Subliming the Ordinary: Expression and Celebration of the Postmodern Anti-hero in Lorrie Moore's Short Stories Collection *Like Life* (1990).

Zanafy Gladys Toahiba ABDOUL
University of Antananarivo, Madagascar

Abstract

This article aims at analyzing the contribution of the sublime in the representation and the celebration of postmodern heroes/ anti-heroes within contemporary American fiction through a collection of short stories written in the 1990s by one of America's most influential writers. Lorrie Moore revisits in her fiction writing the notion of the sublime and culminates the loss of affect, depth and interiority that characterizes postmodern art and culture. Through the choice of her characters, she celebrates the banal, the ordinary and manages to bring some magical glow which renders the ugly, the pathetic, and the insignificant attractive and almost glamorous and touching,if not glorious.Moore's mockery of and indifference totraditional aesthetic frames, associated with an extraordinary compassionate interest in human experience and needs,somehow engage a new sense of heroic criterion and values both in fiction-writing and in the reflected contemporary dysfunctional reality.

Key words: Sublimity, aesthetic, representation, heroism, dysfunction.

Introduction

The summary at the back of Lorrie Moore's collection of short stories *Like Life* describes its eight stories as marked by the characters'confusion toward the incomprehensible absurdity of the world in which they find themselves. Clearly, the main characters of those stories are far from the chivalric, courageous, virtuous and almost superhuman heroes of the traditional narratives that one might be accustomed to. Still, there is something about the way the author is revealing them to us, the readers, that renders them more touching, memorable and particular if not specialin their awkward peculiarity which is often associated with unvalued banality. Considering that "what we can conceive of – the infinitely great, for instance – but is not in our power to represent, exactly defines the *sublime*" (Appignanesi& al. eds., 22); what we perceive through these characters' pathetic and unattractive selves may be the very representation of theunderlying fabulous humanity of people, the existence of which we may not always be aware of unless fiction reveals them. In a way, the infinite liberty offered by the world of imagination, the kingdom of the sublime, is too tempting a refuge against the deceiving coldness and flatness of reality.

However, not every fiction writer is able to play the trick of succeeding in "holding" the readers'attention and in satisfying their modern capricious and inconsistent tastes. This is where the author's talent is essential to render these "rejected, afraid to commit, bored, disillusioned, misunderstood" (*Like Life*, 2002) personages sublime, and maybe even attaching and saleable, to our eyes. It might be much easier for a contemporary reader to identify with the aggressivedespair and solitude of a Zoe ("You're Ugly Too"), for instance, than with the admirable and self-deceiving choices of a Jane Eyre in both women's identity construction and quest for happiness once the reader gets the *mode d'emploi*. Indeed, despite the fact that those virtuous heroes are the worthy representation of a moralistic ideal of humanism; they can also sound boring, pedantic and unreachable to the audience for which they are intended. After all, isnot the aim of fiction writing and any kind of narrative primarily entertainment, the pleasure of sharing and marveling in the experience of human emotion whether in beauty or in horror. Lorrie Moore achieves the sublimation of her characters by giving them some credibility through the use of humor and language as instrumental to identity-construction associated to a flirtation with the absurd and the improbable. And what can be more improbable and credible than awkwardness and silliness of individual eccentricities that define present society?

I Fragmented Voices and Identities:

Over the last decades, American fiction writers have pondered on the process and value of fiction writing under the influence of literary and intellectual "explosion of theory" of the 1960s and 1970s which saw the emergence of Derrida with post structuralism and deconstructionism (O'Donnell, 82). Characterization, of course, has not escaped this phase of questioning and experimenting that saw character as voiced or inferred, varying dimensions of consciousness, autobiographical or non-existent, revered, or simply sacrificed to the altar of plot and narrative. "If contemporary character is legibility in Auster, and voice in Scott and Gaddis, in Tillman, character is embodiment, the mapping of the relation between mind, body, and habitus not as separate, but as even verging upon each other in the formation of identities, individual and collective" (O'Donnell, 92). Amidst all of this confusion, Lorrie Moore seems to have found the right balance between the character as subject and object, the breaking point which brings all the discussion on characterization and its role and place within fiction writing. She describes her receipt for fiction writing in the following: "Narrative combines elements of vision and sound, like little else, as well as the psychological and the social. You get to design the set, write the lines, and be in the play. It is glorious. It is musical, dramatic, intellectual, and historical in its record of inner and outer" (Pneuman, 2005). It is, then, up to each writer to see where all those elements can come in so as to create an interesting story that will captivate the readers.

Obviously, for the stories in *Like Life* to be successful, the situations on their own would not be enough. The characters constitute one of the basic elements at the center of the narrativesthat complement the plot and the setting in order to get the intended effect. Moore's characters function as full individuals that live a life of their own separate from the author's preoccupation; however, they are not totally supreme either, as they have to compose with fate and the circumstances of their quest for self and destiny. Moore chooses to draw her subjects from fragments of voices, smiles, conversations, fears, laughter, cries, sorrows, grief, follies and small wisdom etc. that she observes around her and reads as the cultural reflection of contemporary American society. "I'm just trying to register the way we, here in America, live. Everyone's life is deforming." In making the link between fiction and reality, she tries to reflect upon all those different lives and how each is affected by the present change. "In this country there is a great range in the way people live, and this has to be

acknowledged and felt by all of us, no matter how lucky and safe we may feel" (Pneuman, 2005). It is because her characters are made up of details taken from different personages that everyone can recognize themselves in parts of those fragmented identities which allow a balanced implication through identification or distance on the part of the reader. None of the characters can be met as real individualized subject in everyday situations just as the funny circumstances that render the characters famous are equally improbable.As she suggests in the Garnett interview (2005), she does not believe in fiction as a reflection of reality. It only "takes from the real world" in order to create something else, the reality of the world of fiction, the world of not real.

Moore's characters tend to be deeply romantic and idealist in their deep selves and souls, if they have one, and yet they lack the courage or the strength to live up to these ideals and are washed away in the waves of the hardships of their everyday life. Moreover, these ideals that are more akin to fantasies or illusions render them "unfit" for the real world where there is only corruption and ugliness. This situation drives them to be a bit desperate and self-destructing but they remain none the less impressive as characters. What is so memorable about characters like Zoe ("You're Ugly Too") who can represent the anti-heroic characters of the collection by being the most expressive and touching in her despair, loneliness and stubborn helplessness? It is difficult to forget someone like Zoe, not because her face is memorable, but because she is too loud to be ignored. Physically, what characterizes Zoe is her banal, waning appearance, "almost" pretty in the conventional sense, hopelessly middle aged and with a queer sense of aesthetic in her eccentric ways of dressing (68). She looks too insignificant or even too ugly to attract or deserve attention until one listens to her witty and strong words, which in a way, brings her character into visibility and constitutes her very identity for the reader. It is through language that Mooreforms, creates and expresses the consciousness of Zoe's character and self; and in so doing she joins the young writers of her time and their belief in identity as a "matter of linguistic expression"(O'Donnell, 16). As the reader learns to know more about the characters' deeper feelings, thoughts and emotions than their physical selves, he/she becomes identified with their deep consciousness instead ofthe usual surface ensemble of fake, mannered expressions that is usually associated with individual faces. The choice to put the focus on individual people personalities rather than on the sense of representation of the personages can be viewed as a criticism of the over exaggerated stressput by contemporary society on homogeneity and conformism which erases the creativity of diversity in contrast to the lack of personality of mass production.

The fact they are voiced identities set out by the names more than clear individualized faces render Moore's characters malleable, it is easier for each reader to stick into the names faces that are familiar or can speak to them. Their malleable aspects allow infinite and unlimited possibilities. Furthermore, the characters are more effective in terms of transmitting the writer's point to the readers as the influence and blockage of visual prejudices against typical characters are quasi non-existent. What is being said is more important than who is saying them contrarily to the reality where the identity of who speaks tends to determine the impact of what is being said due to the prevailing cult of the person in movie industry, art and business. Just as in a reversed mirror effect, fiction can imitate life and the reflection may look the same but is as different from the original image. The writer wants the readers to focus more on the range of emotion and feelings revealed in the stories rather than on the individual personalities as identity.

The characters' doubt and despair are as much part of themselves as they are representatives of the erring postmodern world. At some point in the narration, the characters can become symbolic identities speaking for a given category of people. Almost all the women characters of *Like Life*, for instance, carry in their person the embodiment of the feeling of confusion specific to their gender and time period. Most women characters of the collection ofstories are middle aged career women, successful or not, who seem unable to assume the price of their choice in the face of the pressure of society on women of their age: "find a husband and have babies if you want happiness". So, they are lost into an infinite questioning on whether they are really happy or not; should they change and try to do as they are told, be "normal"? or be themselves and live according to their own principles and convictions? Their trouble seems to be personified in their incapacity to find the right balance between their romanticized ideals and the deceiving harshness of reality. From Mary ("Two Boys")who is desperately looking for the ideal lover who will take care of her; Mamie ("Like Life") who is sticking to the love of her despised, talented but poor husband because he is the only anchorage she has on sanity; Jane ("Joy")who cannot seem able to findher destined role and place, the right path meant for her;to the miserable house wife ("Places to Look For Your Mind") who seems to have given up all hope of making anything of her life after the loss of her son because she cannot find the courage to leave her husband despite her deception in his lack of support and indifference. All of those women are unhappy because they have lost track on what they really want or have simply stopped hiding themselves from the delusive truth of the emptiness of their lives. They are asking in a unified voice what a woman is supposed to do or be at this turn of the century when neither a successful career nor a husband or a lover can provide happiness. There is also the

case of the artist caught up in an existentialist dilemma of staying true to his art and soul and dying of poverty and hunger or enjoying life by sacrificing a part of himself and giving in to the imperatives and invading influence of corporate taste. The playwright Harry ("Vissid'Arte"), for one, is a live embodiment of this dilemma in his incapacity to accept the massacre of his work while he dreams of the immediate comfort and luxury that the money of this sacrifice will bring to his pathetic daily existence.Odette, the poetof "Jewish Hunter", on her part, has consented to sacrifice and silence her artistic side to the romance-killing eccentricities of her boyfriend while wondering about the reasons why she should love this inconsistent and crazy man at all. Everybody seems to be after a particular quest, the thing that will contribute to self-fulfillment. But no matter how hard they are trying, their efforts are vain for there seems to be no available answer; nothing is as unsure and uncertain than love and happiness in their present context.

Unlike in most of Moore's short fictions, allthe stories in *Like Life* are told in the third person point of view. Actually, this manipulation of the element of narrative in a rather unconventional way to make the story more effective helps engage the readers' empathy and identification ability with the characters. All the voices in the stories reflect an observation of different kinds according to the standpoint we are taking to listen in our reading. Whose voice is heard depends on the position that the reader adopts vis-à-vis the text. She explains: "There are times when the first person is necessary for observing others (not the protagonist) in a voice that simultaneously creates a character (usually the protagonist); then there are times when the third person is necessary for observing the protagonist in a voice that is not the character's but the story's" (Pneuman, 2005; Phelan, 1994).In a way, Lorrie Moore gets the reader to react according to her aims and fantasies through an expert sense of narration and storytelling. Under her authority, we will feel sorry for Zoe when she is at the lowest and as misunderstood as ever in front of the spite and suspicion of her students toward her "elitist snobbism" which looks ridicule considering the place (70); or for Mary when she desperately tries to get rid of her guilt by changing all the furniture in her room to a purifying, healing "white"(9). This choicesounds ridiculous considering that she is living above a meat shop and that her daily world is made up of blood that "ran off and collect to the gutter, dark and alive," after leaving an infested atmosphere "of refrigerated smell of (…) vague shame and hamburger death…"(4).

Moreover, we cannot help but to reject and condemn them when we are made to feel that they are giving in so easily to the traps that are set before them by circumstances; when they are so willingly playing the victims. With Mary when she keeps waiting for Boy Number One because he

represents reassuring security and yet, she knows that he will never leave his wife and kids for her; on the opposite side, she constantly despises and rejects Boy Number Two who is free because of his fragility and tender sensibility that she takes for a weakness. Such characters' tendency to delude themselves renders them as deceiving and irrecoverable to the eyes of the reader who might have felt compassion for them before; unlike traditional heroes who might fall, are meant to fall, but are assured to rise up and win at the end of the story. Lorrie Moore achieves this manipulation of the reader just by twisting the point of view of the third person observer from that of character's to that of the more neutral one of the story's. The reader is obviously asked to take position and to react, to take part in the making or unmaking of the identities during his/her reading.

The sublimation process occurs somewhere between the birth of the personages as live individuals on paper that the readers are helping to complete through his/her believing in their follies, adhering into their fantasies and the moment their actions and voices become incrusted into our memories like all the fragments of voices and images that we unconsciously capture from everyday experiences or from the mediatized representation of reality that we can recognizeand make our own. "Awkwardness is where tension is, and tension is where the story is. It's also where the comedy is, (…) when it resolves it tends to resolve toward melancholy, a certain resignation, which (I) find interesting "(Pneuman, 2005).Just as we can like or laugh at the Simpsons or the members of the Adams family and accept their absurdities and silliness for we are aware that they can only exist into the reality of fiction. It is all the more easy to believe in them as we know that they are not real. Certainly, we would react differently to both the stories and the characters if we do walk out and meet one of them in our neighborhood. Actually, this tells us that the survival of such improbable, anti-heroic characters depends a lot on the postmodern prevalence of uncertainty which allows all kinds of suppositions and the limitation of their space to the world of the imaginary.

The real world is viewed as hard, cold and flat without the enchanting power of dreams and fantasies. This can be shown in the example of Mary's dilemma, again. Even if she did have two real lovers whose personalities are as separate as complementary, she cannot be happy because those two men do not match her conception of the ideal lover which is but a construction of her imagination and that she went so far as to give a name to, "Number three," in order to make him come alive and credible. Number three is the only one who can satisfy her in every way for the simple reason that he is her own creation and meets all her criteria.

Sometimes in her mind she concocted a third one, Boy Number Three. He was composed of

> the best features of each. It was Boy Number Three, she realized, she desired. Alone, Number One was rich and mean. Number Two was sighing, repetitive, tall, going on forever; you just wanted him to sit down. It wasinevitable that she splice and add. One plus Two. Three was clever and true. He was better than everybody. (7)

Mary's trust in her imagination's creation tries to convince the reader that maybe the reality of fiction is more real and truthful to our expectations than the reality of the real world in the example of Mary's lovers, number one and two, deceiving and inconsistent. This factseems to attribute credibility to the latent pessimism of most postmodern theories about realism in favor of simulacrum. "She always wanted the thing not proposed. The other thing." (11) Even the little girl of the park who comes to look and spit at her withers in the reader's mind as being only partly real. One keeps wondering whether this girl is not just another creation of Mary's imagination too. Theembodiment of her consciousness that reminds her of her innocent years and makes her forget her loneliness. She sounds and looks so improbable that one never knows until the end of the story whether she is a real character or the fruit of Mary's imagination. "There they are. All *our* old boyfriends, (…) The girl turned, and loped away, the bones in her back working hard, colors spinning out, exotic as a bird rarely seen unless believed in, wretchedly, like a moonward thought." (19)

In the thin, blurred frontier line between the real and the fictive, one little thing can become the representation of a whole personage if not a full-blooded person. Moore, here, seems to attract our attention to our tendency to fragment and dismantle personalities and identities in our daily relationships. We seem unable to accept others for what they are, good and bad altogether in one sack; which is at the core of most failed relation. We are so used to respond or correspond to certain isolated images that society creates for us that anything unusual sounds strange and unreal. In "Vissid'Arte," for example, the brilliance and luxuriant aura of success that seems to follow the Hollywood producer, Glen Scarp, everytime Harry, the poor playwright, meets him seems to come from the expensive and outrageously visible and pretentious diamond broach that he is wearing (33). This broach on its own could be enough to tempt Harry who has not eaten any good breakfast for a certain while to sell his soul to Scarp. Its sole glow associated with the owner's confidence represented in Harry's and the reader's mind not only what success and luxury mean; but also what he (Harry and reader) is missing each and every day. He saw in the broach "the limp of flirtation, the lightness of promise." (33) Harry is so impressed by Scarp's outfit that he forgets for a while to discern the real from the hypnotizing light of the fake diamond and the emptiness of Scarp's words and success. Indeed, if the producer was running after him, a small writer, it is because he was out of inspiration and good ideas for a new film. Harry will learn later how this instant blindness would be

bitter when he will realize Scarp's betrayal. Scarp just used him toexploit the core ideas of his future masterpiece. (46)

If the broach represents Scarp and the unscrupulous and fake glow of Hollywood and the film industry in its falseness; the bristle hair on Zoe's chin can also represent her whole being which is characterized by her *mal etre.* All the strength and determination she puts into uprooting this single hair that nobody seems to see, stabbing at it until blood oozes out (88) shows how she is struggling to reach for the people around her but cannot get through. At some point, she realizes that she does not fit into this place, neither in the place where she works nor among her sister's friends who are present at the party, where her presence seems incongruous in emulation to this unnerving hair that symbolizes her "ugliness" and rejection to her mind. The fact that there was just one single hair can also point to her dramatic isolation and loneliness. When she tries to tell Earl her secret about the growth in her stomach, he does not seem to hear or even *see* her at all. Neither could Evan, her kind and caring sister, feel her despair when she tells her that "she is fine" or that "I'm seeing my house. I'm tending to it when it wets, when it cries, when it throws up." (73) She hides her sorrow behind this exaggerated dark humor.

The narratives in this collection of short stories combine the postmodern prevalence of the fantastic to a certain form of liberal realism as a way to render possible the characters' incessant journey between the real and the dreamlike world of their imagination without transition. The doubt and confusion of the real world is expressed through the improbable intermingling of two different spaces as a strategy to either shock the rational readers or enchant the bemused ones. The aim is to attract the attention of the audience on the uncertainty of their own reality by reflecting the confusion in the fiction while not losing the entertaining aspect in the funny; hence, the humoristic tone to atone the crude sadness of the situations described. Moore admits to finding some interest in casting a critical eye on the changes happening in societybut wants to do so in a less judgmental, neutral manner. "She aims at folly with an eminently egalitarian eye… criticizing both urbanites and yokels"(Chodat, 2006); "Lorrie Moore is a wickedly humorous writer. (…) Her characters' private pains reflect the nation's malaise" (Kelly, 2009). As if saying that there might still be some hope, some positive sides to this ongoing folly; and if not, there is still the refuge of imagination as an alternative.

II Sustaining the absurd: outer/inner worlds

As we like to look at ourselves and tend to focus selfishly on our little miseries, we often forget to look around us, to look at the other, at society and others. Solitude is one of the most prominent features of the postmodern era. “Solitude is the real life that takes place inside us. (…) The sense of self is formed by the pulse of consciousness within us; as an endless monologue, the story that our inner self weaves inside us.” (Nikolic, 2011).This celebration of “man as an island” can be traced in Moore’s fiction writing as solitude draws out the outlines of her narratives.Solitude is portrayed at different degrees in the characters. It can even become identified with some of the characters, like Zoe and Harry or Dennis, who can only find and express their true selves when they are on their own. Harry feels abandoned and ignored when no one listens to his complaints,not the police that considers him as one of those eccentric paranoids, not the truck driver who poisons his sleep, nor Bernie, his ex-girlfriend who chose to leave him because of his incapacity to grow up and face what she calls “real life,” with a job that pays and a real house (22-26). Zoe too feels that solitude is the only feeling and state that could really fit with her. She is unable to cope with the outside rationality and logic which sounds as crazy, unreal, and meaningless. And the world around her does not seem ready to understand or tolerate her aggressiveness and digressions. When everybody is wondering at her odd behavior, the only thing she can think of is “how did she look like” to the people she has just offended (90).Dennis, the heart broken divorced man in “Starving Again,” on his part, is suffering from the fact that all the things meant to help people get over heartbreak seem to be addressing women rather than men. He finds his needs as unmet while his only friend and confident mockingly considers *his* whimpering as displaced and unmanly. (44) Pain is often considered as “absurd because hard to look at.” The lack of correspondence between what a person may need and what the outside world has to offer will inevitably lead to the choice of solitude as life style.

Obviously, in those cases, there is a clash between who the character is inside, his inner self and his outer self, orthe perceived personage that the outside world dictates. A clash which reflects what the confused society is doing to individual people. The rules are no longer clear or at least not clear to everybody. This is where the talk of “madness” comes in as we tend to label attitudes and choices that we do not understand and cannot decode as “abnormal” because unchartered and unseen by the authoritative referential eye of media and cinema industry that Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1985) points to when he criticizes the hold of the screen on our present realities no matter how irrational it may be. Our present culture will celebrate and applaud the visually spectacular, the strange and unusual, *insolite et singulier*, as reflect TV reality shows and World

Records, in place of the praise attributed to valuable, admirable exploits of older times. The aesthetic of beauty itself might have shifted. The outer world reaction to those different selvesshows morethe limitationsof postmodern societies in terms of cultural capital and knowledge than a real individual incapacity to adapt. The conformist drive of present time sees in conformity norms the insurance not todeviate in the place of traditional values that served as references and signposts in life.This conformism is shown in Evan and Earl's need and urge to see Zoe behave "like her sister" (90) because this sameness reassures them of the illusion of some order and pattern justifying their automatized behaviors and choices, a kind of normalcy. When society fails in its supportive role to provide the individual with collective approbation and guidance, individuals have to find their salute within themselves; to turn to the inside self as a refuge from outside coldness.

Unquestionably a predominant element of her fiction writing, humor has been considered by most critics as Lorrie Moore's signature. "I'm a sucker of silliness sometimes. (…) I do feel that when you look out into the world, the world is funny. And that people are funny. (…) People being funny with each other shows generosity which (i) am interested in" (Garner, 1998). It is this peculiar sense of humor that sustains the narratives and enables a certain movement and flow bringing the reader from the stories' beginning to their end when the plot itself does not seem consequent. Some critics findthe omnipresence of this dark humor as disadvantaging to her work because it spoils her talent, making her work sound even more senseless than they really are (Mars-Adams, 2008); while others consider this humor as showing her mastery of story-telling in the sense that she can keep her readers alert and concerned when the stories in themselves have no depth or magnitude to anchor the intellect (Verdon, 1992; Lee, 1998;Pneuman, 2005; Mitchard, 2010). I would consider humor as an integrated part of the narrative language and of the characters; and as such, it only adds spice and sparkle to the flatness of the individual histories behind the stories behind told. It is this humor that permits the characters to jump from the real to the imaginary and which constitute a parameter allowing the reader to believe in the existence of the improbable.

Moore uses a wry and dark humor which withers between irony and sarcasm; marries well the metaphorically overloaded language of the narrative; and which has also become identified to the characters themselves. They cannot stand as live being in face of the outer adversities if they do not have the raw energy of this humor to use as a shield and a weapon. Humor is used by all the characters in different degree both to set them off from the general societyand also to hide the depth of their despair and loneliness. It works on two contradictory levels as it can function as a weapon

directed toward the outside world but it can also work as an instrument of isolation excluding the characters farther still from the rest of the world, imprisoning them into the inner world of their imagination. Zoe, for instance, considered to be one of the extremely sarcastic and aggressive characters in the collection illustrates pretty well this dual paradox of self-destructive humor as she is inclined to hurt the people who surrounds her – her simple minded students, her concerned sister Evan and even Earl, a potential lover. Strong of her obsessive prejudice on people's look over her and misreading of reality she sends all of them away at a time when she needs support and affection the most due to her illness. At the end of the story, her madness seems to culminate as she brings her feeling of betrayal and hate out in the open by "jokingly" shoving Earl off the balcony (90) which leaves her in the dark, desperately alone and sadder than ever.

In order to sustain the comedy and add to the effect of humor, Moorefocuses on little moments of awkwardness in order to appeal to the readers' emotivism. "There's a persistent discomfort with the little ruptures, awkwardness of an instant that is close to cinematic minutiaeyou create in the automated ways people observe and talk to each other, ruptures where unbearable and lovely humanity kind of dribbles through"(Pneuman, 2005).Not only is the humor aimed at attracting compassion but it also helps the aesthetic of language. The characters' jokes and funny anecdotes have been overloaded with a metaphoric aspect in order to make them more aesthetic; otherwise, they would just be meaningless digressions. "The language in a narrative has to be magical and enlivening in order to hold readers' attention, to cast a spell, otherwise the writer has to recourse to what really happened", which is clearly less attractive aesthetically speaking (Garner, 1998). The writer believes that playing with language through dark humor and satire would be morepowerful and expressive as opposed to literal or situational comedy which is often judged as flat. It would not fit in with the choice of main protagonists who have been described by a review from *The Village Voice* as "wisecracks." This quality puts them into a different category, like a club, for ordinary people with an unacknowledged potential that ironically counters their isolation in the real story being told. The reader himself may feel special in a human impulse to feel some sense of belonging and get totally entrapped into this world of fantasies. They are "flat and depthless" in the Jamesonian sense, the supposedly wisecracks who do not know what to make of themselves or their lives. This ironical bit may lead one to wonder whether the mockery is really on the characters or on their reflected versions in real life. Indeed, "intelligent" people who are aware of the tricks being played on them and who are more sensitive to their surrounding's falseness can be more harmed by

the drawbacks of postmodernism than simple minded or common people. Those "wisecracks" are even more vulnerable because they are aware of their waywardness but cannot help themselves.

III Celebrate simplicity and smallness:

A celebration of the joys of minimalism can somehow be heard in the narratives' voices. They are telling us to look past appearances and to recognize the real value what might be underlying unseen, in the depth of human character. That is to transcend the flatness and depthlessness that characterize the postmodern world and to go back to more humanist values of earlier periods to find the strength to move on and a meaning to life. We can take here the example of Jane in "Joys" who has settled her mind to be happy with her present job and life even if it does not sound so "great" because she realized that counting on small things that she is sure ofis always much better and reassuring than to wait upon emptiness. She likes loving her cat, around which all her existence seems to turn. The cat is taken to the vet clinic for a "bath" (55), and it is important for her that the cat is "happy" when it sees her getting into the room. (50) She knows that she is being looked down by her colleague Hettie, with her thinning hair, who is quitting her job to go surfing and live something "exciting" (57); so does Bridey, her old time friend, who wants her to audition for a choir competition in order to realize her childhood dream. But no matter how stereotypic she may soundwith her cat, her singing out loud while driving and her sample cheese; she rather takes the little instants of certainty and peace than keep on running after the wind.

> In the distance, past a valley dalmatianed with birches, there were larger trees, cedars and goldeningtamaracks – goldening! – and Jane felt that at last here was a moment she would take with her intothe rest of life, *unlosable*. There seemed nothing so true as a yellow tree. (65)
> The world was lovely, really, but it was tricky, and peevish with the small things, like a god who didn't get out much. (66)

The above words tell us that unlike the other characters that are clinging to their dreams and fighting hard against reality, Jane adopts a passive resilience that is almost too sad and easy to be believed. She is aware of what change and dreams she can expect and reach while at the same time keeping her fantasy free; a "no risk-taking" attitude that goes so well with her character, imprisoned in her ordinariness. As if being happy means having "reasonable" dreams and fantasies.

The images that we read being described in the stories are sometimes funny, confused, going in all directions, or even incongruous but the details contribute in making the characters' world vividly accessible to the readers, more alive, credible and less utopic. It might also be interesting to

consider these details as the author's way to put little sparks worth caring about in the drab realities. Things we may see or do everyday but not give much thought to, that can be contrasted to the usual darkness and senseless associated with absurdity. In a word, Lorrie Moore tries to re-invent a world of fantasies made up of little things that can be meaningless but everlasting and important,depending on the way we approach them, for they constitute the signposts of our contemporary existence. Appraising the dysfunctional reality around us by thinking that there might be some hope and possibility of changeis somehow always a more interesting alternative to the pessimistic purity of realism that most writings offer. Reality canlook like a shattered version of a bad nightmare whereas dreams and fantasies are but a nightmarish reflection of reality since there seems to be no clear cut separation between the two. People are evolving in an atmosphere made of illusion and the ephemeral; a place where everything seems possible and yet, no one seems able to control anything, not even the basic need for love and happiness.

Lorrie Moore seems to provide her characters as solution to avoid disappointment and deception to concentrate on "small joys" that the limitations of our means may confer to us instead of being trapped into the infiniteness that the world of the imagination, fiction, tempt us into. "When life gets complicated, hopes are rounded down to simpler things like getting a sleep…" (Lee, 1998). This minimalist attitude is representative of thecharacters in*Like Life* who are resigning to their failures and tend to abandon when faced with adversity. Nevertheless, to lose is shown by the author as possibly not always such a bad thing for the characters once they realize that happiness and fulfillment may not always be in those illusory and glistening image of success. Contrarily to Jane above, Mamie, the hungry artist's wife in "Like Life"is also taking resignation as her final choice in the face of despair and helplessness. However, she is taking this choice without much conviction. Her expectation of a better life that is embodied in the house of her dreams, a house with a bird feeder (152) is as unreachable as ever and her world is peopled with "if only" (repeated so many times and italicized throughout the story). This is why, unlike the happy Jane, she still suffers at the end of the story. Her reality seems too real and harsh for her. Hence the title "like life", to show that nothing is as what they seem in life. At the end of the story, despite her spite and anger toward him, she goes back to her husband's love for it is the only reality she can believe in.

> There was only this looted, ventriloquized earth. (…) Like some old lesson of knowing your kind and returning. She was afraid, afraid, she realized, sought opportunities for bravery in love. She tucked the flower in her blouse. Life or death.Something or nothing. *You want something or nothing?*
> She stepped toward him with a heart she'd someday tear the terror from.

Here. But not now.(178)

So, she had to keep going on even if she was desperately poor and miserable because death, the other option was worse. Contrarily to what has been said before, this last statement seems to reiterate the fact that even if this world that we know is bad, we cannot do without it. Fiction remains unreal and thus, limitedly reachable. We can take reality inside fiction but not bring fiction into reality.

One can also say that there is a positive thing in Lorrie Moore's representation of ordinary characters as sublime. It is the possibility of having everybody on the same footing. There is no more class or categories, no race, no gender, no status to be restricting for the choice of hero. Even if those distinctions are still existent and vividly marked in real life, they vanish in literature. For the hero to be fully accessible and reachable, he or she has to abandon the elitist and sophisticated attributes that characterized traditional protagonists such as a particularity that sets him or her apart from the common people and underlines his/her superiority: beauty, physical strength, intelligence, cleverness, courage, virtue, wisdom etc. The postmodern heroes do not have to be devoid of these qualities but they are not necessarily what is emphasized as their most worthy and interest aspect.

For these characters, the act of heroism has become just the readiness to keep going in what is already known as meaningless or senseless and to accept it, to take life as it comes without asking too many questions. There is no big morality sketch in the text for the hero to unfold in order to attain immortality through a life without reproach. There is only the courage of ordinary people, who are often victimized or losing in their small battles; their touching emotions when they get small victories. Maybe the heroes in Lorrie Moore's short fictions do not possess the qualities of Homeric, Aristotelian or classical traditional protagonists and they even tend to do silly things sometimes but their actions can be considered as admirably heroic and courageous considering the chaotic context of their present world. They do not make great achievements but they remain human in their awkwardness and absurdities. It leads the reader to question whether it is the characters that we are presented to who are unable to meet out our high standards or it is the aesthetic criteria the characters are being tested against that are inadequate for the realities of America's present time.

Conclusion

To conclude, Lorrie Moore's strategies of sublimation process operates at various level of the narrative elements - language, tone, and characterization – in order to cast the "magic spell" that would render both her fiction and the personages who inhabitit attractive and interesting. By marrying the real with the fictive world of the imagination she manages to render the awkward, the silly and the absurd credible and touching in their human depth. The situations one encounter in those stories can be so absurd that it's hard to believe that they can even really exist and yet, the vivid description of the author renders them so dramatically real in some ways that they are hard to shove off with the simple unreality of fiction. However, no matter how awkward the characters may act or be; their redeeming force lays in the very circumstances of their existence. Only in this postmodern and confused context can such unconventional personages win our admiration and be revered or acclaimed as heroes.So, if the banal characters of *Like Life*can manage to make the readers believe that they are special, then maybe, a new kind of protagonists - less virtuous and aesthetically poor when matched against old time heroes but equally attractive, interesting,and fit for the dysfunctional postmodern world and its culture of the spectacular, and the strange–are born.

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