horizonless past”, which is also shown in the idea of primordial languages<sup>43</sup>. Common history, myths and memory are also vital in the narratives of a nation. *Fawlty Towers* uses these national symbols, myths and memories as well, for instance referring to past wars or sporting events, and thus constructs a narrative of a nation. Also the use of language in *Fawlty*

---

<sup>40</sup> Janus was a Roman god of beginnings, with two faces looking at opposite directions. Nation, then, can be seen on the other hand as looking both in the past and in the future, but also as ambivalent because of the two faces.

<sup>41</sup> Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 3.

<sup>42</sup> Terry Eagleton, “The Rise of English”, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 17- 28.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, 144.

*Towers* is vital, since with phrases such as “we English” it marks the boundaries of a nation and enforces the sense of the community. However, as Bhabha notes, the language of the narrative is often ambivalent as is the discourse of a nation, which can also be noted in *Fawlty Towers*. I will return to these ideas further in the analysis.

Stuart Hall follows Anderson’s ideas, but as Anderson has his focus on the history of the concept of a nation and concentrates on the cultural roots of the concept, Hall focuses on culture and summarizes different aspects on how the narrative of a nation is told<sup>44</sup>. According to Hall, national identities are formed and transformed in relation to representation (as mentioned earlier as well). We only know the character of English from the way it has been represented. Hall thus argues that “a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – *a system of cultural representation* [Hall’s emphasis]”. Nation, therefore, is a symbolic community, or an “imagined community”, which generates “a sense of identity and allegiance”<sup>45</sup>. According to Hall, a national culture is a discourse that constructs identities and influences our actions by producing meanings about the nation with which people can identify.

Hall introduces five elements that can be seen as narrating the nation and forming an imagined community. Firstly, national identity is constructed by different narratives of the nation, namely in national histories, literature, the media and popular culture. These narratives produce a set of stories, landscapes, images, historical events, national symbols and rituals that represent the shared experience (sorrows, victories, disasters) of the nation. This way the nation becomes signified and the citizens feel as part of the community. Secondly, as Hall argues, there is an emphasis on “origins,

---

<sup>44</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity”, *Modernity and Its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: The Open University, 1992) 273-325.

<sup>45</sup> Schwarz “Conservatism, nationalism and imperialism” 1986, 106, cited in Hall 1992, 292.

continuity, tradition and timelessness” in the representations of national identity. This was already noted by Anderson in relation to the primordialness of language (see above). As Hall argues, the national character tends to stay unchanged throughout history; “[i]t is there from birth, unified and continuous – eternal”<sup>46</sup>.

A third discursive method is “the invention of tradition”, which refers to the way traditions that appear old are in fact quite new and sometimes invented so that repeating certain values and norms imply continuity and attachment to historical past. For instance the ceremonial manifestations of British monarchy appear as ancient and linked to “immemorial past” even though the modern form dates merely back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> The fourth method that Hall introduces is the invention of the foundational myth that locates the origin of a nation and thus makes the history more intelligible by converting “disarray into ‘community’ --and disasters into triumphs”. In this way historical events enforce the sense of a community and also boost the national identity. Lastly, Hall contends that national identity is often grounded on the idea of a “pure, original people”, even though in reality it is rare that the original people was the dominant class.<sup>48</sup> This idea of a “pure, original people” is strongly prevalent in the English character and in the idea of the Empire, which brought the sense of superiority into the national characteristics of the English.

Hall continues to argue that national culture tends to unify all of its members into one cultural identity, “to represent them all as belonging to the same great national family”<sup>49</sup> (cf. *Fawlty Towers*), even though in reality the members of a national culture differ in terms of race, gender or class. Hall argues that “a national culture has never

---

<sup>46</sup> Hall 1992, 294.

<sup>47</sup> Hobswawn and Ranger (ed) *The Invention of Tradition* 1983, 1, as cited in Hall 1992, 294.

<sup>48</sup> Hall 1992, 295.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 296.

been simply a point of allegiance, bonding and symbolic identification”, but also “a structure of cultural power”. Hall justifies his claim by introducing some points that manifest the way in which national identity has been affected by power relations. Firstly, Hall contends that “the British people” are the product of a series of violent conquests that have been performed in order to unify disparate cultures. For instance “English”, a southern-based culture, usually represents the whole British culture thus neglecting Scottish, Welsh, Irish and other regional cultures. Secondly, national identity is often associated with masculinity, whereas women are considered as caretakers and mothers of the sons.<sup>50</sup> For instance the national characteristics, which I will turn to discuss later on in chapter four, have traditionally been attached to the “English Gentleman” and the national heroes and characters have usually been men, like John Bull<sup>51</sup> or the English Bobby.

Thirdly, Britain, as an empire, has exercised cultural hegemony over the cultures of the colonized. As Benedict Anderson similarly points out, one of the ways in which nationalism worked, was to bring the European “‘national histories’ into the consciousness of the colonized” by spreading the modern-style education<sup>52</sup>. Education, in fact, was an essential element in bringing up young schoolboys into “English Gentlemen” within the nation-state<sup>53</sup>. In addition, English literature as a subject in public schools promoted the ideological values and characteristics of a nation, as mentioned earlier. Hall points out that the first distinctive characteristics of English identities were defined in comparison to the negative features of other cultures.

---

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 297.

<sup>51</sup> A caricature of an English gentleman wearing a swallow-tail coat, waistcoat and boots, carrying a riding crop. He became “the epitome of bluff, decent, commonsensical Englishness” as Jeffrey Richards notes (1997, 10).

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, 118.

<sup>53</sup> see e.g. Mikko Lehtonen, *Pikku jättiläisiä: maskuliinisuuden kulttuurinen rakentuminen* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1995).

Therefore, representations of national identity have often denied the different social classes, gender and ethnic groups that it is composed of, and instead represented the nation as unified. Hall proposes that we should think of national culture as “a discursive device, which represents difference as unity or identity”<sup>54</sup>.

Even though I think Anderson’s and Hall’s theories are beneficial for the thesis, it should be noted that Anderson’s ideas have provoked criticism as well. For instance Antony Easthope (1999) argues that Anderson’s idea of nation as imagined is “opportunistic and undertheorised”, and since Anderson (1983) many British theorists of nation have relied on the idea of nation as “imaginary”, which suggests that nation is somehow false and unreal. Easthope argues that nation is much more than an ideology; “it is in fact a much wider, lived experience”. He examines national identity “as a discursive effect and so as part of culture, not nature”, and stresses the importance of understanding collectivity.<sup>55</sup> For an individual, then, identification with nation involves the discourse of a nation and also the experience of identification with the collective group. Nation, as Easthope argues, is not “imaginary”, but rather a passion or a desire, which is reflected in culture<sup>56</sup>. Easthope’s argumentation is fair, and his idea of stressing culture as an experience and an important force in the “desire” of national identity does reflect the current situation, when nation-states are losing their political importance for the individual, so that nation is performed more in culture: in art, literature, traditions and media. Despite Easthope’s criticism, I will utilize Anderson’s basic idea, which Hall also uses, but also keep Easthope’s relevant insights in mind.

The theories of Anderson and Hall can be connected to the idea of repetition and performance of nationality. Kirsti Lempiäinen introduces this idea of performing

---

<sup>54</sup> Hall 1992, 297.

<sup>55</sup> Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 8-32.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 33.

nationality in her study on the production of gender in the set books of sociology.<sup>57</sup> Lempiäinen applies Judith Butler's (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) theory of the performance of gender on nationality arguing that nationality is similarly produced somewhere in time and space through repetition.<sup>58</sup> According to Butler, gender is produced and manifested through performance, and thus womanhood or manhood is not something innate. Butler exemplifies her argumentation with the example of drag, where the construction of gender is apparent.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, we can think of different aspects of nation-building and national identity as a performance. Different symbols, histories, rituals, norms and traditions are all part of the performance of nationhood. When we repeat the signifiers of a nation, it becomes to appear as something natural, such as gender too has traditionally been thought of. Louis Althusser similarly emphasises the material aspect of "ideological apparatus", meaning that ideology is served and secured by the repetition of certain rituals (e.g. religious rituals)<sup>60</sup>.

What is important here is to see whether the representations offer any vacancies for different meanings and subject positions, or whether they are fixed and solid, as Lempiäinen argues. Lempiäinen focuses here on gender positions, but similarly we can think of the subject positions for different classes or ethnicities that representations of nationality offer or do not offer. In other words we can see what kind of positions regarding national identity *Fawlty Towers* offers for the viewers. I have now introduced the general ideas of nation-building and of national identity as a discourse composed of different narratives, traditions, myths and memories. I will turn

---

<sup>57</sup> Kirsti Lempiäinen, "Kansallisuuden tekeminen ja toisto", *Suomineitonen hei! Kansallisuuden sukupuoli*, ed. Tuula Gordon, Katri Komulainen and Kirsti Lempiäinen (Jyväskylä: Vastapaino, 2002) 19-35.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990 as cited in Lempiäinen, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Althusser, 158.

to discuss Englishness in particular and the ways in which Englishness has been seen as constructed in opposition to other nationalities.

## 2.2. Formation of Englishness

To begin with, the terms “Englishness” and “Britishness” are problematic, since they both are loaded with meanings and allusions. As Judy Giles and Tim Middleton note, the term “English” marginalises the experience of the Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish, but on the other hand the term “British” is equally problematic since it assumes a common identity amongst the heterogeneous nation<sup>61</sup>. As noted by Hall too, national identity as an ideological discourse does indeed tend to smooth down the social, regional or racial differences. Jopi Nyman tackles the same problem in his book about the construction of Englishness in British fiction, and decides to use “Englishness”, because “it is able to explore the dominant form of national identity constructed around institutions defined as English in discourses constructing the nation as an imagined community”<sup>62</sup>. England also stands for the whole of Britain, as Nyman argues (which is similar to national identity that unifies the nation as one). For the purpose of my thesis, I believe that using the terms “English” and “Englishness” are likewise more appropriate than the term “British”. As I am dwelling with the (ideological) construction of a national identity, I believe the term *Englishness* will convey the meaning best.

There have been many scholars who have studied the history and formation of English national identity as well as the English character. I will not go too far away to history in order not to get side-tracked, but as Nyman mentions, the period of 1880-

---

<sup>61</sup> Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, “Introduction”, *Writing Englishness, 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity*, ed. Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (London: Routledge, 1995) 3.

<sup>62</sup> Jopi Nyman, *Under English Eyes: Constructions of Europe in Early Twentieth-Century British Fiction* (Amsterdam-Atlanta: GA, 2000) 27.

1920 has been thought of as important in the formation of modern Englishness. There were both internal and external factors that aided in defining Englishness. The national identity of Britain was formed in relation to imperialism, war, economic crises in British industry as well as cultural and political changes, as Nyman notes. Englishness was constructed for instance in institutions (the National Theatre, *Oxford English Dictionary*, note the significance of official language here), but the most crucial element was the formal education of the period, which introduced English studies and History as separate subjects to public schools.<sup>63</sup> As Anderson and Hall note, different narratives in literature and history form a sense of community by referring to the “shared past events” that members of the community can identify with. This, in turn, produces the sense of continuity and the nation’s historical past. Public school, then, was one of the important factors promoting Englishness and the national identity, as mentioned earlier by Eagleton too.

Another important factor was the medium of its time, literature, which is for instance Nyman’s object of research. Today an important medium for constructing national identity and offering different meanings about nationality and the national character is mass media, that is the press, the internet and especially cinema and television<sup>64</sup>. The images media offer, however, are not necessarily unified, even though there are a lot of stereotypical and conventional imagery, but the media can also be a site of cultural struggle; it can construct as well as deconstruct the dominant imagery. In the historical context of *Fawlty Towers* (the 1970s), television was more of a national medium that brought the nation together than it is today. In fact, from 1920 onwards, public service broadcasting has had a vital function in bringing the community together and forming a sense of unity by for instance broadcasting national ceremonies (royal

---

<sup>63</sup> Nyman, 27-30.

<sup>64</sup> See e.g. Richards, 25-6.

weddings and funerals) and sporting events<sup>65</sup>. The viewers have been able to participate in national functions and feel a sense of belonging when watching the same shows at the same time, even if in different places. In the digital era the viewers may choose not only the most tempting programme from the abundance of supply, but also the most convenient time and place to view it, which results in the fragmentation of the audience, and as could be argued, to the degradation of the shared sense of a community (or nation)<sup>66</sup>. Therefore, I believe that most of the imagery in television at the time of *Fawlty Towers*'s broadcasting was quite conventional and the discourse did not offer too many viewpoints outside the dominant ideology. *Fawlty Towers*, however, can be seen as offering possibilities for a resistant reading as well, which I will discuss later on. Now, however, I will return to Nyman and his ideas of how in the early twentieth-century literature the European was constructed as the Other to boost English national identity.

As Nyman notes, the post-colonial theory relies on the thought that the construction of any identity requires an Other<sup>67</sup>. Homi Bhabha places the idea into a metaphor and says that the nation is a narrative in which the Other plays a role. We can then analyse the text and the role of the Other, find any ambivalences and silences that appear in the text and thus find new meanings<sup>68</sup>. Nyman has followed Bhabha's ideas in studying English literary texts. He argues that the representation of a unified community is only possible because there are different internal Others (class, ethnicity, religion), who are actually written off as "external perils to an imagined nation". These internal

---

<sup>65</sup> Paddy Scannell: "Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept", *Understanding Television*, ed. Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel (London, New York: Routledge, 1990) 14.

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. David Morley & Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> Nyman, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Bhabha, 4.

Others are represented as Europeans and therefore it further strengthens the boundaries between nations. He also concludes that “[b]y imagining the nation as unified and united, and not as fragmenting (or as already fragmented), the narrative of nationhood becomes a gendered story of hierarchies in which the Other(s) of Englishness mainly figure as threats to the naturalized maintenance of power.”<sup>69</sup>

The same kind of construction of Englishness opposed to Others can be seen in *Fawlty Towers* as well, where there are different nationalities as guests in the hotel. Most of them are Europeans, with the exception of one American and one presumably African. Nationality is then one of the recurrent themes in the episodes and humour is often based on the stereotypical notions of different national characteristics. In chapter five I will go deeper into the analysis of the construction of Englishness in opposition towards Others. Especially the character of Manuel is important in the series, as he could be seen as an “internal Other”, who nevertheless has been remapped to Europe (as he is from Spain). The discourse of Otherness is therefore subtly hinted at, but not made too obvious.

The Europeans in the show have also been projected “negative” features, even though in order to produce humour. This is similar to Hall’s (1992) argument noted earlier, according to which the first characteristics of identities were defined in opposition to the negative features of other cultures. Negativity, then, is often associated with and mirrored onto the “Other”, which even as a term has a negative distancing sound. Visitors do seem to play the role of the Other in *Fawlty Towers*, where for instance characteristics and values that are usually distanced from Englishness are projected onto Others. For instance sexuality is not prevalent in the English community, but a French woman has been portrayed as sexual and of easy virtue, so to say. A Greek

---

<sup>69</sup> Nyman, 194-5.

cook is also openly homosexual, and his sexuality is the reason for the disarray in the episode. However, much of the laughter still derives from laughing at the characteristics of the English, but the roles of Others are nevertheless vital in moulding Englishness.

### 2.3. Popular Culture, Comedy and Humour

So far we have discussed the questions of nation-building, national identity as a system of representation and in particular, the construction of Englishness. They form an essential part of the theoretical framework for the analysis, but as *Fawlty Towers* is a product of popular culture, the other part of the theory resides in cultural studies, more specifically in the theories of humour, the comic and comedy as a genre.

Firstly, it should be noted that as a product of popular culture, analysing *Fawlty Towers* requires a brief note on the way television and entertainment programmes have been treated as objects of research. The dichotomy between “high culture” and “low (popular) culture” has been based on ideas that popular culture offers “easy, pleasurable, hedonistic and democratic” entertainment while high culture is “serious, refined and cognitively difficult” as Michael O’Shaughnessy comments when tracing back the tradition<sup>70</sup>. Pleasure and entertainment that popular culture aims to offer have nevertheless been academic topics of research more frequently lately. It has been acknowledged that as part of culture entertainment products do affect people’s consciousness about the world, about themselves and others. Michael O’Shaughnessy, similarly, argues that as popular culture offers us tools of “‘making sense’ of the world” it has an effect on our thoughts about the world. He contends that cultural critics have argued that popular culture, in fact, is “one of the most crucial sites in which our ‘consciousness’ is constructed, through which ideologies are produced, and by which

---

<sup>70</sup> Michael O’Shaughnessy: “Box Pop: Popular Television and Hegemony”, *Understanding Television*, ed. Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel (London & New York: Routledge, 1990) 91.

hegemony is established” and that for instance popular television is a central agent for this process. O’Shaughnessy adds that popular culture has the ability to challenge the status quo and the important question to think about is *how* it does it.<sup>71</sup>

However, it should be noted that not all popular representations have ambiguous meanings that could be read “against the grain”, but rather *if* they offer possibilities for resistant reading and different subject positions, they *can* work against ideologies. How could *Fawlty Towers* then challenge the status quo? Even though *Fawlty Towers* may seem quite conventional and ideological, the answer to the question in my opinion relies on humour. The ambiguity in analysing popular culture will probably remain in the analysis, since in *Fawlty Towers* there are discourses that are ideological, but also discourses that could offer a resistant reading. But through analysing humour and underlying meanings in *Fawlty Towers* we may reach a fruitful discussion on how the show might offer resistant readings and subvert the ideological representation of Englishness.

Firstly, the concepts of humour, laughter and the comic should be clarified. Humour is often defined in relation to the comic. Seppo Knuuttila contends that the *comic*, which is external, and *humour*, which is internal, are closely intertwined<sup>72</sup>. According to him, humour can be considered as an attitude that has been marked by collective values and norms<sup>73</sup>. This adapts to the idea that humour is often context- and culture-specific, to which I will return in a few moments. The comic, on the other hand, I see as a concrete method (such as physical and verbal comedy, misunderstandings etc.) to produce humour, which, in contrast, has been described as an abstract

---

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 90.

<sup>72</sup> Seppo Knuuttila, *Kansanhuumorin mieli* (Helsinki: SKS 1992) 112.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 95.

experience<sup>74</sup>. *Laughter* is also closely connected to humour and the comic. It can be understood as a physical reaction to experiencing humour, as it often is. Laughter can also spring from purely neurological reasons, as Knuutila argues, pointing out hysterical laughter or laughing when being tickled as examples<sup>75</sup>. People also laugh often when encountering an awkward or a scary situation, as a way of relief. Therefore, laughter is not solely the result of humour. However, in the thesis I will use the term *laughter* as a general term that refers to humour, which is part of the experience of belonging to the community, and also as a term that entails the use of power. Laughter can exclude as well as include. As Simon Critchley points out, “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”<sup>76</sup>. In this case laughter entails the use of power by the dominant group and enforces it while excluding “the powerless” outsiders.

Humour and laughter, then, as well as being natural phenomena, are social as well. As Anu Mustonen notes, humour is a natural and important social language that binds people together<sup>77</sup>. As languages, humour too relies on the shared social world and the norms and rules that are part of the world<sup>78</sup>. Laughter is often contagious as well; in the presence of other people laughing one is more likely to laugh. For instance in situation comedies the cues for laughing are already provided and the viewer may join in the humorous experience more readily than if there were not any laughter in the background. Of course, here we return to the idea of “easy” entertainment which popular culture has been accused of offering. Nevertheless, these points support the

---

<sup>74</sup> Aarne Kinnunen, *Huumorin ja koomisen keskeneräinen kysymys* (Helsinki: WSOY 1994) 24.

<sup>75</sup> Knuutila, 97.

<sup>76</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 12.

<sup>77</sup> Anu Mustonen, *Mediapsykologia* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2001) 109.

<sup>78</sup> See e.g. Critchley, 4.

view that humour and laughter are strongly attached to the *social* context and they even can enforce the sense of belonging to a community.

However, it should be noted that humour does often exceed cultural or national boundaries, and especially this is the case with products of popular culture that are shown in different countries and therefore the viewers have become acquainted with the customs, rules and norms of the cultural background of the products (usually Anglo-American in the Western world). Humour, then, can be universal as well; for instance slapstick and other kind of physical comedy is often laughed at despite the cultural background<sup>79</sup>. Nevertheless, much of humour is based on cultural knowledge, and especially on the national culture that is composed of common rules, conventions, beliefs, habits, customs and values. Simon Critchley argues that humour in fact “takes us back to the place we are from, whether that is the concreteness of a neighbourhood or the abstraction of a nation state”. Humour, according to Critchley, connects us to a specific place, assigning certain characteristics of that place as well as certain dispositions and customs of its inhabitants.<sup>80</sup> Humour in *Fawlty Towers*, then, can enforce the sense of a nation, even though there are social groups within the nation that compose their own sense of a place and enforce it with their own sense of humour (e.g. the English versus the Scots or the Welsh).

The terms *verisimilitude* and *decorum*, which Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik use in their analysis of comedy, are useful when discussing culture and comedy. As Neale and Krutnik point out, “[d]ecorum means what is proper or fitting, verisimilitude what is probable or likely”. These concepts are then closely related to the relationship between representations, to beliefs, opinions and cultural knowledge of the audience,

---

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. Katariina Niiranen, “Nauru raikaa *Pitkän Jussin Majatalossa* – koomisen keinoista ja kansallisuudesta”, *Lähikuva* 3/2002: 87.

<sup>80</sup> Critchley, 68.

and therefore expectations of the audience.<sup>81</sup> Tzvetan Todorov points out that there are two kinds of verisimilitude that arise from the field of cultural knowledge, namely “the rules of the genre” and “public opinion”. “Rules of the genre” refer to the conventions of comedy that the work has to conform to in order to be verisimilitudinous, that is believable. “Public opinion”, on the other hand, refers to people’s conception of reality and to the relation that the conception has to the discourse of the cultural text (for example a film or a situation comedy).<sup>82</sup> As Neale and Krutnik note, the rules of the genre and public opinion, as two kinds of verisimilitude, give rise to two kinds of decorum: the norms that the public opinion has formed are to be respected, as well as the rules of the genre.<sup>83</sup> For instance it is proper and normal that in Finland the New Year’s Day’s speech is held by the President and not by anyone who desires to perform in public. Similarly, as Neale and Krutnik note, it is believable and proper for people to suddenly start singing in a musical, but if for instance a news reporter would sing and dance while reporting about a terrorist attack, it would break the rules and norms of the genre.

Comedy, then, is based on the transgression of decorum and verisimilitude as Neale and Krutnik argue. It is founded on “deviations from any social or aesthetic rule, norm, model, convention, or law” and these “deviations are the basis of comic surprise”.<sup>84</sup> These comic forms are plenty as will be seen when analysing the comic methods of *Fawlty Towers*. Neale and Krutnik note that the comedy composes its own decorum and verisimilitude, in other words the rules, norms and conventions of what is proper and believable in comedy. As they note, “in comedy we expect the

---

<sup>81</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 84.

<sup>82</sup> Todorov’s *Introduction to Poetics*, 1981, as cited in Neale and Krutnik, 84.

<sup>83</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 85.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, 86.

unexpected”<sup>85</sup>. In other words, we have grown accustomed to the convention of breaking the rules of decorum and verisimilitude and turning hierarchies upside down. Comedy as a genre is then quite paradoxical in nature: the audience consciously accepts the world in which rules are broken and hierarchies are reversed, and not only do they accept them, but they also expect those generic conventions from comedy.

To which extent can comedy then transgress the ideological power structures of society? Will comedy be unable to step over the threshold of its genre and offer resistance? This paradoxical nature of comedy has been pondered about by many theorists, and it seems to be one of the questions humour gives rise to but does not offer ready-made answers to. In the light of these paradoxical elements and the nature of humour as a subjective (yet social) and context- and culture –specific experience, analysing and getting to the “root” of humour seems to be quite an impossible task to accomplish. For instance Juha Herkman ponders about the ways in which one could analyse humour that is so experiential and context-specific. He suggests that one should try to look for the limits of the experience, the subject positions and contexts, namely ask questions such as: what is humorous and in which situation? Who laughs, who does not, and who is being laughed at? Why is it humorous?<sup>86</sup> These questions that concentrate on the functions of humour offer us a starting point for the analysis, where the “external” comic methods that produce humour are taken into closer examination.

John Morreall introduces the three most famous traditional theories about humour<sup>87</sup>. Firstly, the superiority theory draws from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and it states that we laugh because we feel superior to others. This is relevant

---

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>86</sup> Juha Herkman, ”Huumorin ja vallan keskeneräinen kysymys – populaarin kokemuksen jäljillä”, *Populaarin lumo – mediat ja arki*, ed. Anu Koivunen, Susanna Paasonen and Mari Pajala (Turku: Turun yliopiston mediatutkimuksen julkaisuja, 2000) 376-7.

<sup>87</sup> John Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: SUNY 1987) 128- 133.

in the discussion of inclusive and exclusive humour, which is used in *Fawlty Towers* in distinguishing “us” from “them”. Secondly, the incongruity theory is similar to the idea of verisimilitude introduced earlier, where the relationship between what we know or expect is incongruous with what takes place. In *Fawlty Towers* for instance Basil’s rudeness towards his guests is incongruous with the idea of friendly service as well as the assumed discreetness of the English. Thirdly, the relief theory draws from the notion that laughter is a release of nervous energy. Nowadays it also includes the Freudian theory of the unconscious<sup>88</sup>. Laughter is seen as a pleasurable release of energy that otherwise would be used to contain or repress psychic activity. Here applies for instance the jokes made about taboo subjects, such as death. In addition, the use of stereotypes is one of the most important methods that will be analysed in more detail in chapter five. As Neale and Krutnik note, comedy tends to use both generic stereotypes as well as cultural stereotypes, drawing on the ready-made imagery of “deviation from social and cultural norms”, which stereotypes represent<sup>89</sup>. The comic (generic) stereotypes include for instance the fool, the drunk, the lunatic, the eccentric and the heroine<sup>90</sup>. In addition, nationality is often represented through stereotypical imagery, and it is often constructed through appearance (clothes, colour of skin and hair) and language.

The theoretical background for the research has now been outlined and it is time to turn to the research material. To briefly summarize, I will analyse *Fawlty Towers* and its representation of Englishness by focusing on the ways in which it constructs national identity. As a product of popular culture, it involves both ideological discourses and conventional representations, and the ability to both strengthen as well as

---

<sup>88</sup> For more information about Freud’s theory of laughter, see Sigmund Freud (1905), *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

<sup>89</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 85.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, 92-3.

challenge the status quo. Taking the historical and social context into account, it could be argued that in the 1970s there was an urge to redefine the national identity of the English, which *Fawlty Towers* could be seen as reflecting. To support the analysis, I will use for instance Benedict Anderson's view of a nation as an "imagined community" as well as Stuart Hall's view of national identity as an ideological discourse composed of different elements. I aim to unravel the ways in which *Fawlty Towers* conveys the idea and character of Englishness, and whether and how it offers a resistant reading from the otherwise often ideological discourse. For this purpose, I will analyse the main characters in the series, its representations of different nationalities and the roles of the Other(s), as well as survey its methods of comedy.

### 3. What Are You Laughing At? Methods of Comedy

Explaining a joke usually takes away the purpose of the joke. In other words, because humour is an experience, it loses its enchantment if it has to be explained. Is there any point in analysing humour at all then? There are a number of books and theorists who justify their research, but to phrase the justifications shortly in my own words: I argue that humour as a subject of research is important because it is so inherent to us as human beings, and therefore belongs to our behaviour and culture. As such, it cannot be excluded from academic interest and research. Humour is a hard subject to approach, since it is very ambivalent — it is a personal yet social experience, it can turn hierarchies upside down but also strengthen them, and the occasions of laughter are infinite. Despite the impossibility of finding a clear-cut solution to the question of humour, I think analysing some of the “external” comic methods used in *Fawlty Towers* brings us closer to the experience of humour and understanding the way humour functions.<sup>91</sup> Focusing first on the comic methods also aids us in analysing the series and the characters further. All in all, understanding the way comedy functions helps us in considering humour in wider terms and perhaps also in understanding its place and function in society.

#### 3.1. Farce, Incongruity and Dramatic Irony at Work

When starting to analyse the comic methods in *Fawlty Towers*, the term *farce* is what first comes to mind. *Ad absurdum* and *ridiculousness* describe the term well and slapstick is often attached to this ancient mode of comedy, too. *Slapstick*, on the other hand, means a physical and therefore also visual form of comedy, which often uses

---

<sup>91</sup> Placing the word *external* in quotation marks is a conscious choice, since it can be questioned whether comic methods can be really described as external, because the experience of humour is necessarily affected by the interpreter’s way of interpreting the methods that are closely connected to the surrounding social world.

rather violent comic actions.<sup>92</sup> Jerry Palmer argues that the difference between comedy and farce is that “comedy is not just mirth creation, it also has serious, important themes [whereas] farce is a form where everything is subordinated to laughter production”<sup>93</sup>. I think this distinction is astute and does relate to *Fawlty Towers* quite well. Much of the farce in the series is intended to evoking laughter, not thoughts or questions about the “themes” in the series. For instance in “The Germans” when Basil is having a fire drill in the hotel, Manuel accidentally starts a real fire in the kitchen. Manuel informs about the fire to Basil, but Basil thinks Manuel believes the drill to be a real fire alarm, and to keep Manuel away from bothering him, Basil pushes Manuel back to the kitchen and slams the door closed. When Manuel finally convinces Basil that there is a real fire, Basil gets the fire extinguisher and tries to pull it open with the help of Manuel. Basil sets the extinguisher off but it squirts in his face. He crumbles on the floor and when he stands up he hits his head on a frying pan that Manuel is holding. Basil passes out on the floor.

This scene is full of coincidences and, according to Palmer, coincidence is the basic law of farce because of its implausible nature (or incongruous, to use another term)<sup>94</sup>. For instance it is unlikely that a real fire would occur at the time of a fire drill, but as it does, the implausibility adds humour to the situation (if in the right context). This incident also exemplifies the nature of slapstick, even though here the element of intended violent action is missing, which is usually present when Basil and Manuel are conversing. Usually it is Manuel who is the recipient of violence, as Basil lets off his anger on him. Even though farce and slapstick are highly present in *Fawlty Towers*, I

---

<sup>92</sup> For instance Buster Keaton became popular for his slapstick shows in the 1920s, which were important for the early comedy in the silent era in the cinema, as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik note (1990, 21).

<sup>93</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London: Routledge, 1994) 120.

<sup>94</sup> Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television Comedy* (London: British Film Institute, 1987) 123.

would not necessarily argue that everything is subordinated to creating laughter. The narrative is indeed farcical, but there are also more “serious” comical themes at work, as analysed in the previous chapters, for instance on the character-level. Physical comedy is most easily recognised in the series, but verbal comedy is vital too.

As mentioned, John Morreall summarises the history of the theories of humour into three theories: the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory. As he notes, however, none of these theories are adequate, and thus he suggests that “laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift”, in other words a sudden change in a psychological state, which is pleasant, makes one laugh.<sup>95</sup> This definition is close to the incongruity theory, except that Morreall emphasises the pleasure of the situation (for the laughter). These theories help us to understand the function for humour, but the most useful theory (or term) for us is incongruity. As Jerry Palmer similarly notes, the relief theory is in part a theory of a function for humour: “humour is defined by its role in the ecology of the mind”<sup>96</sup>. Similarly, the superiority theory that is based on the notion that we laugh because we feel superior to others is in my opinion a *function* for humour and is especially dependant on the interpreter. Incongruity theory, however, where humour derives from a subversion or contradiction of a certain expectation we have, is not as dependent on our personal experience, of “the ecology of the mind”. I argue that incongruity is more dependent on the general knowledge we have about the world, and on our sense of verisimilitude (i.e. what is probable or likely) than the two theories above. Incongruity can therefore be thought of as a *method* of comedy rather than a *function* for humour and in this sense is more useful for the thesis.

---

<sup>95</sup> Morreall, 133.

<sup>96</sup> Palmer 1994, 94.

Another term that is useful here is *comic surprise*, which, according to Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, is based on the deviations from any norm or convention, as stated earlier. Comic surprise is often prevalent in jokes, when analysing a joke on a more general level. As we will come to see, examples of, for instance, the incongruity theory, are often based on the comic surprise. Jerry Palmer discusses the structure of humour quite extensively, and his way to talk about incongruity is to use the phrase “the logic of the absurd”. According to Palmer, there are two processes in a joke based on the logic of the absurd; firstly a sudden creation of incongruity in the narrative and secondly a “bifurcated logical process, which leads the listener to judge that the state of affairs portrayed is simultaneously highly plausible and just a little bit plausible”.<sup>97</sup>

An example of the logic of the absurd is for instance in the episode “Waldorf Salad”, where a guest cannot get Manuel to understand that he wants his salad, which he has been waiting for half an hour already. The guest calls Basil:

Mr Arrad: (*to Basil*) Excuse me.

Basil: Yes.

Mr Arrad: Look, we’ve been waiting here for about half an hour now, I mean we gave the waiter out order...

Basil: Oh him. He’s hopeless, isn’t he.

Mr Arrad: Yes, well, I don’t wish to complain, but when he finally does bring something, he’s got it wrong.

Basil: You think I don’t know? I mean, you only have to eat here. We have to live with it. I had to pay his fare all the way from Barcelona. But we can’t get the staff, you see. It’s a nightmare. (*he moves off feeling better*)<sup>98</sup>

In this joke the first sense (or creation) of incongruity arises when Basil states that Manuel is “hopeless”. The guest (as well as the viewers) would expect Basil to stand up for Manuel as Basil is responsible for him as his manager, but Basil does not behave as expected, which breaks the flow of the narrative as conventionally thought. The second incongruous surprise comes when Basil actually continues to complain about Manuel to

---

<sup>97</sup> Palmer 1994, 96.

<sup>98</sup> “Waldorf Salad”, 221.

the guest. The dialogue does not continue as expected, in other words Basil apologizing for Manuel's mistakes and serving the guest himself. The situation is based on comic surprise, which results from the incongruous narrative, which is, according to Palmer's argumentation, plausible and not plausible at the same time. The guest is surprised of Basil's behaviour — it is not what he expected and it works against the norms of a typical conversation. Basil also leaves the guest after he has complained about Manuel feeling thus relieved, even though it should be the guest who would be relieved after having complained about the service and received what he ordered. This way the roles are reversed, which is incongruous and comical.

Incongruity is not only a comic method, but in order for it to work (in other words for the joke to be funny), there has to be a social world as well as an understanding and some agreement of the rules of that world on the background, as mentioned earlier and as Simon Critchley too argues.<sup>99</sup> In a similar way, Palmer contends that funniness cannot be searched from merely the mind of the laugher or from the phenomenon that raises laughter, but from the interaction between the two.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, the social world in which we live; the rules, norms, rites and habits give birth to comedy, and in order for the comic methods to evoke laughter, we need to comply to or understand the social world. One might here ask whether analysing comic methods in *Fawlty Towers* is then possible for a Finnish researcher. Often, however, the jokes in *Fawlty Towers* are based on a social world which is common to most of us, for instance the "rule" of being polite and friendly to others, or roles of people in certain positions, like in the example above. This would be funny, I assume, to most people despite their nationality. *Fawlty Towers* also complies to the rules of the genre, in other words to the rules of comedy, which most of the viewers are familiar with. Much of the comedy in

---

<sup>99</sup> See Critchley, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Palmer 1994, 93.

*Fawlty Towers* is indeed universal, at least to a person accustomed with the Anglo-American tradition of popular culture. For instance the farcical narrative, physical comedy and much of the verbal comedy in the dialogues is humorous despite the lack of the shared experience of being British.<sup>101</sup>

The jokes in *Fawlty Towers* are often based on incongruity, which can be realised in different forms, for example in reversing ideas or roles (as above), in surprise, changing the context, or in unconventionality, to name a few. As an example I have chosen a scene in the episode “The Germans” where Manuel is cleaning in the hotel lobby under the desk. On top of the desk there is a moose head that is waiting to be put on the wall. Manuel is practising his English at the same time with a strong Spanish accent: “How are you, sir? You see, I speak English well, I learnt it from a book. Hhhello. I am English. Hhhello.”. The Major comes to the lobby but sees only the moose head, not Manuel. Manuel continues:

Manuel: How are you, sir. I can speak English. (*Manuel stands up momentarily just as the Major turns away*) Hello, Major. How are you today?

The Major: (*turns, but Manuel has disappeared again*) Er...er...er...I’m fine, thank you.

Manuel’s voice: Is a beautiful day today.

The Major: (*peering closely at the moose*) Er...is it? Yes, yes, I suppose it is...

Manuel’s voice: I can speak English. I learnt it from a book.

The Major: Did you? Did you really?<sup>102</sup>

Basil comes into the lobby and interrupts the conversation, not knowing about the situation. The Major asks where Basil has got the moose, stating that it is “a remarkable animal” and wondering if it is Japanese. Basil answers that it is actually Canadian. This situation is funny in many respects: first of all, Manuel’s way of talking and repeating the same phrases that he has learnt from an English book evokes mirth, because the

---

<sup>101</sup> Katariina Niiranen, “Nauru raikaa *Pitkän Jussin Majatalossa* – koomisen keinoista ja kansallisuudesta”, *Lähikuva* 3/2002, 77-91.

<sup>102</sup> “The Germans”, 142.

viewer is aware that those phrases belong probably to the only ones Manuel knows. Manuel's phrase "I am English" is funny, because he is not, as he is an outsider, and therefore the viewer may feel a sense of superiority here as well. The sentence shows Manuel's attempts at acquiring the role of an "English Gentleman", which is humorous because in (the show's) reality he does not fulfil the required characteristics. However, there is a sense of sympathy here too, and laughter is not maliciously directed to Manuel, but rather to the situation that connects unsuitable contexts or themes together. The animal head talking is humorous, because it is implausible, but the Major still believes it is actually talking to him. This way the humour arises from both the absurdity of the situation as well as from laughing at the Major's "foolishness". His statement on the animal's place of origin is based on the general belief that the Japanese are clever and their electronics are highly advanced. Naturally, Basil does not understand why the Major would think the animal head is from Japan, which again tickles the viewer's sense of superiority as he/she is aware of the real situation.

Much of the comedy in the series is also based on the superiority theory, which means that we laugh because we recognise the object to be somehow erroneous or inadequate, which again boosts our sense of superiority and eminence. We then feel free from the inadequate characteristics that we are laughing at.<sup>103</sup> This aspect is relevant in the character of Manuel (as will be discussed later), but it is a vital function in the character of Basil as well. In most situations, it is Basil who the viewer feels superior to as he usually makes a mess of everything or does not realise his own shortcomings. For instance in the episode "The Wedding Party" there is a French woman Mrs Peignoir,

---

<sup>103</sup> Tanja Rasila, "Avainsana, mysteerio, täyskäännös...Huumori ja komiikka sarjakuvan rakenteissa", *Ruutujen välissä – näkökulmia sarjakuvaan*, ed. Juha Herkman (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1996) 64. Also commented by Palmer 1994, 62.

who flirts with Basil. In one scene Basil is serving her breakfast and to impress her, he uses his French skills:

Basil: *Et maintenant – un peu café?*  
 Mrs Peignoir: *Ah, oui, s'il vous plait. Café au lait.*  
 Basil: *Café* what?  
 Mrs Peignoir: *Au lait.*  
 Basil: Ah! *Café ... Olé!*<sup>104</sup>

Basil does not understand what kind of coffee Mrs Peignoir wants, but he is reluctant to admit his ignorance and therefore finds a matching word that he is familiar with. The joke here is based on both the feeling of superiority, when the viewer laughs at Basil because he does not know what “Café au lait” is, and also the incongruity of the joke, when Basil thinks a coffee with milk is “*Café Olé*”, referring to the Spanish interjection (*Olé*). Matching these two unsuitable contexts is humorous, as well as Basil’s reaction. The joke also bases on the verbal comedy, and more specifically to the homophony of the two words. This joke implies the control of language, which according to Neale and Krutnik is used generally in jokes and witty remarks (*wisecracks*) to produce laughter.<sup>105</sup> Before discussing verbal comedy, though, I will address dramatic irony with a few words.

Dramatic irony is also connected with the theme of superiority. Dramatic irony is a comic method in which the viewer knows something that the characters in the narrative do not, which enables the viewer to see the situation humorously. Usually this entails some background information from the viewer, such as knowledge from the narrative that has been brought forth earlier, or being able to anticipate how the characters may behave. Dramatic irony is highly prevalent in *Fawlty Towers*. First of all, often the pleasure we receive from situation comedies is when we know how a

---

<sup>104</sup> “The Wedding party”, 63.

<sup>105</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 48.

certain person is going to behave. As noted in the theoretical part, this “anticipation of the inevitable” or the “redundance” in the message plays a major part in experiencing pleasure, which according to Umberto Eco (1972) offers true relaxation. An example of dramatic irony is for instance a situation in the episode “The Psychiatrist”, when Basil is discussing with the psychiatrist. Basil thinks the psychiatrist is asking him about his sexual activity when he says “How many times do you manage it?”, when in fact he is wondering how often Basil and Sybil can have a holiday. The viewer knows the situation best — the characters are not aware of each other’s thoughts, and cannot see anything humorous about the situation. Much of humour arrives indeed from knowing how Basil frets about talking about anything connected with sexuality, and watching his way to handle the situation is very amusing.

### 3.2. Playing with Language — Verbal Comedy

Some of the examples discussed also relate to verbal comedy, but I will try to broaden the subject a little here. Before going further, though, it is good to define the terms that will be used, which base on Neale’s and Krutnik’s thoughts. First of all, I have been talking about *jokes*, which according to Neale and Krutnik are intentionally funny comments, stories, anecdotes or lines. They are rarely integral to the plot, but rather work to construct or mark a pause or digression in the narrative. They often need a punchline, or some form of a closure. *Wisecracks* are similar to jokes, but they are shorter, and often sarcastic and witty remarks. Jokes and wisecracks are distinguished from *comic events*, which contrarily can only exist in the narrative. Comic events are not autonomous — they are not funny outside the context. These forms produce humour by either using or misusing language.<sup>106</sup> There are plenty of examples of verbal comedy in *Fawlty Towers*. For instance Basil often makes wisecracks, that is, sarcastic

---

<sup>106</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 43-50.

comments about Sybil, which often end their conversation, such as “that golfing puff-adder” or “my little nest of vipers”, or other kinds of comments stating Basil’s misfortune of marrying Sybil, such as “Thank you so much. I don’t know where I’d be without you...in the land of the living, probably.”. Sybil, however, never gets upset about the comments, which is important, because if she would, it would not necessarily be humorous, because it would be too plausible.<sup>107</sup> Jerry Palmer notes that Basil’s cracks (which he directs to other than Sybil as well) are “not funny because they are aggressive: they are a permitted form of aggression because they are funny”<sup>108</sup>. Therefore the question of context is relevant here: the viewer knows that this is a comedy show and does not take the jokes literally. This can also be the downfall for the genre of comedy in political sense: can humour really bring change? I will return to this dilemma in the concluding chapter.

Another example of verbal comedy in the series is the following joke, where a German couple comes to the hotel lobby where Basil is:

Elderly German: *Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*

Basil: ...Beg your pardon?

Elderly German: *Entschuldigen Sie, bitte, können Sie Deutsch sprechen?*

Basil: ...I’m sorry, could you say that again?

German lady: You speak German?

Basil: Oh, German! I’m sorry, I thought there was something wrong with you. Of course, the Germans!

German lady: You speak German?

Basil: Well...er...a little...I get by.

German lady: *Ein bisschen.*

Elderly German: *Ah – wir wollen ein Auto mieten.*

Basil: (*nodding helpfully*) Well, why not?

Elderly German: *Bitte.*

Basil: Yes, a little bit tricky... Would you mind saying it again?

German lady: Please?

Basil: Could you repeat...amplify...you know, reiterate? Yes? Yes?

Elderly German: *Wir...*

Basil: Wir?... Yes, well we’ll come back to that.

---

<sup>107</sup> As Palmer notes (1997, 137), if a joke is plausible and not surprising, it is unlikely to raise laughter.

<sup>108</sup> Palmer 1987, 117- 8.

Elderly German: ...*Wollen...*

Basil: (*to himself*) *Vollen... Voluntary?*

Elderly German: *Ein Auto mieten.*

Basil: *Owtoe...out to... Oh, I see! You're volunteering to get out to get some meat. Not necessary! We have meat here! (pause, the couple are puzzled) We haf meat hier...in ze buildink!! (he mimes a cow's horns) Moo! (Polly comes in) Ah, Polly, just explaining about the meat.*<sup>109</sup>

The joke uses many comic methods, such as misunderstanding, incongruity, and it also refers to the viewer's sense of superiority. The viewer is laughing at Basil and his absurd way of making sense of the couple's wish. Combining the wish to hire a car ("ein Auto mieten") and Basil's translation of it as 'getting out to get some meat' is incongruously absurd and evokes laughter. The joke is also based on changing the context<sup>110</sup>: the German request is taken away from its original context and placed into a new context, which is a new language in this case. Basil's refusal to confess his inability to speak German is also humorous, which bases on the sense of superiority as well as the viewer's background knowledge of the character. The conversation here is disturbed, as it does not follow the conventional conversation principles, which have been analysed for instance with Grice's maxims. According to Grice, there are four maxims that govern the conventional conversation: quantity, quality, relation and manner. In other words, it is expected that the participants are informative, relevant, do not tell lies and are clear, brief and orderly.<sup>111</sup> Here the conversation between Basil and the Germans is disturbed by language difficulties and therefore is not very informative; it does not show any progress or give any new information to the participants, but rather returns to the point where it started at. It therefore seems to break at least the maxim of quality and the maxim of manner, since it is disorderly and unclear. This is typical for

---

<sup>109</sup> "The Germans", 152- 3.

<sup>110</sup> See e.g. Rasila, 67.

<sup>111</sup> Grice, H. P. (1975), *Logic and Conversation*, quoted in George Yule, *The Study of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 145.

comedy, since as Neale and Krutnik state, comedy is based on deviations from social rules and norms, which applies to the rules of conversation as well.

The scene uses physical comedy too, when Basil tries to explain that they have enough meat (which is humorous in its absurdity) by miming a cow: making horns with his fingers and mooing. Basil's way to pronounce the English sentence with a "German accent" is also humorous, because it is highly unlikely that Germans who do not speak English would understand it even if it was pronounced with a familiar accent. This way Basil's absurd way of thinking is contrasted with the viewer's knowledge of "reality", which makes the viewer laugh. Neale and Krutnik talk about "a comic misuse of language marked as unintentional in some way"<sup>112</sup>, which is the method used here and also in the Major's and Manuel's characters. The Major's bad hearing and his old age is used in many jokes, and similarly Manuel's use of language is unwittingly comical. For instance when Basil states that Manuel has "too much butter on those trays", Manuel correcting the "mistake" says: "No, no, no, Señor! - - Not 'on- those- trays'. No, sir - 'uno, dos, tres'."<sup>113</sup> There are many other jokes too based on Manuel's incomprehension or mishearing, and they clearly form part of the characteristics of Manuel.

The last example of verbal comedy is a comic event. Comic event, as discussed, is integral to the plot and therefore cannot be taken away from the context. As an example of comic event I have chosen a small subplot in the episode "The Germans". The context for the event has already been laid out in another example above, where Manuel is cleaning under the desk in the hotel lobby and talking to the Major through a moose head. The instance of the comic event comes when at the end of the episode the moose head (placed on the wall now) falls on Manuel and Manuel

---

<sup>112</sup> Neale and Krutnik, 49.

<sup>113</sup> "A Touch of Class", 3.

moans through its head: “Ooooooh, he hit me on the head...”. The Major slaps the moose’s nose and says: “No, you hit **him** on the head. You naughty moose!”. The German guests are watching this and wondering how the English managed to win the war (World War Two), referring to the foolish behaviour of the English in the episode. The sentence would not entail the same comic effect if the viewer was not aware of the situation described earlier, but when the viewer has the background knowledge, the comic event raises laughter and concludes the narrative as well.

Antony Easthope states that according to the agreement judged from the newspapers, “to be properly English you must have a sense of humour; but comedy (wit, humour, joking) is absolutely beyond analysis and should remain so”<sup>114</sup>.

Nevertheless I have tried here to analyse the comedy of *Fawlty Towers*. There is a vast continuum of different theories of humour, of which I have merely scratched upon. But I do not think it will be necessary for the purpose of the thesis to go too far into the theories of humour, or even to the examples of different comic methods, since that would be a vast subject for another research. In my opinion the main comic methods *Fawlty Towers* uses are the use of stereotypes, physical comedy (farce, slapstick), verbal comedy and a witty narrative. It also relies on the comedy of characters, as the “family” of *Fawlty Towers* is composed of characters, who have easily recognisable and familiar characteristics. The aim of looking at the different comic methods was to establish a background for understanding of how humour and comedy work, as intermingled with the surrounding social world, the subjective understanding and the experience of the interpreter and the comic method. In the conclusion chapter, I aim to discuss humour in wider context and situate *Fawlty Towers* into the discussion, but before that let us go further into the analysis of the characters in the series.

---

<sup>114</sup> Easthope, 159.

#### 4. Representing the Nation Through the Family

Each time an episode of *Fawlty Towers* begins, we see the sign of the hotel and the hotel in the background. The order of the letters in the sign of the hotel outside is different each time, and sometimes some letters are hanging loosely from the sign, which could be seen as a symbolical reference to the deteriorated and disorderly state of society. The hotel building could be considered as home of the nation, home of the English. The word play with the name of the hotel is an insightful and ironical comment about the hotel. ‘Tower’ refers to a big building or a monument, which gives the impression of something important and impressive. ‘Fawlty’, on the other hand, is directly associated with its homophone ‘faulty’. Therefore, the pompous name of the hotel works as a sarcastic remark on the state of the hotel as well as society in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By showing the outside image of the hotel at the beginning of each episode, the viewers are invited to the hotel, to the symbolical home.

The community of *Fawlty Towers* — Basil, Sybil, Polly, Manuel, the Major and in the second series the cook Terry — could be seen as representing the family of the nation. Even though they are not a family, they do form a “surrogate family network” that is bonded by “the principles of allegiance and obligation”, to employ the metaphor of Neale and Krutnik (1990). Nation, similarly, bonds the citizens together with these two terms that form the framework for many national ideas and institutions. The major characters in *Fawlty Towers* could be seen as representing different classes in society, for instance Sybil and Polly the women, Major Gowen, Miss Tibbs and Miss Gatsby the elderly, Terry the working class and Manuel the class of immigrants. All these characters represent a deviance from the “norm”; these characters are marked by gender, age, social or ethnic difference. Basil could be seen as representing the norm: white, middle-class male, who is traditionally thought of as the head of the family. I am

using the word *norm* here hesitantly, however, as it suggests that in reality there is merely one norm, when the “norm” actually depends on where one looks from and can therefore vary<sup>115</sup>. In this case I am nevertheless using the word to convey the image of a “Brit” that has been constructed in various discourses and that usually represents the majority, or the dominating class. In this chapter I will concentrate on the different characters in the “family” and discuss the characteristics of the English.

#### 4.1. The Major — “Drunken old sod”

Major Gowen is one of the staying guests in the hotel. He is a retired elderly gentleman, who appears in the series once in a while, mainly to get the fresh newspaper or to get a drink from the bar when it opens. The Major seems to be in a world of his own, which appears to result from his old age and drinking habits. When the Major comes to the lobby at the time of the bar opening and asks Basil to make him “a fruit juice or something”, Basil calls him a “drunken old sod” (behind his back). The Major is a doddering old man, whose misunderstandings cause humorous situations. He is nevertheless a fascinating character, who could be seen as representing the old England and the imperial identity that no longer defines the English. He is addressed as “Major Gowen” or “the Major”, which refers to his masculine, disciplined and honoured occupation as a Major and also alludes to Britain’s military history that together manifest his devotion to the nation. His behaviour also reflects attributes belonging to the English character. For instance the xenophobic character<sup>116</sup> that has identified the English can be seen in Major Gowen, even though it can be detected from Basil’s character as well. For instance when in the episode “The Germans” Basil tells the Major that there are some German guests arriving at the hotel, the Major comments that he

---

<sup>115</sup> For interesting discussion on how the Western world has seen the Oriental as Other, and itself as the norm, see for instance Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 1995.

<sup>116</sup> See e.g. Richards, 25.

does not care much for the Germans and that they are “[b]unch of Krauts” and “[b]ad eggs”. The Major does not show appreciation to other foreigners either. For instance the Major meets a French guest Mrs Peignoir at the hotel bar and asks whether she happens to be French by any chance. Mrs Peignoir answers compliantly and the Major simply states “Good Lord!”, as if it was a big surprise that a Frenchwoman was staying in Torquay. The old grudges between the English and the Germans as well as the French are highlighted with Major Gowen’s character, as well as the feeling of superiority and insularity that has characterised the English.

Major Gowen is also a devotee of cricket, which is a relic of the imperial culture. He is also keen to read the newspaper in the mornings, and frets about the strikes in the news. When in “Touch of Class” the Major receives the newspaper and comments: “ Ah, more strikes...dustmen...Post Office...” Basil echoingly answers: ”It makes you want to cry, doesn’t it. What happened to the old ideal of doing something for your fellow man, of service? I mean, today...” [A guest interrupts Basil]. The idea of duty and service were indeed old ideas of the English character, as Jeffrey Richards notes too<sup>117</sup>. This brief dialogue shows that the Major represents these old values, but the times have changed. Basil tries to hold on to the old ideals as well, but nevertheless realizes the changes, which the Major does not seem to digest.

In “The Germans” Basil and the Major are talking about a girl whom the Major used to know. He says: “...I must have been rather keen on her, because I took her to see...India!”. Basil thinks that he means the country, but the Major continues: “At the Oval...fine match, marvellous finish - -“. The joke is based on the misunderstanding between the cricket team and the country, but it is also an interesting symbolical reference to the colony of India. As if the Major is remembering the former good old

---

<sup>117</sup> Richards, 11.

days of the Empire, when India used to be part of the Great Britain. This too strengthens the analysis of the Major as an impersonation of the fallen Empire. He is always reading from the papers how society is changing (“more strikes”), which shows that he is interested in society’s affairs, but he cannot really do anything about it, as he has lost his power in society, similarly as the Empire has lost its global power. Antony Easthope argues that England cannot face or forget the loss of Empire, but repeating Empire through irony is a way of acknowledging and mourning the loss of it<sup>118</sup>. Representation of the Major is an example of Easthope’s argument; representing the Major ironically but not maliciously, is a way to heal the wounds of the loss as well as acknowledge the social situation of the changing (or already changed) national identity.

Englishness is constructed here with references to history, which are reflected in Major Gowen’s character. For instance the war with the Germans is hinted at, and it is represented as a “shared experience” (Hall, 1992) of Basil and the Major. Also the Major’s story about the India at the Oval could be seen as two references to the nation’s history, firstly to the time when India used to be part of the British Empire and secondly to the sports event at the cricket ground that is probably very familiar to the viewers. The Major is also very keen to talk about the match and the “marvellous finish” which suggests that cricket plays an important part in his life. This emphasizes the representation of the English as passionate about sports, and especially the old generation about cricket. As quoted above, Basil complains that “the old ideal of doing something to your fellow man, of service” has disappeared from society, or from people’s values. This way he both constructs characteristics of the English that the nation’s citizens used to possess, and suggests that the characteristic is not true anymore for the English, and the national identity is changing, or already changed. As Arthur

---

<sup>118</sup> Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 31.

Marwick states, changes in the British lifestyle were notable in the 1950s onwards and consumerism and affluence brought new kind of values, which promoted self-indulgence<sup>119</sup>, which was contrary to the former idea of “general good”. A sense of community is then constructed with these references to the nation’s past (and present) and other traditions and memories, such as sporting events. The viewers can then identify with the common meanings that the discourse of the nation produces.

#### 4.2. Sybil and Polly — the Strong Caretakers

The women in the family of *Fawlty Towers* include Sybil and Polly. There are also the old ladies Miss Tibbs and Miss Gatsby, who are staying guests at the hotel such as the Major. I will not include their characters into the discussion, as they rarely appear in the episodes and only have minor roles in the series. I will therefore concentrate on Sybil and Polly as the main female characters. Sybil has been attached with stereotypically female characteristics, as she is often gossiping on the phone with her friend, filing her nails, reading fashion magazines or romance novels and eating chocolates. These qualities are also methods of comedy; her gossiping on the phone with her friend Audrey and Basil’s contempt towards Audrey and the continual phone conversations is humorous.

Sybil is represented as a working class woman and Basil often mockingly comments about the lack of her education or understanding of “higher arts”. For instance when Basil is listening to some classical music, Sybil comes into the hotel lobby and asks Basil to turn “that racket off”, to which Basil answers that it is “Brahm’s Third Racket”<sup>120</sup>, but turns it off anyway. This reveals Basil’s frustration towards his wife’s inability to appreciate higher art, as well as the power relations in their

---

<sup>119</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 67- 9.

<sup>120</sup> “A Touch of Class”, 9.

relationship (i.e. Sybil has the last say). Basil does not appreciate the novels Sybil reads, and when in one scene she is talking with the guests about her favourite author, Basil comes in and asks: “Who’s this then, dear? Proust? E.M. Forster?” When Sybil says that they are talking about Harold Robbins, Basil comments: “Oh, of course, yes. My wife likes Harold Robbins. After a hard day’s slaving under the hair-dryer she needs to unwind with a few aimless thrills- - [it is a] sort of pornographic muzak. Still, keeps my wife off the streets.”<sup>121</sup>. Basil’s contempt for the American writer, as well as his superior attitude towards his wife, is shown from the juxtaposition he makes with the different authors. The French and the British authors are considered as higher class and read by more intellectual people, such as Basil himself (as he seems to suggest), whereas the romantic thrills are merely some “muzak” that does not require any thinking.

Basil mentioning E.M. Foster, a British author, also enhances the English nationality, as well as makes a distinction between the nations; France and Britain can be considered as having a history of great authors, whereas America does not have the same kind of intellectual history. Basil also jokes about Sybil’s way of laughing, which sounds to him like “somebody machine-gunning a seal”. He warns one of the guests about Sybil’s sudden burst of laughter: “Please don’t alarm yourself. That’s only my wife laughing. I’m afraid her local finishing school was bombed.” When the guest looks surprised, Basil says “No, not really, just a thought”. This would also refer to Basil’s thoughts about Sybil as an uneducated drop-out. Basil, on the other hand, appears — or perhaps more appropriately — endeavours, to be of better class. He listens to classical music, reads classical novels and has learnt Spanish, even though only a little, which he

---

<sup>121</sup> “Waldorf Salad”, 231.

sometimes uses with Manuel. He also speaks some French occasionally to appear as educated and of higher class.

Even though Basil seems to not think of his wife very educated or intellectual, she is still shown as the one who ultimately decides how things run in the hotel. She is very domineering and Basil obeys her, usually motivated by fear, and if he does something Sybil disapproves of, he keeps it a secret from her. This is one of themes that often intertwine into the plot — Basil tries to prevent Sybil knowing about his secret or undertakings and while preventing it from happening the puzzle gets more confused and in the end everything is revealed. Sybil is then often the one who gives the orders, whereas Basil does the traditionally “masculine” things, such as serving the drinks, putting the moose-head on the wall, organizing renovation work and performing as the manager of the hotel.

Sybil could then be seen as the “caretaker” or “mother” of the hotel community, since she is strong and sensible, or at least more so than Basil. As Stuart Hall (1992) has argued, national identity has often been associated with masculinity, whereas women have been the “mothers of the sons”, as noted in the theoretical part. Similarly, both Sybil and Polly act as mothers in the family, without whom the hotel would be in chaos, or more so than it already is. Even though Polly does not manage the hotel, her rationality and help keeps the hotel running. This way the conventional roles have been reversed; usually the man is represented as a strong, rational figure, whereas the woman is hysterical, irrational and powerless. In *Fawlty Towers*, it is Basil who acts hysterically and irrationally, and Sybil and Polly who are level-headed and responsible. Naturally, unconventionality and reversing roles is part of the genre of comedy, in which case the series cannot be treated as highly unconventional and radical. The women characters are represented rather conventionally from today’s point of view, as

can be expected from a situation comedy written in the 1970s. As Mick Bowes similarly notes, sit-coms rarely challenge(d) traditional roles of men or women<sup>122</sup>. Nevertheless the series does question the traditional masculinity and this way attack the conventional notions of the “stiff upper lip” masculinity, even if the roles for women remain rather conventional.

Polly could be thought of as “the normal” one in the family of *Fawlty Towers*. She acts as a waitress in the hotel, but is like a member of the family. She often tries to help Basil in his indiscretions, especially when he is trying to hide them from Sybil. Therefore she could be seen as loyal to the family or the hotel. She appears as intelligent, hard working and responsible, and thus is rarely the butt of the joke. She is also sympathetic towards Manuel, who is often mocked. Polly and Manuel are like children of Sybil and Basil, who do not have their own children. Basil’s attitude to Polly is father-like: in one episode Polly arrives to the hotel with her boyfriend and as Basil sees the two kissing each other over the lobby’s desk, he comes to stand next to Polly, commenting loudly “Yes? A single for tonight, is it?”. They spring apart startled at Basil. Polly introduces her friend, but Basil acts rudely and does not even greet him. Polly’s friend leaves and Basil upbraids her for acting like she did and notes that the hotel is not “a massage parlour”, but a “nice, respectable, high-class” hotel. Polly is amused by the description of the hotel and tries to hide it. She is about to go off to continue her work, when Basil comments about her revealing top and tells her to change clothes as “[they have] abandoned the idea of topless afternoon teas”<sup>123</sup>.

In the scene Basil is acting as a father keeping a guard on her daughter. In the series the relationship between Polly and Basil is purely platonic, which supports the

---

<sup>122</sup> Bowes, 135. It should be noted that Bowes has made this observation over a decade ago, after which there has been progress in the way gender roles have been represented in situation comedies.

<sup>123</sup> “The Wedding Party”, 53.

idea of them as a father and a daughter, even though it is Polly who is the responsible one in the relationship. On the other hand, the relationship between Sybil and Basil is platonic as well, even though they are a married couple. Their relationship seems merely to be based on the promise and bond of marriage and the commitment they have towards the hotel. I will discuss the idea of sexuality later in this chapter, as it is one of the themes of producing laughter in relation to Basil's character. Polly could also be seen as standing for the newer generation of women; she is not like Sybil, but more rational and sensible. Her character could be seen as reflecting the upsurge of feminism, as it began in the 1960s and 1970s, thought of as the time of "sexual revolution".<sup>124</sup>

#### **4.3. Manuel — Cheap and Keen to Learn**

Manuel is the underdog in the hotel community. He is bullied by Basil and mocked for his poor English skills that result in many misunderstandings. Even if Manuel was not to be blamed, Basil tends to put the blame and release his aggression on Manuel. Manuel's different nationality (Spanish) is marked with his appearance and speech. He is a small man with dark hair and moustache, and he is often walking with a stoop. This seems to symbol his lower status in the hotel and also in the class system in England, as he is an apprentice and an immigrant. Much of the comedy in Manuel's character lies in the very physical appearance and in the way he speaks.

Manuel's difference is highlighted in many occasions: whenever he does something inappropriate or does not understand the orders Basil or Sybil give him, the situation is explained by the often occurring remark: "He's from Barcelona". This way Manuel is distinguished from others in the community and made an outsider. In the beginning episode, "A Touch of Class", Manuel and Basil are having a conversation

---

<sup>124</sup> See e.g. Cate Haste, *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain World War I to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Pimlico, 1994).

where language problems cause a lot of confusion. After their conversation is over, Sybil turns to Basil and says:

Sybil: "I don't know why you wanted to hire him, Basil."

Basil: "Because he's cheap and keen to learn, dear. And in this day and age such..."

Sybil: "But why did you say you could speak the language?"

Basil: "I learnt classical Spanish, not the strange dialect he seems to have picked up."

Sybil: "It'd be quicker to train a monkey."<sup>125</sup>

Basil has hired Manuel because he is cheap, which seems to apply to the social context of the 1970s. At that time many immigrants were coming to Britain, for instance from former colonies, and Manuel could be seen as representing the minority in the community, who did not speak English well and were cheap labour. The character of Manuel might as well have been played by a more "realistic" immigrant from the former colonies such as India or Pakistan, where a lot of "internal Others" arrived from at that time. However, a European has been chosen as a representative of the Other, since making mockery towards a Southern European (white, Western, male) is not considered racist or negative, but laughing at an immigrant from India for example would not have been appropriate at that time.

Manuel is contrasted to a monkey in the scene, as well as in another episode, and even his stooped walking style seems to highlight the analogy. He cannot even speak his own language properly, but speaks some "strange dialect". Of course this joke is directed towards Basil's pompous beliefs in his own Spanish skills. It also reveals the class-conscious attitude of Basil; his language skills are based on the "classical" Spanish, not the common everyday language. Nevertheless Manuel is treated as a pet that is "cheap and keen to learn". This analogy, of course, is a comical effect, but nevertheless it strengthens the idea of treating foreigners or Others as animal-like.

---

<sup>125</sup> "A Touch of Class", 4.

As Stuart Hall argues, people who are different from the majority are often represented through “sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes — good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive” and often they are both at the same time<sup>126</sup>. In *Fawlty Towers* Manuel is treated as primitive: he does not understand very well the directions he is given and needs guidance all the time. Basil is like a father to him, who punishes (often rather violently), but also guides. In “Basil the Rat” Manuel is acting depressed so that Basil would think that he has disposed of his pet rat, as Basil has told him to do. Basil does not understand Manuel’s melancholy and arrogantly comments to him: “We didn’t win the war by getting depressed, you know”. This highlights Basil’s attitude of the sense of superiority of the English (“winning wars”) and the contradiction to the Spanish Manuel. It also works to construct the community of the English (“we didn’t get depressed”) and distinguish it from Others, represented by Manuel. On the other hand, the viewer knows what the real situation is and therefore it is actually Basil again, and his pompousness, which is laughed at.

Because of the guidance Manuel receives from both Polly and Basil, he is not a complete “outsider”, but as part of the surrogate family of the hotel community. He is the “child” in the family; this, I believe, is one of the reasons why Manuel’s character is really sympathetic and has been very popular with the audience. The ambivalence resulting from treating him both as an outsider and not as one of us (and also as “a monkey”), and as part of the family, still remains and makes it difficult to find definitive meanings about his character. The character of Manuel is nevertheless vital in the series and in the construction of national identity. As discussed in the theoretical part, post-colonial theory (also taking from psychoanalytic theory) argues that constructing the Self requires an Other. In chapter five I will discuss the Others who, according to my

---

<sup>126</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other”, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: The Open University & Sage Publications, 1997) 229.

analysis, are composed of the visiting international guests. But in addition to the visiting Others, Manuel is an Other, who is nevertheless part of the community and family, which makes his role important and, admittedly, ambivalent.

As stated earlier, I argue that Manuel is an “internal Other”, who could actually stand for the increasing number of immigrants in the British society in the 1970s.<sup>127</sup> It could be argued that by laughing at him, Manuel — and at the same time the immigrant group he represents — is placed outside the community of the English. According to Jerry Palmer, joking about someone else’s stupidity eases the stress and anxiety one feels about his/her own performance<sup>128</sup>. During the joke stupidity, or any other quality that is not desired, belongs to someone else and our laughter acts as evidence of the alleged fact that we are not part of the stupidity. We project qualities that are not desired in our society onto Others, onto marginalized groups, so that joking about Others relieves the stress we feel about our own status.

Manuel does indeed possess qualities that are not desired in the English community; he is child-like, in other words not independent, lazy, small, and unmasculine. His position in the family is the lowest one: he is given the undemanding jobs and no responsibility. This way joking about him and laughing at him is made fairly easy. On the other hand, he or his “stupidity” is not laughed at all the time; in many cases it is Basil and his reactions to Manuel that are the butt of the jokes. Basil’s violence towards Manuel is also shown humorously. However, violence is not “real” in the series. In other words, it is a method of comedy and not meant to be taken seriously. All in all, Manuel’s character could be seen as a tender way of making space for the

---

<sup>127</sup> Today the ethnic minorities, especially the Asian-British are far more openly represented in the media, and ethnicity and the problems between the Asians and the English have been joked about in television comedies, such as *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC2 1998), where the Asian-British of the second generation joke about the traditional Asian habits and customs, or about English traditions.

<sup>128</sup> Palmer 1994, 62.

minority group in the 1970s society. As Jeffrey Richards notes, racial minorities were absent in the 1960s from British cinema<sup>129</sup>, which surely applies to some extent to the 1970s as well. Manuel as a Spaniard can then be considered only as a symbolical character and a comfortable choice to representing minority groups.

#### 4.4. English Characteristics and Basil as the English Gentleman

All nationalities have certain characteristics and features that belong to the national character. National character, however, is not the same as national identity, as Gerald Newman notes. According to Newman, national character can be thought of as an image of the distinctive characteristics that are assumed to belong to the national community, but national identity is much more complex and involves historic, psychological and educational dimensions.<sup>130</sup> As already discussed in the previous chapter, national characteristics are formed by history, myths and memories, and also by and in relation to different institutions, such as the public school, the Church and, especially today, the mass media. As Jeffrey Richards argues, “[p]opular culture has created an expectation of certain characteristics and attitudes”. Richards notes that in popular culture the English have been portrayed as “the inventors of good sportsmanship, as the upholders of the tradition of playing the game, being a sporting loser, not letting the side down, keeping a stiff upper lip, doing the decent thing”<sup>131</sup>. This can be seen in the characters in *Fawlty Towers* as well. Popular culture is a creating force of the images of different nationalities today and the picture of the English we receive from works of popular culture draws its essence from history.

---

<sup>129</sup> Richards, 155.

<sup>130</sup> Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740-1830* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1987) 123.

<sup>131</sup> Richards, 4.

To be brief, Newman traces the formation of the national character to the eighteenth century when one of the defining forces was literature, which celebrated the national virtues. Newman notes that actually the shared values of the nation were selected by writers, whose effort was to find a national soul and values by which everyone, as Newman argues, “and preeminently themselves, may attain identity, hence autonomy, freedom and power”.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, the values that came to represent the whole nation’s character were selected only by few representatives of a nation, which also supports Hall’s argumentation (1992) of nation as imaginary and ideologically constructed. The virtue of “sincerity”, which was a national ideal, derives from the eighteenth century from Shakespeare and Chaucer, as Newman notes. Sincerity came to stand for many things, such as innocence, honesty, frankness and most of all, commitment to duty. Commitment to duty meant that general good was more important than the self.<sup>133</sup> As discussed earlier, the Major’s character could be seen as reflecting this period’s ideal, as he is very frank and honest. For instance, when Basil and the Major are talking about Sybil, the Major says: “she is a fine woman, Mrs Fawltly”. Basil answers that he does not think so, and the Major answers that actually he does not either. The Major complementing on Basil’s wife reflects the idea of a good code of conduct and being polite, and when the Major states what he really thinks of her, it reflects the idea of honesty. Here honesty comes before being polite, which breaks the rules of good conduct and thus produces laughter.

Jeffrey Richards notes that in the nineteenth century two powerful ideologies completed the definition of the national character. These were Evangelical Protestantism and the idea of chivalry. Protestantism imposed for instance a puritanical

---

<sup>132</sup> Newman, 125- 7. By autonomy and freedom Newman is referring to the cultural domination of France, to which a search for a truly English national identity was a counter-reaction.

<sup>133</sup> Newman, 127-133.

code of sexual conduct as well as “ideas of duty, service and conscience, thrift, sobriety and personal restraint”<sup>134</sup>. Chivalry, on the other hand, promoted the virtues of the gentleman, such as courtesy, bravery, modesty and sense of responsibility. Richards also adds the sense of humour and the sense of English superiority to the characteristics of the English. All these characteristics are prevalent even today in popular culture, and in *Fawlty Towers*, especially in Basil’s character.

Much of the praise that *Fawlty Towers* has received can be directed towards Basil, or the actor John Cleese, who is the quirky manager of the hotel. When *Fawlty Towers* was chosen the best television comedy series, British Film Institute described the series as: “a brilliantly written, savage farce following the manic misadventures of a pompous, xenophobic, henpecked Torquay hotelier”<sup>135</sup>. These adjectives describe the character of Basil accurately. He is not afraid to show his class-consciousness or even contempt for the lower class visitors, who he treats rather arrogantly. Basil’s arrogant behaviour also represents the sense of superiority, which the English are famous for. The English “superiority” is referred to for instance in “The Wedding Party” when Basil has to face that he has made a mistake and has to tell it to the guests. He is infuriated and shouts at Sybil (who has suggested that Basil should apologise to the guests): “Oh brilliant. Is that what made Britain great? ‘I’m so sorry I made a mistake.’ What have you got for a brain – a spongecake?”<sup>136</sup> Despite his protest Basil has to apply to Sybil’s wishes, which is also a reference to the diminishing greatness of Britain — she too had to face and admit the mistakes, even though mistakes did not belong to the “great” (or Great) Britain as suggested. Basil’s sense of superiority and pompousness indeed

---

<sup>134</sup> Richards, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Dick Fiddy, “Fawlty Towers”, *British Film Institute*. 6 March 2005.  
<<http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tv/100/list/prog.php3?id=1>>.

<sup>136</sup> “The Wedding Party”, 71.

diminish when Sybil orders him to write the day's menu or put the moose head on the wall, or any other tasks she can think of. Geoffrey Gorer notes that marriages in the 1950s, where the husband was henpecked, were not valued and were even held in contempt.<sup>137</sup> Basil's "henpeckedness" then reflects society's attitudes and is a source for comedy: the traditionally authoritative husband's power and masculinity are diminished, which turns hierarchies upside down and produces laughter. Especially the contradiction between Basil's pompousness and his "fear" of Sybil is humorous. In addition, there are characteristics in Basil that are very familiar to the English national character discussed above. All those characteristics are prevalent in Basil's character or some other way in the series. These characteristics are also under constant negotiation in the series, as I will aim to point out.

First of all, decency, courtesy, modesty, purity and good manners belong to the idea of the English gentleman. These qualities are taken to extremes in Basil's character. His behaviour can be very polite and civil, but he can also be extremely blunt and rude towards the visitors, which happens more often. Basil's cantankerousness reverses the ideas of service and personal restraint that Protestantism promoted. As Sybil says irritated of his husband's behaviour: "You never get it right, do you. You're either crawling all over them licking their boots, or spitting poison at them like some Bensedrine puff-adder"<sup>138</sup>. Basil's politeness depends indeed on the visitors and on what he can gain from being polite — for instance in "A Touch of Class" Basil wants to "build up a higher class of clientele - - and turn away some of the riff-raff"<sup>139</sup>. When a guest asks for a room for the night, Basil asks irritated whether he has booked. The

---

<sup>137</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (1955), as quoted in Cate Haste, *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain World War I to the Present* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Pimlico, 1994) 147.

<sup>138</sup> "The Psychiatrist", 195.

<sup>139</sup> "A Touch of Class", 7.

guest has not, so he asks whether they are full, to which Basil's uptight and loud answer is: "Oh, we're not full...we're not **full**...of course we're not **full**!!" Basil gives the guest a register form to fill in and asks him (a few times) to put both of his names there. The guest answers that he only uses one name. Basil asks angrily whether he has a first name, to which the guest answers that as he is Lord Melbury, he only signs himself 'Melbury'. Basil is quiet for a while and after the silence he speaks with a completely different tone: "I'm **so** sorry to have kept you waiting, your lordship... **I do** apologize, **please** forgive me. Now, was there something, is there something, anything, I can do for you? Anything at all?"

Basil's change of tone reflects the class-conscious attitude that Basil has, and of which the English are famous for. It also makes a mockery of the gentlemanliness, good manners and politeness that belong (or used to belong) to the English character. The episode "Touch of Class" does indeed address the class-consciousness of the English character sarcastically. Basil treats other guests rudely while applauding his "lordship's" greatness. In the end, however, the "Lord" is revealed to be a con man. In the end scene there are two real aristocratic guests coming to the hotel, but as Basil has just been told of Melbury's act, he scares Sir Richard and Lady Morris away with his violent and outrageous behaviour. When Basil realizes that his upper-class customers are leaving, he tries to convince them to stay. When they ignore him and drive away, Basil shouts after them: "You snobs! You stupid...stuck-up...toffee-nosed...half-witted...upper-class piles of...pus!!"<sup>140</sup>, and walks back into the hotel. The end scene shows the frustration of Basil, who, despite his eager attempts, cannot climb up the social ladder towards the upper-class community. Basil's mocking words could be seen as reflecting the attitude of the lower classes towards the upper class and the class

---

<sup>140</sup> "A Touch of Class", 23.

structure in society in general. Humour functions as a way to “let the steam out” so to speak. The viewers can identify with the feelings Basil is feeling, and mocking the upper class in the end can be seen as refreshing.

Jeffrey Richards notes that stoicism, humour and dedication to duty belong to the characteristics of the British national character in films made around the time of World War Two<sup>141</sup>. Especially two qualities stand out from the wartime films, as Richards notes: sense of humour and stoicism. Richards argues that sense of humour is represented as a “secret weapon: it is the essential quality which separates a civilized society from an uncivilized one”. Stoicism, on the other hand, is an admirable quality of the national character that stands for the (British) ideas of understatement, reserve and stiff upper lip.<sup>142</sup> These characteristics are highly prevalent in the series. Especially Basil represents and at the same time reverses the “stoicism” of the English character. He is very reserved, which his physical appearance highlights. He is tall, slim, wears suits and walks quite stiffly. He does not talk about feelings. The relationship between him and Sybil appears to be asexual. When Sybil hears Basil singing happily, she, amazed, says to Basil that he looks very jolly and adds, as a joke, that she thought maybe he was in love. Basil answers sarcastically “Only with you, light of my life”<sup>143</sup>. Even though the words are emotional, his behaviour is anything but emotional and affectionate. Sybil seems to think that love is impossible for Basil, and Basil only repeats the phrase that conveys what is supposed to belong to the relationship of a married couple. Their marriage could be seen as a humorous and ironical representation of a post-war attitude to marriage, according to which marriage is not about happiness,

---

<sup>141</sup> Richards, 85.

<sup>142</sup> Richards, 87.

<sup>143</sup> “Communication problems”, 171.

but about stability and both performing their respective duties, as Geoffrey Gorer argues based on his 1950s survey.<sup>144</sup>

On the other hand, Basil cannot hide his feelings of anger or frustration, which he often directs towards others — either shouting at the guests, hitting Manuel or mocking Sybil. He can also be seen as modifying the “stiff upper lip” of the English with his ravings and impoliteness. His behaviour and attacks on the guests are quite the opposite of the principle of understatement, which is the essence of “stiff upper lip”. Nor do they belong to the code of conduct of a gentleman, which Basil otherwise pursues to be. His attack on his guests can be seen for instance in the example at the very beginning of this thesis, where he shouts at them and even compares them to Nazis, as they are “layabouts with nothing better to do than to cause trouble”.

The characteristics of the English character are then both apparent and reversed in Basil. Also the secret weapon of the sense of humour is apparent for instance in the episode “The Germans”, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Also in “Basil the Rat” Basil refers to the English sense of humour, when he has just been rude to a guest whom he finds out to be a Health Inspector that has arrived to check the health standards in the hotel. Basil trivialises his jokes by saying: “Hope you didn’t mind my little joke just now. Thank God we English can laugh at each other, eh?”<sup>145</sup>. This remark, with the words “we English”, announces the sense of community and nation, as well as the suggested ability of the English to be self-ironical. This is also ironical in the sense that Basil himself is not able to laugh at himself, but is very serious and easily hurt, if he is being laughed at, which indeed is often a subject of laughter for the viewer. Naturally, the English sense of humour occupies the whole series in the meta-narrative

---

<sup>144</sup> Gorer (1955), as quoted in Haste 1994, 147.

<sup>145</sup> “Basil the Rat”, 308.

level too. The series could be seen as the secret weapon of the English for which they are proud of, as the series has claimed publicity and recognition abroad as well.<sup>146</sup>

Basil seems to reflect the atmosphere of the time. Richards argues that since the World War Two “all elements that gave birth to British identity have eroded: The Empire has gone, taking with it the sense of duty, service and chivalry it inspired and leaving behind only the racism it also engendered - -”<sup>147</sup>. This was already reflected in the New Wave Cinema in the 1960s, which was “sexually liberated, politically radical and socially committed” as Richards notes<sup>148</sup>. Also the *Monty Python* group, which John Cleese (who plays Basil) was part of, reflected the changes in society and in the national identity. Mikko Lehtonen has analysed the representation of masculinity in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC 1, 1969 –1974) and argues that the *Monty Python* group succeeds in unravelling the meanings of conventional British masculinity with their grotesque humour. Humour, then, can put the existing order and conventions into a state of flux and possibly even function subversively, in other words, work against the existing order.<sup>149</sup> Basil’s character could be seen as functioning in a similar way. His behaviour reverses the traditional characteristics and makes them the subject of laughter. For instance the puritanical code of sexuality is one of the main subjects of laughter in the series, as will be discussed.

One of the characters I have not yet contemplated at all is Terry (Brian Hall), who is the cook in the hotel restaurant. He only appears in some of the episodes in the second series playing a minor part. Even though his role is small, he is nevertheless

---

<sup>146</sup> According to a poll conducted by BBC Worldwide, *Fawlty Towers* was the best BBC situation comedy voted by foreign viewers. See “Fawlty Towers voted top sitcom”, *BBC News*, 10 Oct. 2004. 6 March 2005. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/tv\\_and\\_radio/3730650.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/tv_and_radio/3730650.stm)>.

<sup>147</sup> Richards, 25.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>149</sup> Mikko Lehtonen, *Pikku jättiläisiä: maskuliinisuuden kulttuurinen rakentuminen* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1995), 146- 178.

bonded to the “surrogate family” by allegiance and obligation. For instance in “Basil the Rat” Terry helps Basil and the others to clean everything in the kitchen and dispose of the rat running freely in the hotel, because the Health Inspector is arriving to the hotel to check whether the hotel and the kitchen adhere to the health regulations. They have already received warnings and the hotel is under the threat of being closed down. Therefore, Terry together with everyone else in the family works hard to keep the community together. The character of Terry is interesting also in the sense that it represents the class aspect of the nation, together with the character of Manuel. His standard of education is distinguished from Basil’s for instance in a scene where Basil comes to the kitchen singing and asks Terry if he likes *Cavalleria Rusticana*<sup>150</sup>. Terry seems to think it is a drink and answers: “I never had it, Mr Fawlty”. Basil states “Never mind”, and continues singing.<sup>151</sup> This highlights the class distinction between the two, as well as reveals Basil’s belittlement of Terry’s knowledge and education, as he does not even bother to explain what he meant. Terry’s working class status is then constructed with references to education, as well as the status in the working community (being a cook). Terry does not appear to be a very good cook either, as he comments: “What the eye doesn’t see the chef gets away with”, when a steak has been to a bin and is still served to the guests. Also his strong cockney accent marks his social status, and it is different from Basil’s way of speaking. Nevertheless he is vital to the community, as he himself reaffirms, when he encourages Polly to ask for her salary from Basil: “Well, **ask** him. I mean, me and you practically run the bleeding place for ‘em.”<sup>152</sup>. This could be argued to symbol the English society; the middle or the upper class impose the rules on others, when in fact it is the working class who makes things

---

<sup>150</sup> An opera by Pietro Mascagni.

<sup>151</sup> “Communication problems”, 171.

<sup>152</sup> “The Anniversary”, 279.

run, but who have often remained invisible or merely played minor roles on the background, like Terry in the series.<sup>153</sup> However, the social situation was changing at the time of *Fawlty Towers*. Arthur Marwick argues that between the late 1950s and late 1970s the working class became more visible and assertive than ever before, even though the class structure remained in society. This was also noticeable in status markers: as working class manners and accent were held in the limelight, soon the “plummy Oxford accent” was replaced by “posh cockney”.<sup>154</sup> This social situation is reflected also in the series as the class aspect is openly referred to at many occasions. The cockney accent is used to mark the class and especially it seems to raise Basil’s contempt towards the working class visitors (e.g. Mr Johnson, as will be discussed). I have now discussed all the characters that could be seen as representing the family of the nation. Next, I will turn to discuss sexuality in the series by first concentrating on the background of the English notions of sexuality.

#### 4.5. Sexuality Shaping Nationality

Decency, purity, restraining emotions as well as the puritanical code of sexual conduct have been modifying the national identity of the English. Since the Victorian age, the English have been thought of as reserved, and sexuality has not been openly discussed. Since the 1960s, which was a time of sexual liberation in the Western world, the attitude has changed. However, the history of Puritanism and the Victorian values can still be seen in the English character represented in popular culture and they are also prevalent in *Fawlty Towers*.

---

<sup>153</sup> For a different kind of discussion about the historical aspect of the working class, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Aylesbury: Victor Gollancz, 1963), where Thompson treats the working class as active subjects defining their own history, and not as passive victims, as historians have traditionally viewed the part of society.

<sup>154</sup> Marwick 1991, 69.

Morality, sexuality, gender, class and nation are all intertwined and were discussed and modified in the Victorian age in the nineteenth century. As Lynda Nead argues, with the emergence of sexology at the end of the nineteenth century, the Victorian age “began to be portrayed as an era of sexual repression”<sup>155</sup>. She has analysed the representations of women and the myths of sexuality, which can be seen in works of art painted during the Victorian period. She argues that defining sexuality is not only connected with gender, but also with class and nation. Following Michel Foucault’s argumentation in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Nead contends that defining the norms of sexual and moral behaviour were highly important in the creation of class hegemony. In the nineteenth-century England, when industry and a dominant middle class were growing, there was a social need for a coherent and distinct class identity. The middle class consisted of various occupational groups and levels of income, wherefore a class identity, which would unify the middle class and distinguish itself from other social and economic classes, was important. Establishing shared notions of morality and respectability, which modified gender roles as well, attained class coherence.<sup>156</sup> Therefore, morality, sexuality and gender were key issues in determining the identity of the middle class, which in result affected the notion of national identity, as it has often been represented by middle-class values and (assumed) characteristics.

Sexuality was also an important issue in defining the gender roles of the class identity. As Lynda Nead notes, sexual activity in men was regarded as a sign of masculinity while in women it was condemned as “a sign of deviant or pathological behaviour”. Nead continues that the notion of female chastity was “most rigorously

---

<sup>155</sup> Nead, Lynda, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 3.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*, 4-5.

applied within the middle classes and was an important aspect of bourgeois ideologies of home and marriage".<sup>157</sup> Female chastity is represented by Sybil and Polly, who are rarely shown as sexually active, and the contrast between e.g. French woman's sexuality and English woman's chastity is quite apparent (as will be discussed later). The idea of sexual activity in men as a sign of masculinity is notable in Basil's character, who seems to be lacking of any sexual activity. Having thus lost his 'masculinity', he is disempowered in the series. However, as if to reclaim his masculinity, he often refers to his aching leg that was injured in the war, as he says<sup>158</sup>. When Basil boasts to some guests that he has killed many men at the Korean war, Sybil dismisses his attempt to boost his masculinity by stating that they were killed by Basil poisoning their food, as he served in the catering corps<sup>159</sup>. This way his masculinity is reduced to traditionally feminine tasks and space: serving and the kitchen. Not only does he lack the sexual signs of masculinity, he also lacks the power to control the hotel, or make decisions, which Sybil makes for him. He even lacks the ability to control his feelings, his rage and anger, which are regarded as part of the "respectability" of the national character.

Nead discusses the notion of "respectability", which determined the middle-class identity. She argues that it meant different things for women and men; for women, it was defined in relation to their domestic situation (whether being a mother, a daughter, a wife, or none of them) and their sexual respectability. Nead does not continue what it meant for men, but it could be argued that for men "respectability" was defined in relation to their occupational and class status. Also the idea of the 'English Gentleman' was essential in the Victorian era, and the characteristics of the gentleman

---

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>158</sup> As an interesting interpretation it could be argued that Basil's leg ache could also be a reference to the symbolism of losing one's leg associated with castration.

<sup>159</sup> "The Wedding Party", 56.

(purity, code of conduct, honesty, responsibility) were related to the class aspect and to the gender role. As George B. Landow comments, “the Victorian emphasis upon the gentleman served as an effective means of retaining upper-class political power while keeping down the middle class.”<sup>160</sup> This way class boundaries were enforced by rules of behaviour as well as imposing ideal characteristics. As Nead similarly continues, a set of practices and representations that were “defined appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance - - worked to regulate both gender and class identities”<sup>161</sup>.

As discussed, the idea of restraint and self-control derive from the Victorian age and they are also affected by Christian values. Different institutions such as home, marriage, nation and public school were highly respected and the national ideal characteristics were modified in relation to the dominant class in society. Sexuality, then, is an important part of national identity, and understanding the history of the English gives an insight into the analysis of *Fawlty Towers* and the instances of sexual references in the series. In “The Wedding Party” a couple, who is engaged, arrives to the hotel giggling, cuddling and teasing each other. They want to book a double room, with a double bed. They introduce themselves as Mr and Mrs Bruce. Basil serves them morosely as usual, and says that they only have one double bed. The couple insists on having that, so Basil books the room. The lady sees a letter in the letter rack, which has her name on it. She points it to Basil. The letter is for Jean Wilson, and Basil realizes that they have lied about their names and marital status and asks:

Basil: Now what is going on here? You’re not married, is that it?... Well, I cant’t give you a double room, then.

Alan: Oh, look...

---

<sup>160</sup> George P. Landow, “The Political Function of the Gentleman”. *The Victorian Web*. 6 March 2005. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/gentleman2.html>>.

<sup>161</sup> Nead, 28.

Basil: It's against the law.

Alan: What law?

Basil: The law of England. Nothing to do with me.

Alan: Nothing to do with you?!

Basil: Nothing at all. I can give you two singles if you like... um...<sup>162</sup>

Sybil comes in and asks the couple if there is a problem. Basil whispers to Sybil that the couple is not married, so as to try to prevent Sybil from giving a room for them. Sybil, ignoring Basil, books a double room for them without hesitating. Here Basil's attitude reflects the idea of marriage as a sacred commitment and sexuality as part of marriage only. He even patriotically refers to the "law of England" trying to distance himself from the hotel's unwritten rules. Basil also notes in another episode that guests are not allowed to bring any "guests of opposite sex" into their rooms after ten o'clock in the evening. The hotel rules as well as Basil's behaviour reflect the morality in Victorian England, when purity and restraint from sexuality before marriage were valued and expected. Basil thus reflects the old puritanical attitude towards sexuality, as he tries to act "civil" and also advise and lead others to the same behaviour. Cate Haste notes that in the 1970s a new ethic of 'sexual pleasure' emerged, which promoted the naturalness of sex, and the right to enjoy sex.<sup>163</sup> The couple's behaviour reflects the social atmosphere of the time, but Basil's behaviour is then like a relic from the past that is laughed at. Also the class aspect is relevant in these instances, where Basil disapproves of any references to sex. Self-control and restraint were considered as possible for the middle class, but not for the working classes, whose "animal lusts" were difficult to control, as claimed in a medical journal in 1869. At that time denial from sexuality was recommended for birth control and medical reasons, so that sexuality and the class identity were attached even to medical issues.<sup>164</sup> Keeping these historical aspects in

---

<sup>162</sup> "The Wedding Party", 55.

<sup>163</sup> Haste, 222.

<sup>164</sup> See Nead, 21-2.

mind, it could then be argued that as Basil desires to have more upper-class guests in the hotel, he wishes to adhere to the supposedly upper-class values and “respectability”, and turn away any “riff-raff” (Basil’s words), who do not respect old norms and values, such as chastity.

Basil’s fear towards sexuality and adherence to the old values can be noted in many scenes and episodes. His reactions to insinuations about sexuality are often the butt of the joke. In many occasions they also reveal Basil’s thoughts, and not the thoughts of others, like in the following scene of the episode “The Psychiatrist”, where a psychiatrist is staying in the hotel. When Basil realizes that the guest is a psychiatrist, he gets very nervous and advises Sybil not to tell him any personal issues. He thinks they just “stick their noses into people’s private parts” and that all is connected with sex. Sybil and the guests have been talking about holidays, when Basil goes to serve the guests. Basil brings the bill to the couple’s table and Doctor Abbott (the psychiatrist) signs it and asks:

Dr Abbott: Yes. We were just speculating how people in your profession arrange their holidays. How often can you get away? (*but Basil does not hear this; he arrives back at the table just before Dr Abbot glances up and asks*) How often do you manage it?

Basil: I beg your pardon?

Dr Abbott: How often you and your wife manage it? (*a fairly long pause as various thoughts go through Basil’s head*)... You don’t mind my asking?

Basil: Not at all, not at all...about average, since you ask.

Dr Abbott: Average?

Basil: Uh huh.

Dr Abbott: What would be average?

Basil: Well, you tell me, ha ha ha.

Dr Abbott: Well, couple of times a year?

Basil: What?

Dr Abbott: Once a year?

Dr Abbott: Well, it must be difficult...my wife didn’t see how you could manage it at all...you know...

Basil: Well, as you’ve asked...two or three times a week actually (*the Abbotts stare*)

Dr Abbott: A week.

Basil: Yes. Pretty normal, isn't it? We're quite normal down here in Torquay, you know.<sup>165</sup>

In this scene it is Basil's imagination that shows his attitude towards sex. Basil is terrified of Doctor Abbott's questions and in order to prove his masculinity, he states that they do have normal sexual life. Basil realizes after the conversation that he has been mistaken and tells the Abbots that he thought they were talking about walks, not holidays, as they actually were. Nevertheless the scene is hilarious and Basil's behaviour and misguided thoughts about the psychiatrist's aims tie in the plot to disarray, as usual. Even Basil's pompous beliefs of "managing it" two or three times a week shows that he feels the need to exaggerate and fend his manliness and "normality", despite the fact that the relationship between Sybil and Basil seems highly asexual, as already discussed.

Basil's asexuality could be seen symbolically also in his eating habits. Eating and sexuality have often been connected together, as eating has been seen as symbolizing sexuality<sup>166</sup>. Basil hardly eats at all. When he tries to eat, he is often distracted by Sybil, who orders him to do something else. In one episode Sybil simply forbids him to eat and takes food out of his hand, as she claims it is not healthy for him. This could be interpreted as if sexuality was not allowed for Basil even if he desired to. His hidden desires then make him anxious and nervous about sexuality, and enforce him to promote morality and purity.

The contrast to the old Victorian values Basil represents to new, more liberal sexuality<sup>167</sup> is made in the episode "The Psychiatrist", where a single man, Mr Johnson is staying at the hotel to Basil's distress. He is wearing a low-cut shirt, which reveals his

---

<sup>165</sup> "The Psychiatrist", 199.

<sup>166</sup> See e.g. Nyman, 160.

<sup>167</sup> See the discussion earlier of the changing attitude towards sexuality, the "sexual revolution".

tanned and hairy chest, and a pair of tight trousers. Sybil seems to enjoy talking to Mr Johnson and she flirts with him while Basil is listening to their conversation with a grumpy face. Basil comments that Mr Johnson looks like a monkey, where Sybil answers that she thinks Mr Johnson is very attractive, easy, amusing and charming. Basil merely wonders why he is wearing so many medals around his neck, and comments that he “must be the bravest orang-utang in Britain”. Sybil says that the medals have symbolic meaning, and one of them is a fertility symbol. This highlights the sexuality and masculinity of Mr Johnson, which also seems to interest Sybil. Sybil does not understand Basil’s behaviour and asks why “the Mediterranean type antagonizes [Basil] so”, and if it is because women find them attractive. Sybil continues:

Sybil: You seem to think that we girls should be aroused by people like Gladstone and Earl Haig and Baden-Powell...don’t you.

Basil: Well, at least they had a certain dignity. It’s hard to imagine Earl Haig wandering round with his shirt open to the waist covered with identity bracelets.

Sybil: Well, he didn’t mind the medals, did he. The military decorations.

Basil: That’s not the point.

Sybil: I suppose the reason you confuse them with monkeys is that monkeys have fun – they know how to enjoy themselves. That’s what makes them sexy, I suppose.<sup>168</sup>

Interestingly, it is not an “English type”, but a “Mediterranean type” that amusing and attractive Mr Johnson represents. This reveals the attitude towards the conventional English man, of which the political figures such as William Gladstone and Earl Haig stand as timeworn examples. As well as illustrating a sturdy, dignified old man who has fought or otherwise represented his country and the nation and therefore been an example of the English, mentioning these names in opposition to the “Mediterranean type”, Mr Johnson, seems to highlight the distinction between the two different

---

<sup>168</sup> “The Psychiatrist”, 191.

examples of masculinity.<sup>169</sup> Mr Johnson represents the younger generation that is easy-going, liberal, sexual and “fun”, as Sybil comments. However, these characteristics are not necessarily seen as “English”, as the term “Mediterranean” suggests. Nevertheless, I would argue that the character of Mr Johnson does represent change in the national identity. It is interesting that Basil calls Mr Johnson’s bracelets as “identity bracelets”; it could be argued that the young generation needs kitsch “identity bracelets” to locate themselves in the world, whereas before the nation provided the medals that helped the citizens to identify themselves within the nation and as part of the community.

Basil seems to detest Mr Johnson and the changes in society that he represents — youth have begun to gain power, sexual attitudes have changed and freedom and openness of the individual are highlighted. As Arthur Marwick notes, these changes were a reaction against the values of the old generation.<sup>170</sup> Basil’s contempt could also derive from the social change in the class structure: the upper class kept its high status, but the middle class was increasing in size and was suffering from high taxation. At the same time the working class had better conditions and also enjoyed higher prestige than ever.<sup>171</sup> In addition, the fertility symbol Mr Johnson is wearing could be seen as drawing a distinction between him as a fertile young man with new values and Basil representing the outdated and infertile values of his age, or even the infertility of Basil himself (see the reference above to his aching leg).

In another scene there is a couple that asks Basil for a guide of Torquay. Mr Johnson gives his guide (named *What’s on in Torquay*) to the couple and says: “Yes,

---

<sup>169</sup> In addition, mentioning Baden-Powell, the founder of the World Scout Movement, here, is an interesting juxtaposition between the representative of a traditional masculine institution (teaching young Boy Scouts to be men) and the representative of new masculinity, which is not necessary as tied into masculine institutions as before.

<sup>170</sup> Marwick 1991, 69.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*, 16.

it's one of the world's shortest books.”. Everyone laughs except Basil, who seems aggravated. Mr Johnson ignores Basil and continues: “...like ‘The Wit of Margaret Thatcher’ or ‘Great English Lovers’.”. Basil seems infuriated but does not say anything when everyone else laughs at the joke. Basil is insulted by Mr Johnson’s joking, as if it was directed towards him. This proves that Basil is not ready for change, as joking about his home town, political figures or the Englishman’s notoriously quiet sexual life is not something that amuses him. On the other hand, Basil’s reaction is a method of comedy as well, as should not be forgotten. His reactions and attitudes are exaggerated intentionally, which is part of the humour in the series.

Humour is vital here, as irony offers a way to discuss also the negative aspects of characteristics of the nation and at the same time offer alternative meanings. As discussed here, Basil as a caricature of the English character offers a humorous representation of the English character, which draws its essence from history. The characteristics belonging to Basil are well-known for most (English) viewers and laughing at them may aid in reforming a new kind of a national identity, but at the same time enforce the sense of community within the English, as they are laughing together at the characteristics that are supposedly “ours” (or “theirs”) as well as constructing representations of shared values, traditions and historical events or figures. As argued earlier, humour and laughter are social phenomena and they can enforce the sense of community. The power of media in constructing national identity is also advocated by Richards. He notes that the famous post-war film actors John Mills and Anna Neagle were recognised of their roles in incarnating an “acceptable and popular image of

Englishness”, because they were like role models for the nation and obtained the characteristics that the people should aspire for<sup>172</sup>.

In a similar fashion *Fawlty Towers* discusses the national character, but rather than representing role models for the citizens, the series also works to deconstruct the image of the conventional Englishman or -woman with laughter. Through repeating traditional characteristics, reversing and exaggerating them, the series offers vacancies for different interpretations and meanings. Other nationalities form an important part of locating oneself in one’s own national discourse. In *Fawlty Towers* other nationalities consist mainly of Europeans, and especially the Germans and the French are well presented. When Basil introduces the German guests to the hotel, he states: “[m]ay I say how pleased we are to have some Europeans here now that we are on the Continent.”<sup>173</sup>. The welcoming words refer to the social situation of the time, namely that the English are beginning to consider themselves as *Europeans* as well. They are moving away from their insistence on insularity and beginning to open their doors for European countries. However, there is an underlying attitude in Basil’s words, which, together with Basil’s behaviour (as will be discussed), reveals that perhaps the Continent is not as near as seems to be suggested. In the next chapter I will look at the different representations of other nationalities, mainly Europeans and their function as Others.

---

<sup>172</sup> Richards, 132.

<sup>173</sup> “The Germans”, 154.

## 5. Other Nationalities in *Fawlty Towers*

Nationality is one of the most common themes in jokes and usually the jokes about nationalities are based on certain, well-known characteristics that are assumed to belong to the nation's inhabitants. Jokes often divide "us" from "them", for instance Finnish people have an abundance of jokes about the Swedish or the Russian. This way joking defines the boundaries of different groups or nations and enforces the sense of community within the group. The genre of humour, as popular culture in general, often uses stereotypes to represent different nationalities. Stereotypes offer an easy and a clear-cut way to representing a group; a representation of a certain nationality is made humorous by merely simplifying and highlighting certain characteristics and modifying the speech and look of a person. Stereotypes are often a way to laugh at ethnic or other minority groups, wherefore the butt of the joke is often someone else's stupidity<sup>174</sup>. For instance Manuel's poor skills in English and the misunderstandings it causes amuse the audience. Stereotypes have often been analysed critically and many theorists (e.g. Stuart Hall 1997, Richard Dyer 1995) have been concerned about the negative effects they have on people's attitudes towards for instance different ethnic groups. When discussing stereotypes the question of power becomes an important issue: who has the power to define the qualities that are chosen for the stereotype? Who laughs and who is being laughed at?

Even though I intend to ponder upon the questions of power in this chapter as well, I will concentrate on the ways in which other nationalities are being constructed in *Fawlty Towers* and on the function of stereotypes in regards to nationality. What kinds of stereotypes are there in the series? How is Englishness constructed in opposition

---

<sup>174</sup> see e.g. Herkman 2000, 381.

towards other nationalities? Who is being laughed at; others or the English, or perhaps both, and does it really matter?

### 5.1. The Function of Stereotypes

Types have been used for centuries, from the early theatre shows to today's works of popular (and high) culture. Using types is not necessarily a negative way to represent people or things, and this is where they distinguish from stereotypes. Using types is natural, since as Richard Dyer argues, wider categories help us to make sense of different things.<sup>175</sup> For instance we have a general idea of what a *shoe* is like, but there can be various kinds of shoes depending on weather, occasion, style etc. Similarly, we tend to group people together and compose different *types*, which tell us something about the person, but not all. According to Richard Dyer's more recent thoughts, *types* are a broader category of fictional characters and they are defined by their aesthetic function, whereas *stereotypes* are a subcategory of types and are defined by their social function.<sup>176</sup> Richard Dyer has analysed stereotypes of alcoholism based on Walter Lippman's ideas of stereotypes. These ideas offer a starting point for looking at stereotypes and therefore I think are relevant here as well. According to Walter Lippman, stereotypes can be thought of as "(i) an ordering process, (ii) a 'short cut', (iii) referring to 'the world', and (iv) expressing 'our' values and beliefs"<sup>177</sup>. As such, they can be thought of as a way to understand the world, to make sense of it by ordering different little pieces of information into more simplified categories. Lippman's ideas are rather positive, but Dyer argues that stereotypes are far more problematic. First of

---

<sup>175</sup> Richard Dyer (ed.) *Gays and Film* 1977, as cited in Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other", *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: The Open University & Sage Publications, 1997) 257.

<sup>176</sup> Richard Dyer, "The Role of Stereotypes", *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, ed. Richard Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.

<sup>177</sup> Dyer 1995, 11.

all, the important question to ask is: who defines the stereotypes, what interests do they serve?<sup>178</sup>

Dyer argues that if stereotypes are considered as an ordering process, there is then a belief in the absoluteness of a particular order, which is also affected by the power relations in society. For instance “Englishness” is defined by the dominating group, and therefore a usual “Brit”, as already discussed, is often a white, middle-class male. Dyer also contends that the effectiveness of stereotypes derives from their power to invoke consensus. As he argues, “[t]he stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype”. Dyer states that often it is *from* stereotypes that we conceive our different opinions about social groups. Therefore, stereotypes do not necessarily express “our” values and beliefs as Lippman states, but merely “particular definitions of reality- - which...relate to the disposition of power in society”<sup>179</sup>. For instance stereotypes of different nationalities flourish in different media imagery and most people have some idea of national characteristics of different people even if they had not visited that country or met anyone from that culture. Stereotypes of nationalities are also affected by historical events and power structures within different nations and countries. The stereotypes also vary between different nations, which again supports the argument that the relationship of a stereotype to reality is indeed imaginary.

Dyer introduces Orin E. Klapp’s distinction between stereotypes and social types, which is also useful when analysing *Fawlty Towers*. According to Klapp, social types “belong” to society, whereas stereotypes are left outside society. For Klapp this distinction is mainly geographical, but Dyer uses the idea to think about different social

---

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*, 14.

groups in society, i.e. who is at the centre and who is peripheral, the Other. Dyer argues that in fiction social types are used in more flexible and open ways than stereotypes. As Dyer contends, “[s]ocial types can figure in almost any kind of plot and have a wide range of roles in that plot - - whereas stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative”. However, as Dyer also argues, it is hard to distinguish between these different types, as they sometimes overlap. While social types and stereotypes define boundaries, mark the insiders and the outsiders, they also insist on keeping the boundaries, when in reality there might not be any.<sup>180</sup> As Stuart Hall similarly states, stereotyping “is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order”. It helps to bond “us” together and leave out “the Others”, who are different in some way.<sup>181</sup>

The concepts of social types and stereotypes are beneficial in the analysis of *Fawlty Towers* as there clearly are typifications, but some of them could be considered as more positive social types, and some as stereotypes. As mentioned earlier, Neale and Krutnik (1990) state that comedy tends to use generic stereotypes, such as the fool, the lunatic, the drunk, the hero et cetera. The characteristics and the roles of these generic stereotypes are usually predefined and do not vary much within different works of fiction. I would not consider stereotypes of nationalities as generic stereotypes, as the characteristics and roles can vary. It should also be noted that comedy uses stereotypes for comical purposes, and it intentionally simplifies and exacerbates the characteristics of the stereotypical characters. Therefore, the implications of comic stereotypes can be different than the implications of stereotypes in another kind of genre, such as in dramas.

---

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*, 14- 6.

<sup>181</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other”, 258.

## 5.2. The “Other” Guests — German, French and American

There are five episodes in which different nationalities appear, disregarding the character of Manuel that appears in every episode. In the episode “The Wedding Party” there is a French antique dealer, Mrs Peignoir, whose flirtation with Basil composes a subplot to the episode. In “Gourmet Night” there is a Greek cook Kurt, who has come to work in the hotel. André, who is a French friend of the Fawlties and owns a French restaurant in Torquay, recommends him. In “The Germans” nationality is the main theme as the hotel receives a group of German guests. In the episode there is also a minor character of Doctor Fin, who treats Sybil as she is having her toenail removed. In “The Psychiatrist” there is a young Australian woman, who has a minor part in the episode, and whose character I will attach to the discussion of sexuality of others. Finally, In “Waldorf Salad” there is a couple, of which the husband is American and the woman English.

The different nationalities appearing in *Fawlty Towers* are mainly European. An exception is the character of Doctor Fin, who could be an African immigrant, based on his accent and black colour of skin. I will return to his character later in this chapter. Nationality, therefore, is not constructed through the colour of the skin, as the visiting guests are white Europeans (and one American), and as in reality most of them are white English actors and actresses. Differences between nationalities have to be made with other methods then, such as with the use of language. Many foreign guests speak English, but with a strong accent and with adding their own language’s words within dialogues. Especially in Manuel’s speech Spanish and English are efficiently mixed, as he cannot speak English very fluently. Language can here be used either for strengthening the community or for excluding others who do not speak the same language. As mentioned earlier, Benedict Anderson’s (1991) idea of language as an

instrument of inclusion applies here. Language indeed can be used as an instrument for defining who belongs to a community and on the other hand who does not, as seen in *Fawlty Towers*. This way language is both inclusive and exclusive. Another way to differentiate nationalities from others is to modify their look. This is not prevalent with all different nationalities, but in some cases it is effectively used to differentiate nationalities. For instance French Mrs Peignoir is wearing a dress coloured with blue, white and red, which highlights her nationality, as if she was wearing the French flag. Manuel, on the other hand, has dark hair and moustache that differentiates him from the rest. In addition to looks and language, national differences are constructed in dialogues, similarly to the way Englishness is constructed in dialogues and language, as discussed earlier. There are often references to for instance historical events, places and names, which can be seen as following the discourse of the nation and this way constructing nationality and emphasizing it to the audience.

“The Germans” is probably the most memorable and loved episode in *Fawlty Towers*. Basil’s behaviour towards the Germans when he tries to avoid mentioning the war to them (referring to World War Two) raised a lot of laughter, and still does. Basil’s phrase “Don’t mention the war” has become a well-known phrase to many people, and John Cleese’s great acting has been applauded by many. The German nationality is connected with the war in the episode, as it often has been after World War Two. However, there is a strong sense of self-irony involved here, as it is Basil (or the English in general as could be argued) who cannot forget the past. They have prejudiced views about the Germans, but nevertheless try to be polite and act civil towards them. For instance the discussion between the Major and Basil highlights the feelings of the English:

Basil: (to the Major) We've got some Germans arriving tomorrow morning, Major, so Polly's brushing up another one of her languages.

The Major: Germans! Coming here?

Basil: Just for a couple of days, Major.

The Major: ...I don't care much for Germans...

Basil: I know what you mean, but...

The Major: Bunch of Krauts, that's what they are, all of 'em. Bad eggs!

Basil: Yes, well, forgive and forget, Major. God knows how, the bastards.- -<sup>182</sup>

The Major's words reflect the general attitude that there used to be towards the Germans, but which is not appropriate anymore. Basil tries to be discreet and reminds the Major that the war is over and the past is the past, but his "God knows how, the bastards", reveals the long-standing grudge against the Germans. Jopi Nyman notes that Germany was considered as "a mental, physical, and bodily threat to England" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nyman has analysed Katherine Mansfield's short stories and novels and argues that "her texts are part of an English nationalist discourse in which the identity of Englishness is constructed in opposition to the nation's Others, i.e. the Germans"<sup>183</sup>. The Germans as a "threat" is visible in *Fawlty Towers* as well. The visit of the Germans seems to be a big event for the hotel staff. Polly brushes up her German, Sybil wants Basil to put the moose head on the wall before the Germans arrive in order to improve the appearance of the hotel, and Basil constantly reminds everyone to "not mention the war". The behaviour of the English reveals that the visit of the Germans is not taken lightly, but as if the Germans indeed were a threat, so that the English have to try to be kind and hospitable to the old enemy.

In the episode, the humour arises from Basil's behaviour and attempts at not to mention the war. For instance in the following dialogue Basil is taking orders for dinner from the German guests:

---

<sup>182</sup> "The Germans", 140.

<sup>183</sup> Nyman, 141.

1<sup>st</sup> German: May I have two eggs mayonnaise, please?

Basil: Certainly, why not, why not indeed? We are all friends now, eh?

2<sup>nd</sup> German: (*heavily*) A prawn cocktail...

Basil: ...All in the Market together, old differences forgotten, and no need to mention the war...Sorry!...Sorry, what was that again?

German: A Prawn cocktail.

Basil: Oh, prawn, that was it. When you said **prawn** I thought you said **war**. Oh, the war! Oh yes, completely slipped my mind, yes, I'd forgotten all about it.

Hitler, Himmler, and all that lot, oh yes, completely forgotten it, just like that..

Sorry, what was it again?

2<sup>nd</sup> German: (*with some menace*) A prawn cocktail...

Basil: Oh yes, Eva Prawn...and Goebbels too, he's another one I can hardly remember at all.

1<sup>st</sup> German: And ein pickled herring!

Basil: Hermann Goering, yes, yes..and von Ribbentrop, that was another one.

1<sup>st</sup> German: And four cold meat salads, please.

Basil: Certainly, well, I'll just get your hors d'oeuvres...hors d'oeuvres vich must be obeyed at all times without question...Sorry! Sorry!<sup>184</sup>

Basil's first remark of being all friends now reveals the underlying "fear" for the Germans as discussed above, as if he was trying to remind the Germans that they all are now in a peaceful relationship and "old differences" have been forgotten, as he continues. Nationality is constructed with different references to the war and the people involved in it. The Germans appear as normal, but they do seem to get frustrated at Basil's constant insinuation about the war. The Germans appear to have little sense of humour and instead of merely laughing at Basil, they are insulted by his behaviour. As Basil continues his hopeless small talk where different names appear, which is both humorous and also constructs the history of the German nation as well as the shared history of the English and the German, one of the German ladies starts to cry. Basil hopes to cheer her up with his bravura that most people laugh at:

Basil: No, this is a scream, I've never seen anyone not laugh at this!

1<sup>st</sup> German: Go away!

Basil: Look, she'll love it — she's a German! (*places a finger under his nose preparatory to doing his Hitler impression*) - - Here, watch — who's this then? *He places his finger across his upper lip and does his Fuhrer party piece. His audience is stunned.*

Basil: I'll do the funny walk...

---

<sup>184</sup> "The Germans", 155.

*He performs an exaggerated goose-step<sup>185</sup> out into the lobby, does an about-turn and marches back into the dining room. Both German women are by now in tears, and both men on their feet.<sup>186</sup>*

The Germans start to get angry and they shout at Basil to stop his act, as they do not find it humorous. The German man says that it is not funny for the ladies, as it is not funny for any German people. Basil shouts back at them disappointed: “You have absolutely no sense of humour, do you!” The German shouts back repeating that it is not funny, to which Basil answers: “Who won the bloody war, anyway?”

In the episode the Germans do indeed look constrained, and even dull with their grey clothes, which would be consistent with the stereotype of a stiff and disciplined German soldier, who has no sense of humour. However, the Germans first politely try to ignore Basil’s rude behaviour. Basil cannot understand why they do not find the imitation of Hitler amusing, and tries to regain his self-respect by commenting the suggested end result of the war and thus marking Britain’s superiority. In the end, the joke is again on Basil, when after watching Basil’s weird behaviour for a while, the Germans comment: “However did they win?”, referring to the past war. The German nationality is represented here with one German figure that is well known to probably all viewers. The narrative that belongs to Hitler represents the German nationality in this scene as well as builds boundaries between the different nationalities. The English national identity, on the other hand, is enforced by highlighting the victory of the nation, which can be viewed as a narrative in the nation’s history as argued by Stuart Hall (1992).

The English and the Germans are opposed in this scene, as they seem to act out the old war-like relationship. Nyman notes that in Mansfield’s *In a German Pension*

---

<sup>185</sup> Basil’s ‘silly walk’ is also an intertextual reference to Monty Python’s sketch ‘Ministry of Silly Walks’ in which John Cleese performed a similar walk.

<sup>186</sup> “The Germans”, 156.

(1911) the differences between the nations are emphasized with “underlining the alleged fact that the Germans hate [the English] too”<sup>187</sup>. This can be seen in the attitudes that Basil and the Major have towards the Germans, and, especially in this scene the Germans have towards the English (or Basil). Another insight by Nyman is that in the German stories by Mansfield there is “a juxtaposition between two spaces: one ordered, one free, one closed, the other open”<sup>188</sup>. In *Fawlty Towers*, similarly, the Germans are highly restricted and disciplined (until they get angry enough), as they do not show their feelings at first and remain calm. Basil, on the other hand, is lively and freely says what he thinks disregarding everyone else, which symbolizes his “free space”. Even the physical space accentuates this juxtaposition: the Germans are confined to one room while Basil walks (with goose steps) freely from one room to another.

Also the sense of humour, which the Germans seem to be lacking of, can be thought of as “the secret weapon” of the English, as mentioned earlier. As Jeffrey Richards notes, the Germans have been represented as “uncultured, ungentlemanly and humourless” in wartime films, where the English sense of humour is the “essential quality which separates a civilized society from an uncivilized one”<sup>189</sup>. In *Fawlty Towers* the sense of humour is a prevalent feature in this episode, and Basil tries to use the English sense of humour as a weapon by stating that the Germans have no sense of humour. However, it should be noted that in this scene Basil is suffering from a concussion from an earlier incident, and therefore his outrageously rude behaviour can be explained, as well as forgiven by the viewers. Using concussion here is a way to make tender mockery towards English attitudes, and it also reveals something about the

---

<sup>187</sup> Nyman, 145.

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>189</sup> Richards, 87.

social atmosphere of the time. Even Basil could not probably get away with that kind of behaviour without the concussion as a reason for the rudeness.<sup>190</sup>

Even though the stereotype of a German is constructed with a few easily recognisable characteristics, as stereotypes usually are, I do not think the Germans are treated as negative outsiders, even though differences and past grudges are highlighted. Even though there are similarities between the Germans in *Fawlty Towers* and in Nyman's analysis, I would nevertheless argue that in *Fawlty Towers* the English and the Germans are represented as more or less equal, and the Germans are given other kinds of roles as well than merely the role of a stiff soldier- like patriotic with no sense of humour. Especially the end scene of the episode is important, since it creates a symbolic bond between the viewers and the German visitors, as they both are watching Basil's chaotic behaviour. This way the Germans are included into the same group as the (supposedly) English viewers, when they can jointly laugh at the prejudices and preconceptions that the old conflicts have caused, and which are now reflected in Basil's behaviour. Thus, it could be argued that the Germans in this episode represent more of a positive "social" type as discussed earlier, than a negative stereotype, even though there are features in the characters that are rather stereotypical. The Germans are therefore ambivalent: on the other hand they are included into the same community as the viewers, but on the other hand they are distanced from the viewers and from the community of *Fawlty Towers* with the use of stereotypical features.

Mr Hamilton is an American guest staying in "Fawlty Towers" while he is visiting England with his English wife. Mr Hamilton's nationality is constructed with stereotypically American features: he is loud and demanding, knows his rights and speaks with a strong American accent. Jokes are based on misunderstandings, such as

---

<sup>190</sup> See Palmer 1994, 139-140.

when Mr Hamilton asks for a “screwdriver” in the restaurant Basil assumes he really wants the tool, not the drink. Similarly, the episode’s title “Waldorf salad” refers to the confusion when the American wants to have a Waldorf salad as dinner. It is already late so the American pays extra for the cook to stay in order to make them dinner. However, the cook refuses to stay, so Basil decides to keep the money and prepare the salad himself instead, without telling about the situation to the guests. Basil does not know what kind of a salad a “Waldorf salad” is and tries to escape the odd situation by saying that they are “out of Waldorfs”. The American insists on having the salad and despite Basil’s attempts to suggest another dish, he cannot help but obey the overbearing Mr Hamilton. With Sybil’s help he manages to compose the salad, but in the end Basil’s plot is revealed and the American shouts out the complaints right to his face.

The nationality of the American is referred to by talking for instance about the weather and the scenery. As Stuart Hall (1992) has noted, geographical references work to construct nationality, as they do for instance in this episode. Sybil and the American couple are having a conversation, and Sybil finds out that they are from California. They start to discuss the climate, and Mrs Hamilton admits that she misses England, but loves the climate in California, as there you can “swim and sunbathe and then after lunch drive up into the mountains and ski”. Sybil listens enchanted. The conversation continues:

Mr Hamilton: I like England and the English people, but I sure couldn’t take this climate.

Mrs Hamilton: Harry finds it too gloomy.

Basil: (*putting the drinks on the Hamiltons’ table*) Oh, I don’t find it too gloomy. Do you, Sybil?

Sybil: Yes I do, Basil.

Basil: Well, yes, my wife finds it too gloomy. I find it rather bracing.

Sybil: What do you find bracing, Basil? ...the damp, the drizzle, the fog...

Basil: Well, it’s not always like this, dear. It changes.

Sybil: My husband’s like the climate. **He** changes. This morning he went on for two hours about the ‘bloody weather’, ha ha ha.

Basil: Yes, well, it has been unusually damp this week, in fact, but normally we're rather spoiled down here on the English Riviera.

Sybil: Mr and Mrs Hamilton were telling me about California. You can swim in the morning and then in the afternoon you can drive up into the mountains and ski.

Basil: It must be rather tiring.

Mr Hamilton: Well, one has the choice.

Basil: Yes, but I don't think that would suit me. I like it down here. It's very mild all the year round. We have palm trees here in Torquay, you know. Do you have palm trees in California?<sup>191</sup>

The differences between the English and the Americans are made prevalent in the discussion of the different kind of climates, which are juxtaposed here. California is usually thought of as a sunny place, where people are open and joyful. England, on the other hand, is known for its "gloomy" and rainy weather, where people, correspondingly, are "colder", more reserved and moderate. Weather is usually a very popular topic for discussion in Britain, as is widely known elsewhere. It is part of the English national identity, and Basil's reactions could be seen as acts of defence of the English national identity. Even though he complains about the weather, he still defends it against the "outsiders" and would not change it to anything else. Basil tries to impose Torquay's superiority by noting that they have palm trees and asking whether the visitors do, which is of course a humorous attempt because everyone (except for Basil) knows that there are palm trees in California. Sybil, on the other hand, seems to be interested in the Americans and would not mind living elsewhere. She also seems to envy Mrs Harrison of her husband, who is like the characters in her favourite American novelist's (Harold Robbins) books: interesting, ruthless, sexy and powerful. Mrs Harrison says that she does not have the time to read novels when her husband is home. Sybil states "Who needs Harold Robbins when you've got the real thing". This emphasizes Sybil's disappointment in Basil, who apparently cannot be awarded with the attributes that Mr Hamilton has.

---

<sup>191</sup> "Waldorf Salad", 230.

When at the end of the episode Mr Hamilton is infuriated by the standard of the service he has received in “Fawlty Towers”, which according to his words is “the crummiest, shoddiest, worst-run hotel in the whole of Western Europe”, Basil defends himself by asking other guests, who are listening their argument in the hotel lobby, of their opinion about the hotel. When no one yet has time to give their complaints, Basil gives the money that was meant for the cook back to Mr Hamilton and states:

- - You see, satisfied customers! Of course if this little hotel is not to your taste, then you are free to say so, that is your privilege. And I shall of course refund your money. I know how important it is to you Americans. But you must remember that here in Britain there are things that we value more, things that perhaps in America you’ve rather forgotten, but which here in Britain are far, far more important...<sup>192</sup>

Basil emphasises here the difference between the English and the Americans. It seems as if he is referring to the long history of Britain and how young the United States as a nation still is, and how The United States have forgotten the Victorian values, such as improving the general good instead of the self and adhering to morality and respectability, and instead have placed market value and money above everything else. In Basil’s speech, there is a sense of father teaching the son to remember what is “right”. After all, the British are the forefathers of the Americans, which is subtly hinted at here. As mentioned in the theoretical part, Stuart Hall (1992) has noted that the idea of a “pure and original” people is prevalent in the discourse of the English character, which can be seen here too, as Basil is highlighting the more important values, which could be seen as belonging to the original and pure people. At the same time, Basil is constructing the English nationality by emphasising tradition, continuity and history, similarly to the way Stuart Hall argues that nationality is constructed in different narratives. In addition, the speech builds a picture of a uniform and solid community, the members of which share the same values and traditions.

---

<sup>192</sup> “Waldorf Salad”, 241.

Other guests, however, turn out to be unsatisfied with the hotel's service, so that the British sense of superiority that Basil so proudly claimed for is actually merely in Basil's imagination. Basil, then, is the butt of the joke again. There are different themes that are used in constructing the nationality of the Americans, and in this episode, similarly with "The Germans", the "Other" nationality is in dialogue with Englishness. When Basil is defending English weather and Victorian values, it seems as if in the background there is insecurity and jealousy towards the strong, self-assured and self-assertive American. In this sense, it could be argued that the jealousy the English feel towards Americans is reflected in the stereotypical character of the American. National boundaries are made separate, but none of the nationalities is put on a higher pedestal than the other, because self-irony is strongly prevalent in this episode as well.

There are two French people in *Fawlty Towers*. The other one is André, who owns a French restaurant in Torquay and is a friend of the Fawlties, and the other Mrs Peignoir, who is an antique dealer and is staying in "Fawlty Towers" for a night. These characters represent the controversial relationship the English have with the French. They (too) have a long, battlesome history together and this is also reflected in *Fawlty Towers*. As mentioned in the theoretical background, Jopi Nyman argues that in the twentieth century literature, Englishness is constructed in relation to Europe, where Europe is seen as the "Other". Nyman discusses for instance the representation of Germans and the French in English literature, but generally he talks about Europe as an entity that is clearly separated from Britain. This is naturally a generalisation, as Europe is composed of many distinct nations, but it reflects the attitude of the English towards Europe as a separate entity, and thus Europe as one term is applicable to the discussion here. Nyman argues that although the British have seen Europe "as a site of harmony and cultural achievement, the fact that the European is often the Englishman's Other

cannot be changed". He concludes that therefore it can be argued that "in the British imagination Europe is both admired and despised". His argument is then that

the European Other in its early twentieth-century reincarnation is a historical and cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in the period's pleas for national efficiency and its naturalized sense of British superiority over other races and nations, a process in which the achievements of European high culture remain secondary to discourses emphasizing nation-based difference.<sup>193</sup>

This "Janus face of Europe" (a term Nyman uses) can be exemplified in the French characters in *Fawlty Towers* for instance. André represents the admired France: he is a friend of Basil and Sybil, who they consult when setting a special menu for dinner in the episode "Gourmet Night", in which they intend to invite the cream of Torquay to the hotel's restaurant and impress them with their culinary delights. In the same episode André is asked for emergency help when Basil's own cook Kurt (Greek) is too drunk to prepare dinner and the gourmet night is about to turn into a disaster. André prepares the dinner in his own restaurant, where Basil collects it from. Unfortunately at the first time Basil takes the wrong tray, and at the second time when he has fetched the right one, he accidentally drops it on the floor, so that the guests are deprived of the gourmet dinner.

Representing André as a helpful friend reflects the admiring attitude of the English towards the French: the French cuisine has a wide reputation, of which the English would like to have a taste of, but apparently can only dream of (at least according to the insinuation in the episode). Also the French language is appreciated and thought of as a beautiful language of the upper class. French, indeed, used to be the language of the court and the aristocracy of Britain in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, while English was the language of the masses. Basil often uses some French phrases to appear as a learned, upper-class gentleman. For instance in "Gourmet Night" Basil wishes the

---

<sup>193</sup> Nyman, 4.

guests welcome by saying: “How very *au fait* of you to come to our little culinary *soirée* this evening”.

The antique dealer Mrs Peignoir could be seen as representing the other side of the “love and hate” relationship. She has dark hair, strong make-up, and speaks with a strong French accent and openly flirts with Basil. However, Basil does not respond to her flirtation, but is actually frightened of her “light-headed” behaviour. Mrs Peignoir’s occupation, however, suggests that she is a respected character, as she is an antique dealer and thus cultured and educated. On the other hand her occupation is strongly associated with aesthetics, which is usually attached to women and the French as well.

In one scene in “The Wedding Party” Mrs Peignoir comes to the hotel late in the evening. She is giggling happily and tells Basil, who is in the hotel lobby, that she was with her friends and had perhaps a little too much to drink. Mrs Peignoir drops her purse on the floor and they both go on their knees to reach for it. They collide together on the floor. Other guests come to the lobby and Basil quickly stands up and starts to explain how the whole situation started, to prevent any misunderstandings. Mrs Peignoir merely giggles.

Later in another scene Mrs Peignoir comes into the lobby and hears the music Basil is playing there.

Mrs Peignoir: Ah, Mr Fawty.

Basil: Oh. Good evening. Sorry. (*turns the recorder off*)

Mrs Peignoir: No, no, don’t switch it off. I love Chopin.

Basil: Oh really? Hah. There’s your key. (*he switches the recorder back on*)

Mrs Peignoir: Ah, it’s so romantic!

Basil: Exactly.

Mrs Peignoir: Are you romantic, Mr Fawty?

Basil: No, good God, no! (*switches off the tape*)

Mrs Peignoir: Well, I think you are. I think beneath that English exterior throbs a passion that would make Lord Byron look like a tobaccionist.

Basil: Oh, no. No way, no, sorry.

Mrs Peignoir: Oh, don't look so bashful. I won't try and sit on you again!<sup>194</sup>

Basil is confused from the attention Mrs Peignoir gives him. When Mrs Peignoir asks whether Basil is romantic, Basil's refusal to acclaim such characteristics is highlighted by his repetition of "no" and also by his quickly switching off the tape. This creates a humorous situation but also emphasises the difference between the two nationalities. Mrs Peignoir can openly discuss these fairly personal issues with Basil, but Basil is afraid of the foreign woman's open behaviour. Basil is represented as "asexual" and the English sexual continence is the source of the joke. Basil's reserved behaviour causes many bursts of laughter when he tries to protect himself from Mrs Peignoir. The flirtation and insinuations go further when Mrs Peignoir continues their conversation and asks where Mrs Fawcety is that evening. When Basil answers that Sybil is with her friend for the night, Mrs Peignoir teasingly states: "While the cat's away, eh..?" to which Basil quickly answers that there is too much to do. Mrs Peignoir asks Basil to fix her room's window. When they are in her room, and they feel the breeze coming from the open window, Mrs Peignoir starts suggestively:

Mrs Peignoir: I shall sleep *au naturelle* tonight.

Basil: Good idea!

Mrs Peignoir: Only it's not much fun on your own...

Basil: Oh well, one can always pretend. Argh! A twinge from the old leg. Better go lie down. Goodnight!<sup>195</sup>

When Basil is in his room, Mrs Peignoir knocks on his door because Basil had forgotten the recorder in her room. Mrs Peignoir suggests that Basil left it there on purpose so that he could "come and get it" later. Basil merely laughs nervously. Mrs Peignoir goes back to her room and Basil shuts the door. Soon he hears someone knocking on the door and thinks it is Mrs Peignoir again. Actually it is Sybil who is asking Basil to open the door. Basil looks frightened, thinking it is Mrs Peignoir, and does not open the door. He starts

---

<sup>194</sup> "The Wedding Party", 72.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, 73.

to explain: “Listen, I can’t [open the door], my wife’s just got back unexpectedly.- - Look, you’ll meet somebody else sooner or later (*she hammers on the door*) Try to control yourself. Where do you think you are? Paris?” Finally he realizes it is Sybil and pretends that he was having a nightmare.

These scenes play with the idea of sexuality and the stereotype of a flirtatious, promiscuous French woman is prevalent. Jopi Nyman argues that in Arnold Bennett’s *The Old Wives Tale* (1908) the French are constructed as “a different, more primitive race with an overtly emotional and sexualised culture”<sup>196</sup>. Englishness is constructed in opposition to France in the novel. This is emphasised in representing French women as sexual objects and describing them as parts of the body, which is in controversy with the English suppression of sexuality. In the novel emotionality, self-assurance, sexuality and lack of self-control are portrayed as non-English virtues. The English appreciate Victorian values such as reason and self-control.<sup>197</sup> Similarly in *Fawlty Towers* the French woman is portrayed as sexual and emotional, which poses a threat towards the English values that Basil could be seen as representing here. She is also self-assured; she is not afraid to flirt with Basil even though Basil does not respond to her behaviour. Mrs Peignoir is immoral too; she does not care about the fact that Basil is married, but still tries to get Basil into her room and by determining on her insinuation, into her bed as well. Basil’s request “[t]ry to control yourself” refers to the suggested French woman’s lack of self-control, which Basil, on the other hand, does possess. Mrs Peignoir, then, does not seem to appreciate the Victorian value that is sacred to the English: marriage. The French woman’s sexuality therefore threatens not only Basil’s marriage, but also the unity of the hotel community and symbolically thinking the

---

<sup>196</sup> Nyman, 119.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, 126- 7. See also the discussion in the preceding chapter.

whole family of the English nation. Basil distances the sexuality and indecent behaviour to France by the implication that Mrs Peignoir is mistaken on the country she is in. Only in Paris, or France, can that kind of behaviour be tolerated. Basil escapes the situation by referring to his leg ache, which is the result of the Korean war he was in, as explained in another scene<sup>198</sup>. The reference to war is like proof of Basil's masculinity, which seems to be questioned here as he is escaping sexuality. As mentioned earlier, sexuality is part of a man's masculinity, and especially in the Victorian era it was regarded as a sign of masculinity, whereas for women it was a sign of deviance. Nevertheless, the reference to war and fighting, which are considered as masculine signs, saves Basil from losing all of his masculinity.

The two extreme French characters represent the ambivalence of the stereotype. As Homi K. Bhabha argues, "the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation"<sup>199</sup>. Bhabha discusses the stereotype as part of the colonial discourse. He argues that stereotyping is an

ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.<sup>200</sup>

In other words, we can see the fears and desires of the colonizer, which have been projected onto the Other in stereotypes. As post-colonial theory argues, identity always needs an "Other" for the construction of self. Otherness is represented in the stereotypes in *Fawlty Towers*, which according to Bhabha's ideas could be seen as projections of English fears and desires. Here, the English could be thought of as the "colonizer" and the stereotyped Others as the "colonized". For instance in André's character we can see

---

<sup>198</sup> See above for the suggested symbolism of the leg ache as referring to castration. This analysis would tie into the narrative here as well.

<sup>199</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) 70.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*, 81- 2.

the projection of the “desire” of the English to be similar to the French. André could be considered as a positive “social type”, who belongs to the inside group. The “fear” of the English is represented in Mrs Peignoir’s character, who, with her open sexuality, threatens the morality and decency of the English. Mrs Peignoir could then be considered as a negative stereotype that is not part of the social group. This is supported by her one-sided role that is written into the plot and from which she cannot escape. Mrs Peignoir is a light-headed woman, who drinks too much, flirts openly and tries to seduce another woman’s husband. This way the relationship between the English and the French is portrayed as ambivalent; the English both admire and fear the Otherness of the French.

### **5.3. Sexuality, Race and the Self**

Sexuality and other women are also as a subplot in the episode “The Psychiatrist”, where there is a young Australian woman, Ms Raylene Miles. Basil is clearly confused of the young woman’s beautiful looks and her low-cut dress, so that he tries to avoid any sexual insinuation, but without meaning to, harasses the woman. In this episode the situation is different from the one in “The Wedding Party”: the woman is beautiful, but does not flirt with Basil, and behaves “normally”. Basil’s behaviour is similar, however; he is confused and frightened about the woman’s sexuality and the fuss is caused by his confusion and attempts to dismiss the sexuality of other women. Sexuality is again attached to other nationalities. There is also a quick reference to a Finnish woman in the episode “Waldorf salad”, in which the cook (Terry) is going to a karate lesson, and reveals the karate teacher to be a pretty, tall blonde from Finland. Basil does not seem to like the idea of Terry going, as the American guests have paid extra for the cook to stay, and says:

Basil: That Finnish floozie's your karate teacher, is she?

Terry: Well, it's sort of karate, ain't it...

Basil: Right, give me that. (*graps the money back*)

Terry: What?

Basil: I pay you overtime to miss a class, not to keep some bit of crumpet hanging around.

Terry: Yes, but she's...

Basil: No, it's all right, I'm doing the washing-up, I'll do the cooking too. You go off and enjoy yourself. Don't worry about me, you go and have a good time. I'll be all right. Go and have a bit of fun with a Finn.<sup>201</sup>

Basil refers to the Finnish woman as a “floozy” or “a bit of crumpet”, which reflects the idea of an Other (or another) woman as a woman of easy virtue, of someone to have “a bit of fun” with. The reference to the Finnish woman could also be seen as a general attitude of the English towards Scandinavian women, who have had the reputation of being light-headed and wanton, especially from the 1960s onwards. These terms also highlight the negativity of the Other woman as well as highlight Basil's anger towards Terry for leaving early. It could be argued that if Terry had been going out with an Englishwoman, the same idea of promiscuity would not have been apparent.

English women guests in “Fawlty Towers” are not portrayed as sexual, or at least the sexuality of the characters is in the eye of the viewer. Basil is not connected sexually to English women; he is not the object of their desire and neither does he desire them. Not even Sybil, even though they are married. As already discussed in chapter four, the relationship between Sybil and Basil is rather platonic, as is the relationship between Polly and Basil, which is more like a father- daughter relationship. This emphasises the family community in *Fawlty Towers*, where the fear of Others is realized by projecting sexuality to Others and making a clear distinction between different nationalities (“us” vs. “them”).

---

<sup>201</sup> “Waldorf Salad”, 227- 8.

The character that has not yet been discussed is Kurt, who is the Greek cook in the episode “Gourmet Night”. Kurt is a fat, strong, moustached Greek man, who turns out to be homosexual. Kurt’s nationality is constructed with his strong accent and looks. Kurt is fond of Manuel, but Manuel is not interested in Kurt the way Kurt would like him to be. He is depressed from Manuel’s rejection and drinks too much. Kurt’s homosexuality is revealed when Polly tells Basil that Kurt is too drunk to prepare the gourmet dinner:

Basil: Right. (*he makes a supreme effort of self control; he fails*) Aargh!!!- -  
 How?  
 Polly: I don’t know. It happened so quickly. He had a row with Manuel.  
 Basil: Manuel?  
 Polly: ...He’s got a crush on him.  
 Basil: A **what**?  
 Polly: A crush...you know...in love.  
 Basil: - - [*goes to the lobby to get the steam out and returns to the bar*] I knew I should never have hired a Frenchman.  
 Polly: He’s Greek, Mr Fawlty.  
 Basil: Greek?  
 Polly: Of course.  
 Basil: Well, that’s even worse. I mean, they invented it.<sup>202</sup>

Basil’s first reaction is that Kurt is French, as their sexuality is often excessive and could well go to “extremes” (at least this is assumed from the dialogue). When Basil realizes he is not French, but Greek, the sentence “they invented it” could be seen as referring to Ancient Greece and the openly erotic homosexual relationships between men and boys of that time. Basil’s attitude emphasizes the negative aspect that is attached to the Greek “Other”. With the last phrase not only does he raise laughter but also distances homosexuality from the English and at the same time attaches it exclusively to Others. Homosexuality and alcoholism are not part of English virtues and therefore the negative features are again projected onto Others. On the narrative level, it is indeed Kurt’s homosexuality that prevents the Fawlties from improving their social

---

<sup>202</sup> “Gourmet Night”, 120.

status with the gourmet night. If Kurt was heterosexual, there would not have been any problems to start with. This way homosexuality is highlighted as the fault to the Fawlties' misfortunes.

On the other hand, there is the character of old Major, whose alcoholism and deteriorated state symbolize the state of the great Empire. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that all negative features would be mirrored onto the Other. This, on the other hand, could emphasise the idea of constructing the self in opposition to the Other; homo- and heterosexuality as well as alcoholism threaten the nation and cause fear, as they can be seen as "intruding" the English values as well. Major drinks a lot and there are also a couple of scenes where homoeroticism is hinted at in Basil's and Manuel's relationship. In one scene Sybil tells Basil that there is a burglar downstairs. It is late and dark, and Basil goes downstairs and sees a figure, whom he hits with a frying-pan. Basil turns to look at the figure more closely and sees that it is Manuel. At the same time when they are both on the ground, the lights turn on and a company of hotel guests comes to the lobby. They survey the scene and one of them states: "**We've** been to a wedding!", as if emphasising **their** righteous behaviour and contrasting it to the suggested "indecent" behaviour of Basil and Manuel. These insinuations do give space for alternative meanings, but they still remain mainly as comic methods. Threatening negative characteristics are nevertheless mainly transferred onto the European Others and this way distanced from the (English) Self.

Doctor Fin is the only black character in *Fawlty Towers*. He only appears twice in the episode "The Germans". His "Otherness" is constructed clearly with the colour of his skin and also with his accent, which suggests that English is not his mother tongue. In "The Germans" Sybil is in the hospital to have her ingrowing toenail removed. Basil is visiting her and meets Doctor Fin in the corridor in front of Sybil's room. Basil jumps

back, as if frightened of the black man, Doctor Fin. Here the object of laughter is Basil's exaggerated reaction and more generally the white man's fear against the black man. Otherwise the racial aspect is not treated in this short scene. Stereotypical ideas are nevertheless apparent in the character of Doctor Fin. When later in the same episode Basil is in the hospital because he is suffering from a concussion, Doctor Fin comes to his room to try to calm him down because Basil is trying to go home without permission. Doctor Fin rests his hands on Basil's head and makes a circle slowly and repeats hypnotically: "You should get as much rest as you can...as much rest as you can...as much rest as you can...". In this scene the black doctor's skills are associated with the mystical and supernatural skills of an African "witchdoctor", thus portraying a stereotypical image of a "wild and primitive" African<sup>203</sup>. On the other hand, Doctor Fin's representation also stresses the fact that despite his race, Doctor Fin is in a high position as a doctor, which stands for western science. Therefore, the binary oppositions of rationality (science) and emotionality or culture ("the witchdoctor" reference) both appear in Doctor Fin's character, which make the character ambivalent.

In the same episode Basil escapes from the hospital and manages to upset the German guests (described above), before Doctor Fin arrives at the hotel to take Basil back to the hospital. In the end of the episode Doctor Fin is chasing Basil in the hotel holding a tranquillizer needle in his hand. The humorous situation of Basil trying to escape Doctor Fin and the needle could be juxtaposed with the social context of the late 1970s. The educated immigrant is threatening the English native in his "own" country (the situation is located in the hotel), and the tranquillizer could be seen as a symbolical suggestion that the English would need to "calm down" and accept the immigrants as part of their society. Doctor Fin can therefore be thought of as acting a similar

---

<sup>203</sup> See e.g. Stuart Hall, "Spectacle of the Other", 1997.

symbolical part of an “internal outsider” than Manuel. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Manuel could be seen as representing the Internal Other, or the immigrant, in the symbolic nation of “Fawlty Towers”. The English national identity is changing; there are more and more immigrants in English society, who necessarily affect the nature of the national identity. The characters of Manuel and Doctor Fin could be seen as representing the change in society, and the problematic relationship between the immigrants and the natives. However, the discussion of race is not obvious, so that it remains simply on the symbolical level, as it often has been, and especially at that time. It is then apparent that issues of race or ethnicity are not addressed in relation to national identity, but the representative of a national identity often is from the dominating group (white, masculine).

I have now discussed the different characters that appear in *Fawlty Towers*. Questions such as “who laughs” and “who is being laughed at” have been key issues in discussing the power relations as regards to stereotyping. But what exactly is being laughed at, is it the *representation* of a minority group, or the minority group itself? In other words, if it is the representation that is the butt of the joke, there usually is self-irony involved. The viewers may not only find the representation funny, but they can also (unintentionally) laugh at their own preconceptions and prejudices about certain groups. In this case, it could be argued that this kind of laughter does not work against the minority group or diminish its power in society, but rather makes the dominant group (the viewers) think about their prejudices and attitudes. I think this is often the case in *Fawlty Towers*, where it is usually representations of different groups that people laugh at rather than real groups of people who would be mocked and this way disempowered. Self-irony is also highly prevalent in *Fawlty Towers*, which suggests that it is often the conceptions of the English that are being laughed at, and not the

actual minority groups. Necessarily, we have to keep the subjective nature of humour in mind and acknowledge that not all viewers may feel this way.

Directing laughter towards the Self (the English), which Basil could be seen as representing, and not the Others, can give birth to new representations and conceptions of the English national identity. Using other nationalities is nevertheless important, as Englishness is defined in opposition to Others. In the theoretical part, I discussed Nyman's ideas and his argument that internal Others, who are Europeans in his analysed material, are necessary for the construction of a unified community. However, I think this is not necessarily the case with *Fawlty Towers*. Other nationalities do work to construct Englishness and strengthen national boundaries, but nevertheless *Fawlty Towers* does seem to "work against the grain", so to speak. As already discussed in chapter four, there are discourses that attempt to break the norm and deconstruct the traditional idea of Englishness, which is not the case with Nyman's objects of study.

Using other nationalities and stereotypes, then, is not only a method of comedy, but also a way to construct one's own nationality. In addition, the fears and desires of the English can be seen in the stereotypes of Others, as for instance the references to sexuality in the representations of Others. The English (or Basil) seem to have an ambivalent relationship to sexuality — it is distanced from the self, and that way could be considered as an object of fear (as in the case with Mrs Peignoir), but on the other hand, it is also a desired characteristic, as in the case with Mr Johnson or Mr Hamilton, who Basil is jealous of. Stuart Hall discusses difference from psychoanalytical point of view and states that

[P]sychically, we are never fully unified as subjects. Our subjectivities are formed through this troubled, never-completed, unconscious dialogue with - - the 'Other'. It is formed in relation to something which completes us but which – since it lies outside us – we in some way always lack.<sup>204</sup>

In this sense it could be argued that as “our identity” (or national identity in this case) is never complete, we discuss our identity in relation to “Others” and also feel jealousy towards the Others who are different from us, and who seem to possess something that we lack of. This can be applied to Basil’s hostile reaction towards sexuality of Others or for other characteristics that Others have, such as the openness and joyfulness of the Americans, as noted earlier.

The stereotypes of other nationalities in the series are not given possibilities for radical alternative meanings, however, but they work as a comic method and as a way to oppose different nationalities. The stereotypes often rely on a few, well-known characteristics, and their roles do not vary much. Using stereotypes here could also be seen as a way to protect one’s own identity. As Donald argues, clutching onto familiar polarities and to the representation of difference can be seen as a manifestation of the fear that “without known boundaries, everything will collapse in undifferentiated, miasmatic chaos, that identity will disintegrate, and the ‘I’ will be suffocated or swamped”<sup>205</sup>. This, however, is a strong statement and cannot be wholly attached to comical stereotypes, but does support the argument that representing difference does entail own identity work, fears and desires of the self as well.

Naturally one also has to consider the subjective aspect of humour when thinking about stereotypes, because viewers may compose different ideas of the stereotypes used in the series, and not all may think likewise about the characters analysed here. It is also good to keep the time gap in mind, as stereotypes necessarily

---

<sup>204</sup> Hall 1997, 238.

<sup>205</sup> Donald J. “How English is it? Popular literature and national culture”, *New Formations* 6/1988: 44.

change somewhat within decades. I have tried to focus on the context of the 1970s and analyse the stereotypes within that period. Actually, I think one of the reasons why *Fawlty Towers* is still popular today, is its use of stereotypes that are generally known typifications of certain nationalities. They are clearly defined with just a few, easily notable characteristics and they also tell something about the way in which the English have seen other nationalities at that time.

## 6. Checking Out from *Fawlty Towers*

It was surprising to notice how little academic research there has been carried out on *Fawlty Towers* before. It was nonexistent almost, and especially as regards to national identity and Englishness. I set out to examine the way in which *Fawlty Towers* represents, constructs and possibly redefines Englishness, concentrating on the main characters and foreign visitors in the series and also taking the social atmosphere of the 1970s into account. For theoretical support I chose theorists from the area of cultural studies, which rely both on social studies and literary theory. In addition, I concentrated on the methods of comedy, since the role of humour is vital in the series. There has been academic research on the subject of humour, but to the best of my knowledge there are not many academic researchers, who would have combined aspects of humour and comedy as well as notions of national identity.

In the analysis part, I formed an idea of the community of the hotel “Fawlty Towers” as representing a family of the nation, which entails aspects that are closely connected to the formation of national identity: race, class and gender. Race is discussed through Manuel’s character, but as it often has been, discussion of race is rather silent and works on a metaphorical level. The idea of class is vital for the English national identity, and it is discussed through many characters, for instance Basil and the cook Terry, who represents the working class. Gender is quite conventionally represented in the series; reversing traditional masculine and feminine characteristics can be seen merely as a comic method. However, traditional English masculinity is challenged with Basil’s character and especially sexuality appears as a recurrent topic of laughter in the series. This way gender too participates in the moulding of national identity. *Fawlty Towers* then constructs national identity from different kinds of subject positions; it is not totally restricted to a representation of a middle-class white male, even though

Basil's character does represent the conventional image of national identity. As mentioned earlier, Lempiäinen (2002) suggests that nationality is produced through performance by repeating certain signifiers. In *Fawlty Towers*, nationality is indeed constructed by repeatedly referring to national characteristics, historical figures or events and familiar names of national writers or television programmes. This repetition is connected to the ideological discourse of nationality, but vacancies for the representation of national identity are made through the use of humour: national characteristics are remoulded by reversing and exaggerating them, and therefore subject positions offered by *Fawlty Towers* are not fixed and solid. This way they can work against the ideological notions of nationality. Even though the representation offers vacancies for alternative meanings, there still remains silences that reveal the ideological notion of national identity: the differences between the Northern Irish, the Scottish and the Welsh are flattened and the moulding of national identity is done by addressing merely the "English", which comes to stand for the whole of Britain. This reflects the ideologically traditional stereotype of a "Brit", who is represented by the dominating class in society.

The historical aspect of the changing identity can also be seen in the "family": the Major represents the old imperial Britain, Basil the post-war Britain (still with somewhat conventional values) and Polly the younger generation affected by the cultural revolution in the 1960s. Discussion of the changing national identity is addressed with the character of Mr Johnson, who Basil detests, as well as Manuel, who represents the growing immigrant group in the English society. Mr Johnson represents the changing social situation: the working class is beginning to receive visibility and status, sexual restrictions have loosened and values of the older generation have been abandoned. Englishness is then, as stated, constructed through the metaphor of the

family, and constructing the (English) Self is done in opposition towards the “Others”, who, according to my argumentation, are the visiting guests in the hotel, and who are composed of different nationalities. This way nationality is a recurrent theme in many of the episodes and the characteristics of Others often reflect the desires and fears of the Self. Using different nationalities is not only a tool for constructing national identities and boundaries between nationalities, but also a comic method, which relies on the use of stereotypes. Understanding the way comic methods function, in other words what makes us laugh, is a way to get deeper into the realm of humour and laughter in general: what is the relationship between humour and society?

There are two relevant theories of the function of humour, which can lead us closer to pondering upon the nature of humour. Firstly, humour can be seen as a “safety valve” for anti-social impulses, for instance to taboo subjects or racism. Jerry Palmer follows George Orwell’s (1961) ideas and states that laughing is a “temporary release from the inhibitions involved, a safety valve which in no way challenges the inhibitions, but allows us to return to them as it were refreshed by a brief holiday absence”.<sup>206</sup> For instance laughing at Manuel can be a temporary release from the social anxiety one feels about foreigners or immigrants, and laughing at his stupidity eases the feelings. Comedy, then, gives us permission to act against the norms and rules in society. Another thesis that the relationship between humour and taboo subjects has given birth to is found from the work of Emerson (1969), who sees joking about taboo subjects as a way to introduce them into everyday discourse and handle them in a serious manner.<sup>207</sup> For instance joking about World War Two and the relationship between the Germans and the English could be seen as a subject that has not been openly discussed, but which can now be more easily confronted, because it already has been introduced with

---

<sup>206</sup> George Orwell “The Art of Donald MacGill” 1961, as cited in Palmer 1994, 60.

<sup>207</sup> J.P. Emerson, “Negotiating the Serious Import of Humor” 1969, as cited in Palmer 1994, 60.

humour. As mentioned, laughing at Basil's frantic behaviour in "The Germans" is possible because he was concussed — he would not have acted that outrageously if he had been stable and "normal". The concussion then, gave a right to behave against decorum. This would insinuate that the subject is indeed sensitive. It is also interesting that no references to the American military history are made in the episode where there is an American visitor; the Germans are described according to their military history, but for instance the Vietnam War remains unmentioned. Similarly, the fragile relationship between the Irish and the English remains untouched, even though it has been a prevalent issue in the 1970s' society. It could be suggested that this is because Vietnam and the grudges between the Irish and the English are still too fresh in people's memory (or life), and as such cannot be laughed at, but World War Two is much further away in time. The discourse remains ideological in this respect, as its silences reveal the topics of discourse that can and cannot be discussed.

The argumentation represented by Palmer brings forth the two-sidedness of humour; it can subvert the existing ideology or function only as a momentary break from society's rules, in which case the rules remain unaltered and are possibly even enhanced by the refreshing break. This ambivalence is something that many theorists have come up against with when thinking about the nature of humour and its effectiveness. It is probably futile to suggest a definitive answer for the question of humour, but rather acknowledging the way humour *can* function is important. How does *Fawlty Towers* situate itself into the discussion then? I have argued that self-irony is highly present in *Fawlty Towers* and this could be seen as one of the ways in which conventional national characteristics are put into a state of flux. In my opinion self-irony in *Fawlty Towers* is one of the defining sources and forces for its humour. Irony, according to Linda Hutcheon, is "the intentional transmission of both information and

evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented". In other words the "real" meaning lies behind what is stated so that the interpreter has to decode it. However, as Hutcheon notes, irony does not work as simply by decoding the "real" meaning, because there is no guarantee that irony will be interpreted as it was meant. Therefore Hutcheon calls it a "risky business".<sup>208</sup>

Hutcheon states that because irony is not simply the unsaid meaning or the opposite meaning of what is stated, it is ambiguous and also has the effects to "mock, attack, and ridicule [as well as] exclude, embarrass and humiliate". However, Hutcheon argues that "nothing is ever guaranteed at the politicized scene of irony", in other words even if someone intends irony to be interpreted in subversive circumstances there is no guarantee that it will happen.<sup>209</sup> Hutcheon argues that irony can be mocking, embarrassing, ridiculing and excluding, but what about **self**-irony then? Is it disarming? Does directing irony towards the self take away the aggressiveness of irony, the attacking and mocking force of it? Being ironical towards the self can be thought of as a way to defend one's own feelings, as a way to protect the inner self. On the other hand, when one is self-ironical, one understands the faults and characteristics of oneself and by laughing at them perhaps pursues to change, which could be the case with *Fawlty Towers*.

Hutcheon continues that irony happens in discourse, when the question of power and authority are relevant. It has been said that irony creates communities of in-group and outside- group, but Hutcheon argues contradictorily that irony happens, because ""discursive communities" already exist and provide the context for both the

---

<sup>208</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: the theory and politics of irony*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1995) 11.

<sup>209</sup> *ibid.*, 12-7.

deployment and attribution of irony”<sup>210</sup>. This is for instance evident in self-irony in *Fawlty Towers*; how could the show be self-ironical if there was not a discourse that was familiar with the context? In other words, mocking at the traditional characteristics and values that Basil represents is only possible because there is a social need for something new: there already exists a community that is familiar and open for an alternative discourse. However, as Jerry Palmer notes, some people found Basil embarrassing rather than funny, and he suggests that the reason for this was because it was “a bit close to the bone”<sup>211</sup>. I think being “close to the bone” is the force of the series and self-irony in general. Indeed, if people were embarrassed by the show, it must have had *some* effect. However, we cannot stress the importance of subjectivity enough — not all may view the show similarly, because not all may feel receded from the characteristics and values that are being mocked or ridiculed in the series, and thus may feel embarrassed or humiliated (as Palmer notes). Similarly, as noted by Hutcheon, not all may interpret the ironical message in the same way. The show’s success even today shows that viewers can laugh at the issues raised by the series more openly today, because national identity has already changed. On the other hand, the success can also reside in the suggested fact that the series still relies on a discourse familiar to many, and it reveals and exploits characteristics that are very close to oneself (the viewer). Therefore, the series also works to construct a sense of community even today, possibly in the form of nostalgia.

There are an abundance of comedy shows that have followed *Fawlty Towers*’s example since the 1970s. Many of the shows use self-irony as a tool, and the discourse of national identity has in this respect democratised. Issues of race, ethnicity, gender and class are now more openly discussed and there are active subjects that used to

---

<sup>210</sup> *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>211</sup> Palmer 1987, 118.

remain invisible or silenced before. For instance shows like *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC, 1998- 2000) or *Ali G* (Channel 4, 2002-), address issues of the Asian-British minority group in Britain and direct irony not only towards the white British community, but also to the Asian immigrants. There are also active female actors in shows such as *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC, 1992-) or *Smack the Pony* (Channel 4, 1999-), who modify the traditionally masculine picture of national identity and give possibilities for new meanings to issues of gender with their ironic and carnivalesque humour. There is also a situation comedy called *The Royle Family* (BBC2, 1998-) that addresses the life of a working class family, thus bringing the class aspect to the centre of humorous discussion. It could be argued that if *Fawlty Towers* represented the national family in the 1970s and early 1980s, then *The Royle Family* would be a similar representative in the 2000. For further research, it would be interesting to compare these different series and the way national culture and identity have changed. It would also be enticing to examine the way in which the sense of humour has changed within thirty (or even more) years. Is it more aggressive nowadays, as many issues are discussed more openly? For instance an animated comic series *South Park* (USA, 1997-) is an example of the kind of satire and irony that does not shy away from addressing any subjects, be they taboo or not.<sup>212</sup> Has the role of humour in society changed then? Is it more powerful than before or is it just more prevalent? Are we living in a constant carnival today? For further research, one could combine the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin about the carnivalesque, which could be seen as one of the grounding theories of humour, and the ideas of more current theorists and apply them to today's comic works. Bakhtin has examined popular humour in the Middle Ages and the world of the carnival that offers a liberating chance for people to escape from the official world of hierarchy and norms

---

<sup>212</sup> See e.g. Maria Siironen, "Ironian karuselli South Park- sarjassa: stereotyypistä parodiaa vai stereotyypin parodiaa?" *Lähikuva* 3/ 2002: 53-68.

into the world of laughter, where no boundaries exist, class or rank do not matter and spectators and actors are not distinguished. According to Bakhtin the laughter of the carnival is festive and ambivalent, but the essential question that the carnival leaves behind is whether the carnival can bring any change into the main culture and to the power structures in society, which is the question we have pondered upon as well.<sup>213</sup> It would be interesting to use these famous Bakhtinian ideas and develop them further to be more applicable to today's popular culture and the role of humour in society.

Antony Easthope (1999) notes that many young English people feel distracted from the English national identity today. Nevertheless, they “cannot flee from a particular set of discourses in which they find their identities”. Easthope argues that even if the nation-state is not as strong as before, nation as culture is still important. If nationality was indeed more attached to culture instead of the nation-state (meaning the economic and political dimensions), it would perhaps exclude the “dark side”, the excessive and aggressive part, of nationalism, as Easthope suggests.<sup>214</sup> This suggestion is very close to the discussion at hand today, when Europe is composing a set of common rules and laws, and beginning to gain power over the individual nation-states. However, national culture is not on the verge of diminishing, because culture, in my opinion, is the soil that feeds national identities today, just as Easthope mentions. Nation, then, can be understood today more in terms of its “internal” functions, which according to Anthony Smith (1991) bond the individuals together with the shared values, traditions and symbols. National identity is indeed changing, and this change can be traced in the works of popular culture (as well as other forms of culture). Popular culture not only reflects the discourses in society, but also works to restructure them. I argue that *Fawlty Towers* is an example of the kind of work popular culture does in

---

<sup>213</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 11-2.

<sup>214</sup> Easthope, 228- 9.

society — it is not merely a form of entertainment, but also works to maintain as well as challenge the discourses in society and this way offers a tool for defining one's place in society and the world.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources:

Cleese, John and Connie Booth. *The Complete Fawlty Towers*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001.

*Fawlty Towers*. By John Cleese and Connie Booth. Perf. John Cleese, Prunella Scales, Connie Booth, Andrew Sachs, Ballard Berkeley, Brian Hall. Dir. John Howard Davies, ser. 1. Dir. Bob Spiers, ser. 2. BBC2 1975, 1979. DVD. BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2001.

### Secondary Sources:

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." 1970. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: NLB, 1971.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Bauman, Zygmunt. "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity." *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. London: SAGE, 1996. 18-36.

"The bfi TV 100." *British Film Institute*. 6 March 2005 <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tv/100/>>.

Bhabha, Homi K., ed. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.

---. *Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Bowes, Mick. "Only When I Laugh." Goodwin and Whannel, *Understanding Television* 128- 140.

- Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Donald, J. "How English Is It? Popular Literature and National Culture." *New Formations* 6 (1988): 31- 47.
- Dyer, Richard. "The Role of Stereotypes." *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. Ed. Richard Dyer. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London & New York: Routledge, 1995. 11- 18.
- Eagleton, Terry. "The Rise of English." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983. 17- 53.
- Easthope, Antony. *Englishness and National Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Eco, Umberto. "The Myth of Superman." 1972. *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Modernism Through Postmodernism*. Ed. Robert Con Davis. New York & London: Longman, 1986.
- "*Fawlty Towers* voted top sitcom." *BBC News*. 10 Oct. 2004. 6 March 2005 <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/tv\\_and\\_radio/3730650.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/tv_and_radio/3730650.stm)>.
- Fiddy, Dick and Phil Whickham. "Comedy and Variety." *British Film Institute*. 6 March 2005 <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tv/100/articles/comedy.html>>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Transl. & ed. James Strachey. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Giles, Judy and Tim Middleton, ed. *Writing Englishness, 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Goodwin, Andrew and Gary Whannel, ed. *Understanding Television*. London & New York: Routledge, 1990.

- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. John Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 222- 237.
- . "The Question of Cultural Identity." *Modernity and Its Futures*. Ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. 273- 316.
- . "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: The Open University, 1997. 13- 74.
- . "The Spectacle of the Other." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: The Open University, 1997. 223- 277.
- Haste, Cate. *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain World War I to the Present*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Pimlico, 1994.
- Herkman, Juha. "Huumorin ja vallan keskeneräinen kysymys - populaarin kokemuksen jäljillä." *Populaarin lumo - mediat ja arki*. Ed. Anu Koivunen, Susanna Paasonen, and Mari Pajala. Turku: Turun yliopiston mediatutkimuksen julkaisuja, 2000. 372- 388.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: the theory and politics of irony*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Kinnunen, Aarne. *Huumorin ja koomisen keskeneräinen kysymys*. Helsinki: WSOY, 1994.
- Knuuttila, Seppo. *Kansanhuumorin mieli*. Helsinki: SKS, 1992.
- Landow, George P.. "The Political Function of the Gentleman." *The Victorian Web*. 6 March 2005 <<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/gentleman2.html>>.

- Lehtonen, Mikko. *Pikku jättiläisiä: maskuliinisuuden kulttuurinen rakentuminen*.  
Tampere: Vastapaino, 1995.
- Lempiäinen, Kirsti. "Kansallisuuden tekeminen ja toisto", *Suomineiton hei!  
Kansallisuuden sukupuoli*. Ed. Tuula Gordon, Katri Komulainen and Kirsti  
Lempiäinen. Jyväskylä: Vastapaino, 2002. 19- 35.
- Marwick, Arthur. *British Society Since 1945*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Penguin Group, 1990.  
---. *Culture in Britain since 1945*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Morreall John, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*. Albany: SUNY, 1987.
- Morley, David and Kevin Robins, ed. *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic  
Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London and New York: Routledge,  
2002.
- Mustonen, Anu. *Mediapsykologia*. Helsinki: WSOY, 2001.
- Nead, Lynda. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*.  
Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.
- Neale, Steve, and Frank Krutnik. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London & New  
York: Routledge, 1990.
- Newman, Gerald. *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740- 1830*.  
London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1987.
- Niiranen, Katariina. "Nauru raikaa Pitkän Jussin Majatalossa – koomisen keinoista ja  
kansallisuudesta." *Lähikuva* 3 (2002): 77- 91.
- Nyman, Jopi. *Under English Eyes: Constructions of Europe in Early Twentieth-  
Century British Fiction*. Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi B.V., 2000.
- O'Shaughnessy, Michael. "Box pop: Popular television and hegemony." Goodwin and  
Whannel, *Understanding Television* 88- 102.
- Palmer, Jerry. *Taking Humour Seriously*. London: Routledge, 1994.

- . *The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television Comedy*. London: British Film Institute, 1987.
- Rasila, Tanja. "Avainsana, mysteerio, täyskäännös...Huumori ja komiikka sarjakuvan rakenteissa." *Ruutujen välissä : näkökulmia sarjakuvaan*. Ed. Juha Herkman. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1996. 61- 80.
- Richards, Jeffrey. *Films and British National Identity: from Dickens to Dad's Army*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Scannell, Paddy. "Public Service Broadcasting: the History of a Concept." Goodwin and Whannel, *Understanding Television* 11- 28.
- Siironen, Maria. "Ironian karuselli *South Park*- sarjassa: stereotyyppistä parodiaa vai stereotyyppien parodiaa?". *Lähikuva* 3 (2002): 53-68.
- Smith, Anthony D.. *National Identity*. London: Penguin Group, 1991.
- Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. 1963. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Woollacott, Janet. "Fictions and Ideologies: The Case of Situation Comedy." *Popular Culture and Social Relations*. Ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott. Milton Keynes & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986. 196- 218.
- Yule, George. *The Study of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.