

# Black Humour, Psychoanalysis And Psychotherapy: Reading Of The Remedy In Martin Amis's Dead Babies

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## Abstract

This paper proposes an interdisciplinary study of Martin Amis's novel *Dead Babies* in the context of black humour and psychotherapy for the purposes of identifying and understanding how black humour can act as psychotherapy for the psychological trauma and physical pain that an individual suffers. Invoking some of the key tenets of black humour pronounced by Schultz, Friedman, Vonnegut, Breton and Bloom and those of psychotherapy as articulated by Freud, Anna Freud, Lacan, Jung, Klein, Bowlby and Winnicott, this essay explores the various traumatic psychological phenomena and their manifestations through the expostulations of Keith Whitehead, a physically challenged and prurient character in the novel, to sense how he takes resort to a sinister laughter to negotiate those and eventually internalize them. The paper includes an analysis of how the clinical psychological concepts like childhood trauma, suppressed sexuality, defence mechanisms, splitting, integration, breakdown, avoidant attachment and the superego are operational in various degrees in the character of Amis's protagonist and how they are extrapolated from medical and therapeutic interpretations as well as from the literary perspectives of black humour in this text for their broader appreciation and application.

**Keywords:** psychotherapy, black humour, trauma, unconscious, sexuality, defence mechanisms

## Introduction

When Andre Breton coined the word black humour he took his cue from Freud's remarks on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and opined that laughter in black humour lacks mirth and the lightness of spirit; it is opposite to "joviality, wit or sarcasm. Rather it is partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd." (Breton, 1997/2009, p.10) Years later the term 'black humour' was again coined by the writer Bruce Jay Friedman in his anthology titled *Black Humour*, drawing the attention of readers, critics and scholars. Vonnegut, one of the chief practitioners of the form, connected Friedman's term "black humour" with Freud's European "gallows humour" and described the laughter in black humour with Freudian interpretations in the following manner:

"Laughter is a response to frustration, just as tears are, and it solves nothing, just as tears solve nothing. . . The example [Freud] gives is of the dog who can't get through a gate to bite a person or fight another dog. So he digs dirt. It doesn't solve anything, but he has to do *something*. Crying or laughing is what a human being does instead . . . the biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments and the biggest fears. . ." (McConnell, 2019)

The origin of black humour has been founded on modern psychological and mental health principles. Freud says that (black) humour is a source of aesthetic pleasure, in which a discharge of mental energy takes place. He observes that 'grandeur' lies in the core of black humour, as well as, generally, in a narcissist triumph, a victory of the ego... With the help of humour, even a potentially suicidal person is able to avoid his/her suffering. (Lecher-Švarc, 2017, p.399) Echoing Freud and the literary artists who borrowed from him, black humour instruments the realisation of incapacities both physical and mental, and does not hesitate to deal in subjects that are considered sensitive and embarrassing. It highlights them for anagnorisis, admission, analysis and amelioration because, as Ionesco observed quoting Zarathustra, "to become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it . . . is to become the master of that which is horrifying." (O'Neill, 1983, p.165, 166)

About a century ago, black humour was established as a phenomenon which identifies the mental disturbances and physical aberrations in the activities of individuals which meander through convoluted thought processes and disgusting physical expressions. Friedman opines that it deals with "thoughts no one else cares to think." (Schultz, 1973, p.4) It foregrounds the contradictions of our

utopian desires and the futility of our dreams. According to Lisa Colletta, “dark humour tends toward the dystopian and presents a grim and even hopeless picture (and) satirizes ... man’s position in the universe.” (Colletta, 2003, p.6) To Schultz it is “a pointless journey with death as the only true destination” (Schultz, 1973, p.9) concerning itself with men’s inability to deal with the hollowness in their lives and their ineffectual efforts to combat the same. Black humour, apart from foregrounding horror and pain also serves as an agent of recovery as it is ultimately “affirmative of life and a celebration of the victory of the embattled spirit...” (Bloom, 2010, p.100) Lisa Colletta emphasizes that black humour highlights “ways of coping with the trauma of the claims of the real world: neurosis, madness, intoxication, self absorption, and ecstasy” (Colletta, 2003, p.33) and thereby becomes an essential tool for psychotherapy in its efforts at healing and rehabilitation.

Psychology takes into account all the behavioural and cognitive processes of an individual. The behavioural patterns are measurable but the cognitive processes rely totally on the mind through memories and thoughts. Through contemplative inquiry it tries to appropriate an understanding of the various factors which impinge on and influence human behaviour. Again through contemplative behaviour studies, it seeks an interdisciplinary approach in understanding the mind from fields as diverse as psychiatry, psychotherapy and other iterations of modern science. These all serve to work in tandem to reveal the unaccounted thoughts and feelings in an individual’s mind for treatment and cure.

The word ‘psychotherapy’ derived from the Greek *therapia*, meaning ‘healing’, is used in literary expositions quite often. According to Richard Nelson-Jones, psychotherapy means “healing the mind or the soul” and “healing of the mind by psychological methods”. (Jones, 2015, p.3) It is basically a “series of conversations...” (Jones, 2015, p.10) an unerring talking cure. This is reinforced by Wampold when he states that “Psychotherapy belongs to a class of healing practices that involves talk as the medium to address psychological distress.” (Wampold, 2019, p. 19) Our mental landscape comprises of a small conscious area and a huge uncharted hinterland of the unconscious. We constantly forget many incidents as and when they occur. But psychotherapy contends that they remain arrested in the recesses of the unconscious. Any childhood pain or humiliation contained in the unconscious, affects our present behavioural pattern. No incident is insignificant enough to get unnoticed by the unconscious – it can range from a petty squabbling

between one’s parents to any form of indignity – physical or mental – that the person may have faced earlier. Fearing a recurrence of such ignominy, the unconscious may react in unpredictable ways, adversely affecting the present. Psychotherapy dives deep below the surface of problems in understanding mental issues, their origins, influence and potential remedies. It aims at an affirmative change for the patient. Dr Conte specifies that “the essence of counselling and psychotherapy is change ... means through which clinicians can elicit change in others.” (Conte, 2009, p.1). Psychotherapy affords a renewed opportunity at living and renegotiating one’s own identity with oneself. Jung stated that the therapeutic goal was to ensure “normal adaptation to overcome neuroses connected with shrinking back from the concrete life tasks ... attaining specific goals dealing with complexes and strengthening consciousness and ego functioning.” (Jones, 2015, p.70) In fact, psychotherapy aims at improving our mental health and our relationship with other members of the social ecosystem that we inhabit; it aims in “providing a patient with a secure base.” (Levy, Johnson, Clouthier, Scala, & Temes, 2015, p. 202) It is a powerful tool in helping us identify our shortcomings, especially when we fail to understand the asperity and obloquy that attaches to our reception by others.

Reading Martin Amis’s *Dead Babies* from the perspective of black humour as psychotherapy is a re-tracing of Keith Whitehead’s life-journey through his suffering childhood, his traumatic adolescence, the problematic mature years and his final near self-realization where he learnt to accept reality and to forgive, forget and move on. A clinical insight into his complexities is expected through such a reading in which a reader is able to interpret the causes for such malaises. In the novel, the authorial arc lights focus on the circularities of his psychological vicissitudes resulting from his physical incapacities, mental distractions and their release through humour. Keith’s humour is not benign, genial, and affable. Rather it is bellicose, unpleasant and depressing. It acts as his psychotherapy with the possible healing being promised to him both through clinical and non-clinical mechanisms. At this juncture, it would however be pertinent to remember that the identification of problems would not mean that the mental damage and the physical scars never existed or that they would disappear. It would simply imply that the damages already caused, could no longer control the victim’s life.

In the following discussion, in tandem with black humour, some of the key tenets of psychotherapy would be employed to understand the mental

fissure points in the protagonist and his probable koinonia with the self and the world at large, in the best median manner with their respective healing measures. This study will progress with an analysis of Keith's life-journey – his mental trauma resulting in the unconscious upheavals of his mind leading to pain and suffering, his attempts at compliance and his tendencies towards self-destruction, the pain of his physical insufficiencies and finally the path to the future that he negotiates while coming to terms with his self resulting in restitution, transcendence and a possible rejuvenation.

### The Mental Trauma of Keith Whitehead

The mental trauma from childhood to adolescence to maturity is one of the psychoanalysis and black humour cores and psychotherapy is one of the key components of catharsis in their discussion. The word *trauma* in Greek means a 'physical wound' but the wounds in psychotherapy need not necessarily have drawn blood as they allude to emotional wounds which an individual could have sustained. Freud in his *Outline of Psychoanalysis* underlined this phenomenon as the inability of a child to deal with problems at his tender age, which he could, however, readily address at a more mature stage in his life. For those that cannot expand this faculty and find answers, may suffer debilitating psychological consequences subsequently. Keith's stunted growth had made him the subject of abject ridicule right from his childhood, leading to major mental repercussions and a concomitant physical aggression in his life thereafter. His early-life trauma manifested itself in more ways than one in his interactions with others. Keith was the recipient of unwarranted verbal offence and physical abuse from an early age. Several of such situations from Keith's childhood could be read in the disparaging exchanges between his parents and himself. For example, his father's abuse with respect to his physical gait is a case in point here: "...Keith ... you fat little sod... you're only four foot and a fart". (Amis, 1984, p.144, 145) Here it is not just physical violence that had protracted and haranguing effects on an individual who was helpless to react. The pent-up woes, the incapacity to retaliate when one is but a child and the inability to match up in strength and courage against one's adversary remain locked up in the depths of the mind to erupt subsequently. Nietzsche's concept of '*ressentiment*', expounded further by Scheler, is applicable here wherein he had stated that it is a "generalized chronic feeling that involves both a desire for revenge against its perpetrator(s) and failure to express the revenge in direct action.

(Meltzer & Gsof, 2002, p. 243) Keith's unreasonable punishment of Celia's bronchitic Persian cat, Mandarin and getting pleasure out of it is substantive of Nietzsche's concept. Amis writes: 'Gently trapping the Mandarin ... Keith caught her a good one right on the nose... kicked her into the corner ....' (Amis, 1984, p.18) Keith finds pleasure in the pain, afflictions and misfortunes of others, in this absolute epicuricity.

The darkness of this humour demonstrates that this aggressive reaction and the resultant satisfaction are manifestations of a mind that is terrorised, traumatized and humiliated, a self that is powerless against the indignity and ignominy inflicted upon it by a more powerful enemy. Breton observes that "a child will always set a fundamental opposition against those who try to mould him, and then diminish him..." (Breton, 1997/2009, p.138) Keith's opposition to his parents' abuse is channelised through a series of vengeful and violent behaviour patterns. Andy's dismal and pathetic behaviour towards Keith was belittling to him in no small way, especially when Andy "... kicked and stomped on his tremblingly obtruded legs" (Amis, 1984, p.181) and this provoked him to take his revenge on him at the first possible instance by declaring that he had tricked him, much to Andy's surprise and remonstrance: "'Oh yes... I tricked you'. Andy sat back. 'Fuck me,' he said." (Amis, 1984, p.194)

Keith's biggest victories against the weak and the powerless seemed to be based on his biggest disappointments and greatest sadnesses; as Vonnegut proposed as an important procedure of the black humour protagonists. Nietzsche pronounces that "the rancor of beings who, deprived of the direct outlet of action, compensate by an imaginary vengeance." (Nietzsche, 1956/2009, p.170) In the case of Keith the thought of others' discomfiture at his purported death gave him much vicarious pleasure: "... the news of Whitehead's forthcoming death saw an infusion of coltish high spirits into Appleseed Rectory... And was Keith going to throw a dampener on their good cheer? Not a bit of it, Whitehead had never felt better in his life." (Amis, 1984, p.194) The imaginary vindictive activities of Keith provide him with macabre pleasure that approximate the laughter of black humour.

Psychotherapy helps a patient realise and come to terms with his early traumas, the erosion of love, the annihilation of meaningful relationships and the loss of self-esteem, confidence and self-respect. In such an endeavour, it joins the dots between past occurrences and their present manifestations in identifying the problems at the core. Instead of rejecting the past it adopts a 'social constructionist'

viewpoint assuming that “how people process and construct information about themselves and their world is central to their existence. Rather than conceptualizing progress as a departure from the past (it) draws on the past to serve the present.” (Jones, 2015, p.6) It helps to calibrate the unconscious and uncontrolled past to a predictable present. It draws support from the psychodynamic school of counselling which emphasizes “the influence of unconscious influences on how people function... to increase... greater conscious control over their lives.” (Jones, 2015, p.5) This helps individuals to dissipate their unbearable consequences and prevent any subsequent crises in their adult lives.

In black humour, the humour lies in the fact that the causes of the problems which turn men into aberrant individuals lie unaccounted for within them. Ironically, he unsuccessfully tries to find answers without. Keith was aware of the external manifestations of his unhappiness but unaware that the reasons for such penury of mirth and his violent reactions to situations lay entrenched deep within him and in the painful history of his childhood as expressed in his conversation: “No one likes me, actually most people dislike me instinctively, including my family – I’m not much good at my work, I’ve never had a girlfriend or a friend of any kind...” (Amis, 1984, p.148) Such a self-flagellation and the realization that one is absolutely dispensable do search for conduits later on - it may be a quiet manifestation or a loud outburst of pent-up feelings of hurt, anger and disillusionment. These were ‘defence mechanisms’ explained by Anna Freud, the “unconscious resources used by the ego” to ultimately decrease internal stress. (Bailey & Pico, 2020). ‘Acting Out’ is such a defence mechanism where one resorts to aggression. Leonard and Roslyn Swartz state that “manifestations of character problems are often viewed as a form of acting out ...” (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1971) Keith’s hostile attitude towards the timid Tuckles, the tenants at the outhouse of the Appleseed Rectory, are manifestations of such pent-up humiliation. The victim in him sought to gain self-esteem by being overtly violent towards people who were powerless and physically inferior to him. Freud stated that (dark) humour originates from a process of victimization: “The person who is the victim of the injury, pain, and so on, might obtain humorous pleasure, while the unconcerned person laughs from comic pleasure” (Freud, 1960, p. 228) and humour substitutes itself for indignation, “the small contributions of humour that we produce ourselves are as a rule made at the cost of anger - instead of getting angry.” (Freud, 1960, p. 231) Amis uses irony, a potent of black

humour when he makes Keith, without resorting to anger, admit his drawbacks tearfully that one “can get used to anything, really...” (Amis, 1984, p.130). Psychotherapy concludes that these are external manifestations of the conflict between the id and the superego, where the patients try to reduce the pain and the conflict within themselves with the help of such measures: “the patient becomes aware of and takes responsibility for, the unconscious impulses inherent in his acting out behaviour, when he is urged to interact, employing his typical lifestyle in an exaggerated and pronounced form.” (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1971).

The ‘Superego’, as translated by James Strachey of Freud’s ‘*Über-ich*’ or the ‘Over-I’ is the psychological and mental aspect of a person that sits in judgement over him. Freud states that “the *Über-Ich* imposes the strictest moral standards on its helpless victim.” (Freud, 2003, p.112) It is an internalisation of the people we have encountered and the voices we have heard in our lives before and is broadly a summation of our “cultural, racial and family influences.” (Jones, 2015, p.31) The animosity that Keith experienced in his tumultuous childhood reflected in his barbarous dealings with those he came into contact with in his adulthood. An example of this is the verbal aggression he exhibited while addressing the meek tenants at the Rectory: “Out of the bloody way then... I want some more of the gin that I brought you, That’s if you haven’t already bloody...” (Amis, 1984, p.154) Nelson Jones quotes Freud to state that “... individuals vary in the severity of their super-egos which may be benign or punitively harsh and restricting.” (Jones, 2015, p.31,32) Despite Keith’s belief that his physical repugnance would deny him sexual favours from Lucy, the thought of refusal still induced the idea of self-destruction in him. It is ironic that the narrator of the story gives a comedic twist to the events at the cost of Keith’s predicament: “. . . he would kill himself if Lucy did not alleviate it by sleeping with him.” (Amis, 1984, p.161)

This dark romance with suicide can be addressed by the therapist by gentle conversations and counselling which helps the patient to retrieve his lost self-esteem and pride. It resorts to an emphatic ‘person-centred care’ which it expresses as “high-quality health care that respects an individual’s preferences, needs and values, and is provided in an emphatic and compassionate way.” (Stergiopoulos, Ellaway, Nahiddi, & Martimianakis, 2019, p.1021) John Bowlby’s ‘attachment theory’ suggests that the emotional bond that “early interactions between child and caregiver are at the core of attachment theory. The affective bond that develops between caregiver and infant is the developmental nucleus

of identity formation, intrapersonal regulation, and inter-personal attitudes". (Levy, Johnson, Clouthier, Scala, & Temes, 2015, p.197) However, nasty experiences when young and impressionable, force individuals to react indifferently with people they would, otherwise, have liked to be actually very close to. Bowlby continued that specific personality disorders were related to specific insecurity styles. Such a distinction is utilized to identify three different disorder styles such as secure, anxious-ambivalent and avoidant. Avoidant children stop getting distressed by the pain of separation and start treating both their caregivers and perfect strangers similarly. (Levy, Johnson, Clouthier, Scala, & Temes, 2015, p.198) Despite his traumatic experiences at the Institute or with people he had interacted with before, Amis's authorial voice asserts that to avoid a precarious turn of events later on, Keith would still "yearn to be at the Institute, or even in Parky Street, Wimbledon, with that family (he) so loathe(s)...". (Amis, 1984, p.162) Black Humour uses laughter and tears alike as fallouts of frustration, and they solve nothing. Mark Polizotti confirms that this "is the opposite of joviality ... the revenge of the *pleasure principle* (attached to the *superego*) over the reality principle (attached to the ego)." (Breton, 1997/2009, p.11) The tears dry up, resulting in a paradoxical exhibition of entropy, misery becomes personal and internal and a person fails in his emotions, treating all alike. Keith had been an absolute anathema to his parents. While still in college, his father had even communicated to him to not contact ever again: "His father rang to say that he spoke for the whole family in asking Keith never to contact them again... Whitehead started to be insane." (Amis, 1984, p.148) Keith's life at college had not been any cake walk either. His days at Wolfsan College had been days of "ostracism, mortification and self-loathing." (Amis, 1984, p.147) Such reversals had led him to suffer from the disorder of avoidant attachment and in his journey he erred in distinguishing between repulsion and love. Even those who seemed to care for him were placed on the same plain of disdain and disparagement. Hence, even though the Tuckles were deferential to Keith, and made him "feel flash, cool, grand, a pop-star, a Mohawk, one-up, stylish, sexy, brilliant, rich, tall and good," (Amis, 1984, p.57) he could not reciprocate appropriately. Bowlby suggests that the attachment theory had relevance for psychotherapy as the therapist could help the patient to come to terms with this predicament by exploring his past and present relationships and recognize the cause for such reactions. Keith sought to achieve this by working "his way through the reading-room

magazines, appreciatively noting down all instances of deformity and privation more acute than his own; a study of *The Guinness Book of Records* assure him how puny his problems really were.." (Amis, 1984, p.149) Black Humour sums up the attitude as "a defensive strategy." (Bloom, 2010, p.84) But Keith was just some fantoccini of his past experiences, a prisoner of his unpleasant childhood. Even while he believed that he was in perfect control of the situation, unknowingly, he was actually relinquishing control of his own self – it was in "a SENSE... of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything ... reducing everything that then seemed all important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path." (Breton, 1997/2009, p.11, 12) Even while he laughed the laughter of his own pain and disillusionment at the misfortune, he caused the Tuckles, inwardly he may have felt just the opposite! The actions and the intended results did not find congruence. His violence in his interaction with the Tuckles and the perverse pleasure that he extracted from their discomfort were nothing but a dark comedy of concealment and suffering. He seemed to have distanced himself from the people, whose proximity could have afforded him peace and solace, thereby leading him onto even greater psychological complications. Compliance thereby becomes a case in point of consideration at this juncture.

The Compliance theory indicates that a person is pliant, receptive and obedient. It is a characteristic that is greatly admirable in others. However the compliant person necessarily may not believe in the activities he carries out at the request of others, but for peer acceptance only. Martin Gould quotes Kelman: "action performed consistent with an attitude in the anticipation of social approval or some other reward; but compliant actors do not actually hold the attitude." (Gold & Douvan, 1997, p.152) It is also the 'Persona' that Jung referred to. The character wears a mask in front of others so as to project a pliant image of himself. The real self is concealed and Jung calls it the 'conformity archetype'. (Stead, 2019) The Jungian Keith could be visualized in his gentility with Lizzy Bardwell in trying to project a favourable image of himself when all he wanted was to get physical with her. He hid his desire in a mask of concern and chivalry: "Keith was gallant and deferential, parading with Lizzie over the grounds... and only every now and then going noiselessly down on his knees to look up her skirt, or peering down her blouse..." (Amis, 1984, p.151) Black humour operates at this level in the irony that despite the apparent effort of the mind to predominate the body it is the body which triumphantly persecutes the mind. Instead of a

luminescence of the self it becomes a descent into the deplorable darkness of the mind through the crevasses of the body.

The secret and unfulfilled desires of the person, or the roadblocks that he may have faced in the realization of his objectives, result in a readiness to please. Martin Gould evokes Kelman and Hamilton to state that “in identification, in contrast to compliance, the person is not primarily concerned with pleasing others, with giving them what they want, but is instead concerned with meeting the others’ expectations for his own role performance” in order to actualize a desired self-identity” (Gold & Douvan, 1997, p.106) The system results in duress, translating into erratic behaviours like violence and self-mortification over one’s physical imperfections. Jung’s ‘Anima’ or the feminine feelings of love, compassion, sympathy and empathy that a man harbours, find expression in aberrations and erratic behaviour patterns when faced with such duress. It then slithers out through means of sentimentality, eccentricity, fantasy, hysteria and even violence. Keith’s unfulfilled sexual desires led him to indulgences in the fantasy of pornography and a desire for sex at the Rectory at the weekend: “Whitehead, who had hardly fucked anyone, hadn’t fucked her, and it was his dream to do so this very weekend.” (Amis, 1984, p.20) Again, Keith had seemed to be overtly servile as far as Andy was concerned. The eagerness to please was such that Keith readily agreed to sniff the drugs first and test them for their efficacy before they would be sampled by Andy and his tribe: “It’s drug time”, Andy announced. “Oh God,” said Keith. One among the many of Whitehead’s domestic posts was that of drug-tester.” (Amis, 1984, p.31) This readiness is actually distorted civility, which he imposed upon himself to comply with powers more potent than himself resulting from a delusion of the self. Here Keith experiences what Friedman states is actually the black humour that “is a feeling of insecurity, of a ‘fading line between fantasy and reality,’ a sense of ‘isolation and loneliness of a strange, frenzied new kind,’ and above all the element of social satire in a world gone mad.” (Bloom, 2010, p.82)

On reflection one may find it darkly humorous that an activity that attracts social approval may have such censorious outlets for its expressions. Humour expresses itself again when it is prescribed that while obedience is great, it is also sometimes necessary to assert oneself and be rebellious and disengaging “in a refusal to treat tragic materials tragically...because (it is) the only remaining approach...” (Bloom, 2010, p.83) to lead a productive and fruitful life. While black humour accentuates such perplexing complexities in man,

psychotherapy seeks alleviation through care that shifts from “the biological sciences and disease to person-centred care” (Stergiopoulos, Ellaway, Nahiddi, & Martimianakis, 2019, p.1021) thereby making the process more caring, compassionate and individualistic with more positive implications. This soothing care which psychotherapy affords the patient becomes particularly relevant and important when it comes to sexual performance and thereby the esteem of the self as both a sexually capable person and a potent individual as well.

Gould observes that “there is always in the sexual encounter the potential for both exhilaration and danger in the dissolution of the boundary of the self. Whether this potential is a threat or promise depends on the confidence of the individual’s sense of identity.” (Gold & Douvan, 1997, p.112) Repressed thoughts and desires search for fissures of escape and when denied, they formulate aggressive modes of expressions. The suppression of the libidinal urge leads to dissatisfaction. Freud had identified this as ‘fixation’. Fixation at any stage could lead to anxiety in childhood and neurosis in adulthood. (Lantz & Ray, 2021)

From his childhood Keith knew about his physical drawbacks but could not undertake any ameliorative measure: “It was not release that he craved, far less pleasure, merely a token withdrawal of the insult of ugliness” (Amis, 1984, p.73) He could only afford to mock himself, but it would only be a helpless mockery, empty and nihilistic. “I’m fat, poor, bad, I’ve got a horrible spotty face, constipation, B.O., bad breath, no prick and I’m one inch-tall” (Amis, 1984, p.149). When the doctors would pronounce him more fat-prone than ever, Keith would lie “in pulsing, hot-faced, glandular silence by day and at night... the weeper of unreflecting tears.” (Amis, 1984, p.30) Physical impotence and sexual unfulfillment combined with mental rage, unknown to oneself, leads to dangerous tendencies of violence and self-annihilation. Martin Gould echoes Erikson in such a context that “... in sexual fantasies, a loosening of sexual identity threatens . . . the ego thus loses its flexible capacity for abandoning itself to sexual and affectual sensations...” (Gold & Douvan, 1997, p.112) The realization that one is not only incapacitated but also helpless to reverse the predicament, invariably creates a sinister laughter and Amis does it through Keith. The desperation to have coition culminated in his bold invitation to Roxeanne when no one else would sleep with her resulting in the unabashed invitation – “With me?” (Amis, 1984, p.184) However, such over-the-top manoeuvres do prove to be highly detrimental in the end due to non-performance, leading to a sense of anomie with damning psychological implications.

The experience ended up in disappointment and shame: “At the far end of the room, between the bed and the wardrobe, was a pile of blankets, sheets and clothes. Inside it was a motionless lump. That was Whitehead”(Amis, 1984, p.189)

Here psychotherapy aids to identify the true cause of mental afflictions as it offers opportunities for “comparing and appraising the quality and direction of reform agendas, including multi-level strategies...” (Stergiopoulos, Ellaway, Nahiddi, & Martimianakis, 2019, p.1019) Sexual frustration is a case in point. Why does performance not have sex as an option for Keith who “hadn’t minded discovering that he was small, fat and ugly half as much as he had minded discovering that he would always be those things, that all of it could never change now”. (Amis, 1984, p.73) Freud’s seminal work in this aspect is particularly noteworthy, especially where he distinguished the symptoms of such ailments with their causes. He had identified five stages of psychosexual development corresponding to the age, the erogenous body parts and the clinical consequences for aberrations. Stage five of the development theory pertaining to children between thirteen and eighteen years of age is particularly relevant in Keith’s case. Freud had stated that at this stage the fully developed ego of the child learns to negotiate meaningful relationships and desires freedom. Any dysfunctional experience at this stage leads to the inability to develop any healthy relationships thereafter. (Lantz & Ray, 2021) It was at this specific age point that Keith had faced the maximum humiliation, with his family and in college. No doubt, it had crippling consequences on his psyche later on: He almost cried to himself, “I am not like anyone else” (Amis, 1984, p.35) To Bloom this is the “black humour of lost norms, lost confidence, the humour of disorientation.” (Bloom, 2010, p.89) Despite being one of the primary reasons for such disturbances, it is ironical and an absolute travesty that the patients fail to identify the real cause of their problems as these are ‘dissociated narratives’ or ‘silent stories’ which are “accounts of loss or trauma unvoiced to others, and often even to the self ... the result is a breakdown in sociality.”(Hermans&Dimaggio, 2005, p.219) Keith was unable to appreciate why he repeatedly failed in his sexual endeavours and why he could fail again at the weekend. Self-decimation was on his mind if he failed to indulge in a rewarding sexual experience at the weekend.

However, there is never a total loss of the self or complete breakdown. Black humour highlights that dialogical breakdown simply manifests in extreme behaviours which in Keith’s case was both self-rebuke and a desire to end his self. With such an

understanding, psychotherapy helps a resolution at the level of enunciation itself. The individuals are motivated to extract meaning from life once again. This is confirmed by Hermans and Dimaggio who suggest that “with major disruptions of life narratives such as patterns of disorganization, dissociation or dominance... individuals are faced with the task of ‘relearning the self’ and ‘relearning the world’, as they struggle to revise their previous life stories to render them more adequate to the circumstances in which they live.” (Hermans&Dimaggio, 2005, p.220) The individual is assisted in revisiting the unexplored caverns of the mind where lie hidden the esoteric facts of the problems. Once the issues in the past and the “fading line between fantasy and reality, a sense of isolation and loneliness”(Bloom, 2010, p.82) get identified, it foregrounds the problematic factors for their identification and attenuation.

Keith’s forthright admission to the doctor that he was disliked by others and that he had never had a girlfriend, seemed to have revealed a great scar in his psyche. Since his gait denied him physical intimacy with the opposite sex, he resorted to delusions with seedy periodicals and pornography. Bloom suggests that “entropic humour... centred on borderland areas of the imagination: taboo and insanity, dream and fantasy, mirror-worlds at the lip of the abyss, realms of the hypothetical...” (Bloom, 2010, p.96) The fantasies that Keith harboured about women and sex veered to an absolute preoccupation with physically revealing visuals accompanied by mental masturbations. Black humour suggests that the love that he wanted and could have received if not for his physical deformity, found expression through such a preoccupation and obsession with pornography.

Anna Freud had dwelt on this concept with respect to both psychological conflict and mechanisms of defence. To her, the defence mechanism of Sublimation was “the displacement of the instinctual aim in conformity with higher social values” and an instinctual process by which “the ego achieves its purpose of diverting the instinctual impulses from their purely sexual goals to aims which society holds to be higher.”(Freud, 1983, p.52, 135) Such a defence mechanism operated in two ways – as humour it converted unsavoury experiences into light hearted jokes as an overt process which was socially acceptable and as fantasy it channelled unacceptable or unfulfilled desires covertly into various imaginations and avoided social sanction. Keith sought refuge in fantasises of sexual indulgence which he could never realize in actuality. He sought to hide such disenfranchisement through an overt expression of extreme fixation with pornography. Such an

uninhibited consumption was startling to even the guests at the Rectory, who themselves indulged in much facetiae.

“Why? What could Keith possibly have to masturbate about?” ... “He’s got plenty of visual aids”... “Just a great load of cunt-magazines.” (Amis, 1984, p.26)

Despite such a preoccupation, Keith did have the desire to be loved and to be cherished, the feeling of being wanted. But he may not have realized that he was perfectly capable of feeling for others and for himself. Unknown to himself, he may well have repressed such feelings for ever, to his own detriment: “...Lucy fell asleep and her head dropped carelessly onto Keith’s waiting shoulder...tiny tears glistened beneath the lids of his closed eyes”.(Amis, 1984, p.113) Not only does this reveal Keith’s psychological predicament where he seeks defence as a mechanism to conceal his frailties, it also foregrounds the irony of the situation,— Keith himself seemed to have lost the finer nuances of emoting and forgotten that he was also capable of being loved and loving others as well. The defence seemed to have shielded his very identity as that of an emoting human being. The humour of the situation foregrounds the tragedy seeking Breton when he observes that it was a process of “reducing everything that then seemed all-important to a petty scale. Desecrating everything in its path.” (Bloom, 2010, p.12). In a sense it is a headlong plunge into ethical and aesthetic chaos. But once the cause gets identified, it becomes easier for psychotherapy to address the issue through talking, discussing and gentle counselling of the patient as “exploring the operations of discourse generates nuanced descriptions of how institutionalized ideas underpin day-to-day activities of actors in different organizational and social contexts.”(Stergiopoulos, Ellaway, Nahiddi, &Martimianakis, 2019, p.1019). However, a particular decline leads to further psychological issues requiring attention.

Keith’s lifelong humiliation led to what the psychotherapist Melanie Klein referred to as ‘*splitting*’ or the tendency to compartmentalize people into whom we like and dislike – the good and the bad respectively. The ‘bad’ are subsequently repressed: “the individual may turn away from it, on account of his fear of it as a source of danger and also in order to shield it from his own sadistic impulses; or he may turn towards it with greater positive feeling, An object-relation of this kind is brought about by a splitting up of the mother-*imago* into a good and a bad one.”(Klein, 1960, p.215)This makes a person fail to distinguish between the negative and positive traits of another resulting in an all-or-none compartmentalized

thinking pattern. It takes him forward to both attachment and aggression, leading to borderline personality disorders. With Lizzie Bardwell, his college mate, it was whom Keith liked, she was his “dream girl” (Amis, 1984, p.151) With the Tuckles it was pure verbal aggression, as if he was almost getting back at his parents for their ill treatment: “How many bloody times do I have to tell you, Mrs Tuckle, I don’t take sugar in my tea”.(Amis, 1984, p.141) It is ironical that the patient does not even understand why his response to others and the external world is shaped as aggressively as it is. This leads to a crisis resulting in squeamishness and aggression as defence mechanisms which manifest themselves in such dark exhibitions through both docile and belligerent behavioural patterns.

The cure to this is through ‘integration’ – the psychotherapist aids the patient to understand why he had has such a split and helps him take those baby steps again to realization and recognition. Hermans and Dimaggio affirm that integration “as meaning bridges become stronger, progressing from partial awareness through recognition and naming to understanding and integration, the client’s feeling gradually emerges and then changes from intensely negative to positive.”(Hermans&Dimaggio, 2005, p.138) Therapy helps to realize the ambivalent nature of others and “foster relationships that acknowledge and encourage acceptance of our differences and similarities”. (Stergiopoulos, Ellaway, Nahiddi, &Martimianakis, 2019, p.1021) and helps to admit one’s shortcomings without turning it into a case of embarrassment and mortification. As realization starts to settle in, he stops blaming the world and himself. When Keith realizes that he is unlike others, he seems to be on the verge of an outburst of emotional release and mental relief: “. . . And I’m a dwarf,’ said Keith (before anyone else could) to tremendous applause”.(Amis, 1984, p.88). Along with integration, the humour is also not lost, when the patient undergoes a crepuscular anagnorisis to understand, accept and laugh stoically at his own helplessness, because as O’Neill remarks, “... in the end- we do laugh, and while we laugh there’s hope” (Bloom, 2010, p.79) leading to both a kenosis and a catharsis of sorts.

Therapy makes all the difference at this juncture. By listening and caring for the patient it helps him to gather hope and reconfigure his emotions and his world. The concern and care of the therapist helps the patient to open up and share his misfortunes. This aids in relieving him of his heavy and oppressive mental load, helping him with an opportunity to come to terms with his present and negotiate his future by understanding and accepting his past.



## The Way Forward to Realisation of the Self

In psychotherapy, Sublimation is the process often witnessed when the lower thought processes are filtered out and the base instincts metamorphose directly into something beautiful and creative. Freud had defined Sublimation (*Sublimierung* in German) as “a certain type of modification of the aim and exchange of object in which our social values are taken into account.” (Freud, 2003, p.158) It is a defence mechanism in which socially unaccepted impulses, sexual or otherwise, get transformed into those more laudable by society. It proposes for itself many manifestations as the products of art, culture, science and other domains. Freud adds that a “method of guarding against pain ... is ... one of transferring the instinctual aims into such directions that they cannot be frustrated by the outside world... Its success is greatest when man knows how to heighten sufficiently his capacity for obtaining pleasure from mental and intellectual work. (Freud, 1930/1961, p.26) Ignoble thoughts undergo filtration for compositions that are more appealing and universal. It is as if the unrequited love and unrealized sexual desires result in a catharsis of the self where the sorrows and the unfulfilled desires of a person find expression in outbursts of great beauty.. While Keith’s frustration did find its own channel of expressions in physical and verbal violence, it also found articulation in something nobler in his *billet doux* to Lucy. The energies contained by his physical and sexual repression underwent alchemy to have found expression and agency in the soul, substance and body of his love letter! Even though the authorial voice would have the reader to believe that the letter was rather pedestrian by nature, it was nevertheless an impassioned plea and an intense outpouring of the heart. Jung describes such outpourings as “primordial experiences” that characterize a “visionary mode” of artistic creation that “is a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man’s mind ... it arises from timeless depths” (Bloom, 2010, p.5) Psychotherapy identifies such fissures through which it can channel the patient’s base feelings into something much more purposeful and creative. It utilizes “the Narrative process Model of experiential therapeutic change ... of human meaning making which constructs, maintains and when needed, revises our sense of self in the world.” (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2005, p.106, 109)

Black humour concerns itself with the physicality, the somatic, the body and the flesh, its cravings, desire and lust – the unnameable and the unthinkable – the “grotesque, gallows, macabre,

sick, pornographic, scatological ... or any combination of these.”(Bloom, 2010, p.80) But this turns out to be the point of inflection where the situation turns around for creativity, beauty and pleasure. Psychotherapy emphasises these redemptive processes, through an “interaction of the social and the psychological... (as) both... have the most profound effects on each other.” (Gold & Douvan, 1997, p.6) If they do not to convert sorrow into ecstasy then at least they do not transform into deprivation and despondency. It aims for a limited redemption of the self from the purgatory of self-loathing and aids to resist its annihilation. By breakdown we usually mean a complete physical meltdown accompanied by an absolute mental dissolution. However, psychotherapy seems to suggest that it is not a degeneration of the body and the mind, but rather a wild bid to recuperate and gather around oneself all that was normal, healthy and steady. Nathan Field evoking the Jungian philosophy observes that “any extreme tends to evoke its opposite, a process that he called enantiodromia ... in his view the tension of opposites is self compensatory... the psyche is a self-regulating organism. The unconscious will naturally balance consciousness...” (Field, 1996/2003, p.12) It is here when we stop, reflect and then pick up our mental baggage for an onward journey of growth and development. Keith had learnt to suffer dejection, undergo the passion of rejection and bear it as his cross. Quite early in life “he normally counted himself lucky if he could get into a room without exciting open derision: being totally ignored was, for him, an imperial entrance.” (Amis, 1984, p.132) It was just this resistance to failure that Freud had foregrounded in *Jokes*. “Humor can be regarded as the highest of these defensive processes. It scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing effect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defence”.(Freud, 1960, p.204) Freud even added that humour withdrew energy from the emotion of aggravation and transformed it into the pleasure of releasing it. According to O’Neill black humour “allows us to envisage the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair.”(Bloom, 2010, p.79) Keith, while in college, had faced dissonance and derision: “...his inaugural few days at Wolfson College ... had opened up whole new eras of ostracism, mortification and self-loathing”.(Amis, 1984, p.204) With time he had learnt to accept his frailties and live with them. He learnt that what could not be cured had to be endured: “...he didn’t go any madder...He found too that within a suspended community his sense of isolation could be turned to good account. He grew to think more

coldly and shrewdly about his personal shortcomings. .... In time, the feeling he had carried around with him since the age of six or seven, the feeling that he ought to be dead, gradually began to fade".(Amis, 1984, p.149) Psychotherapy aids to address such failures. Nathan Field says that it helps the patient in following the process of "going back to leap forward... the healing pattern of crisis followed by *lysis*."(Field, 1996/2003, p.12). It is ironic that Keith fell sick to become cured, fell to rise, degenerated to grow again and died every day to live another day. Humour rests on acceptance and renewal. Black humour works on the principle of experience that sings even as it upholds and exalts to move on. When Keith was young, every deprecation was like a whiplash – he may not have been able to comprehend why he was being rejected. But with age that seemed to have got addressed: "Hey there", said Marvel, looking over the lid of his box. "What can I do for you?" "Make me tall", said Keith. "Make me tall".(Amis, 1984, p.93) Freud's concept of humour originated from a process of victimization: "humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place. (Freud, 1960, p.200)Keith's coming-to-terms with his physical deformity, corpulent gait, maladroit moves and its accompanying rejection would have seemed to deaden the pain of isolation and loneliness to a great extent. Freud had highlighted this too when he had stated that humour "refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure'.(Streip, 1991, p.172) Despite being abandoned to die Keith decides decisively to return to the Rectory: "...he moved on gradually, in a way relishing the stealth force on him by his damaged legs, enjoying the sweet and painful integrity of his body..."(Amis, 1984, p.223) It is this mature acceptance of his imperfections that helped Keith to move on.

Donald Winnicott, the psychoanalyst, had introduced the concept of 'good enough' wherein he had stated that parents try to offer the best to their offspring and feel guilty when they are unable to do so. We often judge ourselves based on externalities, of yardsticks decided by society and what we are supposed to be by popular perceptions of goodness and propriety. We may think that we are not 'good enough'. Such a desire for conformity almost always makes us forget the good qualities that we possess and makes us impose punitive restrictions on our own mental landscapes. This observation

prompted Charlotte Sidebotham to observe that "Dr Winnicott's crucial insight was that perfectionism can be cruel and counterproductive." (Sidebotham, 2017) The psychotherapist would therefore act on to lower the patient's expectations of himself as 'good enough' is not bad or mediocre – it simply means that it delivers benefits as per the need of the hour without any accompanying criticalities. Keith's negotiations with the level of acceptance of his macabre realities generates the "good enough". Despite the horror and the physical humiliations that he was forced to experience at the Rectory, Keith did decide to return there: "The Intern had asked him, with every show of urgency, to stay on for treatment at the Institute, but – no – Keith had wanted to return as soon as possible...How, he thought, could he ever have wished to be elsewhere? He felt as if he had undertaken a long journey and had survived to be born again – born again through the midwifery of this sudden weekend" (Amis, 1984, p.223) The realization of the extant goodnesses, no matter how small or insignificant, in others and probably in himself and the ability to forgive transgressions, led to a rediscovery of the self and a possible rejuvenation of the mind. The best is mostly not always possible but the quest for perfection will always be there. Ratnapalan and Batty state that "good enough is not mediocrity. It has to do with rational choices as opposed to compulsive behaviour. The good enough approach is a way to drive ongoing improvement and achieve excellence by progressively meeting, challenging, and raising our standards as opposed to driving toward an illusion of perfection."(Ratnapalan, 2009, p.239, 240) Psychotherapy advocates that the 'good enough' life is actually the very life we all seem to lead in the daily humdrum of our lives where we meet half-way of our expectations and reality. It is the reality that we have to understand and come to terms with. By helping to accept one's shortcomings and frailties, psychotherapy acts as an enabler in knowing the self better and attuning with the universe in a more fulfilling manner. The benign part of black humour rests on renewal, rebirth and resurrection. Keith attains peace and gets to terms with his self with the acceptance of his shortcomings and the realization that it is with these that he has to carry on his renewed journey to the future.

## Conclusion

*Dead Babies* by Martin Amis is a text on mental dishevelment due to repressed desires of the mind and physical deformations of the body. Black Humour in the narrative is a veritable therapeutic

mode which helps to highlight Keith's travails in his arduous journey towards maturity and self-realization. It brings to the fore his physical incapacities and its corresponding mental upheavals and erratic physical articulations. Psychotherapy maps the mental landscapes for exact identification and isolation of the malaises and their possible remedial actions. Trauma, especially that which is the result of violence and abuse faced during childhood results in upheavals in Keith's mind. Aggression and thoughts of self-flagellation and self-annihilation in Keith are actually the result of repressed sexuality and cancelled sex. His obsession with pornographic material was a defence against the shame of his incapacitation. Keith's fierce emotions, where he loved deeply and hated with a vengeance, the tendency to divide people into groups he liked and disliked was a manifestation of 'splitting', whose cure lay in 'integration', where he learnt to accept his shortcomings and take them in his stead. One of Keith's key problems lay in his inability to distinguish between whom he preferred and whom he did not, leading to a clear manifestation of the 'avoidant attachment', resulting in erratic behaviours with those he would have liked to love and warming up to those who hated him and to whom he reciprocated in equal measure, but only on a subconscious plane. Keith's expression of violence towards others was an appropriation of the humiliation and degradation he had encountered early in his life. His love letter was actually a dalliance in art and an effect of sublimation of the mind and the self. His compliance was nothing but a forced reconciliation of his own helplessness. His ultimate acceptance that not being 'good enough' was the most realistic mode of survival, it was a final coming to terms in his overall realization of the self. The novel throws the spotlight on the one-of-a-kind and unique psychological issues that a person may face as a result of his physical deformities, repressed thought processes and its accompanying mental trauma. It highlights how they can be identified and addressed by the palliatives of humour and psychotherapy.

Keith's journey - one of sickness, identification and amelioration - is from his childhood till he attains maturity and self-realization. Its resolutions resonate with the psychiatrist, the psychotherapist and also the humanist in their quest to discover and identify all that ails and torments the human mind and the psyche, from their conception to their manifestation and maturity, up to their possible remedies for alleviation of the resultant pain and suffering. The uniqueness of the situation lies in challenging one's own self constantly by redefining and renegotiating meaning as it evolves and

crystallizes in its myriad interpretations. The journey has to continue through selective forgetting and contextual remembrance though the extant structures of society that the individual finds himself enmeshed in.

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