Don’t Be Absurd

Absurdist Humour in Absurdist Literature From a Cognitive Perspective

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Introduction

> Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this being short of jaundice all the time confused them.
>
> (Heller 1995: 7)

1. Experiencing the Absurd

From the very first page, Joseph Heller's classic novel, *Catch-22* (1961), impresses on its reader the absurdity that reigns supreme in its fictional world. Directly tied to that absurdity is a particular brand of humour that permeates the novel and which I term absurdist humour in this dissertation. Heller's classic is set on an air force military base in Italy during the Second World War. As such it centres on the absurdity of war, on the absurd regulations put in place by the military and bureaucratic complex behind the war, as well as on the high costs these demand in terms of human lives and how they erode human values. Although more than seventy years have passed since the end of World War II and more than fifty-five years since the publication of the novel, *Catch-22* to this day still resonates with readers. This is not altogether surprising as absurdity is still experienced in abundance in modern society. The absurdity of life, given literary form in *Catch-22* through the exploits of Yossarian and his fellow airmen, is not limited to the fictional realm.

In a seeming testament to Oscar Wilde's assertion that life tends to imitate art more than the other way around, a Romanian man recently experienced this absurdity first-hand. Constantin Reliu had been legally declared deceased after his (ex-)wife had presumed he died in an earthquake in 1999 when working in

Turkey. When Reliu was forced to leave Turkey in December 2017, he had a hard time convincing Romanian officials to let him into the country. Despite having the evidence right in front of them, Reliu was considered dead as indicated by his death certificate (Lewis-Smith 2018: 24). In *Catch-22*, the protagonist Yossarian is forced to share his tent with the corpse of a young lieutenant. Unlike Reliu, this hapless officer could not officially be declared dead as he had never actually reported in. Therefore, he could not technically be present on the base nor could he have died there, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary (Heller 1995: 115). Just like in Constantin Reliu's case, the officials could not be swayed and both the Romanian man and the fictional character find themselves in some sort of existential limbo. This dogged bureaucratic denial is clearly absurd and also generates some humour for most (perhaps exempting Reliu himself). This instance of absurdist humour derives its humorous quality from the fact that it borders on the edge of the implausible while still, obviously, being possible. This incongruity is further strengthened by the response to these events, which in both cases is nearly inconceivable. In the real-life case of mister Reliu, the courts have ruled that the appeal period to annul his death certificate has expired and that consequently there is nothing they can do for him. In *Catch-22*, Sergeant Towser determines that "the unfortunate lieutenant had reported to the operations tent instead of to the orderly room". He therefore "decided that it would be safest to report him as never having reported to the squadron at all, and the occasional documents relating to him dealt with the fact that he seemed to have vanished into thin air, which, in one way, was exactly what did happen to him" (Heller 1995: 115).

While perhaps no longer directly linked to the experience of war, there are still many aspects of modern life that impress upon us the absurd strictures governing our lives and society, often put into place by ourselves. The existentialist unease underlying Camus's philosophy of the absurd still reverberates strongly in our experience of daily life. And a dominant response to

the absurd is humour, not only in real-life but also in literature. It seems that, much like humour, the experience of the literary absurd is often a direct result of readers' inability to immediately reconcile literary text and experience (Safer 1989: 94). Events in the fictional world do not unfold as expected nor do they seem to respect the rules of (logical) causality, leaving no recourse but to interpret the text as absurd while generating humour at the same time.

2. Delving into Absurdist Humour

Absurdist humour in literature deserves scholarly attention as a fundamental device to both suggest and put into perspective the struggles of modern life. For this purpose, the humour is embedded in a narrative and literary context in ways that are not acknowledged nor properly understood. Despite the obvious co-dependency between the (literary) absurd and humour – a relationship often remarked on in both philosophy and humour studies – literary scholars have rarely delved deeper into the narrative function of absurdist humour, how it works, and more importantly how it impacts both the absurdist theme of absurdist novels and literary interpretation. That such a connection between the absurd and humour exists, is not only evident, it is also crucial for the understanding of absurdist fiction and its thematic structure, certainly within the Anglo-American literary canon.[1] But although many have remarked on the humorous quality of absurdist novels, few have explored in any detail why this is so. Rarely has the question been asked how absurdist humour is integrated into the narrative structure of absurdist novels and how it impacts the reading process and the reading experience. In my dissertation I aim at a better understanding of absurdist humour in absurdist fiction by focussing on two components. The first component

[1] I am referring to the work of authors such as Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Daniil Kharms, Lewis Carroll, Douglas Adams, John Kennedy Toole, Richard Brautigan, Flann O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, just to name a few.

is the relationship between absurdist humour and narrative concepts, specifically literary characters/characterisation, plot development and narrative spaces. These three basic narrative concepts are inextricably linked and serve as the basic building blocks of any narrative. Absurdist humour too is, in the third chapter, defined in terms of character interaction within the fictional setting and how this bears on the development of the narrative plot. This overlap then enables me to chart in more detail how absurdist humour is woven into the narrative structure of absurdist novels. The second component centres on the reader's experience of absurdist humour in absurdist literature. From the outset, I have adopted a meta-hermeneutic perspective, i.e., a perspective that reflects, through the means of hermeneutics, on how people make meaning of texts (see Korthals Altes 2014). It is not my intention here to prove whether or not the novels that make up the corpus are absurdist or not. Rather I aim to illustrate how such an interpretation comes into being and how absurdist humour contributes to that process.

Rather than focussing solely on literary comprehension, as cognitive stylistics is wont to do, I will also try to elucidate the interpretative process itself through schema theory. Although cognitive stylistics comprises a variety of subdomains, a unifying concern can be identified. Centre stage is given to the cognitive processes that inform the reading and interpretative processes. Cognitive stylistics is not so much interested in providing one 'absolute' interpretation as it is in trying to establish how readers interpret literary texts: "By looking at the form and structure of a text and by observing people managing to interpret such texts, therefore, researchers hypothesize about how readers understand" (Emmott 2004: 98). Schemata offer a valuable tool to achieve just that. Broadly, schemata are cognitive structures which represent generic knowledge about events, objects or entities in their general form. The term originated in the field of (cognitive) psychology during the 1930s. Several decades later it was further developed in the computer sciences, particularly by research into artificial intelligence and eventually found its way into literary

studies. It is my belief that at least some kind of schema theory is necessary to study the workings of absurdist humour. Schemata govern people's expectations and absurdist humour (and humour in general) is often about defying expectations. In this dissertation, I challenge the label of being purely computational that schema theory has been given in the post-cognitive era. From the onset schemata were conceived as intrinsically dynamic incorporating both top-down and bottom-up processes. This makes them ideally suited to describe the text-reader interaction. Schema theory aims to offer an account of the role of the reader and the knowledge he or she brings to bear on the reading process and literary interpretation. Schemata are therefore of considerable importance to my conceptualization of absurdist humour and readers' experience of that humour.

3. Absurdist Humour and Schemata: Comprehension and Interpretation

Understanding and interpreting text involves more than just simply connect individual words, sequences of words or even sentences. Sometimes information is (consciously) omitted from the text and it falls to the reader to fill in the blanks, establish causal relationships between constituent parts and construct a coherent narrative from the text (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 23, 28). Schemata are particularly useful to better understand the cognitive processes underlying literary interpretation. They help us navigate standardised situations while at the same time they minimise cognitive expenditure. Schemata also serve as repositories of knowledge, experiences, and memories which can be amended as new information or new experiences are encountered (Schank 1995: 7-9). They enable readers to better understand a literary text because they provide them with a frame of reference which readers can use to make sense of what is going on in the text (Eco 1989: 105). They help us understand "other people's actions and reports of actions, including those reports that appear in literature" (Hogan 2003: 45).

Of course, the use of schemata as an analytical tool comes with a caveat. As it is impossible to gain direct access to the interpretative processes of readers, the reading experience I endeavour to recreate via schemata in the analysis is evidently based on my personal reading experience. One way in which this high degree of subjectivity is countered is by relying on the assessments of both literary critics and ordinary readers of the novels in the corpus, specifically in terms of the absurdist humour they contain. The qualification of those novels as absurdist and humorous is based on a more communal reading experience that extends beyond my personal interpretation of the texts. At the same time, schemata are to a large extent determined by the socio-cultural context in which they are shared. They therefore have the advantage that they can account for the shared reading experience as well for more "idiosyncratic readings produced out of personal experience" (Stockwell 2003: 269).

Besides providing a valuable tool for literary analysis, schemata also prove suitable to describe and understand both the literary absurd and absurdist humour. The literary absurd, following in the footsteps of Camus, is often described in terms of incongruity, a key concept of my dissertation and which will be explained in more detail in the first chapter. The experience of the absurd follows from the discrepancy between readers' expectations, which they form on the basis of their schemata, and the (literary) schemata created and evoked by the text. Schemata are also of significant importance in humour studies. This highly diversified field of study encompasses many different scientific disciplines, each with their own perspective on humour. In the context of my dissertation, I concentrate on cognitive theories of humour, and specifically on the incongruity resolution theory of humour.[2] These particular cognitive theories of humour build on the belief that humour follows from the resolution of one or more

[2] For simplicity's sake, I have introduced incongruity theory as a singular and homogeneous theory. But while there is a shared central principle underlying the theory, the actual meaning or definition given to the concepts of incongruity and resolution can vary between different humour theorists.

incongruities.[3] The term incongruity, here, describes an experience where certain objects, events, or actions do not conform to our expectations of them (McGhee 1979: 6-7). The incongruity then reveals a mismatch between the schemata operating during the reading process.

Incongruity theory offers an interesting way to look at absurdist humour through means of script oppositions. However, it is essentially a linguistic theory and it focuses solely on the text, disregarding the importance of the context. While this offers a promising starting point, most traditional humour research fails to adequately account for the importance of the storyworld and readers' interpretation. Using schema theory to analyse literary texts addresses this issue as it goes to the core of how people process and interpret text and can be used to expand on traditional theories of humour such as the incongruity resolution theory. Taking a different approach than most humour research, I propose a more in-depth integration of humour theory, literary theory and schema theory. The integration of schema theory and humour theory offers the added advantage that it can account for all the dimensions important for the interpretation of absurdist humour in literary texts: the text itself – both in terms of style and content – the reader and the (extra)literary context. A schema-theoretical analysis of the absurdist humour characteristic of the novels in the corpus also goes beyond the scope of traditional humour theory research by situating and exploring the absurdist humour in the context of the literary text in its entirety, rather than limit the analysis to short and often specifically designed jokes as is generally the case in humour research.

Literary texts, and absurdist novels certainly, contain much more complex and intricate humorous passages. Consequently, the absurdist humour that is seemingly inherent to this genre has all too often been explored only superficially. Gavins, for instance, lists a number of works that touch on the subject of humour

[3]In his recent book *Riveted*, for example, cognitive scientist Jim Davies makes the claim that "incongruity is the essence of all humor" (2014: 127).

in absurdist novels, but goes on to say that these generally neglect to analyse "how humour might be functioning on a linguistic or discoursal level and [do] not address the conceptual effects absurd humour might have on the reader" (2013: 48). This was even the case for, arguably, the most exemplary absurdist novel *Catch-22*. A novel that features prominently in my dissertation, as *Catch-22* and Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) provide the illustrations for the first three and theoretically oriented chapters of this dissertation.

4. Absurdist Humour in Absurdist Literature

Catch-22 has widely been acknowledged as an absurd novel as well as a funny novel. Tony Hilfer, for instance, describes the world that *Catch-22* portrays as a world "in which everything is rationalized but nothing makes sense" (Hilfer 1993, 115). Joseph Waldmeir says that Heller creates this absurd world by "the ancient comic device of portraying the preposterous as normal, […], and [that] Heller is superb at the creation of this kind of comedy" (Waldmeir 1964: 192-193). Literary scholar Sanford Pinsker considers *Catch-22* to be "a classic of American humor," going on to say that no "other novel comes close to it in terms of sheer invention or comic timing" (Pinsker 2000: 609). But literary criticism rarely went beyond these general labels such as, funny, darkly comic, or that the novel contains a lot of black humour, again without going in much detail.

In literary criticism, *Catch-22*'s humour has been described as satire, black comedy, grotesque, and the list goes on.[4] These variegated and often generic labels already hint at the "complexity of any attempt to codify the humor of the novel" (Nagel 2010: 48) and its humour, in the broadest sense, is generally treated as a localised phenomenon. There is, however, a specific type of humour

[4] See among others Nagel 2010; Ramsey 1973; Vos 1973.

prevalent in *Catch-22*, namely absurdist humour, which not only gives the novel its particular flavour but also proves essential to the narrative structure of the novel, certainly in terms of characterisation. This, in turn, significantly impacts readers' understanding of the novel, an effect that is largely realised by a recurring tendency to oppose conflicting scripts such as, for instance, SANITY and INSANITY and the many role reversals permeating the novel, specific strategies which have hitherto remained underexposed.

This specific type of humour is also ubiquitous in the *Hitchhiker's Guide* but has not yet received the detailed attention it deserves. While almost universally praised for its comedic value, the novel (or the original radio play for that matter) has rarely been analysed in terms of its characteristic absurdist humour. This apparent oversight is somewhat surprising in light of the influence of the innovative and absurd comedy style of the Monty Python's highly successful *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (aired between 1969-1974) on Adams (Roberts 2014: 25). Something which has undoubtedly left its mark on *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.[5] Absurdist humour, and by extension literary humour, is not realised in isolated instances but spans the entire narrative and relies on the literary and extra-literary context as well as on readers' own input.

Absurdist humour is ingrained into the narrative structure of absurdist novels. A thorough analysis of how absurdist humour interacts with narrative concepts such as character, plot and setting to create humour and impacts readers' interpretation is overdue. Therefore, I have opted for a concentrated approach even though somewhat limited in scope. The three theoretical mainstays of the project are one and all specific subsets of vast areas of academic research. It is beyond the scope and aim of this dissertation, and in my opinion counter-productive, to attempt to provide a complete overview of the absurd, humour

[5] Adams really always wanted to be a member of Python. He finally got his wish, to some extent, when he was invited by Graham Chapman to collaborate on a number of sketches, one of which actually made it to air and earned Adams a writing credit on the show and also saw him performing on television alongside his comedy heroes (Roberts 2014 47-48; Webb 2006: 72).

studies, or cognitive stylistics. More can be learned from the concerted exploration of a specific type of humour that abounds in a specific genre of literary texts, i.e. absurdist humour and absurdist novels respectively. This choice extends both to the first three theoretical chapters as to the subsequent three chapters containing the literary analysis. Running through the theoretical part of the dissertation is the concept of incongruity which links the literary absurd to absurdist humour as well as to schema theory. While subdivided into three chapters, the analysis maintains a to some degree artificial distinction between literary characters, the narrative plot and the setting. These three narrative concepts are inextricably linked to each other and to absurdist humour. The actions and interactions of the characters generate absurdist humour. At the same time the narrative development is driven by a series of characters' actions operating in a specific narrative setting. In this dissertation, the barrier between these narrative concepts is considered fluid in nature, a fluidity that is mirrored in the analysis as characters influence and are in turn influenced by narrative plot. Additionally, the analysis also describes how absurdist humour impacts the interpretative process and how it is both part of the thematic message as well as adds to the absurdist theme of the novels.

The corpus itself then consists of five novels and is divided into two parts. Heller's *Catch-22* and Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide* provide the illustrations for the theoretical chapters. Both novels have been firmly established in the canon of absurdist literature by literary scholars as well as by the general reading public (Gavins 2013: 12). As I have already illustrated, both novels have also been lauded extensively for their humorous quality, although the absurdist humour is generally only referenced superficially. I use these two novels to identify absurdist humour specifically and to demonstrate how that type of humour is integral to the narrative structure of the novel and how it impacts readers' interpretation. The other three novels of the corpus, Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* (2006), Tim Dorsey's *Florida Roadkill* (1999) and Carl Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy*

(2003 [2000]) have received far less critical attention. The analysis opens up new avenues of enquiry hitherto left unexplored, both in terms of the absurdist humour that characterises these novels and their absurdist theme. The inclusion of these novels in the corpus is motivated in part on the basis of my personal evaluation as well as on the basis of a thorough review of extant literary criticism by both academic and non-academic readers. This intersubjectivity provides a counterweight of sorts to the subjectivity inherent to the humorous experience.

Humour, however, is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is to a large extent culturally defined, much like schemata are. To alleviate this concern, I have limited the corpus to a specific geographical space, namely the United States. And while I am aware that the US cannot simply be considered as one socio-cultural homogenous space, it nevertheless provides a measure of consistency in terms of its cultural context, language and literary context, important for both the production and experience of absurdist humour. Additionally, the novels under scrutiny in the final three chapters of the dissertation have all been published in a relatively short interval between 1999 and 2006, again providing a somewhat culturally consistent frame of reference. At the same time, when considered in its entirety however, the corpus also hints at the privileged status absurdist humour has enjoyed in absurdist novels throughout the decades, and still does. Published some forty to forty-five years after *Catch-22*, absurdist humour in *A Dirty Job*, *Florida Roadkill* and *Sick Puppy* is still as integral to the narrative structure of these respective novels as it is for Heller's classic.

5. What is to Come

The first chapter traces the roots of the literary absurd to the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's philosophy is characterised by a turn to man and his subjective experience as the focal point of philosophical inquiry. Kierkegaard sketches out the path to self-realisation and self-

determination. To Kierkegaard, then, truth and meaning can only be obtained through faith, a paradox which he describes as absurd but nonetheless necessary. The emphasis on trying to give meaning to human existence is also what enthralled Albert Camus, although he ultimately arrives at a different conclusion.

If Kierkegaard can be thought of as the primogenitor of existentialist philosophy, then Camus can be considered to be the father of the literary absurd. Camus's absurd is conceived of as epistemological in nature. Concerned with the struggle to find meaning in life and with man's increasing alienation from his environment, he lays out a path to face up to the incongruities and contradictions that we see all around us. Our search for coherence then is constantly opposed by the incongruity between desire and reality, rendering this search ultimately pointless and absurd. Yet giving in to the despair that comes with this realisation is not the answer, says Camus. On the contrary, we must revolt against the absurdity inherent to human existence. And literature, particularly novels, is ideally suited to show how one can deal with the consequences of this absurdity.

The chapter subsequently charts some of the literary antecedents of the absurd. Starting off with an overview of absurdist drama, I identify some of its key elements and illustrate how these have also found root in absurdist novels. Running through these novels are a preoccupation with the search for meaning in a universe that has none to offer, the struggles of an absurd hero, the break-down of logic and causality, and the alienation of man. In conveying these thematic concerns, absurdist novels challenge readers' comprehension by deviating from, subverting or even inverting standard schemata, thus impacting the interpretative process. The incongruous experience, characteristic of the literary absurd, therefore is explored through schema theory in the second chapter.

This chapter opens with a broad perspective on what the term schemata entails exactly. Schemata are a concept used throughout various disciplines and are often attributed (slightly) different meanings. In this dissertation, a schema is used as a general term that encompasses different representations of the cognitive

processes responsible for the storage and retrieval of knowledge and experiences in and from memory. I then consider the genesis of the concept of schemata, which originates in the experimental psychology of Frederic Bartlett. I also chart their subsequent development in the field of artificial intelligence, specifically in the work of Roger Schank and Robert Abelson and that of Marvin Minsky who introduced and developed the notions of scripts and frames respectively. Both of which feature prominently in my literary analysis in chapters four through six.

Special attention is payed to how schemata relate to memory, to the importance of the socio-cultural context, and their impact on the reading process. Of particular interest is their role in readers' search for text coherence. Readers use schemata to make sense of characters' actions, to attribute motivations, and to formulate expectations about these characters' ultimate goals and plans and how these fit with the narrative plot. A process that is often (deliberately) complicated in absurdist literature. Using passages from *Catch-22* I illustrate how a schema-theoretical approach of the literary absurd elucidates the process of both literary comprehension and literary interpretation. As schemata allow us to chart the incongruity at the heart of the literary absurd, they are also ideally suited to elucidate the incongruity at the centre of the humorous experience. Absurdist humour relies on relating the unfamiliar to the familiar, and schemata have an important role to play in this experience.

Throughout the ages, absurdist texts have successfully blended tragedy and comedy to convey their message. I am of course referring to a very specific type of humour, namely absurdist humour. The third chapter explores the historical and philosophical roots of absurdist humour, emphasising the importance of the concept of incongruity. It then critically evaluates current and influential cognitive and linguistic theories of humour, specifically incongruity resolution theories and their purported suitability for literary analysis. Using *The Hitchhiker's Guide* it illustrates why literary humour cannot be analysed in the

same manner as short, often specifically designed, joke texts as is common practice in most humour research.

Literary humour can only be understood in the broader context of the reading process. One must not only take into account the humorous passages themselves but also how they relate to the literary and extra-literary context, and how readers engage with literary texts, a process facilitated by schemata. Firstly, however, I propose an operational definition of absurdist humour by defining its specific features and by distinguishing it from nonsense humour with which it is often conflated. Absurdist humour is dependent on eroding and subverting logical and causal chains. As such it is ideally suited to convey the existentialist unease characteristic of the literary absurd. But rather than on a strictly linguistic or verbal level, as does nonsense, absurdist humour creates conceptual incongruities. It presents readers with discrepancies between the storyworld and their own referential world. The absurdist humour evokes a fictional world that, through schematic associations, finds itself on the crossroads between low possibility and high improbability. The ambiguity caused by this incongruity as well as its effect on the reader are only strengthened by the actions and behaviour of the literary characters in their fictional setting. Subsequently, the traditional classification of absurdist humour as a type of humour where resolution cannot be achieved is also challenged as the analysis reveals how absurdist humour is part and parcel of the narrative structure of novel. Finally, I suggest that resolution be equated with (literary) interpretation and removing it from the single level of the text to the higher ontological level of the reader interpretation, a neurocognitive process.

The fourth chapter focuses on the nexus of absurdist humour, incongruity and characterisation in *A Dirty Job*. Drawing on the incongruity resolution theory of humour, absurdist humour, and on the concept of characterisation categories, this chapter describes the close-knit relationship between absurdist humour and characterisation in the novel. The analysis highlights the structural importance of

absurdist humour both for the narrative structure of the novel as well as for readers' understanding and interpretation of *A Dirty Job*.

When trying to understand and interpret the actions and motivations of literary characters, readers must rely on both textual and extra-textual information. This extra-textual information includes social categories which readers integrate with text-specific and literary categories to makes sense of the text and its plot. In *A Dirty Job*, this process results in an abundance of absurdist humour as opposing and seemingly conflicting schemata are conflated, as roles specific to social categories are subverted or reversed, and incongruities between fictional and real world are highlighted. The absurdist humour forces readers to let go of the schemata and the characterisation categories they are so used to rely on in the reading process. In turn, absurdist humour also serves as a textual strategy that creates a tension that impacts readers' evaluation of characters. The importance of that nexus cannot be stressed enough. Instrumental in absurdist humour is the way in which characters act, behave and how they respond to each other as well as to the events happening in their fictional universe. As such this importance will also be highlighted throughout the subsequent chapters.

The fifth chapter details the relationship between absurdist humour and the narrative plot of *Florida Roadkill*. The focus lies on the text-reader interaction. Literary texts require readers to fill in missing or incomplete information, make inferences and formulate expectations on how the plot will develop. All processes which are heavily reliant on their schemata, both world and literary schemata. Plot here is conceived of as a framework that structures the events of the novel, but also how the characters act and behave, and that sheds light on their motivations and goals. The link between plot, character and setting is clear. Plot chronicles the actions of characters, within a specific fictional setting.

In *Florida Roadkill*, the plot manifests itself in a series of seemingly random and unconnected events. Once again, schematic reversals and incongruities abound. These do not only give cause to the many instances of

absurdist humour in the novel but also tie in to the existentialist theme of the novel. As such the plot and its absurdist humour anchor the literary absurd into the narrative structure of the novel. The plot serves to underscore the meaninglessness of human existence; At the same time, by its very nature, the plot also confers its protagonists the status of absurd heroes. Faced with the incongruity between their desires and their (fictional) reality, they nevertheless refuse to relent, thus becoming literary embodiments of Camus's proposed revolt against the possibly soul-crushing experience of the absurdity of life.

The close relationship between the three narrative concepts under scrutiny in this dissertation is also evident in the sixth and final chapter, dealing with the connection between absurdist humour and narrative setting in *Sick Puppy*. The narrative setting provides the backdrop against which the characters' actions are interpreted by the reader. In turn, the setting itself can also require specific actions from the characters.

Combining Zoran's concept of total space with Ronen's distinction between narrative spaces and narrative frames, the chapter introduces the notion of macro and micro spaces and how these contribute to the absurdist humour in *Sick Puppy*. Through the combination of referential and (intra)textual schemata, the novel amalgamates spatial frames, thereby inverting and subverting default slot of the original schemata. The resulting incongruity underlies the mechanism of absurdist humour which forces readers to reconsider the personal schemata they rely on during the reading process. An analysis of the absurdist humour in *Sick Puppy* reveals how narrative spaces are thematised to express the existentialist paradigm at the core of the novel. Thus bringing us back full circle.

The important question emerging from my theoretical framework is to what extent the concern with the absurdity of life and how to deal with it is present in all the novels. In what ways does it differ from Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd and the appropriate response owing to the specific socio-cultural context in which they were written? What are the similarities with Camus's

views? Most poignant among those similarities is the absurdist humour that characterises these novels and which I take as my point of departure. It seems only logical then to start our journey with an exploration of the literary absurd. Together these case studies will show the layered working of absurdist humour. In each case study, I will examine how absurdist humour is part and parcel of the narrative structure of absurdist novels, whether and how they all use similar techniques, such as role reversals, hyperbole, schematic associations to generate absurdist humour. But first, we will explore the literary absurd.

1. The Literary Absurd

> "This is a pretty good tree", [Milo] observed admiringly with proprietary gratitude. "It's the tree of life," Yossarian answered, waggling his toes, "and of knowledge of good and evil, too." Milo squinted closely at the bark and branches. "No it isn't", he replied. "It's a chestnut tree. I ought to know. I sell chestnuts." "Have it your way."
>
> (Heller 1995: 325)

The brutal death of Yossarian's crewman Snowden lies at the heart of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and provides the impetus for most of the absurd twists and turns that characterise this novel. Returning from the ill-fated mission over Avignon, Yossarian emerges from the plane, utterly traumatised, stark naked and covered in Snowden's blood and gore. When Snowden is buried the next day, Yossarian, still in the nude, hides himself away in a tree to overlook the ceremony. It is there that Milo Minderbinder, the Mess Officer, finds him contemplating the absurdity of life and above all the senselessness of a war made all too real by Snowden's gruesome death. Milo, as so often, is blissfully unaware of and ultimately unsympathetic to Yossarian's philosophical, existentialist, ruminations. Throughout the novel, Yossarian has to contend with the conflict stemming from the discrepancy between his own personal moral code or desires and those imposed on him by society, here specifically by way of the military hierarchy. In his pursuit of a free and meaningful life, he is at every turn thwarted by the "catch-22" from which there is no escape:

> "Forty missions is all you have to fly as far as Twenty-seventh Air Force Headquarters is concerned." Yossarian was jubilant. "Then I can go

> home, right? I've got forty-eight." "No, you can't go home," ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen corrected him. "Are you crazy or something?" "Why not?" "Catch-22." "Catch-22?" Yossarian was stunned. "What the hell has Catch-22 got to do with it?" "Catch-22," Doc Daneeka answered patiently, when Hungry Joe had flown Yossarian back to Pianosa, "says you've always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to." "But Twenty-seventh Air Force says I can go home with forty missions." "But they don't say you have to go home. And regulations do say you have to obey every order. That's the catch. Even if the colonel were disobeying a Twenty-seventh Air Force order by making you fly more missions, you'd still have to fly them, or you'd be guilty of disobeying an order of his. And then Twenty-seventh Air Force Headquarters would really jump on you." (Heller 1995: 72)

The damned if you do and damned if you don't nature of catch-22 epitomises the absurdity of Yossarian's situation as it codifies a strategy of intertwining antithetical prerequisites in a seemingly logical manner. Avenues of escape are thus forever kept out of reach. Yossarian cannot find an answer to his problem, namely how to escape the war. He is consistently confronted with the absurd strictures put in place by a, to all intents and purposes, intangible military bureaucracy, the intricacies of which Yossarian cannot fathom. The catch also erodes any stable ground to ponder moral values such as good and evil. The absurdity that characterises *Catch-22*, then, does not merely situate itself on an epistemological level, but also pertains to the difficulty and absurdity of passing moral judgement, as there is no stable ground on which to make such value claims.

Yossarian often finds himself at a loss in trying to figure out how to successfully navigate his world, and consequently frequently feels alienated from his surroundings. As Albert Camus (1913-1960) said, a "world that can be

explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger" (Camus 1955: 6). With these and similar questions at the core of the novel, it is not surprising that *Catch-22* is often labelled as absurdist. Many of the concerns broached in Heller's masterwork resonate with Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd, which will be the point of departure for my discussion of the absurd. This chapter foregrounds the importance of the philosophical origins of the literary absurd, going back to Kierkegaard's ethical and religious thought and to Camus's absurdist philosophy. I argue that the literary absurd should always be defined, and indeed can only be understood, in conjunction with the philosophical notion, while acknowledging that there exist both distinct traditions and recurrent forms of the absurd in literature. The latter also allows us to circumscribe the nature of the connection between humour and the absurd and to speculate about the narrative and stylistic characteristics that prompt readers to read a literary work as absurd.

1.1 Considering the Individual: From Kierkegaard's Existentialism to Camus's Absurd

According to Camus, the question with which philosophy should really concern itself is whether or not life is worth living or if one should just surrender, admit defeat and ultimately commit suicide (Camus 1955: 4-5). That life is absurd, is a given to Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) he wishes to explore the relationship between recognizing an absurd and senseless existence and the desire to escape from it by taking your own life. Camus strongly believes that the feeling of absurdity, inherent to human existence, emerges out of the "confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, qtd. in Foley 2008: 6).

People want or need the world to make sense, to be more or less completely understandable. Yet sometimes what people experience or perceive, defies understanding. Camus postulates, then, that it is not "human existence" or the world itself that are absurd. Rather, "the absurd arises because the world is resistant to this kind of intelligibility", resistant to any kind of 'system' that makes grand claims as to possessing the key to making sense of life and the universe (Foley 2008: 6). This desire to make sense of a world that ostensibly defies reason and the "dialectical experience of an individual trying to relate to an irrational world" is also a common thread running through the work of most existentialist thinkers and philosophers, says Richard Baker (1993: 1). Such similarities might possibly explain why the absurd and existentialism are generally considered as one and the same thing in the public's consciousness.

It is important, however, when speaking about existentialism, or indeed even about the absurd itself, to keep in mind that there exists no real, unified school of existentialist thought.[6] Some scholars, like David Cooper, acknowledge that there is no single program detailing the tenets of existentialism, but nevertheless maintain that broadly dispersed and very "distinctive existentialist" tendencies can be discerned (Cooper 2012: 28). It is undeniably so that one of these tendencies is a preoccupation with the absurdity of life. Somewhat unsurprising therefore, the absurd, in some form or other, plays a significant part in many existentialist theories. It is not my intention here to provide an in-depth overview or analysis of existentialist philosophy. However, the provenance of the literary absurd cannot be detailed without at least touching upon the work of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), commonly labelled as the father of existentialism. There are several reasons why Kierkegaard should deserve special attention in the context of the (literary) absurd. Kierkegaard's philosophy was decidedly humanist, and he pioneered "the development of a

[6] See for instance Cooper (2012: 27-28) or Malpas (2012: 291).

mode of thinking that takes the individual in its concrete existence as the primary philosophical focus" (Malpas 2012: 296), so much so that his idea of what it means to exist, "inspired" the very term existentialism (Cooper 2012: 31).

The emphasis on the individual and the world he or she lives in also goes to the root of the absurd, as "[u]nderstanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human" even if complete comprehension is forever out of reach (Camus 1955: 13). Kierkegaard's philosophy also has had an impact on Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd, even though the latter ultimately rejected Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" as a solution to the absurdity of life.[7]

As a philosopher, Kierkegaard is at times, wrongly, characterised as someone who challenges the potential of rational thought. He was not opposed to reason and critical thought as such, but he did doubt its "ability […] to arrive at universal and objective truth on matters of value" (Hannay and Marino 1998: 1). At its core this sentiment echoes some of the beliefs expounded in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. What is different, however, is that Kierkegaard was concerned above all with "the ethical and religious dimensions of human experience" and all that this entails (Gardiner 2001: 27, my translation). With this emphasis on human experience he wishes to address the proclivity of traditional philosophy to "undervalue the concrete individual" (Kenny 2012: 768). But unlike Camus, his interest in the individual's existence is always thoroughly informed by the relationship between the individual subject and the religious dimension, specifically Christianity.[8] In order to make explicit the limits of reason, Kierkegaard scrutinises first Kant's scepticism and then Hegel's response to that scepticism.

[7] Camus has often been criticised for his supposedly poor understanding of philosophy, most notably by Sartre (Carroll 2007: 55; Foley 2008: 109). Sartre was not alone in this assessment, but Camus's shortcomings as a philosopher tend to be overstated, something which, according to Jacob Golomb, he himself is partly responsible for (1995: 168).

[8] Although opposed to the religious institutions of Christianity, the Christian faith played an important role in Kierkegaard's life. His father was a devout Christian, his older (and only surviving) brother studied theology, as did Kierkegaard himself (for a detailed biography see Garff (2007) or Hannay (2001)). Much of his philosophical work is devoted to illustrating how one might become a 'good' Christian.

Kant's philosophical work was very much rooted in the, then contemporary, context of the presumed exhaustiveness of the empirical scientific method to understand and explain reality. According to Kant both the empirical and the (strictly) rational approach were necessary to understand the world and acquire knowledge. Kant's "'empirical realism'" is a vindication "of the objectivity of scientific knowledge" (Evans 1998: 162). Governing this process is Kant's belief that a structure of a priori forms and concepts are imposed on information provided by the senses. At the same time the correct application of these facts is limited by the senses. Abstract thought alone cannot lead one to truth. For in order to arrive at any kind of truth there has to exist some empirical proof for a specific hypothesis. Any truth claim lacking such a foundation remains speculative. Theological questions, then, could never be completely proven. Theorising about them is therefore pointless. Conversely, Kant also believes that on the same basis, theological questions can neither be disproven as we simply cannot gain access to that plain of existence through experience (Gardiner 2001: 27-30). Reason, says Kant, is also at the heart of morality, as it enables us to ignore certain proclivities or feelings and it is this ability that makes us ethical beings. So, adhering to a certain moral code is a conscious and rational decision that cannot simply or adequately be justified by a divine being. In Kant's view, then, a God must exist from a practical point of view because we could never attain "moral perfection" otherwise. From a theoretical point of view however, the existence of such a God can never be proven nor disproven (Gardiner 2001: 31-34). Hegel, in contrast, does believe that the basic tenets of Christianity can be understood as objective truths.[9]

[9] Situated somewhere between these two positions (though more closely to Hegel's) is the Roman scholar Tertullian (155-240) and his *credo quia absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd). This inaccurate quotation has led to Tertullian often being considered to be a fideist, someone who puts blind faith over rational thought (Sider 1980: 417). Contemporary scholarship, however, refutes this claim and illustrates that Tertullian did not consider faith and reason to be mutually exclusive (Amesbury 2017: 2.1). What Tertullian actually wrote in *De Carne Christi* is "*credibile est, quia ineptum est*" (it is believable, because it is absurd). Somewhat simplified, Tertullian's argument is that the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is so improbable and 'out there' that it is unlikely to be made up. In *De Carne Christi*, Tertullian sets out to prove the material existence of Christ through the use of reason (Sider 1980: 417-418). Kierkegaard was aware of Tertullian's work, but he was not a

To a certain extent, Hegel considers religion and its dogmatic truths as a by-product of the human mind's development throughout history. This ultimately leads to a belief that religion is a specific form of consciousness that mirrors the fundamental truths of our reality. Hegelianism, then, claims that following "the dialectical progression of the purportedly transparent concepts of Hegel's logic would" grant one "access to the mind of God (which for Hegel was equivalent to the logical structure of the universe)" (McDonald 2016: 2). In Hegel's philosophy people consider the natural world to be something external to themselves. They exist within it, but at the same time independent of it. But sometimes people can feel alienated from their own context and so they will withdraw into themselves. What we then feel or perceive to be alien is nothing but an expression of a universal and cosmic process. A process which we are also part of, and which in essence is a mental and spiritual process. He thus concludes that "universal categories of thinking" can in fact reveal the inner truth of things (Gardiner 2001: 39-41).

Similarly to Kant, Kierkegaard believed that religion was not strictly a manner of knowing. Under the name of one of his pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, he asserts that "Christianity is not a philosophical doctrine" that can be understood as "an objective truth" or can be satisfactorily explained in a rational manner (Walsh 2013: 293). In this context, truth should be understood as "moral and religious truth" absolutely vital to "human existence" (Evans 1998: 172). To Kierkegaard, that "truth is not something pre-established in God's mind" but can only be obtained in the moment when the individual realises his or her individuality (Hannay 2012: 81). That also explains his interest in exploring what human existence entailed exactly, as something that came from within rather than something that was imposed from the outside. He felt that people in general were

major influence on his own writing even though Tertullian's paradox (believing because it is absurd) does already hint at Kierkegaard's leap of faith as a means of moving from the ethical to the religious stage (Bühler 2008: 136-137).

overly prone to consider things only in abstract or theoretical terms. Personal experience was substituted for sophistry and pseudoscience, and people were reluctant to assume personal responsibility, seeking legitimisation in the dogmas championed by society, by group thinking (Gardiner 2001: 47-50).[10] Kierkegaard wanted to incite people to think for themselves, to be critical and to decide on their own course of action. He proposed a shift from the Hegelian focus on scientific logic as a means of understanding the "totality of the universe to the solitary 'inwardness' of the individual" (Golomb 1995: 36). Kierkegaard firmly believed that their "freedom and autonomy as an individual had to be respected at any cost" (Gardiner 2001: 53). To that end he wanted to show to his readers how they could transform themselves into a complete and rounded individual, "or a self-integrated, autonomous person who retains his infinite concern for eternal blessedness" in the knowledge that any universal or fundamental truth is beyond reach unless the absolute rules of rationality are wilfully disregarded (Hannay 1982: 14). This is the context in which Kierkegaard develops his doctrine consisting of the three stages of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious stage.

In the aesthetic stage, man engages in the pursuit of a kind of refined and elegant hedonism that aspires to more than just pursuing pleasure for pleasure's sake. He aims at the "transformation of the boring into the interesting", says Kierkegaard (McDonald 2016: 3). The aesthetic man's comportment is not distasteful but does evince a tendency to eschew personal responsibility (Kenny 2012: 768). He ultimately leads a passive life, waiting for external input and impulses. Consequently, the aesthetic man is dependent on circumstance, on what

[10] Not that there is anything wrong or untoward with the pursuit of objective knowledge, explains Kierkegaard, so long as it is situated within a well-defined and suitable context such as the natural sciences for instance. He does, however, note that "human knowers can […] make contact with an external world but that all such contact involves *faith* or *belief*", meaning that "knowledge of the external world is never objectively certain" (Evans 1998: 165).

might or might not be possible.[11] He thinks he owns something which in actuality cannot be owned. And this realisation can lead him to feel that he no longer has a reason to live or that he has lost that which makes his life worth living (Gardiner 2001: 58-61). When recognised, the resulting feelings of doubt can prompt one to move on to the ethical stage.

It is in the ethical stage that one starts the development of a true self by shifting his focus inwardly and by assuming personal responsibility (Kenny 2012: 934). But the ethical man also finds himself operating within the confines of a community and the social and behavioural norms associated with such a community. But how does he navigate the (possible) conflict between the universal principles and values governing society and his personal values? If you argue that universal principles are nothing more than the objective representation of individual values, seeing as that society consists of individuals, then you can reconcile individual conscience with societal mores. The ethical man must balance his quest for self-realisation in isolation with the awareness that man is in fact a social being and not some abstract construct. But, warns Kierkegaard, this balancing act is not always straightforward (Gardiner 2001: 66-70). This difficulty is compounded when trying to explain or understand religion in the context of the ethical stage. Sometimes (seemingly) morally reprehensible acts cannot be validated by the community or be justified in the name of the greater good. Nor can they be legitimised by pointing to a divine being who transcends both our experience and comprehension.[12] In such cases the ethical decision must be "postponed" in favour of the religious stage (Gardiner 2001: 76-77).

[11] Making "possibility absolute" and continuously opening oneself up "to new possibilities" is a hallmark of someone situated in "the aesthetic sphere of existence" (Dreyfus 2012: 101).

[12] Kierkegaard here offers two examples. When the Greek king Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia he is not judged by his compatriots because they recognise that sometimes human sacrifice is needed to appease the gods and ensure the future of the nation state. But sometimes man is asked to fulfil a task that "cannot be justified in terms of social norms" (McDonald 2016: 4). Kierkegaard illustrates this with the story of Abraham who must sacrifice his son. That Abraham is willing to do so is testament to his "paradoxical" devotion to a higher duty that supersedes that of his social duty of not harming anyone and his moral and personal responsibility to his son as a loving father. Abraham's choice cannot be rationally justified by the community but is the result of him simply obeying the will of God (Gardiner 2001: 77-78).

Once again, the issue at stake here is truth and whether it can be found. Kierkegaard opposes two possible responses to this question. The first one, which he connects to Meno's paradox, reveals that truth is already present within each person.[13] Learning is nothing more than bringing that innate knowledge to the fore. The alternative answer is provided by Christianity and establishes that a man's knowledge is dependent on some transcendental and external force. Consequently, truth must come from the outside and man must be transformed on the inside in order to grasp that truth. But only God is capable of bringing about such a change, meaning that only God can impart true knowledge (Gardiner 2001: 88-91). This truth, however, cannot be forced onto man. He must accept it willingly and freely. It must thus be presented to him by someone who can be considered an "equal", by a God who has taken on human form. To Kierkegaard this is absurd: "The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being; indistinguishable from any other human being" (Kierkegaard and Marino 2017: 135).

This absolute paradox, then, asks us to consider the possibility of an eternal and infinite being entering the temporary and finite realm, which seems completely incomprehensible. Thus religion and reason appear irreconcilable. For if we hold on to reason, then that would mean that we have to reject the paradox as absurd. In the religious stage, finally, the categories of rational thought are cast aside as faith takes hold, enabling the individual to take a "leap of faith" (Gardiner 2001: 92). We willingly believe that there is something higher than rational thought and take the plunge continuously reaffirming our faith as we "believe *by virtue of the absurd*" (McDonald 2016: 5). The absurd paradox, explains Kierkegaard, "is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all

[13] In Plato's Socratic dialogue *Meno*, Socrates is teaching Meno when the latter presents him with a dilemma: How do you acquire knowledge? If you already know the answer to the question you want to ask, then you will gain nothing by asking it. But if you do not know the answer, how will you know it to be true when it is provided to you? This leads Meno to conclude that "one cannot learn anything by asking questions" (Sorensen 2017: 6.1).

to dissolve it in nonsense and prove that it is nonsense" (Kierkegaard and Marino 2017: 136). The absurd, then, is not something that can be dissected by or explained away through reason. But, says Kierkegaard, the fact that it cannot be fully understood does not mean it should be discredited as nonsensical. Quite the opposite, engaging with the absurdity inherent to human existence "is the one and only marvel" (Kierkegaard et al. 1983: 36). The absurd undeniably fulfils an important role in Kierkegaard's philosophy and the notion of the absurd has found its way into the work of many existentialists of the twentieth century although it has generally been stripped of its religious connotations, as in the work of Albert Camus (Pyper 2013: 573; Ellison 1990: 76).

1.2 Searching for Meaning in a Meaningless Universe: Alienation and Revolt in Camus's Absurd

Much like Kierkegaard is considered to be the father of existentialism, so too can Albert Camus be considered to be the father of the literary absurd. Camus primarily develops his view of the absurd in the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and gives it literary form in his novel *The Outsider* (1942) and the play *Caligula* (1944). From a very young age Camus was faced with the cruel consequences of war, losing his father in the First World War.[14] As the Second World War broke out in 1939, Camus was once again struck by the absurdity of war, especially as "he believed it could have been avoided" (Todd 1996: 209, my translation).[15] It is also at this time that Camus really started to refine his essay on the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as well as work on his play *Caligula*, which together with *The Outsider* lies at heart of Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd: "Together with

[14] His father was conscripted into the French army and forced to fight in the First World War. He was mortally injured during the Battle of the Marne and died soon after (Garfitt 2007: 26).
[15] For an exhaustive biography of Albert Camus, see Olivier Todd's highly informative *Albert Camus: Une vie* (1996).

my novel and my essay on the absurd, [*Caligula*] constitutes a first phase in what I can now call my oeuvre" (Camus, qtd. in Todd 1996: 221, my translation).

The Outsider tells the story of Meursault, who stands accused of having murdered an Arab man some time after having attended his mother's funeral. Meursault's narrative is characterised by a striking detachment from the events that have expired. He is unmoved by the death of his mother and shows no remorse about murdering the Arab nor does he offer up any motivation for his crime.[16] *Caligula* focuses on the Roman emperor of the same name who, after the death of his sister (and alleged lover), embarks on a quest for absolute freedom. But by "overstepping the limits" he turns into a murderous and amoral "tyrant" who needs to be opposed (Margerrison 2007: 69-70). According to John Foley, *The Outsider* offers a literary example of what the "confrontation with the absurd may look like in a social or political context", whereas *Caligula* is Camus's attempt to situate or sketch the absurd hero in a historical context (2008: 22). Although all three of these texts contribute to Camus's notion of the absurd, it is arguably *The Myth of Sisyphus* that makes his ideas about the absurdity of life most explicit. Consequently, this essay will take central stage in my discussion of Camus's absurd.

As I have already mentioned, existentialism and the absurd are often conflated in the public's mind. It is therefore not altogether surprising that Camus is generally identified as belonging to the tradition of existentialist philosophers. It is a label, however, that he has vehemently rejected (Baker 1993: 53-54; Foley 2008: 2). Yet in spite of this disclaimer, it is not difficult to see the many similarities between the central tenets of existentialist philosophies and Camus's own. As previously indicated, there exists no philosophically homogenous school of existentialism. There are, however, recurring concerns and topics that run through the variegated branches of the existentialist tree, if you will. Based on

[16] The novel was well-received and met with generally favourable reviews (Dunwoodie 2007: 156).

the works of existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, David Cooper drew up an "existentialist manifesto" of sorts. He surmises that humans are frequently predisposed to feel alienated from their environment. This alienation prompts them to contemplate their place in life in relation to their surroundings. Still, despite this distance between world and subject, they need each other in order to "be thinkable". Things can only be understood in terms of their "significance" for individual subjects. Once this mutual dependency is recognised, says Cooper, man becomes cognisant of his "radical freedom and responsibility" to engage with the world (Cooper 2012: 29-30).[17] This awareness necessitates the development of a moral framework that enables us to coexist in a world where individual subjects interact constantly.

While Cooper stresses this is only a basic manifesto in need of elaboration, there are clearly notions here that resonate with Camus's absurd, such as the struggle to find meaning in one's existence, or the alienation between man and his surrounding and the resulting absurdity of that divide. Where Camus does differ from most other existentialist thinkers is in how one can or should cope with that absurdity, something which we will return to later on. As made explicitly clear in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus essentially feels that existentialist philosophies in general are flawed in the sense that they all take recourse to a path that enables man to escape the absurdity of life. In doing so they adopt an attitude of "philosophical suicide", says Camus, as it means that their core philosophical idea "negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation" (Camus 1955: 22; 28). Mirroring the view of John Cruickshank, it seems safe to say that while Camus never adopted the existentialist point of view, his conceptualisation of the absurd is decidedly existential (1970: 44).[18]

[17] The self is not something that is granted by a higher being but it is something that must be fashioned through conscious "choices and commitments" (Crowell 2012: 8).

[18] Jeff Malpas makes a distinction between "existential" as referring to matters of existence and "existentialist" or "existentialism" which points to a specific "philosophical attitude" or method that focusses on the predicaments of "human existence" in a world devoid of any higher or external authority imparting meaning and significance

This becomes immediately evident from the opening pages of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where it is made clear that what is at stake is, literally, the question whether to exist or not. Camus himself indicates that the essay deals with the relationship between recognizing an absurd and senseless existence on the one hand and the decision whether or not to run from that realisation through the act of suicide on the other hand (Camus 1955: 6-7). At the heart of the absurdity of life is the insurmountable distance between man and the world he inhabits. Seemingly echoing Kierkegaard, Camus goes on to explain that man can only truly understand his world when it is brought down to his level, in other words when it is made human. In Kierkegaard's philosophy, the underlying idea is that knowledge is never completely objective, there is always an element of faith, of belief involved (Evans 1998: 165-166). His point, more specifically, is not that there exists no objective truth but that humans, by their very humanity, can never grasp that truth. Camus, too, believes that true knowledge is unattainable. A difference, however, is that for Kierkegaard truth is not limited to epistemological concerns but also encompasses moral and religious aspects (Evans 1998: 170, 172). Once again it is faith that offers succour. This religious dimension is entirely absent in Camus's work as unknowability here is firmly rooted in an earthly materiality. In fact, the only thing that we can be sure of is our own materiality (Camus 1955: 13-14). And that is not enough.

Humans have a need to try and understand their world, to make sense of it, a need that reason fails to meet. All that we find are incongruities and contradictions. And so the "absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1955: 20). More so than most existentialists, ironically, Camus emphasises how the absurd alienates man from his surroundings. It is a divide that cannot be easily spanned for the absurd is not inherent to man, nor is it inherent to the world. Rather it is

(2012: 293). The usefulness of such a distinction, however, seems questionable as the first category is undeniably constitutive of the second.

found when man and world come together. As neither can exist without the other, the absurd is inescapable. In the face of this "truth" the question of whether or not to commit suicide becomes all the more poignant. If there is no escape possible, what then is the point in living? It is here that Camus distances himself from existentialist philosophies who offer no adequate or simply the wrong answer. Kierkegaard, for instance, locates the absurd in a transcendental realm (i.e. the leap of faith) and we only experience its shadow in this reality. The absurd becomes a property of the divine (Camus 1955: 26-27). But in adopting this view, Kierkegaard removes exactly that which gives rise to the absurd, namely the discrepancies owing to the meeting of man and the natural world. Additionally, Kierkegaard's faith in the divine and a divine afterlife leads people to neglect their life here on earth. This becomes all the more problematic as there is no way to ascertain the veracity or even existence of such a higher plain and consequently it can never give meaning to our lives. The absence of such absolute knowledge also has moral and ethical implications as it begs the question what values should be upheld or aspired to as there is no universal truth to legitimise them (Davis 2007: 107).

The only possible answer, says Camus, is to face the absurd head on, to revolt. Suicide is no option as that would constitute exactly the opposite, namely surrender. And it is revolt that "gives life its value" (Camus 1955: 36).[19] Accepting the absurd entails accepting that there is no future in which everything will suddenly fall into place. Acceptance consequently grants one a "radical" freedom of thought and action. That does not mean that one is free of responsibility, nor is it a licence for amoral behaviour. It merely implies that they are essentially the same (Camus 1955: 44). The mores of a society typically operate on the belief that actions have consequences that either make them (socially) desirable or conversely discourage them. What the absurd reveals is

[19] Or as Martin Crowley puts it: revolt becomes a positive force as "it affirms a human value, by refusing to accept the absurdity of human existence" (2007: 102).

that opposite values are in fact equal. Or more accurately that neither is preferable. Because in an "absurd world the value of a notion or a life is measured by its sterility" (Camus 1955: 45).

Camus's absurd, then, not only implies impossibility but also contradiction (Camus 1955: 21).[20] Humans strive for coherence. They are driven by the desire to make (logical) sense of the world around them. Yet the world operates inconsiderate of such desires, it refuses to be understood in strictly rational terms. Consequently, true knowledge is impossible, forever out of reach. People are made aware of this impossibility each day by the incongruity between their desires and the reality of daily life. And yet recognizing the inherent absurdity of human existence is what ultimately provides the impetus to continue on challenging it. We must acknowledge the absurd, but not surrender to it.

Exemplary of the absurd hero is Sisyphus, the king of Corinth from Greek mythology. Sisyphus repeatedly defied and outsmarted the Gods and was subsequently punished for his hubris. The hapless king was forced to push a large boulder up a mountain. Each time he got close to the top, the boulder would slip away from him and tumble down the mountain forcing Sisyphus to start again. And so the Gods condemned Sisyphus to an eternity of meaningless and senseless labour. To Camus, Sisyphus possesses everything that is needed to face the absurd: he revolts against his lot in life and he does so freely and with passion. It is his passion for life that leads to him being singled out for punishment by the Gods (Camus 1955: 75-76). But what interests Camus is the moment when Sisyphus has to walk back down to the base of the mountain. During that descent, Camus imagines, Sisyphus is acutely aware of the futility of his task and the fact that he is doomed to repeat it forever. And yet he shoulders his burden and once more starts rolling that boulder up the hill. It is in those moments of wilful and

[20] In his essay *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1912), Spanish author and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) also identifies the absurd as the contradiction between people's intentions and the reality facing them, rendering them keenly conscious of their existence (Baker 1993: 13-14).

lucid defiance that Sisyphus becomes the absurd hero. It is also in those moments, says Camus, that the Greek hero finds some measure of happiness as he takes control of his life within the confines of his divine punishment. In doing so he realises that a "universe without a master" is "neither sterile nor futile" (Camus 1955: 78).

That Camus chose Sisyphus as an example was deliberate. Despite drawing on philosophers such as Heidegger, Jaspers and Kierkegaard, it was not Camus's intent in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to establish an exhaustive philosophical system of his own. As Camus himself explains, he is not particularly interested in capturing the absurd itself, but rather in the consequences of these absurd discoveries (Camus 1955: 12). At the heart of the essay, then, lies, as Carroll accurately identifies, a concern with everyday people's awareness of and preoccupation with the realisation that "life suddenly no longer makes sense" (Carroll 2007: 56). Sisyphus comes to stand for the common man and his revolt against the absurd. It is not the Gods who will provide answer, only Sisyphus's conscious and stubborn resistance. He understands and accepts his fate but does not resign himself to it. He asserts control over his own life, wresting it back from the hand of the Gods. The choice for a myth to illustrate his message already points to the importance Camus attributes to literature as a means of conveying the absurd. Art, and specifically literature, serves as a (necessary) complement to philosophy.[21] The novel is the preferred genre to establish this as it is the "most philosophical" genre (Carroll 2007: 61).[22]

A work of art is not an escape from the absurd as the process of artistic creation unfolds along the same lines as a man's life. And like the response to the

[21] This point of view echoes that of fellow author and intellectual Simone de Beauvoir who states that "'philosophy objectifies human reality, the novel captures it as it is lived, in all its subjective complexity and ambiguity'" (de Beauvoir, qtd. in Baker 1993: 3).

[22] Camus himself puts theory into practice as his conceptualization of the absurd encompasses the triptych of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (essay), *The Outsider* (novel), and *Caligula* (play). Camus's fiction, in general, centres on the conflict between a senseless reality and man's imperative to look for coherence and meaning (Cornwell 2006: 116).

absurd, so too does the work of art entail contradiction. At its core it must consist of the most rational thought, yet this rationality must remain inconspicuous, only barely noticeable: it "is lucid thought that provokes it, but in that very act that thought repudiates itself" (Camus 1955: 62). The novel is ideally suited for this purpose as it allows for a "greater intellectualization of the art" (Camus 1955: 64). Camus, here, has a specific type of novel in mind, namely what he calls philosophical novels. More concretely, Camus mentions the works of authors such as Kafka, Stendhal, Dostoevsky or Balzac. Opposed to these "philosophical novelists" are "thesis-writers". Thesis-writers, says Camus disapprovingly, are authors who resort to explaining, in excessive detail, a thought or a truth they are convinced of (Camus 1955: 74). Philosophical novelists, conversely, share a tendency to write in images in order to bring across their message. They are not intent on providing readers with explicit explanations, but rather on showing and sharing with the reader experiences (Camus 1955: 64-65). Good novels, then, are illustrative of a particular philosophy but are so, to a large extent, implicitly. Camus especially admires Kafka's work which refuses to offer clear explanations to its readers. The problems that Kafka's protagonists, such as K. in *The Trial* (1925) have to face are never made explicit. Kafka's literary texts present a series of events that are natural when considered from the point of view of the character but are less so for the reader. Camus also applauds how Kafka consistently incorporates contradiction and paradox in his novels which are essential for understanding the absurd (Camus 1955: 78-80). Camus acknowledges *The Trial*, for instance, as a "work that is absurd in its principles" (1955: 82), but, ultimately, he does not consider Kafka to be an absurdist (1955: 86), unlike many other (literary) scholars, as hope in Kafka's fiction is offered up as a solution. Kafka's novels seem to suggest, says Camus, that one can "be saved by true hope" and that the absurdity of this existence is but a path leading to God (Camus 1955: 84).

Nevertheless, there is much to admire in Kafka's work which largely mirrors Camus's own concern with the consequences of the absurd, rather than

strictly with the absurd itself. The privileged status of literature is not only evident from Camus's own novels but also becomes apparent in his literary criticism. How Camus approaches the absurd (both philosophical and literary) has had a great impact on how literary scholars to this day try to identify and study the absurd in a variety of authors and genres. In the following paragraphs I will turn my attention to the literary absurd in its different guises. Firstly, I will briefly consider the absurd in the larger context of literary history. Many of the sentiments expressed by and captured in Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd are not exclusive to twentieth century literature as they can, for example, be traced back to Ancient drama. A historical overview already points to the importance of the theatre as an artistic vehicle to communicate the experience and the consequences of the absurd. It is perhaps not surprising then that some of the first and pivotal studies into the literary absurd, such as Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961)[23] focus almost exclusively on theatre. Yet as I will illustrate, absurdist features can readily be found in other literary genres as well, specifically (but again certainly not exclusively) in post-war American literature as evidenced by the novels that make up the corpus of this dissertation. Finally, I will identify some of the stylistic features most closely associated with the literary absurd and hone in on the role that absurdist humour plays in absurdist fiction and how it ties in with the narrative structure of absurdist novels.

[23] The popularity of Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* has resulted in multiple revised editions. The first edition was published in 1961 and revised in 1969. The content and focus of Esslin's seminal study remained much unchanged throughout the different editions. In each revised edition, however, Esslin did stress that he never claimed the existence of a specific literary "absurdist school". He specifies that it was always his intent to identify a set of techniques that at that particular time happened to be used by a variety of authors to similar effect. This is iterated in the edition from 1980 as well as in the 2001 edition used in this dissertation.

1.3 The Absurd in Literary History

In his treatment of the philosophical absurd Neil Cornwell writes that the absurd "is born out of nihilism, out of existentialism" (2006: 5) and seemingly lumps together (French) existentialism, nihilism, and Camus's absurd (2006: 7-9). As I have already argued, Camus's position vis-à-vis existentialism is much more nuanced than that. And while Camus was certainly influenced by Nietzsche's work, it would be inaccurate to conflate Camus's absurd and nihilism. Camus, for example, does not reject "value-claims" but instead expresses the belief that the absurd man should always adopt a profoundly sceptical attitude towards any type of (new) knowledge (Foley 2008: 7; 28).[24] Things are not made simpler by the fact that, like existentialist philosophy itself, the philosophical absurd is informed by many different intellectual schools of thought that often have a long and distinct lineage dating back centuries. It would be a mistake then to see the absurd as something that only originated in modern times. In a similar vein, one must take care not to exclusively associate absurdist literature with the twentieth century, certainly in the wake of Camus's own work.

Yet it would be equally unfortunate to simply or blindly transpose both philosophical and literary concepts of the absurd from one socio-historic context to the next. As Camus makes clear, the absurd is born from the conflict between an individual's desires and his or her surroundings, which are heavily subject to change. Historically, people have always demonstrated a tendency to search for meaning and purpose and they have always been intent on discovering their place in the grand scheme of things. But the context in which they have to search for that purpose and meaning varies greatly. For the longest time, religion was thought to offer the ultimate answer (whether in the form of the ancient Greek pantheon or Kierkegaard's Christian God). After the first half of the twentieth

[24] In his play, *Caligula*, Camus expressly differentiates the absurd from nihilism (Foley 2008: 24-25).

century, however, the horrors of both the First and Second World War had become all too real. In an increasingly secularised society, many felt that religion could no longer be counted on to provide satisfying answers or meaning to their lives. People were unsure how to respond to the changing socio-historic context, leading Michael Bennett to conclude that these "unique, many times often difficult and 'strange' situations" seemed to warrant a "tragicomic response" which many absurdist texts provided (2015: 19).

Once more, it is worth remembering that the term literary absurd expresses a particular "disposition" much more than it identifies any deliberate and homogenous literary movement (Cornwell 2006: 99). Elements of the absurd as conceptualised by Camus can, in varying manifestations, be traced back to the playwrights of Antiquity. Cornwell, for instance, states that some Ancient Greek drama, in its practice of combining unconventional theatrical features such as the use of masks and costumes, a commentating chorus, a propensity for vulgarity and the use of "metatheatrical devices" comes close to what we now call Theatre of the Absurd. Unfortunately, he neglects to specify the supposed correlation between such unusual combinations and a similarity to the Theatre of the Absurd. He does, however, note that classical drama was imbued with a pervading "pathos" communicating the melancholy or desolation that accompanies existence, certainly considered against the background of the omnipotence and domineering presence of the pantheon in Ancient Greek society (Cornwell 2006: 34-35). A concern it certainly shares with the absurd as outlined previously.[25] From its origins the absurd has been philosophically inspired and used to express an existential quandary: if life is without meaning, why do we live it, and how? How can we make sense of it?

These and similar questions are not exclusive to the playwrights of antiquity but continue to occupy the minds of a wide range of authors in years to

[25] This is evidenced in Camus using the Sisyphus myth as an example, although in his interpretation, the myth is about the king's defiance of the Gods rather than meek subservience in the face of their indiscriminate tyranny.

come. In medieval times, too, man struggled to find purpose in his existence and to make sense of his surroundings. Esslin shows, for example, how the figure of the clown in the *commedia dell'arte* displayed absurd behaviour arising "from his inability to understand the simplest logical relations", as often did "clowns and court jesters" in Shakespearean theatre who turned logic on its head and frequently resorted to the use of disingenuous syllogisms (Esslin 2001: 330; 332).[26] There is no doubt that the literary absurd, whether or not in a more rudimentary form, has a long and distinguished lineage, in drama but also in other literary genres. Rabelais's novels often incorporate illogical events to comic effect and in so doing draw attention to the absurdity of life (Cornwell 2006: 38-39). Edgar Allan Poe, as well, regularly presented his readers with a variety of absurd situations, thus creating a world that operates on its own logic, where the unnatural is presented as natural (a literary technique that Camus praises in Kafka's work) and where the lines between rational and irrational behaviour become blurred heightening the absurd experience, again often leading to humour (Bryant 1996: 38-39). Paradox and contradiction are also central to Dostoevsky's writing with many of his novels expressing the belief that life is built on absurdity and asserting the difficulty and even futility of striving to find meaning and purpose in life (Morson 1999: 473, 476). It is clear that the literary absurd has a long history, drawing on and borrowing from a variety of cultural contexts.

While specific features of the literary absurd can be found throughout history, absurdist texts seemingly proliferated during the twentieth century. This development can perhaps best be understood in terms of the specific secularised socio-cultural context of that period with its ever-increasing industrialisation and its grand conflicts waged on a global scale, which fostered a feeling of alienation and disenfranchisement leading many to feel that their life had no meaningful purpose. The (literary) absurd is also indebted to the avant-garde movements of

[26] The figure of the fool in Renaissance theatre also frequently served as a mirror "'reversing the judgments of the world'" thereby exposing its absurdity (Welsford, qtd. in Cornwell 2006: 38).

the early 1900s such as Futurism, Dada or Surrealism providing a fertile cultural environment for the literary absurd to mature (see Cornwell 2006: 74-86). The impression that the experience of the absurd only originated in recent times is reinforced by the emergence of existentialist philosophies and the writing of Camus as already mentioned.

That to this day, however, drama and the absurd are tightly linked in the public's consciousness, is largely down to Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd,* his seminal work in which he predominantly analyses the theatrical texts of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter as well as a number of other authors Esslin considers to be their "proselytes".[27] Esslin saw in the works of these playwrights the birth of a new kind of theatre which required a new paradigm to be fully understood and appreciated (2001: 15-16). He was quick to point out however that these authors were "not part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement" (2001: 22) but that they nevertheless shared a set of characteristics through which the authors give voice to "the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 2001: 24).

1.4 Staging the Absurd: The Theory of Absurdist Theatre

It is clear to see that Esslin's description of the literary absurd is firmly grounded in Camus's philosophy, specifically Camus's belief that the "divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Camus 1955: 6). In forming his definition of the absurd, Esslin complements his

[27] That such attention is payed to the literary absurd and drama may seem at odds with the importance placed on Camus as the "originator" of the absurd in the context of this project as well as in relation to its overarching thesis. While it is true that Camus considered the novel to be the vehicle most suited for sharing the experience of the absurd with an audience, drama also figures prominently in his conceptualisation of the absurd (as in *Caligula*). Secondly, one cannot reasonably overlook the importance of Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* on subsequent scholarship of the literary absurd, and indeed the dissertation under scrutiny here.

reading of Camus with a commentary of Ionesco on Kafka's work: "'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose…. Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless'" (Ionesco in Esslin 2001: 23). It is this "metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" that takes centre stage and forms a unifying thread in the works of the authors Esslin discusses (2001: 24-25).

These two points, however, central to the *Theatre of the Absurd*, have recently become a point of contention to some. A first point of critique levelled at Esslin is that he overstates the "theme of absurdity", which runs the risk of reducing these important works of literature to monothematic texts (Bennett 2015: 6).[28] A second criticism pertains more specifically to Esslin's interpretation of Camus. Bennett, for instance, believes that Esslin misconstrues the "message" of the plays he analyses, owing to his inaccurate translation of the Ionesco quotation as well as to an inaccurate reading of Camus as an existentialist (Bennett 2011: 2).[29] According to Bennett, these texts do not so much express "metaphysical anguish" but rather incite their audience to "revolt against existentialism" and should be considered as "ethical parables that force the audience to make life meaningful" (Bennett 2011: 2). Bennett has a point here, in the sense that Camus would not be overly interested in this metaphysical anguish per se but rather in its consequences, its impact on the individual and how he or she should respond to it. And as indicated, Camus does indeed advocate an attitude of defiance, of revolt. But Bennett is perhaps too quick to dismiss the underlying sense of distress as anguish and revolt are not mutually exclusive but rather co-dependent.

One of the issues is that Esslin, while undoubtedly inspired by Camus, does not really go into much detail when discussing his philosophy of the absurd. If he equates Camus's notion of the absurd to existentialism, then he does so, to a large

[28] Esslin addressed this issue in the foreword of the 2001 edition (11-13).
[29] This claim may in and of itself be considered contentious, as we have seen.

extent, implicitly.[30] Esslin's reading of Camus can indeed at times be ambiguous or is at least presented as such. He certainly is aware that there exists a difference between the Theatre of the Absurd and Existentialist theatre. He indicates that the Theatre of the Absurd no longer concerns itself with "arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition", rather it shows it on stage thus "striving for an integration between the subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed" (Esslin 2001: 25). This would suggest that Esslin holds rather faithfully to Camus's idea of what constitutes good art, namely that it must show the absurd rather than merely try and explain it.[31]

Esslin explains he is more interested in what these plays express than how they are written on the page and, to him, there is more to theatre than just language because "true theatre can become manifest only in performance" as it incorporates "pure, abstract theatrical effects" that say more "than language could" (Esslin 2001: 329). This is why he considers the basis of the Theatre of the Absurd to be the incongruity between the actions as performed on stage and that what is said. The divide between man and world is mirrored in the gap between performance and audience.[32] The conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd make it difficult for an audience to connect with the characters and understand their motives. Esslin goes on to say that the Theatre of the Absurd is inherently incapable of provoking "the thoughtful attitude of detached social criticism" and consequently can only communicate to its audience "a

[30] It is certainly true that Esslin seems to lump Sartre and Camus's philosophies together, ignoring their (in)famous falling-out later in life. Sartre believed that absurdity is inescapable, inherent to human existence. It complicates our comprehension of the world but does not make it impossible. Camus, in contrast, felt that "absurdity is not a property of existence as such, but is an essential feature of our relationship with the world" (Aronson 2012: 3.3). Camus was less interested in proving that life was absurd and more in determining how we should deal with that fact (Sprintzen et al. 2004: 38).

[31] Interestingly, Esslin felt that Camus himself did not meet this requirement in his own writing, which Esslin described as being too conventional.

[32] Esslin's insistence on the dramatic performance to reveal the absurdity expressed in these plays is somewhat dismissive of both the script and paratextual information such as stage directions for example, which can already convey the absurdist theme of a play without having to be performed first. Conversely, non-absurdist texts can also be performed in an absurdist manner, without necessarily having been conceived of as such initially. In both cases however, incongruity will still be at the heart of the absurd experience, even if perhaps situated at a different level (text-audience, text-performer, audience-performer, etc.).

disintegrating world" devoid of meaning and purpose (Esslin 2001: 411). Bennett holds to an opposing view. He suggests that "meaning-making, not meaninglessness" lies at the core of the plays Esslin analyses, forcing "the reader or audience member […] to confront his or her own worldview in order to create order out of chaos presented in the plays" (2001: 8).[33] Bennett then goes on to re-evaluate the work of the same playwrights Esslin discussed, shifting the focus from the thematic analysis favoured by Esslin to a more "structural approach" (Bennett 2011: 2).

Bennett discerns four characteristics shared by most absurdist literary texts, the first feature being that they tend to experiment with language. Specifically, says Bennett, absurdist texts endeavour to oppose "realistic" language. The second is that its preferred genre is "tragicomedy", owing to the post-war climate which often demanded a "tragicomic response" of both laughter and tears. A third characteristic reveals that authors of the absurd frequently experiment with "non-Aristotelian plot lines," minimising exposition and "flattening out the narrative arc". Characters are no longer given a backstory but simply appear on stage and the audience is left to its own devices in trying to establish their roles in the narrative. Similarly, the narrative arcs no longer follow the Aristotelian principle where a tragedy follows an incline leading to a climax centred on some conflict and which ushers in the tragic fall of the hero. In comedy, conversely, the hero's fate seemingly descends into chaos only to have his or her fortunes reversed at the last moment culminating in a happy ending. Absurdist texts, says Bennett, follow neither the path set out by classic tragedy or comedy. Instead they tend to favour a largely horizontal narrative development often leading to open and ambiguous endings. The fourth characteristic,

[33] This idea was also expressed in Bennett's *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* (2015) where he suggests that the plays themselves force the audience "to make sense of the contradictions, thereby forcing them to make life meaningful" (17).

according to Bennett, entails that absurd texts are generally "set in strange (i.e. Kafkaesque, surreal, and ridiculous) situations" (2015: 19).

One might ask however if Bennett's proposed "structural approach" is better suited for capturing the literary absurd than Esslin's thematic perspective. Although Bennett does indicate that these characteristics feature in absurdist texts in general, and not as a rule, he does appear to overstate both their importance and recurrence. David Galloway (1981), for instance, remarks that unlike the divergent or experimental styles of playwrights like Beckett or Ionesco, the style used by the authors whose work he explores is more closely related to realism. Galloway thus points out that the literary absurd can be found in different literary genres and styles, ranging from the realistic to the experimental.[34] The novels of the corpus confirm Galloway's assertion rather than contradict it.[35] The claim that absurdist texts tend to minimise exposition is similarly unconvincing. A lot of characters, though not all, in *Catch-22*, for example, have extensive backstories that are integral to the story and its characteristic humour. That backstory and the characters' motivation may not always be presented conventionally but they are discernible nevertheless. More often than not, however, these motivations prove incongruous when measured against readers' schematic expectations. The same holds true for the other texts making up the corpus as will become clear in later chapters.

Despite Bennett's claim, it appears that his approach, centred on these four characteristics, in many ways echoes Esslin's own views rather than contradicts them. Bennett's assertion that authors of the absurd experiment with language, for one, is shared by Esslin. The combination of and the contrast between experimental language and dramatic performance is one of the main reasons that

[34] Unfortunately, he does not really elaborate on specific stylistic features. In the wake of Galloway, Helen Weinberg (1970) and, more recently, Joanna Gavins (2013) propose considering absurdist literature "as existing along a cline of experimentalism, with realist texts at one extreme of this and stylistically innovative texts at the other" (Gavins 2013: 23).

[35] As does a previous analysis of the absurdist short story 'The alienation' ('De vervreemding', first published in 1961) by Maurice D'Haese (2002) (Couder 2014).

he feels the works of playwrights like Beckett or Ionesco are more suited to accurately express the philosophy of the absurd. Even more so than the writings of Sartre or Camus, both of whom broached the topic of the absurd using the "old convention",[36] attempting to rationally describe the absurd rather than simply showing it as it is by contrasting language and action and by abandoning "discursive logic for the poetic logic of association or assonance" (Esslin 2001: 406).[37] Similarly, Esslin also remarks that the playwrights under investigation in *The Theatre of the Absurd* have a tendency to forgo exposition. Characters' motivations and actions, says Esslin, become unintelligible and the narrative arc does not help readers to make sensible predictions about what will happen next but simply shows "what *is* happening" (Esslin 2001: 416). The emphasis on performance is also why Esslin feels that theatre is best suited to convey the absurd as it offers more meaning than language could ever hope to by itself. The discrepancy between performance and language really captures the divide between man and his surroundings, Esslin intimates repeatedly. However, that divide can just as pointedly be captured in novelistic form. As Camus said of Kafka's work, novels can create a storyworld where events or actions might make perfect sense to the characters of the novel but be highly incongruous when considered from the reader's perspective. As I aim to illustrate in the coming analyses, the interaction between the setting and characters of a novel on the one hand and its readers on the other hand can be just as successful in conveying the absurd as the dramatic performance.

[36] Camus's penchant to opt for a concise and rather direct writing style is in keeping with his belief that his fiction should reflect his 'philosophy' in which lucidity and rational thought are vital in the revolt against the absurd.
[37] This penchant for experimentation with language seems to be one of the points of divergence between absurdist drama and absurdist novels, certainly for the plays Esslin and Bennett discuss versus the authors in Galloway's study (1981).

1.5 Enter the Novel: The Absurd in Narrative Fiction

Despite the specificities owing to the genre of drama (e.g. the performance), much of what Esslin described as being part of the convention of the Theatre of the Absurd can also be found in other forms of literature.[38] It would therefore be incorrect to limit the literary absurd to drama only. It is especially interesting that the debate on absurdist drama is largely mirrored in the study of absurdist prose fiction. Once more we can see a move from predominantly thematic analyses of novels to a more structural approach – to use Bennett's term – geared towards the "systematic investigation of the linguistic features commonly exhibited by absurdist texts" (Gavins 2013: 5).

One of the first to look more closely at the absurd in prose is Galloway, who like Esslin, was inspired by Camus's philosophy of the absurd when describing an upcoming trend in American fiction. His 1964 book *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction* analyses the portrayal of the heroes in the works of John Updike, Saul Bellow, William Styron and J.D. Salinger. Galloway, again agreeing with Camus, emphasises that the conflict between "intention" and "reality" lies at the heart of the (literary) absurd (1981: 5-7). He specifies that man's continuous search for meaning clashes with his realisation that the universe itself is meaningless. He must find a way to resolve this conflict between intention and reality. The absurd then is "a relationship of nonconformity between the individual and the world" (Cruickshank 1970: 51). This idea of nonconformity is expressed in the belief that "man must oppose" the absurd universe he lives in. Through the act of revolt against the absurd, man also avers his humanity (Galloway 1981: 13). These insights, borrowed from Camus, thoroughly inform Galloway's concept of the "absurd hero" who "is by definition a rebel because he refuses to avoid either of the two components on which absurdity depends,"

[38] Camus, like Kafka, suggested different approaches to study drama and the novel. The first should be approached "through its externals", the second "through its form" (Camus 1955: 79).

namely intention and reality (1981: 15). These absurd heroes can, for instance, appear in the guise of a "tragic hero", as in the work of William Styron, or as a picaro in Saul Bellow's novels, with the absurd hero being "that man who is aware of the disorder of the universe but who" incessantly keeps searching for "truth" in a universe that has none to offer (Bigsby 1967: 74-75).

It is this "moment of sudden insight", says Christopher Bigsby, which Galloway picks up on (1967: 75). Bigsby, however, feels that Galloway overstates its significance for the (then) contemporary American novel which was certainly influenced by the philosophy of the absurd but often incorporated it differently than how Camus, certainly initially, had envisioned (Bisgby 1967: 73). One such difference is that Galloway interprets the absurd as a "symbol of hope", with the absurd hero soldiering on in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds suggesting that even though "victory is questionable, defeat is not final" (Galloway 1981: 16). Camus, though, was quick to point out that the absurd entails "a total absence of hope", which is not to say that one should give in to despair. It is in fact the absence of hope which gives the absurd man strength as it implies that he has accepted that the universe is ultimately meaningless and that he is firmly rooted in the present, not focused on a distant future (Camus 1955: 22; 40-42). Much of the confusion Bigsby perceives in Galloway owes to the almost fluid nature of Camus's concept of the absurd which he himself was continuously changing and amending,[39] and which became less important to Camus as his career progressed (Carroll 2007: 65).[40]

Interest in the literary absurd continued throughout the seventies with the emergence of studies that consider the absurd to be more than an expression of existentialism, although this remains an important aspect. Receiving particular

[39] Galloway was aware of this as well, noting that "Camus' investigation of the absurd is itself impressionistic and often lyrical" and he warned that while "the myth of the absurd may serve as a critical tool," it would be "unwise to demand rigidity from such criticism as it is to demand of Camus' meditations the logic and consistency of a finalized philosophical system" (Galloway 1981: 230).

[40] The belief that "political and religious […] ideologies should be resisted", however, will always stay at the forefront of his writing, as will the importance and value he places on "human life itself" (Carroll 2007: 65).

attention is the relationship between the absurd and logic. Human beings have the tendency to try and approach or explain all manner of things logically. But this is not always possible and the incongruity that arises when something cannot be logically explained ends in absurdity. The inability to reconcile literary text and experience can often lead to readers' expectations of events to be frustrated, as in John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (Safer 1989: 94). The tension between the logic and the illogical is also at the forefront of Russian author Daniil Kharms's novels. According to Hilary Fink, Kharms's conceptualisation of the literary absurd "relies on the subversion of logic and causality" and the violation of "logical and causal textual norms" (Fink 1998: 527; 528). Kharms's writing is characterised by a repeated breaking of the causal chain which has a significant impact on the coherence of his stories. This reduced coherence reinforces the incongruity we are often left with in a story "where nothing explains anything" (Jaccard, qtd. in Fink 1998: 529). Such preferences can be directly linked to Kharms's "poetics of extremism" and its abstainment from extraneous explanation and context in lieu of brevity (Cornwell 2006: 163). What the literary absurd does, then, is complicate readers' understanding by refraining from offering easy and/or explicit explanations. The lack of clarity readers might experience is further complicated by the sociological implications of the absurd. As will be explained in more detail in the second chapter, human interaction is to a large extent facilitated through schemata, repositories of all forms of knowledge and experiences. In turn, schemata are also socio-culturally defined. The absurd and its inherent incongruity tends to subvert, complicate or even undermine schematic exactions. Therefore, the absurd can also have a sociological impact, leading to devolving social norms and the collapse of social interaction thus further alienating man. Consequently, the absurd can impede the individual's innate desire to process information as efficiently as possible (Cornwell 2006: 24). The novel then can just as successfully communicate the experience of the absurd as drama by playing with readers' expectations and by frustrating or subverting the

schemata readers rely on during the reading process. One question that remains, however, is how literary techniques can be used to achieve such an effect.

1.6 Finding Humour in Absurdity: Reading the Style of the Absurd

A possible answer to the question of literary strategies can be found in the application of cognitive stylistics to absurdist fiction. Such an approach considers specific stylistic features while also accounting for the manner in which readers respond to absurdist texts. Literary texts, through both their content and stylistic presentation, can draw or even demand more attention from readers – an effect absurdist novels often capitalise on (Gavins 2013: 33-34).[41] One of these effects, according to Joanna Gavins, is that of narratorial unreliability which severs the empathic connection between reader and literary character. She concludes that narrative unreliability, which can express itself through a range of stylistic means, is a key feature of the literary absurd. Whether or not this is always the case is less evident. Gavins rightly asserts that, in absurdist fiction, unreliable narrators steer readers in constructing hypothetical modal worlds, which can later be found inaccurate or incomplete and consequently force readers to repair their mental representations of the storyworld based on the new information. But, in and of itself, unreliability is not sufficient to classify a literary text as absurdist. This not only holds true for unreliability but also for other stylistic features Gavins presents, such as negatively shaded modality, or foregrounded fictionality (Gavins 2013: 133). It is not always clear how these stylistic features pertain to the absurd or how they advance our understanding of the absurd. One of the difficulties Gavins (and Bennett as well) are faced with is that of substantiating a

[41] The way in which a text like Camus's *The Outsider,* for example, achieves that effect is through its narrator. In Camus's *The Outsider,* the narrator Meursault represents the only point of access to the storyworld for readers. Gavins indicates that Meursault's language, laced with epistemic and perception modality, calls for multiple text worlds to be created. Often these text worlds will be only partly filled out. By keeping the information deliberately vague, a text can force readers to continuously adjust and re-evaluate their mental representations, which for the reader mirrors the confusion and alienation of the protagonist.

one-on-one relationship between a particular stylistic feature and an absurdist text, especially given the context of the geographical and historical diversity that characterises absurdist literature. It might prove more beneficial to combine a thematic perspective with an interest in stylistic features.

Gavins does, however, acknowledge the importance of the role of the reader in the interpretation of absurdist literature and is one of the first to actively try and describe how real readers experience absurdist texts. Her research also reveals that humour is something which can be abundantly found in absurdist literature but that the "stylistic techniques through which absurd humour is created" as well as its possible impact on readers and their reading experience are mostly ignored (Gavins 2013: 48). Gavins is certainly not alone in remarking on the important role humour plays in many absurdist texts. Esslin and Bennett, for example, both posit that humour offers a counterbalance to the tragedy of man's absurd situation which lies at the heart of all absurdist literature.

One highly interesting characteristic and seemingly universal trait of absurdist texts is the link Bennett makes between absurdist literature and tragicomedy. Bennett indicates that one of the generally held beliefs about absurdist texts is that they tend to have "ridiculous plots" (2015: 9). Once more the link between literary text and the common understanding or meaning of the word absurd is touched upon. In "common usage," says Esslin, "'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous'" (2001: 23). That is not however how Camus understood the term, nor did Esslin. Bennett acknowledges that the absurd and ridiculousness are not interchangeable terms, but does point out that ridiculousness nevertheless constitutes a significant part of absurdist literature, certainly in its appreciation by readers, and that it "aptly describes an obvious element of the texts […] and should be cherished for its creativity and inventiveness rather than glossed over *only* in favor of a more intellectually serious notion of the absurd" (Bennett 2015: 10).

Many absurdist texts, says Bennett, intertwine tragic and comic elements to reflect their experience of a new and absurd reality, leading him to conclude that tragicomedy is the genre of absurdist literature. A case that can certainly be argued. Esslin too picked up on the tragicomic elements in the plays he discussed, certainly in the work of Ionesco. The French-Romanian playwright, for instance, made no distinction between the tragic and the comic, "as the comic is the intuition of the absurd, it seems to me more conducive to despair than the tragic" (Ionesco in Esslin 2001: 192). Indeed, by its very nature, the Theatre of the Absurd invites confusion in its audience: plots are unclear, characters' motives are hard to follow making it difficult to identify with them, all factors which, according to Esslin, greatly add to their comic potential. The Theatre of the Absurd is "a comic theatre in spite of the fact that its subject-matter is sombre, violent, and bitter" and thus "transcends the category of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with horror" (Esslin 2001: 411). Cornwell, as well, stresses that the absurd draws heavily on both tragedy and comedy, going on to single out laughter as a crucial component of absurdist literature (2006: 33-34). In some instances, he argues, humour theory offers the most meaningful path to understanding the absurd, as in Kharms's oeuvre (Cornwell 2006: 166). Unfortunately, he neglects to satisfactorily elaborate this point as his overview of humour theory is extremely limited.[42] He does, however, raise some interesting points and establishes intriguing links between absurdist tendencies and parody (2006: 67), the (dark) humour that infuses Camus's writing (2006: 116) – something which few pick up on, to Camus's frustration[43] – or the "demystifying" power Ionesco attributes to humour in dealing with the "illogicality of the absurd" (2006: 128). But Cornwell rarely moves his analysis beyond the surface. He also

[42] Aside from the briefest of references to Freud, the only theory of humour mentioned in this section is that of Jerry Palmer (1987; 1994). Palmer's conceptualisation of absurd humour will be discussed extensively in the third chapter of this dissertation.

[43] Camus felt that his critics neglected the humour of his work, which he felt was integral to it (Golomb 1995: 181). See also Demirkan (2009).

tends to group together different types of humour such as nonsense and absurdist humour, two forms of humour which are, erroneously as I will argue, all too often conflated even within the field of humour theory.[44] It seems then that if a truly universal stylistic feature of the literary absurd were to exist, it would be humour, albeit a very specific type of humour which I call absurdist humour. In order to analyse that absurdist humour, its narrative function, its impact on the reading process and on interpretation, I turn to cognitive stylistics and specifically to schema theory. Schemata not only facilitate human and social interaction, they also have an important role to play in how readers understand and interpret literary texts, as will be made clear in chapter two.

1.7 Conclusion

What emerges from this overview is that both the absurd and the literary absurd are not easily encapsulated in one specific definition. This is not altogether unexpected as the absurd gives expression to a feeling, to a sentiment which is then given literary form and which we interpret as the literary absurd. In the wake of Kierkegaard's philosophical turn from objective reality to subjective experience, Camus's absurd captures the individual's realisation that his or her relationship to or place in the universe is highly problematic. Man searches for meaning and coherence in a world that can offer neither. This is what sends Yossarian up a chestnut tree. He cannot understand nor reconcile the consequences of war. His existence is devoid of meaning. And universal (moral) truths such as good and evil are eroded. At its core then, the literary absurd communicates an existential (but not necessarily existentialist) unease. Yossarian divests himself of his uniform and isolates himself in a desperate attempt to return to a simpler time where things made sense. In Esslin's view, the absence of reason

[44] See, for instance, Hamilton (2013: 26); Ermida (2008: 74) or Moura (2010: 13).

and causality are realised by foregrounding the incongruity between the theatrical performance and the actual written word which reinforces the sense of alienation, characteristic of the (literary) absurd, in its audience. When considered in the context of the novel, Galloway states that the absurd is conveyed through the seemingly pointless struggles of the "absurd" hero in a world indifferent or even inimical to his desires, as when Yossarian's feeling of alienation is exacerbated by Milo's seemingly wilful incomprehension.

Neither Esslin nor Galloway, veer much from Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd as laid out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Indeed, virtually all studies of the literary absurd take as their point of departure the philosophical origins of the absurd. My dissertation will be no different and considers it one of the most significant features of absurdist literature. Like Foley, I consciously interpret Camus's absurd as an "epistemological claim" (2008: 8). As such, it centres on the (biological and social) imperative of man to search for meaning and coherence in a universe that is essentially meaningless. And it is this worldview, expressed in absurdist texts, which evokes a powerful effect that readers generally perceive to constitute the literary absurd. But as both Gavins's and Bennett's studies illustrate, it is hard to identify a set of absolute stylistic features or narrative structure as the exclusive domain of absurdist texts. What is certain, however, is that the literary absurd is always a product of the interaction between a literary text and its reader.[45] What is also clear is that that interaction requires a particular (narrative) context in order for it to be realised successfully. And one of the most widespread and important strategies to create that context in absurdist literature relies on the use of (absurdist) humour. Generally defined by the notion of incongruity, humour creates a framework that serves to reinforce the incongruity that is inherent to the experience of the absurd itself. To better understand this

[45] The role of the reader, then, is of great importance in my dissertation. That is why I have drawn on both literary criticism and reader responses when compiling the corpus. It is not the intention of this research to establish whether or not a particular novel is absurdist, but rather how such an interpretation is reached and what role absurdist humour plays in this process as well as in the narrative structure of a novel.

incongruity, we must consider more closely where it is situated, in terms of the text-reader interaction, and how it operates. This requires a more thorough understanding of the reading process, of how readers relate textual information to their own knowledge and experiences. Schema theory is ideally suited to this purpose and it is therefore the focus of the following chapter.

2. Experiencing the Absurd: Schemata and Absurdist Literature

In the first chapter we delved into the roots of the literary absurd and identified incongruity as its defining feature. How exactly that incongruity manifests itself or rather is experienced by readers will be elucidated in this chapter on schemata and schema theory. To illustrate how schemata aid in communicating the absurd and absurdist humour, we can once again turn to *Catch-22*. While recovering from his leg injury, Yossarian and Dunbar are reprimanded by Colonel Ferredge because Dunbar repeatedly grabbed Nurse Duckett's bosom. Coming to the conclusion that they must be crazy, Ferredge refers both Dunbar and Yossarian to Major Sanderson, the resident psychiatrist. Sanderson goes on to quiz Yossarian on a dream he supposedly had:

> "I think your dream is charming, and I hope it recurs frequently so that we can continue discussing it. Would you like a cigarette?" He smiled when Yossarian declined. "Just why do you think," he asked knowingly, "that you have such a strong aversion to accepting a cigarette from me?" "I put one out a second ago. It's still smoldering in your ash tray." Major Sanderson chuckled. "That's a very ingenious explanation. But I suppose we'll soon discover the true reason." (Heller 1995: 366)

The conversation continues and turns towards the specificities of the dream:

> "What does the fish remind you of?" "Other fish." "And what do other fish remind you of?" "Other fish." Major Sanderson sat back disappointedly. "Do you like fish?" "Not especially." "Just why do you think you have such a morbid aversion to fish?" asked Major Sanderson

> triumphantly. “They’re too bland,” Yossarian answered. “And too bony.” Major Sanderson nodded understandingly, with a smile that was agreeable and insincere. “That’s a very interesting explanation. But we’ll soon discover the true reason, I suppose.” (Heller 1995: 367)

Asked about his feelings toward fish, Yossarian admits that he is rather ambivalent to them, much to Major Sanderson’s delight:

> Major Sanderson sprang up with joy when he heard the words ‘ambivalent attitude’. “You do understand!” he exclaimed, wringing his hands together ecstatically. “Oh, you can’t imagine how lonely it’s been for me, talking day after day to patients who haven’t the slightest knowledge of psychiatry, trying to cure people who have no real interest in me or my work! It’s given me such a terrible feeling of inadequacy.” A shadow of anxiety crossed his face. “I can’t seem to shake it.” “Really?” asked Yossarian, wondering what else to say. “Why do you blame yourself for gaps in the education of others?” “It’s silly, I know,” Major Sanderson replied uneasily with a giddy, involuntary laugh. “But I’ve always depended very heavily on the good opinion of others. I reached puberty a bit later than all the other boys my age, you see, and it’s given me sort of – well, all sorts of problems. I just know I’m going to enjoy discussing them with you.” (Heller 1995: 367-368)

The psychiatrist finally and reluctantly realises that Yossarian is the actual patient in this scenario and wishes to probe deeper into his subconscious by showing him different ink blots to find out what they remind him of. Yossarian, somewhat facetiously, tells him to save himself the trouble as everything reminds him of sex. This confession prompts Major Sanderson to ask Yossarian about a very

specific, graphic and violent type of sex dream. Yossarian's non-committal answer does not please the psychiatrist:

> Major Sanderson recoiled as though he had been slapped. "Yes, of course," he conceded frigidly, his manner changing to one of edgy and defensive antagonism. "But I'd like you to dream one like that anyway just to see how you react. That will be all for today. In the meantime, I'd also like you to dream up the answers to some of those questions I asked you. These sessions are no more pleasant for me than they are for you, you know." (Heller 1995: 368-369)

This funny and absurd interaction between Yossarian and his psychiatrist illustrates the important role schemata fulfil in the creation of absurdist humour. Schemata are "cognitive structures which represent generic knowledge" about events, objects or entities in "their general form" (Emmott 2014: 2). Schemata structure past experiences (whether acquired personally or vicariously) and knowledge. People constantly make predictions about the behaviour of those around them as well as make sense of what is going on in the world around them. Our own experiences have a crucial role to play in this process. Some psychologists state that as human beings we are constantly gaining new experiences which we then distil into cognitive memory structures. These in turn are used to determine how we assess events as well as people and their actions (Hinton 2000: 42). The relationship between schemata and our environment seems to be inherently cyclical and both directly influence the other.

The types of schemata distinguished by schema theory reflect the many different types of knowledge they can contain. In the scene cited above, for example, several types of schemata are at work. In order to interpret this passage and its absurdist humour, readers need to make use of their general or world knowledge, such as knowing what a psychiatrist is or how the interaction between

psychiatrist and patient generally unfolds (that it is the psychiatrist who asks the questions and not the other way around). Some readers might have recourse to more specific schemata pertaining to psychoanalysis (the dream and the subconscious) or to intertextual schemata concerning Sigmund Freud's work (sexual taboos) or even to Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). More text-specific schemata can also be brought to bear by readers in terms of their mental representation of Yossarian and his character (his facetious and contrary nature) or the almost word for word repetition of the last sentence in the first and second quoted passage. Schemata, in their many forms, not only inform our own actions, says Patrick Colm Hogan, but also help us understand, interpret or even predict the actions of those around us, both in real life and in literature (2003: 45).[46] They engender certain expectations in readers. These expectations can subsequently be subverted or even frustrated, as is often the case in absurdist texts, frequently to humorous effect.

In this chapter, I will draw on *Catch-22* to illustrate how schemata inform our experience of both the literary absurd and absurdist humour. First, I discuss some of the different concepts included under the umbrella term schema (or schemata). The term schema returns in a wide variety of scientific disciplines but is not always given the same meaning. Next, I focus more specifically on how the concept of schemata developed in the field of (cognitive) psychology and artificial intelligence. There are several reasons why these two fields merit special attention. Considering schemata in the broader scientific context of psychology and its body of empirical research into the subject allows for a more objective basis, however tentatively, on which to evaluate and assess my own reading experience (as the primary reader of the texts under scrutiny in this dissertation) and to speculate about the general reading process in terms of memory structures

[46] In fact, Hogan intimates that most cognitive scientists believe that there is no fundamental difference between the way in which we deal with literature and the manner in which we navigate our daily life. It is simply the level of intensity or reach of the cognitive response that varies (Hogan 2003: 87).

and text processing. Artificial intelligence, specifically Roger Schank and Robert Abelson's script-theory, is also of particular interest as its focus on text coherence thoroughly informs both cognitive literary theory (see Cook 1995, or Emmott 2004) and cognitive humour theory (see Raskin 1985, or Attardo 2001). A following section elaborates on the manner in which schema are used in literary studies, most notably in the field of cognitive stylistics, which focuses on "the form and structure of a text" in order to ascertain how readers understand and interpret these texts (Emmott 2004: 98). Finally, I will elucidate how schema can contribute to both the creation and interpretation of absurdist humour in absurdist texts.

2.1 Schemata, Scripts, and Frames

The concept of schema has a long tradition dating back to the early twentieth century. Generally, the term is attributed to the work of British psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett and his *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932). Today, generally, schemata are considered "as some form of knowledge structure stored in the brain or mind of the individual to assist in the interpretation of experience" (Middleton and Brown 2005: 16). Schema theory then encompasses those theories that postulate that when someone is faced with a particular situation that person will automatically draw on a "knowledge store", i.e. a schema, which contains information acquired through both personal experience and socio-cultural parameters (Bell 2014: 143). Schemata allow for situations to be compared against standardised patterns and thus facilitate cognitive processing and minimise cognitive expenditure.

Bartlett himself, however, credits neurologist Henry Head, as the first to use the term to denote cognitive structures that "modify the impressions produced by incoming sensory impulses in such a way that the final sensations of position or of locality rise into consciousness charged with a relation to something that

has gone before" (Head, qtd. in Bartlett 1932: 200). Bartlett largely agrees with Head's definition but does remark that the latter does not sufficiently acknowledge the dynamic character of these proposed schemata. Bartlett rejects the idea that they are unchangeable. On the contrary, he says, it is essential to their role in cognition that they can be re-evaluated or even (re)constructed entirely if need be. Nor does Bartlett agree with the implication that schema activation is always a conscious decision that subjects are at all times aware of. Moreover, he intimates that he does not much like the term schema, finding it too vague to be of real use. Yet at the same time he admits to not being able to find a better alternative to describe the cognitive activity at work (Bartlett 1932: 200-201). Therefore, he uses it as well, but aims to provide a more precise definition. For Bartlett, a schema collects and cognitively structures past responses and experiences thus forming a large interrelated network of specific responses to a series of standardised situations. Schemata constitute an integral part of humans' cognitive faculties and in consequence influence how people perceive and process information (Bartlett 1932: 201). In the context of Bartlett's interest in memory and remembering, specifically, schemata provide an "organised setting" allowing us to infer on the basis of past experience how a current situation might have come about and to predict, to a certain extent, how that situation might unfold (Bartlett 1932: 202-203; 207).

Although Bartlett's book *Remembering* was widely circulated, it did not immediately garner much response until the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence but also in cognitive and experimental psychology (Emmott 2014: 3). However, within the field of cognitive psychology, Bartlett's work is not always appreciated or considered adequately. It is especially unfortunate, say David Middleton and Steven Brown, that it is exactly the term schema that is most often misunderstood. Within psychology, there has been a tendency to "make an overly firm distinction between the 'inner world' of the cognitive system and the 'outside world' reached via human perception"

(Middleton and Brown 2005: 24). This criticism is frequently extended to schema theory, which is classed as a computational theory. The implication is that schema theory erroneously equates the brain to a computer where the brain functions as a central processing unit independent from both the individual's physical materiality and his or her surrounding environment (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014: 261). Such a description of schemata does not correspond to that of Bartlett, nor to the concept as it is used and presented in this dissertation. Remembering is not a matter of simply reproducing experiences enclosed in immutable schemata. Rather it should be considered as a constructive process in which different schemata work in conjunction with sensory data and other contextual parameters. During this process, schemata influence how the individual perceives its environment just as the environment in turn influences schemata (Bartlett 1932: 213). So while Bartlett's notion of schemata remains, at times, somewhat vague (something which I will return to later on) it does, even if tentatively, account for 'outside' influences and considers memory in a decidedly constructivist manner. Rather than purely computational, Bartlett's schemata are thoroughly embedded and embodied as they are conceived of to incorporate 'outside' input and how our body responds to that input.

This constructivist approach is something that Bartlett's work shares with later iterations of schema theory developed in artificial intelligence research, most notably by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson on the one hand and Marvin Minsky on the other hand. In *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (1977), Schank and Abelson try to ascertain how people process and understand text in order to enable computers to perform the same task. Much like Bartlett, they noticed that people rely heavily on past experiences and acquired knowledge to interpret and navigate specific situations. But whereas Bartlett's schema situates itself on a more general level, Schank and Abelson sought to develop a more detailed and specific framework to chart the varying cognitive structures at work during text processing. To that

end they start by introducing the term script which is "a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context. A script is made up of slots and requirements about what can fill those slots. The structure is an interconnected whole, and what is in one slot affects what can be in another" (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 41).

Schank and Abelson believe scripts to cover a variety of situations that people are faced with on a day-to-day basis. As scripts remain largely resistant to change, according to both authors, they are not particularly suited for dealing with new and unfamiliar situations. A script is, first and foremost, "a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation" (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 41). They give the example of a restaurant visit. When we read or are told about a restaurant visit, we do not need every little detail to make sense of the situation. Based on our experiences with such situations we know how the average restaurant visit unfolds. The passage detailing Yossarian's (forced) visit to the army psychiatrist can be explained (and understood) in similar terms. In the case of Yossarian, his behaviour is deemed as that of a crazy person by his superior officer. In the text, however, Colonel Ferredge never explicitly orders Yossarian to report to Major Sanderson for an examination. Yet readers know that, generally, one visits a psychiatrist when issues arise pertaining to one's mental health. And Colonel Ferredge is not shy about voicing such concerns. It is a logical step then that the next scene puts Yossarian in the psychiatrist's office as, certainly at first glance, there seems to be sufficient evidence justifying Yossarian's presence there.[47] The text can also dispense with much of the preamble as most readers are aware of the stereotypical interaction between the psychiatrist asking poignant questions and the patient baring his or her soul that

[47] In that sense, schema theory is similar to common-sense or folk psychology. This is not surprising as schemata represent standardised patterns of events, actions, and situations. By virtue of being standardised, they can also be considered to represent responses and behaviour conforming to the governing socio-cultural norm. Schema theory, however, offers a better equipped apparatus to analyse how readers respond to and interpret absurdist literature and absurdist humour as it allows to chart deviations from those standardised patterns as well as allow for a holistic view on the text-reader interaction.

characterises a visit to the psychiatrist – a stereotypical pattern which *Catch-22* deviates from to humorous effect. That does not mean, however, that scripts are exactly the same for everyone, reliant as they are on personal experience. Yet often they share sufficient elements to be commonly understood, although Schank and Abelson do specify that "[d]eviations from the standard pattern are handled with some difficulty" (1977: 67). They indicate that scripts pertain to specific situations and as such are not equipped to cope with the unexpected. But people do have access to the cognitive mechanisms underlying scripts and when there is no appropriate script available they can rely on plans.

A plan operates along similar lines as a script but acts as a "repository for general information that will connect events that cannot be connected" through the use of a specific script (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 70). The main difference is that scripts pertain to very specific situations whereas plans schematise more general information. In order to understand plans, people have to first try and ascertain the objectives of the "actors involved" and then determine how they aim to realise that objective (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 73). Plans then can be used to explain a series of events or actions in terms of a (perceived) goal that needs to be accomplished on a more general level. Determining these goals is a process that is thoroughly informed by our general knowledge and our understanding of universal motivational factors and how they relate to real objects and locations, say Schank and Abelson (1977: 108). We know for instance what type of activities usually take place in a restaurant and can thus surmise some basic (motivational) goals when someone informs us they are going to a restaurant. We formulate these assumptions on the basis of expectancy rules which help us to theorise how people might act or react in a specific context (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 119). Situated a level above goals are themes[48] which are essentially nothing more than a collection of interconnected goals: "When a theme is

[48] Schank and Abelson distinguish different types of themes such as role themes (1977: 132), interpersonal themes (1977: 138) or life themes (1977: 144).

identified it makes sense of a person's behaviour by providing a prior context for his actions" (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 132). In the case of Yossarian, readers can quickly infer that he is not actually crazy, but that his behaviour is simply part of one of his plans to achieve his ultimate goal, namely to survive the war and to return home. Major Sanderson's turn from good-natured and sympathetic listener to deeply disturbed individual can also be understood in terms of his personal goal in seeking pleasure, a pleasure he derives from sharing his perverted sex dream with, what he thinks is, a like-minded individual. Major Sanderson, then, is primarily motivated by what Schank and Abelson call enjoyment, one of the types of goals they distinguish next to satisfaction, achievement, preservation, crisis and instrumental goals (1977: 113-117).

Almost concurrently with Schank and Abelson, Marvin Minsky conceives of the term frame as "a data-structure for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of living room, or going to a child's birthday party" (Minsky 1975: 212). Frames are best understood as a series of nodes. At the upper level are a number of codified aspects or characteristics that are virtually universal to a given situation or object. At a lower level we find a multitude of slots that are filled with more detailed and specific information. These slots have "*default-assignments*", i.e. the most commonly predicted or expected value, that are nevertheless subject to change and can "be easily displaced by new items that fit better the current situation" (Minsky 1975: 212-213). In our frame of visiting a psychiatrist, for example, there are clearly defined slots. The slot of participants, for instance, consists of doctor on the one hand and patient(s) on the other hand. Both participants also have specific roles that they fulfil in this interaction. The example from *Catch-22* recounted above initially conforms to that default assignment. Major Sanderson is the one asking the questions and trying to explain Yossarian's behaviour by analysing his dreams. Soon these roles are reversed, however, when Sanderson reveals his own dreams and fixations to Yossarian and asks him for his input.

At first glance there is a considerable amount of overlap between Schank and Abelson's script and Minsky's frame. One difference is that frames include stereotypical representations of objects as well as actions and events. They are in a way more inclusive than scripts. Most psychologists do, however, limit the scope of frames. They tend to differentiate scripts, that "deal with knowledge about events" whereas frames are thought of as "knowledge structures referring to some aspect of the world (e.g. building) containing fixed structural information (e.g. has floors and walls) and slots for variable information (e.g. material or materials from which the building is constructed)" (Baddeley et al. 2009: 128). This is also the distinction that I will maintain throughout this dissertation, with the understanding that schema (schemata) serves as a general term to denote various representations of knowledge and experience stored in memory. In the next paragraphs, I further explore the important role schemata fulfil in memory.

2.2 Remembering: The Role of Schemata

As is evident from the title, Bartlett was especially interested in the workings of human memory. But he explicitly rejected approaches that considered memory as an isolated process. Bartlett was keenly aware that societal and cultural factors needed to be taken into account as they bear directly on the way in which schemata store and structure information, and thus in turn on how they impact memory. Previous experiments, such as those conducted by Hermann Ebbinghaus, endeavoured to negate that influence by trying to remove "personal and idiosyncratic responses" in a strictly controlled experimental setting (Baddeley 2009: 95). But Bartlett argued that such an experimental setting is just as much a social context that impacts memory and memory recall as does any other context. What Bartlett proposed, then, was to more closely consider how people process unfamiliar information by trying to bring that information into line with their own experiences, in other words, by making it more conventional.

Bartlett illustrated that people always select and exclude material when they are recollecting events. These choices are made by an individual in relation to a specific context (Middleton and Brown 2005: 15-16). To truly understand how memory functions, it should therefore not be studied in a strict experimental setting, but rather under as natural conditions as possible. The psychologist, says Bartlett, must never forget that he is dealing "with human beings" and therefore he "must consider the everyday behaviour of the ordinary individual" and remain cognizant of the social context that informs that behaviour (Bartlett 1932: 12). In *Remembering*, Bartlett puts theory into practice and describes a series of experiments designed to elucidate how higher cognitive functions such as perception and remembering influence each other and how socio-cultural parameters impact these processes. What is interesting about Bartlett's study, is that he investigated memory in a complex setting. He asked subjects to read and later recall a complex folk tale unfamiliar to them. This deliberate choice allowed him to look more closely at the errors subjects made (Baddeley et al. 2009: 94).

In what is perhaps his most well-known experiment, Bartlett asked participants to consider a North-American folk tale titled "The War of the Ghosts". He chose this tale as it was far removed from the cultural and "social environment" of his test subjects and he was keen to see how this cultural translation influenced recall (Bartlett 1932: 64). Bartlett also wanted to gauge how participants dealt with a story that lacked "obvious rational order" and incorporated elements of the "supernatural" (1932: 64-65). Participants were asked to read the story twice and subsequently asked to reproduce the story. A first time after about fifteen minutes had passed and a second time at varying "intervals as opportunity offered" (Bartlett 1932: 65). Bartlett found that people only rarely succeeded in accurately reproducing the story and the more time passed, the more difficult this task became. They were also more successful in remembering the general content than specific (formal) details. In reproducing the story, Bartlett noticed that subjects tended to omit details, simplify events,

rely heavily on stereotypes to fill in gaps, and replace unfamiliar details with more (culturally) familiar ones. He also found that subjects are more likely to remember specific details when these are in line with their own interests (Bartlett 1932: 93-94). This led him to conclude that the cognitive process of remembering is reliant on "rationalisation" which enables people to make a story more coherent by substituting unfamiliar elements with what they know from (personal) experience. Thus the story is made to fit more closely with the individual's specific socio-cultural context (Bartlett 1932: 94).

The participants generally made these changes when asked to reproduce the story for the first time and maintained those alterations during subsequent retellings. Bartlett's experiment hinted that there exists "a general scheme, form, order and arrangement of material" that "seems to be dominant, both in initial reception and in subsequent remembering" (Bartlett 1932: 83). And that scheme is constructed on the basis of past experiences and an individual's responses to similar situations. When specific experiences are stored in memory we do not include every little detail. Only some information is retained. That means that specific experiences can be generalised and serve as templates which can then be used to process new information as well as enable us to make predictions about the actions of others (Anderson 2005: 154). Bartlett believed that the errors in recall that his test subjects evinced could be explained by their own schematic knowledge asserting itself in an effort to make sense of the story they were asked to remember and to bring it more closely in line with their own experiences (Baddeley et al. 129-130). In a sense, then, schemata can be considered as "abstractions from experienced reality" (Edwards 2004: 143). These general abstractions, however, are not rigid structures. They can be modified to include new information or can even be adapted into entirely new schemata to account for recurring procedural aberrations or anomalous information (Fiske and Taylor 1991: 113-115).

Many absurdist texts, and certainly the novels that make up the corpus of this dissertation, successfully capitalise on the habit of rationalisation identified by Bartlett. A reader asked to retell the story of *Catch-22* would be challenged to resist rationalising plot motivations and character interactions even though the socio-cultural context of the story might be very familiar. Think for example of Milo Minderbinder and his convoluted egg-scheme (Heller 1995: 286-289). Milo buys eggs from Sicily at one cent apiece. He then surreptitiously imports them to Malta where he sells them at four and a half cents apiece only to buy them back from the merchants he sold them to (in actuality his own company) at seven cents per egg. He finally sells these eggs to the Mess Hall at the military base for five cents apiece, earning him a profit of one and a half cent per egg. While Milo's intricate math checks out, the other character's reliance on Milo as the middle man is much harder to rationalise. The Mess officer makes clever use of the capitalist economic system by artificially controlling the market mechanism of supply and demand. The air force brass at Pianosa never question the provenance of the eggs and consequently are tricked into paying too much for their eggs. Milo consistently displays such behaviour and always gets away with it, much to the reader's amazement.[49]

When discussing cognitive processes such as rationalisation, though, there of course always exists the caveat that the brain, and by extension memory, is exceedingly complex. And we are still unable to trace how certain cognitive activities such as remembering, or reading for that matter, unfold (Hogan 2003: 33). There is however less doubt that long term memory plays an important role in the reading process. Long term memory is generally divided into two distinct, though interconnected, sections. On the one hand there are our general knowledge

[49] An example is the scene in which he buys the entire supply of Egyptian cotton in the hope of making a fortune. When the demand for his cotton fails to reach the dizzying heights Milo expected, he still turns a profit by coating the cotton with chocolate and selling it as food in the Mess Hall.

and knowledge acquired through experience.[50] This also includes our mental lexicon, which functions as a highly diversified network that links a wide variety of data sets. On the other hand there is that part of long term memory that pertains to our ability to perform specific skills (Hogan 2003: 42).

Similarly to Bartlett's constructivist view on the workings of memory, it makes sense to interpret the brain as a vast and intricate network of connected nodes. Certain triggers or impulses stimulate the activation of particular networks while at the same time inhibiting others (Hogan 2003: 48-49). This leads to the formation of relatively stable cognitive structures in the form of schemata. It is also worth noting that we do not remember events in excessive detail. Or at least not if we are not primed specifically for such a task. Moreover, details we do remember fade from memory as time goes by. But that is not to say that mental representations do not play an important role in how we process information. They play a significant part in that process but do not constitute the process in and of themselves. Memories do not come in the form of readymade and complete reproductions but are actively reconstructed on the basis of different memory fragments (Hogan 2003: 161). This echoes Bartlett's claim that "memory is reconstructed in the process of its articulation and transmission" (Middleton and Brown 2005: 20). Memory recall is a subjective process and past experiences are influenced by the context surrounding the present. Memory and environment influence each other making a rigid distinction between an isolated cognitive world and the outside world accessed via the human senses untenable (Middleton and Brown 2005: 23-24). In terms of the reading process, schemata do more than

[50] Within psychology there also exists a tradition of distinguishing between semantic and episodic memory. Semantic memory encompasses a vast store of information and knowledge that people possess but that does not necessarily come from personal experience. What sets semantic memory apart from episodic memory is that the first is organised hierarchically. For instance, we know that cars generally have four wheels so we can assume that a Mercedes has four wheels simply because it is a car. Episodic memory, in contrast, pertains to events and situations that we have actually experienced for ourselves (Schank 1995: 118-119). Schank however indicates that this distinction is not clear cut as the "world is full of oddities and idiosyncratic events that fail to fit neatly into a pre-established hierarchy" (Schank 1995: 119).

simply help us remember words. They allow us to relate conceptual and semantic knowledge to the surrounding world.

Bartlett's study was seminal in that it tried to account for the socio-cultural context specific to the individual. That is not to say that his research is without criticism. He provided his test subjects, for instance, with very vague instructions and his data analysis was less than meticulous. Critics were quick to suggest that the errors or omissions in memory recall that Bartlett found in his research were actually a consequence of his subjects deliberately adapting the story when asked to reproduce it, rather than being evidence of a faulty memory. This criticism was proven valid when follow-up experiments illustrated that test subjects who had received more explicit instructions that stressed the task of accurately remembering the story produced significantly fewer errors when retelling the story. At the same time, however, there is also ample empirical evidence that supports Bartlett's claims. Additional experiments, for example, have shown that people are more likely to substitute textual information and textual detail for schematic information as times goes by, as the latter is more prominent in long term memory (Baddeley et al. 2009: 95-96). They also suggest that the remembered version of the story people are asked to reproduce is generally more structured and expresses subjects' personal views more strongly (Baddeley et al. 2009: 130). These studies, interestingly, point towards a second significant use for schemata, namely that people use them to form coherent stories, to make (logical) sense of the world. And it is exactly this use of schemata that is typically frustrated in absurdist fiction.

2.3 Making Sense of it All: Schemata and Coherence

Schemata feature prominently in the field of artificial intelligence. The general view held in artificial intelligence research is not that language must be decoded but rather that meaning is something that needs to be constructed (Cook 1995: 63). Pioneers Schank and Abelson aimed to develop a programming language that would allow computers to create and understand stories. This presented several problems as computers by necessity rely on input data in the form of series of isolated sentences. Narrative comprehension, however, encompasses both variability and continuity as seemingly isolated sentences have to be integrated into a whole for a story to make sense (Emmott 2004: 112-113). Schank and Abelson, too, were aware that the meaning of (literary) texts constitutes more than simply pasting together a series of individual sentences. Readers are often required to establish a level of causality between sentences in order to establish a causal chain, which is exactly what grants a story coherence (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 22-23; 28). This is where scripts come in: scripts prime and allow readers to "fill in the surrounding steps that ought to be implicitly inferred and treat them as if they were said" (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 48). Scripts are prompted by a variety of "headers" which in turn activate different scripts enabling readers to fashion a suitable narrative construct to make sense of what they have read. Schank and Abelson distinguish four types of header which are ranked in terms of how accurately they predict the activation of the context associated with a particular script. "Precondition" headers provide justification for the scripts they precede when these scripts are actually activated. For example, if it is mentioned in the text that John is hungry prior to the activation of the restaurant script, then John's "condition" justifies the activation of the restaurant script as this script allows for a context in which John's need for food can be logically and sensibly sated (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 48-49).

Instrumental headers activate scripts that enable the individual or character to realise his or her plans. Consider, for instance, the sentence "John drove to the restaurant". In this context we can infer that John used a car to go to the restaurant in order to fulfil his desire for food (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 49). A third type of headers are "locale headers", which as the designation suggests, activate scripts pertaining to a particular setting relevant to the planned activity (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 49-50). Finally, Schank and Abelson introduce "Internal Conceptualization Headers" which refer to specific roles that pertain to specific scripts (such as a waiter in the restaurant script). These headers prompt scripts enabling readers or listeners to draw on codified instances of particular "social interactions" (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 61). Multiple headers can work together to activate a specific script. In fact, the more headers work in conjunction, the more likely it is that the correct script will be activated (Stockwell 2003: 256). In the example of Yossarian's visit to Major Sanderson, Colonel Ferredge's outburst serves as a precondition header as the fragment raises questions concerning Yossarian and Dunbar's sanity and at the same time alerts readers to the fact that a visit to the psychiatrist is at hand: "'Get up off the floor and into your bed,' he directed Dunbar through thin lips. 'And I don't want to hear another word about this dream from either one of you. I've got a man on my staff to listen to disgusting bilge like this'" (Heller 1995: 366). So too are locale and internal conceptualization headers activated by the setting, the office of Major Sanderson, and the specific roles that Yossarian and the psychiatrist fulfil, certainly initially. As the roles ultimately become reversed, this passage increasingly deviates from the stereotypical pattern that characterises the social interaction between doctor and patient. This deviation from the standard script significantly contributes to both the absurdist and humorous quality of this scene.

As we have already seen, Schank and Abelson describe scripts in terms of specific and concrete situations that rely heavily on a subject's prior knowledge of or experience with that situation. If people do not have this familiarity, they

can still rely on plans to render the situation intelligible. When we read or hear something, we process information by activating multiple "plan boxes" which help us anticipate various scenarios (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 75-76). When we read "John ran out of gas when suddenly he sees another vehicle heading his way", we can assume that John will try to stop the car in order to ask for help. That help in turn can materialise in different forms. John might ask for a lift to the nearest petrol station or might simply ask to borrow the other driver's phone. As soon as we determine that a specific action is performed as part of a specific plan we can draw on a considerable store of predicted outcomes and integrate new information and actions in the framework provided by the plan box (Schank and Abelson 1977a: 82).

These increasing levels of abstraction, however, imply that there exists a vast multitude of possible schemata to be entertained simultaneously by any one person. To that end, Schank and Abelson described memory in terms of "Memory Organization Packages" (MOPs). Such a MOP "covers a context-dependent aspect of memory" and "is composed of a set of scenes, each of which covers visually defined boundaries that might occur in a variety of different MOPs" (Schank 1995: 127). Take for instance the act of looking at a time table which can occur in the setting of a public transport terminal (train or bus station) but also in the context of a movie theatre. When memory is considered to consist of such episodes which are remembered in relation to the specific setting they occurred in, they can be related to the broader context through a process of "reconstruction" (Schank 1995: 127). This process of reconstruction, however, relies heavily on coherence (Schank 1995: 128). In absurdist fiction, establishing coherence is by no means a straightforward process. Coherence is often found lacking in the absurdist storyworld and can operate on another level as readers interpret specific events within the frame of the broader literary context. When Major Sanderson offers Yossarian a cigarette, for example, which the latter refuses, there is no logical justification for the psychiatrist's over-the-top

response: "'Just why do you think,' he asked knowingly, 'that you have such a strong aversion to accepting a cigarette from me?'" (Heller 1995: 366). It is a pattern that is frequently repeated throughout the exchange, as when Yossarian recounts his dreams (which are not actually his own) to Sanderson who then reveals his ineptitude in his flawed analyses. While the 'question-answer' format that characterises this interaction constitutes a script that can be shared by various MOPs (such as an interrogation, or an interview), both textual and contextual cues (Major Sanderson being designated as the base psychiatrist, the focus on dreams and what they might mean, etc.) arguably activate the MOP of a visit to the psychiatrist when reading this scene. This characteristic script does not however facilitate coherence, but rather problematises it as Yossarian and Sanderson trade roles and repeatedly introduce logical non-sequiturs.

Coherence then must not be gleaned from the immediate text but by interpreting that text in the grander scheme of things. Yossarian's facetious answers make sense when considering his contrary character just as Sanderson's incompetence emphasises the absurdity of Yossarian's situation. In *Catch-22*, and indeed in most absurdist fiction, coherence is not derived from simply combining the literal meaning of individual words. One must also consider the beliefs, the mental images and motivations that these words convey to readers. This is not always adequately accounted for in artificial intelligence research (Stockwell 2002: 76). In other words, a more literary and sophisticated understanding of coherence is necessary to approach the rhetoric of absurdist fiction. In the next paragraphs we will turn to the work of Guy Cook to examine a more layered and nuanced notion of coherence that will prove valuable in our analysis.

2.4 Coherence

Schemata and coherence are not only important for everyday communication but also have an important role to play in how readers engage with and interpret narrative texts. What makes many literary texts stand out is that they create a fictional storyworld that is understood by readers via schemata and continuously compared against the reader's real-life experience and knowledge which serves as a frame of reference. In absurdist literature, this process of comparison is frequently complicated as the absurdist text evokes a storyworld which may be very similar to reality in some respects but strikingly divergent in other respects. *Catch-22* for instance is largely set in Italy and describes a country that mostly conforms to readers' schemata. The action that takes place in that setting and characters' motivation for those actions, however, make much less sense when compared against that same frame of reference (i.e. based on our personal experience and knowledge of how things (should) work). Similarly, coherence might be achieved in some aspects of the fictional world but not in others.

Guy Cook describes discourse as "a coherent stretch of language" (1995: 25). Coherence however does not imply that (literary) texts must be communicated in a conventional or chronological sequence. Nor do narratives have to necessarily confirm to "schematic expectation" (Cook 1995: 26). But coherence is not simply a matter of the literary text, it is also the result of the reader's response (Cook 1995: 35). Readers are always searching for coherence and causal relationships to improve the coherence of the text in their reading (Sanford and Emmott 2012: 10-11).

In artificial intelligence research this search for coherence is often described in terms of a "conceptual dependency [CD] representation" which "depicts information as an unbroken causal chain of primitive actions" (Cook 1995: 69). Simply put, a CD representation starts off with a particular event which is then linked to subsequent events setting up a (seemingly) coherent chain of

cause and effect. This is often problematised in absurdist literature. An example from the opening pages of *Catch-22* is the description of the Texan who "turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him" (Heller 1995: 10). This first part of this statement is offered up as justification for the fact that everyone seems to hate the Texan. But that motivation does not hold up. Examples such as this abound in *Catch-22* but also in the other absurdist texts that make up the corpus. In some cases, however, a coherent chain of cause and effect seems to be entirely messing, at least at first glance. When Yossarian first suggests to Milo that he bribe the government, Milo, initially, is outraged:

> "Shame on you!" he scolded severely, breathing virtuous fire down and upward into his rusty mustache through his billowing nostrils and prim lips. "Bribery is against the law, and you know it. But it is not against the law to make a profit, is it? So it can't be against the law for me to bribe someone in order to make a fair profit, can it? No, of course not!" (Heller 1995: 329)

Milo's reasoning, strictly speaking, makes no logical sense. It does make sense when considered in terms of Milo's characterisation which depicts the Mess Officer as someone who will do anything for a profit. This example once again underscores the importance of the literary context when interpreting specific instances of absurdist humour.

Artificial intelligence research can sometimes neglect to account for the "complexity of human discourse" (Cook 1995: 74-75) and by extension for that of absurdist literature. Goals are not always transparent, which allows for ambiguity in interpretation, compounded by the fact that "often literature concerns itself with departure from expected goals" (Cook 1995: 88). The goal of Lieutenant (and later General) Scheisskopf, one of the characters in *Catch-22*,

for instance, is not to prepare his men for combat or to try and win the war as one might reasonably expect. Instead he devotes all his time and resources to training his men so that he can win parades. Readers have to account for possible deviations from expectations but at the same time they have to take heed to not solely focus on information that conforms to our expectations.

When reading narrative texts, readers draw on various stores of information. The reading process is not only influenced by one's general knowledge or world schemata but also by intertextual and literary schemata, all influencing each other. Some literary scholars, such as Peter Stockwell, make an additional distinction between language schemata and literary schemata. The first category focusses on linguistic patterns and how these are presented stylistically. A literary schema, then, is "a higher-level conceptual structure that organizes our ways of reading when we are in the literary context" (Stockwell 2002: 80). Of course, the distinction between these various types of schemata is not clear-cut, but rather fluid. In the interaction between Yossarian and Major Sanderson, for instance, it is difficult to differentiate intertextual schemata a reader may possess based on his or her familiarity with Freud's psychoanalytical theory on the one hand and world schemata based on personal (or vicarious) experiences detailing a visit to the psychiatrist on the other hand. Additionally, Freud's views and work have become so commonplace in Western culture that many will have a rudimentary understanding of Freud's theories as part of their general knowledge.

As I have already mentioned, it should be clear that these different types of schemata all work together and influence one another. The genre of a literary text, for instance, can impact our world schemata that store and structure our knowledge of a particular event (Cook 1995: 140).[51] Literary schemata are also important because the degree to which they diverge from real world schema

[51] An obvious example would be the depiction of World War II in a canonical absurd novel such as *Catch-22* versus its depiction in a historical and equally canonical work such as William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960). Most readers' schemata of WWII will no doubt correspond more closely to the events as described by Shirer.

determines if schemata are reinforced, refreshed or restructured, to use Cook's terminology. If the difference is too significant, this will result in schema disruption, meaning that the existing schema will be refreshed. This can take the form of the initial schema being modified, or of the schema being discarded and the construction of a new schema – possibly by connecting various existing schemata. If the deviation is not too severe, however, the reader will try to reconcile the information these two types of schemata contain and either maintain the original schema or add new information to it and reinforce the dominant schema (Cook 1995: 191-192; Stockwell 2002: 80-81).

Discourse approaches in general, says Derek Edwards, imbue schemata with a greater amount of flexibility than more traditional approaches (in artificial intelligence of psychology).[52] Rather than a strictly "*cognitive*" perspective on flexibility, a discourse approach offers a more "*pragmatic*" take on flexibility which also considers the socio-cultural norms of interpersonal interactions and how these norms and conventions relate to personal experience (Edwards 2004: 164). Interestingly, this contrasts with the discourse approach outlined by Cook as it suggests that schemata are highly resistant to alteration and it outright rejects the idea that people pick up on and remember specific deviations from the standard schema. Cook asserts that literary discourse can, deliberately or not, change the mental representations and schemata of readers (1995: 44).[53]

Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor more closely align with Edwards's belief. Information that contradicts or deviates from schemata is more likely to be noticed, particularly when the schemata in question concern topics that people

[52] A similar concern was expressed by Van Dijk and Kintsch who remind us that "schemata are descriptions, not definitions" (1983: 47). Kintsch also felt that frames and scripts are too rigid and lack the flexibility needed to accommodate an ever-changing context and environment (2008: 241). As I have stated, my own understanding and use of the term is closer to Bartlett's concept in that it does allow for and even tailors to a continuously changing context.

[53] Cook builds on Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or defamiliarization as the distinctive feature of literature. Defamiliarization describes the literary technique of presenting the ordinary in an extraordinary manner, in a way that deviates from reigning norms and expectations. Cook, however, specifies that the Russian formalists wrongfully neglected the input of the reader in this process as he or she brings extra-literary information and schemata to bear during the reading process (Cook 1995: 138-139).

are not really familiar with. Readers' cognitive processes, then, have to maintain a "balance between the biasing effect of schemas and the effects of the data at hand" (Fiske and Taylor 1991: 124). As schemata generally offer a stable framework to navigate complex social interactions, it is unsurprising that there exists a bias towards schema preserving and schema reinforcing, to use Cook's terms. This is also interesting in the context of absurdist literature. It might offer an explanation as to why a novel such as *Catch-22*, with its frequently recurring absurdist humour, still reaches its effect as by its very nature it resists integration into a reader's "normative" schematic framework.

Most narrative texts are episodic in nature. That means that characters can take centre stage at certain moments in the text to then fade into the background for a while. There can be jumps forwards and backwards in time and so on. So what narratives tend to do is to mention only little details, asking readers to fill in the gaps (Gerrig and Egidi 2003: 36). This process relies on the active involvement of the reader and the conscious decision he or she makes. When we remember details concerning a specific character or about previously narrated events that can be attributed to "*resonance*" which enable the exchange of information between working and long-term memory (Gerrig and Egidi 2003: 37). And while the experimental data seems to suggest that this response is automatic, Gerrig and Egidi emphasise that this does not need to mean that reading is a passive process. When the clues provided by the text are too obscure or limited, readers have to actively search their memory. Resonance is a cognitive process that is not restricted to reading but informs facets of our mental functioning in everyday life (Gerrig and Egidi 2003: 39). Gerrig and Egidi indicate that there are two contrasting theories on how readers use schemata. The minimalist theory implies that there exists a number of basic inferences that readers will always make, such as the actual referent of pronouns or readily accessible information (2003: 41-42). The constructionist theory conversely states that we read texts with a specific purpose, that we are always looking for

meaning (Gerrig and Egidi 2003: 42). And we use schemata to more easily achieve that goal.

According to scholars such as Zwaan, readers categorise events in terms of how these events relate to the goals of the protagonists and preceding events, when and where they take place and which characters participate in these events. Readers continuously monitor and assess this information and adjust their schemata or mental representations when required. A lot of cognitive effort is thus invested in trying to ascertain why characters do what they do, trying to understand their motivation when pursuing a particular course of action. In absurdist fiction this inherent need of the reader is not only impeded but also ridiculed in a manner of speaking. When characters act and behave in a manner seemingly lacking logical motivation or if that motivation is turned upside down, the reader is comically invited to confront this propensity for narrative and logical coherence. Thus, in absurdist fiction, isolated events and details become more salient and are more likely to capture readers' attention as opposed to their general inclination to only retain information pertinent to the overall plot (Gerrig 1993: 46-47). However, these conclusions should not be overgeneralised as the (psychological) experiments through which they have been obtained are not without fault. Some experiments, for instance, have revealed that people can recall text verbatim if they are sufficiently invested (Cook 1995: 66-67). The absurdist humour that is so characteristic of most absurdist literature fosters exactly that willingness.

In order to fully understand, however, what transpires when readers engage with absurdist fiction we first need to establish what happens when a text is not coherent with its immediate context. In such a case, readers will look for coherence on the "global" level of the text, in terms of temporal, spatial and causal information. Readers construct a coherent representation of the storyworld ("text-base") which they elaborate on with each rereading to construct a situational model. When confronted with discontinuous information they will try

to make it coherent by searching and comparing the macrostructure and substructures (Zwaan et al. 1995: 395-396). Many scholars believe that we can only really understand text after constructing a situational model (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998: 163). One of the issues is that structuralist approaches that divide literary discourse in terms of macrostructures and sub-propositions are prone to forget that interpreting discourse is a process, whereas these overarching structures are only constructed after the analysis has already taken place (Cook 1995: 46).

One of the problems facing schema theory is that it cannot precisely explain how much detail must be communicated exactly. Some people will need less information than others to understand a certain text for example (Cook 1995: 76). This is especially relevant in literary discourse where a "reduction to constituent detail may obscure a general view of what is happening", and sometimes "for narrative effect" (Cook 1995: 76). Causal links may be wilfully omitted. How do readers decide which detail or missing information they will fill in? Schema theory does not claim to have the answers to these questions but its value lies in its interest in the processes that govern which information to access and when and how to use it (Cook 1995: 78-79), which is also what I aim to do in my dissertation, but specifically geared towards absurdist humour in absurdist literature.

In the context of literature, it is worth noting that the interaction between schemata and literary text is not unidirectional. As schemata influence the process of literary interpretation, so too can a text induce changes to schemata (Cook 1995: 181). Texts that can change our schemata are a safe environment because they do not effect immediate consequences. They can however have an effect in the long term, changing our outlook or perspective, says Cook (1995: 191). Whether or not they do, however, is also determined by a reader's familiarity with the relevant schemata.

Readers who are confronted with a topic they know relatively little about, on the one hand, find it easier to integrate and process information that is consistent with the schemata they already have. People who are already well-informed on a particular subject, on the other hand, find it easier to process and assimilate information that either confirms or rejects their view as they already have access to schemata covering both sides of the issue (Baddeley et al. 2009: 132). This consistency bias proves interesting in the context of absurdist humour. Does an abundance of absurdist humour, such as in *Catch-22* for instance, influence how readers respond to this humour? In other words, does familiarity with absurdist humour undermine its effect? By the time Yossarian is sent to Major Sanderson for counselling, readers have had ample time to familiarise themselves with the bomber's facetious nature and his contrary character. Major Sanderson too fits the bill of the supporting cast of characters that have been hitherto introduced. Consequently, his self-obsessed behaviour might be something that readers have come to expect by this point. Yet such a familiarity with the characters and some of the literary themes of the novel does not necessarily diminish a reader's enjoyment of the absurdist humour that characterises this scene (and indeed the novel in its entirety). Thus, we can reasonably assume that the relevant text-specific schemata with which readers have familiarised themselves do not invalidate the humorous quality. What might be considered standard in the fictional world is still sufficiently incongruous when considered in the context of readers' world schemata.[54]

On the whole, schemata are rather successful to describe how readers relate textual information to general and contextual knowledge during the reading process. But while experimental evidence reveals strong indications that readers use schemata, the exact extent to and manner in which they do is less clearly defined (Baddeley et al. 2009: 132). One of the oft cited advantages that schemata

[54] There seems to exist a correlation between a person's reading skill and his or her ability to access schemata. The higher the reading skill, the easier schemata are accessed (Baddeley et al. 2009: 132).

supposedly offer the reader is that they facilitate the process of inference-making and that they allow readers to store and process experiences without having to remember excessive detail (Anderson 2005: 154). In artificial intelligence research, however, it is frequently assumed that readers use their schemata all the time to fill in every little missing detail in a text. But Gerrig indicates that this is not an accurate representation of the reading process. The use of a particular schemata is not some mandatory process but is instead a process that is under the strategic control of the reader (Gerrig 1993: 39). Whether or not a schema will be activated depends on its importance to both the immediate literary context and the overarching plot of the text.

When Gus and Wes first appear in *Catch-22*, they are introduced as the two enlisted men in charge of the medical tent at the army base. It soon turns out that they are in fact mechanics and not licensed medical professionals. Subsequent mentions of these two characters, however, do not automatically mandate that a "mechanic" schema be activated. Such a schema is only tangentially accessed when demanded by the literary context. As for example when the action reverts to the medical tent and when the text elaborates on their medical activities for which, being trained mechanics, they are grossly unqualified – as indeed are so many characters in *Catch-22*. That is why it is instrumental that any analysis considers the literary text in its entirety. The approach laid out by Schank and Abelson focuses on isolated sentences where the information is foregrounded making it safe to assume that it will be easily retained by readers. This is generally not the case in longer narrative texts where the focus lies on the actions and experiences of the main characters throughout the novel (Emmott 1998: 179). It is also worth noting that forgetting is a crucially important feature of how our brain works as it allows us to differentiate between important and irrelevant information (as determined by each individual reader and his or her personal interests and context). Retaining every piece of information and every single detail would be most detrimental to the reading

process. So readers do in fact draw inferences based on their general knowledge but use their own experiences and their singular perspective on matters as a filter as they reconstruct and ultimately interpret (literary) texts (Emmott 2004: 64-66).

Describing the reading process and the role memory plays in it in terms of schemata runs the risk of oversimplifying how memory processes and memory retrieval operate. Schemata do not always account for the complexity of the events or actions they represent or contain knowledge of. Another interesting thing to remember about schema theory, certainly how it was conceived of by Bartlett, is that it suggests that we are more prone to make errors than we do in reality. Experimental research indicates that we are "better at discriminating between schema-based and text-based information than is assumed by the theory" (Baddeley et al. 2009: 132).

2.5 Schema theory and Literature

In general, cognitive literary studies (CLS) rely on the idea that there exists a basic universal mode of comprehension. At the same time, it operates under the assumption that literary texts are designed to include zones of ambiguity. As such, literature allows for different interpretations to materialise. At the core of CLS there is the firm belief that, while differing socio-cultural contexts dictate that readers will complement the text differently as they fill in the blanks, they nonetheless share a common reading strategy that relies on the integration of both textual and contextual information (Adler and Gross 2002: 215). Like Stockwell, I acknowledge that schemata are largely "sociocultural products" which implies that they are widely used and accessible within a particular socio-cultural group as it is likely that such a community draws from a shared well of (social) experiences (Stockwell 2003: 256). We should also remain cognizant of the fact that in identifying schemata in a literary text, we are prone to resort to vague descriptions and ad-hoc labelling of scripts. This implies a substantial degree of

subjectivity both in terms of the analysis and the interpretation of the literary text (Stockwell 2003: 260-261). At the same time, however, we should not overstate its importance because as a group we do tend to interpret texts similarly.

Schema theory is uniquely qualified to describe both the inherently individual nature of the reading experience as well as relate it to a more general and social experience of understanding. As I have argued, schemata play a significant role in the rhetoric of the absurd as it emerges from narrative contexts. In my dissertation, I focus specifically on how configurations of plot, characterisation and setting activate and impact readers' schemata. It is precisely in the nexus where literary context meets the reader's reliance on a variety of schemata that absurdist humour arises. Analysing the central narratological concepts of characterisation, plot, and setting through means of schema theory, enables me to explore how readers use their experience and knowledge to engage with literary texts as they try to identify "causal and motivational relationships between actions and events, to place events in time and space, and to associate traits with protagonists" (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998: 177). In the following paragraphs I consider how plot, characterisation and setting emerge from and affect mental schemata, crucial to the reading process as well as the creation of absurdist humour.

2.5.1 Understanding Literary Characters: Characterisation and Schemata

Even though literary characters are fictional creations, we tend to understand and interpret their actions as we would those of real-life people. In doing so, readers draw on both textual information as well as on their schemata (Culpeper 2002: 256-257). Schemata allow us to flesh out characters by allowing us to make inferences and predictions about their actions and motivations. There remains, however, some debate as to how significant the role of schemata is exactly during the reading process. Culpeper describes how we use textual data and general

knowledge in conjunction to form a "situational model", a term borrowed from the work of Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983). Their research suggest that readers rely more heavily on their past experiences and their acquired knowledge when creating a situational model of characters and they simply try to integrate the information provided by the text with the existing schemata (Culpeper 2002: 265-266).[55] Culpeper even goes so far as to say that text-based information will only be remembered when it is deemed relevant and fitting with the individual's schematic representation. Only then will it be included in the situational model (Culpeper 2002: 268).

Emmott acknowledges that readers utilise general knowledge schemata to form mental representations. At the same time, however, she argues that the importance of the literary text cannot be overstated as readers rely on text-specific knowledge to make sense of what they have just read as well as make predictions about future plot developments: "To make elementary coherence inferences, readers must be constantly judging which sub-set of information presented by a text is relevant within any particular context, updating the knowledge stores and inferring the impact of events on the context in which they are 'situated'" (Emmott 1998: 177). Schemata offer a way for readers to manage and maintain these text-based knowledge stores during the reading process. Text-derived or literary schemata contain the knowledge that readers gather from the text. This mainly concerns information about the fictional universe which in turn influences the inferences a reader makes (Emmott 1998: 181). Take for instance the science fiction novel *Altered Carbon* (2002) by Richard Morgan. When the main character is killed, we know (or at least might assume) that this is not the end for

[55] This runs counter to Van Dijk and Kintsch's notion of propositional representations which are more reliant on textual input. Van Dijk and Kintsch, however, predominantly focused on newspaper articles and not necessarily on fictional narratives. This explains, says Emmott, why they emphasise the importance of general knowledge rather than scrutinise the process through which readers parse and store information from the literary text itself (Emmott 2004: 109).

the character, as the novel is set in a fictional universe where people can have their consciousness downloaded into a repurposed body.

Readers have to decide for themselves which information they wish to retain and for how long and they do so in relation to the literary context. Like Emmott, I am inclined to agree that, just as in real life, intelligibility is not solely a matter of relying on "updatable knowledge structures" in the human brain but it is equally determined by the way in which "social actions flexibly unfold, as situated performances" (Edwards 2004: 165). So, to analyse a literary text in terms of schemata one must always take into account the literary context as readers make use of their schemata in relation to the specific actions of specific characters in a specific (fictional) context.

Reading is a highly complex process and the same holds true for a reader's engagement with literary characters. Characters in a novel, or in any other literary text for that matter, cannot be understood as nothing more than fictive representations of real people or as a "paradigm of traits described by words" (Jannidis 2013:13). In order to describe the interaction between a reader and a literary character one needs to account for information provided by the literary text and the context, and for the knowledge that the reader brings to the table. Cognitive theories of characterisation attempt to do just that and try to describe "in detail the cognitive and affective operations of information processing". They posit that literary characters are best considered as "text-based constructs of the human mind, whose analysis requires both models of understanding text and models of the human psyche" (Eder et al. 2010: 5). When readers try to understand and interpret the actions and motivations of literary characters, they largely rely on knowledge that comes from outside the text.

Generally, stories give the account of actions of characters and to truly understand a story, readers have to be able to match characters' desires, intentions and motivations on the one hand with their actions on the other hand. Readers then expect characters to undertake certain actions, based on motivations they

have attributed to these characters (Schneider 2001: 608). This suggests that characters and a reader's interpretation of them are highly dependent on that reader's contextual knowledge at the time of reading. So, when readers think about or construct a mental image of literary characters, they draw on both textual information and on their own schematic knowledge concerning "human nature; social categories; prototypes and stereotypes; knowledge of patterns of social interaction; groups and roles" (Eder et al. 2010: 14). This social knowledge is supplemented by what Eder et al. describe as "media-specific knowledge", which pertains to the specificities of the medium through which the message is conveyed. In terms of a literary text, such media-specific knowledge refers to knowledge about a specific literary genre or intertextual references (Eder et al. 2010: 14). *Catch-22*'s canonical status as a classic of absurdist literature, for example, can influence how readers expect its characters to behave, as absurdist texts have a propensity for defying logic, societal norms and even literary conventions (Bennett 2015: 25). But that would in no small amount depend on their familiarity with absurdist texts such as *Catch-22*. Research in the field of social psychology has illustrated how schemata are formed through repeated social interactions, creating repositories of knowledge we can draw on when navigating a complex social environment (Schneider 2001: 612). Categorising people, as based on previous experiences, facilitates our response to other people's actions. What is interesting is that our interaction with literary characters is not all that different: "readers routinely and unreflectively use characters' behavior to link them to particular categories" (Gerrig 2010: 361). Patrick Colm Hogan, for instance, categorises literary characters as either "socially normative"—characters that conform, to a high degree, to certain "social categories and their associated norms"—or "individualistic" characters, characters that do not fit neatly into any preconceived category and usually go against reigning social norms (Hogan 2010: 144-145). Yossarian, for example, could certainly be considered an individualistic character as he refuses to conform

to the stereotype of the dutiful and obeisant soldier. Interestingly though, such classifications are not always easy to make in absurdist fiction as these socially determined norms are often alien from the perspective of the reader or altogether lacking.

Nevertheless, the distinction Hogan makes, here, reveals an important aspect of a reader's interaction with literary characters. Readers have a heightened sensitivity to any kind of behaviour that they perceive to be different from the norm for a member of a specific category, and they judge and evaluate literary characters accordingly (Gerrig 2010: 365). So, when readers construct a mental model of a literary character, they start from their schematic knowledge in a top-down process that relies on categorisation. This does not mean, however, that these categories and their membership are unchangeable. As we gather more textual information, it might prove harder to satisfyingly match character to category. If such is the case, rather than make use of a top-down process, readers will rely on a bottom-up process where individual pieces of textual information are incorporated in the mental model of the character in a process called "personalization" (Schneider 2001: 617-619). Schneider distinguishes three different types of categorisation: one based on social categories, one on literary categories and a third one based on text-specific categorisation. Social categories equate to the function a literary character fulfils in the story, such as a doctor or a soldier, and is more strongly linked to our real-life knowledge and context. Literary categorisation, says Schneider, occurs when a reader identifies, or partly recognises, in a character elements of stock characters, such as the wise mentor in a Bildungsroman or the damsel in distress. Readers will then draw on their schematic knowledge and its predetermined character slots. Text-specific categorisation, finally, occurs when a literary character is described, usually by the narrator, as having a trait so central to his or her personality that we expect and predict that character's behaviour to reinforce this personality trait (Schneider 2001: 619-620). While "non-expert" readers are most likely to engage in social

categorisation, all three strategies can be employed simultaneously, which only amplifies their effect (Schneider 2001: 623).

Of course, many more categories than these three can be discerned. One could, for example, differentiate between abstract categories such as characters with agency as opposed to those without it. However, a reader's experiences are rarely restricted to such abstract notions of literary character and readers have the tendency to fill in their mental representations of characters more concretely, provided the text itself allows for such a strategy. Schneider's three distinct categories are well suited to literary analysis as they account for both the reader's input and textual information and how these two interact. As I have already stated, categorisation is subject to change. New information provided about a character can possibly lead to the character no longer fitting a specific category. If so, then the mental model of the corresponding character has to be modified or amended through a process of "individuation". Individuation, says Schneider, is a fairly common process, as a character that would never change throughout a story could be considered uninteresting, unless, of course, this solidity of character is a deliberate strategy, for example, to invoke comic effect. However, if the new information provided about a character is in direct contrast to the expectations engendered by category membership, then a process of "decategorization" ensues (Schneider 2001: 624). This basically means that the reader can no longer assign a character to a specific category as the discrepancy between textual information and the reader's expectation has become too significant. This heightens readers' awareness making them more sensitive to what they have just read. This constitutes a recurring literary strategy in absurdist fiction and is often realised through the use of absurdist humour. A case in point is Aarfy, the incompetent and thoroughly self-absorbed lead navigator on Yossarian's crew. Aarfy is consistently described by the narrator as a thoroughly stand-up guy with a kind and angelic face (Heller 1995: 359). The way the narrator portrays Aarfy, at least for a large part of the novel, invites readers to construct a text-specific category

of ‘the good guy’, certainly within the topsy-turvy storyworld of *Catch-22*. Based on this category-membership, readers formulate certain expectations concerning Aarfy’s future behaviour and actions. Gradually however, his actions reveal him to be anything but a good guy. The contrast between Aarfy’s initial portrayal and his later actions is made all the more poignant by the jocular tone in which he recounts his sordid adventures. In Aarfy’s case, text-specific categorisation is made untenable by the incongruity between the rhetorical choice to portray Aarfy as a convivial, avuncular character and his sociopathic behaviour. The absurdity of this contrast generates humour, certainly initially, but, also causes readers to contemplate the horrific scenes they found so funny, just as Heller intended (Merrill 1986: 150; Hunt 1973: 242). It is clear that schemata play an important role in how readers engage with and interpret literary characters and their actions. As these actions make up the plot of a novel, schemata also have a role to play here.

2.5.2 Schemata and Plot: Charting the Plot

The relationship between narrative plot and schemata is an important one, particularly as readers generally do not remember every single detail of what they have read. They do however remember the basic overall plot and salient stylistic characteristics of a literary text (Stockwell 2002: 122). A similar idea is expressed by Van Dijk and Kintsch in their concept of the “macroaction” which is “the global conceptual structure organizing and monitoring the actual action sequence. It defines the global final results and goals” and thus the plot of the narrative text (1983: 63).

Broadly speaking, plot can be understood as a term denoting the presentation and ordering of narrative developments which allows readers to gauge the motivations of characters and the ramifications of their actions (Kukkonen 2014: 1). One could say then that the plot encompasses a set of

actions, performed by characters, that are temporally arranged and spatially situated and which readers have to causally connect into a logical and coherent whole. Immediately, it is clear to see that plot, characterisation and setting are inextricably linked. Splitting up these concepts will to some extent always be an artificial process. In the context of this dissertation, however, I consider plot as a dynamic narrative development driven by a sequence of narrative actions performed by literary characters in pursuit of their goals which is (re)constructed by the reader.

When constructing that plot, readers rely on schemata to fill in missing bits of information, speculate about events and their possible outcomes and repercussions (Coulson 2001: 20). Each reader, however, will do so on the basis of his or her specific interpretation of the fictional world (Gerrig 1993: 65). That does not mean, however, that one cannot make generalised observations on the way in which readers understand and interpret literary texts. Our personal dispositions towards the characters and the events described also influence how we perceive these events and the inferences we make from them. The background against which the plot of *Catch-22* develops, for instance, is that of the Second World War. A historic event that virtually all readers of the novel will be familiar with, even if to varying degrees. As we know, schemata represent standardised representations of (highly) familiar events and experiences, so much so that we often take the information they contain for granted. What readers do tend to notice however is when the text introduces anomalous information that highlights deviations from the standard template. Something which absurdist texts such as *Catch-22* cleverly capitalise on, often to humorous effect. The degree to which narrative information can impact our reality is determined by the strength of the association between story concepts and pre-existing world-knowledge concepts. Centring the plot on an iconic historic event such as WW II, *Catch-22* creates a strong connection between story concepts and world-knowledge schemata on the macro level. That link is also firmly established in terms of the protagonist's

ultimate goal, namely to escape the dangers of war and to make it back home safely. This is a perfectly sensible aspiration in times of war. At the same time, however, the literary context in which Yossarian has to try and fulfil these goals increasingly undermines that link as the actions and motivations of those around him are highly incongruous with reader's world schemata. The plot of *Catch-22* does not only constitute Yossarian's attempts to escape the war but also the myriad ways in which his ambition is thwarted. This classic absurdist novel, then, is a perfect example of how absurdist fiction blends the familiar and the unfamiliar, how it blurs the line between the barely plausible and the impossible, a defining feature of absurdist humour as we will see in the third chapter.

Sanford and Emmott's Scenario-Mapping Theory (SMP), a variation on schema theory, describes a similar process. SMP postulates that readers form mental representations of narrative text by correlating what they have read to situations that they have already been exposed to or are familiar with. It emphasises the cognitive processing of specific situations through means of schematic information that is directly relatable to these situations (Sanford and Emmott 2012: 20). Readers' knowledge and experience are acquired from everyday life and form the basis for understanding. When they are forced with "abnormal situations", situations that do not immediately match our scenarios and expectations, they are forced to look for a reason why this is so (Sanford and Emmott 2012: 35-36). Sanford and Emmott specify that understanding is a matter of both primary and secondary processing, where readers change from one scenario that does not match their expectations to a new and better suited one (Sanford and Emmott 2012: 38-39). Such switching, however, is not altogether straightforward in the context of absurdist literature, as there is often no more suitable alternative at hand. This can in turn complicate the reader's search for a coherent plot.

The search for coherence is made even more challenging when one considers the complex narrative structure of many absurdist texts. Only rarely is

the plot of an absurdist text laid out in a simple sequential manner. *Catch-22*, for instance, abounds with repetitions describing the same event from different perspectives as well as with analepses and prolepses where the narrative actions jump wildly in time and location from one scene to the next. These flashbacks and flash-forwards, however, do little to clarify the motivations of the characters, quite the opposite in fact. When the past of Major Major, the highly unfortunate base commander, is recounted in more detail, it only serves to heighten the incongruity between the rules governing this fictional world and that of the reader's experiential world. It already starts with Major Major's father who is incentivised to not cultivate alfalfa through means of government subsidies. His father grows rich on the scheme by using that money to buy up more land to not grow anything on. That same father also, as a joke, named his son Major Major Major rather than Caleb Major. It was a joke that ended up killing the Major's mother (Heller 1995: 104-106). This is but one example, but virtually every character in the novel has a similar backstory, detailing a past, and indeed a present, where events, actions and motivations seemingly share no logical correlation.

This stands in contrast to Yossarian's ambitions which are much more relatable. Yossarian's desperate schemes and his ever-increasing sense of urgency become only more legitimate as the text introduces more references to and information on young Snowden's death. An event that arguably reveals itself the catalyst for the entire plot.[56] The plot of *Catch-22*, but also of many other absurdist texts, is characterised by an inherent duality. On the one hand, we have a protagonist trying to obtain his goals, which drives the plot. Goals that will make sense to most readers when compared against their world schemata. On the other hand, the text evokes a fictional universe in the mind of its reader devoid of logical causality and coherence which strikes readers as highly incongruent. It is

[56] Snowden's actual death, however, is only recounted in detail in the penultimate chapter.

this opposition that creates much of the absurdist humour in *Catch-22*. That absurdist humour and its incongruity are integral parts of the narrative structure of the novel and its plot. And this incongruity owes its existence to the interaction of literary text and readers' schemata as it constructs a storyworld that to a large extent relies on and aligns with those schemata, but at the same time emphasises its own unconventionality. The importance of the storyworld already points to the role of the narrative setting, which can activate its own particular schemata in the reader as I will illustrate in the following paragraphs.

2.5.3 Creating Absurdity: Schemata and Setting

As I have already mentioned, it is not always easy to disconnect plot, characterisation and setting from each other. If we understand characterisation as the accumulation of character traits, dispositions, and behaviour throughout the narrative text, setting can be best conceived of as the configuration of time and space. Such a definition ties in close with Emmott's concept of contextual frames, which I will return to in a moment. The setting, however, does more than merely provide the canvas for the characters and the actions they perform. The setting itself can activate specific schemata in which characters fulfil a particular role. A specific scene set in a hospital, for example, will engender certain expectations as to what action will be taking place at the hospital as well as to the variety of characters that will participate in the scene and how they will behave.

Readers have to construct and maintain a counterfactual world, populated with characters that might not exist, events that might have never happened, etc. And yet we have to integrate these fictional worlds with our own reality which we rely on as a frame of reference (Sanford and Emmott 2012: 46). Readers use schemata to fill in "gaps" in the text and to make inferences in order to create a mental representation of the fictional world which tends to be mimetic in nature (Emmott 1998: 175-176). Generally, readers assume the continuity of the

fictional world, meaning that they assume this fictional setting to operate along the same (natural) rules governing their own environment unless it is explicitly indicated that this is not the case (Emmott 2003: 146). This is something that absurdist texts, like *Catch-22*, often take advantage of. They evoke a fictional setting that is highly congruent with our own physical reality but which normalises events and situations that are highly incongruent to our own experience and understanding of reality and they frequently do so to comic effect. In absurdist fiction, explicit refutation is often non-existent. The storyworld and the events that unfold within that literary context are presented as perfectly conventional but are incongruous from the reader's frame of reference.

In the real world, time and space (and our experience of it) are inextricably linked, as are cause and effect. In a (literary) text however a narrator can effortlessly jump from one place or indeed time frame to another (Zwaan et al. 1995: 386). This means that readers have to continuously be aware of the fictional context, where the action is set, which characters are present and who is privy to what information and how these factors can change in order to understand what is going on. To describe this process, Emmott created her contextual frame theory. This theory is built on the belief that readers create mental representations in which they integrate both implicit and explicit textual information about the fictional events with their general knowledge (Emmott 2004: 103-104). Contextual frames describe how a reader "actively" tracks "the dynamics of the fictional world" and constructs a "context from and around the events which occur (Emmott 1998: 191). So the term context here refers to the configuration of characters and the spatial and temporal setting at a specific point in the text. A frame is best understood in a rather literal sense as a structural framework which ties together literary characters and locations in a process Emmott calls "binding". During the course of a story, multiple frames coexist. And when a specific frame receives full attention, then that frame is "primed" in the mind of the reader. Within a primed frame a division can be made between "overt" and "covert"

characters. The first category refers to characters who are explicitly referred to in the text. So either they are identified by name or pronominally. Covert characters, in contrast, are not explicitly mentioned and the readers have to infer their presence in the frame from their knowledge and monitoring of the literary context (Emmott 2004: 123-125). Just as readers assume the continuity of the fictional world, so too do they expect that these frames are consistent as well, meaning that characters stay bound to a particular contextual frame unless the literary text states otherwise. The value of Emmott's contextual frame theory is that it demonstrates the importance of textual information and that it describes how readers might relate specific narrative information to the broader literary context. It also offers a comprehensive framework that integrates relevant information pertaining to the setting, characters, narrative action and plot. Contextual frame theory does not, however, really elaborate on the interaction between schemata and setting.

Just as characterisation can activate schemata in the mind of the reader – in the form of social categories or stereotypes for instance – so too can the setting. Consider the tribunal of Clevinger, Yossarian's fellow airman who is brought to trial in a case that "was open and shut. The only thing missing was something to charge him with" (Heller 1995: 88). Clevinger is accused by Lieutenant Scheisskopf for having answered a question. Clevinger of course pleads his innocence. It is worth quoting the opening scene of the tribunal at the military courthouse:

> "In sixty days you'll be fighting Billy Petrolle," the colonel with the big fat mustache roared. "And you think it's a big fat joke." "I don't think it's a joke, sir," Clevinger replied. "Don't interrupt." "Yes, sir." "And say 'sir' when you do," ordered Major Metcalf. "Yes, sir." "Weren't you just ordered not to interrupt?" Major Metcalf inquired coldly. "But I didn't interrupt, sir," Clevinger protested. "No. And you didn't say 'sir,' either.

> Add that to the charges against him," Major Metcalf directed the corporal who could take shorthand. "Failure to say 'sir' to superior officers when not interrupting them." "Metcalf," said the colonel, "you're a goddam fool. Do you know that?" Major Metcalf swallowed with difficulty. "Yes, sir." "Then keep your goddam mouth shut. You don't make sense." (Heller 1995: 93)

Clevinger is clearly brought up on spurious charges. From the start it becomes evident that no one, besides Clevinger himself, is really interested in a fair trial. The proceedings continue to be made a mockery of when it becomes apparent that Scheisskopf will simultaneously act as aggrieved party, prosecutor, defence attorney and as one of the judges. At the end of this farcical trial, Clevinger is ultimately found guilty "or he would not have been accused, and since the only way to prove it was to find him guilty, it was their patriotic duty to do so" (Heller 1995: 100).

This uproariously absurd episode owes much of its humour to the incongruity between the manner in which the scene plays out on the one hand and the expectations the setting would engender in the reader, set as it is in a military courthouse during a time of war. In terms of its spatial component, a court house suggests certain schematic presupposition. Firstly, that it is a place of law and order where plaintiff and defendant can argue their case in a fair and neutral environment. It might also prompt readers to assume that different characters will perform specific roles within that setting. Additionally, as the trial takes place during wartime, one could expect the military hierarchy to evince more consideration for the value of human life. But as the text reveals, nothing could be further from the truth. Guilt or innocence is irrelevant as one and the same character assumes the mantle of four irreconcilable roles within this scenario. The institution of justice, which a courthouse is, is proven to be anything but just through the incompetence and prejudice of its representatives which it had

invested with its power. The setting here specifically creates a counterfactual world that is predicated on readers' world schemata, but rather than affirm expectations, it inverts the default slots of the schemata. This literary technique is not unique to *Catch-22* but is prevalent in much absurdist literature as the analyses will illustrate in subsequent chapters.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn on both research in the field of cognitive psychology and in the field of artificial intelligence to define what schemata entail. The term schema was used to refer to a broad collection of varying cognitive structures that have a role to play in the storage and working of memory, that codify general and personal knowledge as well as experiences and that help us navigate our environment and facilitate social interaction. Starting with Bartlett's seminal study on the role of schemata in the workings of memory and in memory recollection, two important facts emerged. The first is that people do rely on past experiences and previously acquired information to process new information. The second fact is the realisation that schemata are dynamic in nature and are subject to change due to outside factors. From the outset, then, Bartlett's use of the term schema refutes more recent claims of being overly computational. Schemata incorporate both top-down and bottom-up processes extending the cognitive paradigm beyond the mind to include both man's physical materiality as well as his socio-cultural context.

The concept of schemata was subsequently extended and refined, predominantly through the works of Schank and Abelson, and Minsky. This resulted in a more nuanced account of schema theory and provided a more detailed apparatus to analyse literary texts. Subsequent studies, in artificial intelligence and in cognitive literary science, also brought to the fore the importance of coherence. Much like the absurd is predicated on man's search for

meaning, so too do readers strive for textual coherence, to make sense of what they have read. When that search for coherence is impeded or made problematic, readers tend to take notice and try to relate the textual information to their own knowledge and experience, in the form of schemata.

That is not to say that schema theory is without its shortcomings or pitfalls. Literary texts are highly complex and a schema-theoretic analysis runs the risk of being overly simplistic or reductive. They also, remain, to some extent, rather arbitrary and speculative. At the same time, they are well-suited to literary analysis as they allow for all aspects of the text-reader interaction to be described and analysed in the same manner. The fact that they have been widely studied in cognitive and experimental psychology endows them with a generality, for lack of a better word, that counterbalances the inherently individual nature of both literary interpretation and the humorous experience. In absurdist literature, absurdist humour is often used to highlight or reveal the consequences of the absurd condition. Absurdist humour can, for instance, be used to both support and emphasise the revolt and struggle of the absurd hero in the face of his absurd condition[57] and is integral to the absurd[58] and indeed to the narrative structure of absurdist literature as will be explained in the next chapter.

[57] We can think of Yossarian in *Catch-22*, for example.

[58] This observation is not limited to literary scholars as many humour theorists have also remarked upon the strong link between humour and the absurd (McGhee 1979; Oring 2003; Chafe 2007).

3. Absurdist Humour: Incongruity and Its Resolution

Many humour theorists have commented on the relationship between humour on the one hand and the absurd on the other hand. Some, like Elliott Oring (2003), even go as far as to claim that all forms of humour and jokes are in a sense absurd as they in some way always violate logic and thus are incongruous. Others, like Wallace Chafe (2007), link the absurd to a notion of non-seriousness, which according to Chafe is a prerequisite for the humorous experience and laughter. For Chafe something is non-serious if we cannot bring it into line with our own reality, again highlighting the incongruous nature of both the absurd and humour. As we have seen from the first chapter, this connection between humour and the absurd also extends to absurdist literature.[59] However, rarely has the question been asked exactly how humour ties into the narrative structure of literary texts. In her essay "Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity" (1973), for example, Jean Kennard emphasises the caricatural quality of the novel's cast of characters who are frequently introduced in such a way as to "provide the reader with irreconcilably opposite traits", which can frustrate readers' expectations (264-265), but she does not expand on the humour this technique generates and its structural role in the novel.

There are of course exceptions to this tendency to treat literary humour only superficially. One notable such exception is the work of Jeroen Vandaele (2010, 2012) who seeks to combine cognitive humour theory and narrative theory in what he calls narrative humour, which "exploits incongruity and superiority relations between participants (agents) or intentional perspectives as they appear in minimally two-layered action discourse text" (Vandaele 2012: 64). Vandaele, however, equates deviations from the norm (i.e. incongruity) to inferiority (2012: 61). This contention is untenable, certainly within the context of absurdist

[59] See for example Esslin 2001, Galloway 1981; MacNamara 1968; Waldmeir 1964; Brodwin 1972; Safer 1990; Cornwell 2006; Gavins 2013; Bennett 2011 and 2015.

literature where characters' actions are not necessarily presented as being abnormal. He also understates the importance of the storyworld, of how characters interact within the context determined by that storyworld, and how readers evaluate and interpret these interactions.

Relevant in this context is Laura Hidalgo Downing's study of literary humour and her article "How to Do Things With Contradiction: Exploring Humour in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*" (2000a) in particular. In this article, she draws on Werth's (1999) Text World Theory – particularly on the notion of text coherence which as we have seen is an important aspect of the process of text comprehension as well as literary interpretation. She then supplements Text World Theory with Apter's (1982) notion of cognitive synergy to describe how contradiction and contrariety give rise to humour.[60] Hidalgo Downing's main interest, however, is not in the interaction between absurdist humour and the narrative structure of the novel, in her case *Catch-22*. Instead, she chose to focus almost exclusively on what she calls "realisation humour". A term that refers to "the humorous effect […] produced by the choice of language to represent a situation which in itself need not be necessarily comic". Realisation humour, she opposes to content humour, which, she explains, "has to do with humour which arises from details of incidents in the plot, situations or characters in a novel" (Hidalgo Downing 2000a: 119).

The topic of my dissertation much more closely aligns with the notion of content humour. This chapter, specifically, details how absurdist humour ties into the narrative structure of absurdist novels as well as its impact on the process of literary interpretation. Starting off by tracing the historical and philosophical roots of absurdist humour, the chapter emphasises the importance of the concept of incongruity, referring back to the two previous chapters. It then critically evaluates current and influential cognitive and linguistic theories of humour,

[60] A more expansive version of this article can be found in Hidalgo Downing's dissertation (2000b).

specifically incongruity resolution theories and their purported suitability for literary analysis. Drawing on schema theory, I take as an example Douglas Adams's *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980), the second novel in Adams's trilogy in five parts, to illustrate why literary humour cannot be analysed in the same manner as short, often specifically designed, joke texts as is common practice in most humour research. Subsequently, the traditional classification of absurdist humour as a type of humour where resolution cannot be achieved is also challenged as the analysis reveals how absurdist humour is part and parcel of the narrative structure of *The Restaurant* and how the incongruity is resolved at the moment of literary interpretation.

3.1 Venturing into the Absurd

In Douglas Adams's 1979 novel *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Agrajag is a hapless creature whose many reincarnations continually end up being killed, most of the time unintentionally, by the main protagonist of the story, Arthur Dent. The first time Agrajag is introduced to the reader, it has taken on the form of a bowl of petunias:[61]

> Curiously enough, the only thing that went through the mind of the bowl of petunias as it fell was Oh no, not again. Many people have speculated that if we knew exactly why the bowl of petunias had thought that we would know a lot more about the nature of the Universe than we do now. (Adams 1995: 100)

The odd twists in this quotation are indicative of a specific type of humour permeating the novel, which I call absurdist humour. Humour and the absurd

[61] This connection between Agrajag, the bowl of petunias, and Arthur Dent is only revealed in the sequel (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980)).

share a close connection as both are generally defined in terms of incongruity which implicates a cognitive response. While, in this chapter, I focus on cognitive humour theory, there exists a variety of other approaches.

Most books on humour divide the field into three main categories. Next to cognitive theories of humour, there are psychoanalytical theories of humour, such as release/relief theory, which holds that "laughter provides relief to various tensions and allows repressed desires to be satisfied" (Ermida 2008: 22); and sociological theories of humour, particularly superiority theory, which postulates that we find humour in the misfortunes of others. When someone (or something) is made the butt of a joke, we laugh at their expense because we deem ourselves superior, whether that be socially, physically, culturally, etc. (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 6; Gruner 2000).[62] Most influential in contemporary humour research, however, are cognitive theories of humour. And dominant within that field is the incongruity resolution theory.

The incongruity resolution theory states that "a joke text (T) is funny if T contains one or more incongruous elements any of which may or may not be fully or in part (playfully or not) resolved by the occurrence of the punch line, which may or may not introduce new incongruities" (Attardo et al. 2002: 27). As an example of instances of humour where resolution is only partially realised or entirely absent, Salvatore Attardo points to absurdist humour which "lacks resolution" (Attardo et al. 2002: 25).[63] Oring, however, doubts that such a distinction "can be maintained" as all types of jokes are to some degree absurd and therefore no joke is ever truly resolved (Oring 2003: 14). What differentiates absurdist humour from other forms, says Oring, is the disparity between "the joke world" and "the world as we know it" which cannot be resolved (Oring 2003:

[62] For a more detailed survey see Martin (2007).
[63] A view also shared by, for instance, Joanna Gavins (2013: 50), Isabel Ermida (2008: 74) and Theresa Hamilton (2013: 26).

25).[64] Oring correctly identifies the discrepancy between "joke" world and real world as a distinguishing feature of the absurd. I believe, however, that this incongruity is in fact resolved at the moment of (literary) interpretation as absurdist humour can only be understood in the context of the entire text, yet at the same time, absurdist humour is also instrumental in defining that context, something which I will return to later in the chapter.

Humour theorists like Attardo are predominantly interested in what makes humorous discourse stand out from "serious discourse". They are not so much interested in the *interpretation* of humour as in the *description* of humorous "mechanisms that exist prior to any text and that make the interpretation of a text possible" (Attardo 2006: 351). Consequently, traditional (linguistically oriented) humour research has the tendency to focus on short jokes rather than on longer and more complex narrative texts. But when reading a novel like Adams's Sci-Fi classic, humorous passages as the one cited above are never read nor understood in isolation. They are firmly embedded in the narrative context and all that this entails, and thus have significant bearing on both the reading process and the interpretative process. Yet this is something that is all too often glossed over in the field of humour studies.

This chapter aims to address this oversight and explores how absurdist humour impacts (literary) interpretation, challenging the generally espoused belief that absurdist humour's incongruity remains unresolved. Following a synthesis of influential and contemporary cognitive theories of humour dealing with incongruity and its resolution, the chapter posits that resolution is in fact achieved, not at the linguistic level of the humorous utterance but at the level of a reader's interpretation. To this end, the chapter combines insights from incongruity resolution theories with those drawn from schema theory. As we have

[64] Attardo, later, seems to come round to Oring's point of view stating that nonsensical jokes are only partially resolved but that "truly nonsensical jokes" contain "an element of incongruity that isn't even addressed" (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011: 143).

seen in the previous chapter, schema theory has successfully been used in literary studies to describe how readers process and understand narrative text. It can also be used to describe how readers reconcile the disparity between the storyworld (in lieu of Oring's "joke world") and the "real world". Additionally, schema theory proves fruitful for the study of humour, particularly absurdist humour, because, as Neal Norrick says, "schema conflicts on a single level suggests (the possibility of) conflict resolution on some other level" which in turn generates humour (Norrick 1986: 230). Integrating incongruity resolution theory and schema theory enhances our understanding of absurdist humour in literature, elucidates how it can generate meaning, and thus expands on the role it plays in the interpretative process. The study of literary humour necessitates such an integrated approach as humour constitutes an inextricable part of the narrative structure. Humour, for instance, impacts characterization, influences plot development, interacts with the narrative setting, and thus significantly affects how we interpret a literary text.

3.2 Incongruity and Absurdist Humour

If there is one thing cognitive humour theorists (generally) agree on, it is the belief that humour is caused by incongruity, even if they do not necessarily agree as to what incongruity means exactly (Ritchie 2009: 313-314). In *Humor: Its Origin and Development* (1979) Paul McGhee indicates that the terms "congruity and incongruity refer to the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth" (6), going on to specify that when "the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous" (1979: 6-7). Simply put, incongruity describes an experience where certain objects, events, or actions do not conform to our expectations of them. Such a definition of incongruity resonates strongly with the discussion of incongruity in connection

with the literary absurd in the first chapter. The next few paragraphs reveal that there is yet more that connects the (philosophical) absurd to humour.

McGhee is not the first to assume that "incongruity is central to all humor" (1979: 10).[65] Many influential philosophers, ranging from Aristotle to Kierkegaard and beyond, have preceded him. These philosophers have all devoted significant time and effort to understanding humour and the related phenomena of comedy and laughter. And while each philosopher tackles this subject from a specific perspective befitting their own philosophy, many shared the belief that incongruity was of pivotal importance to the humorous experience. The following paragraphs explore some of these philosophers' thoughts on humour, albeit succinctly. The focus lies on ideas that, to this day, still resonate with contemporary humour theories and also have a bearing on the conceptualisation of absurdist humour specifically.

One of the earliest thinkers to have addressed humour and its causes was Aristotle.[66] And while he may not have used the term incongruity specifically, he believed that one way to get an audience to laugh was to engender a certain set of expectations only to subsequently violate them (Morreall 2013: 4). The idea that jokes or humorous experiences first create certain expectations which are then not realised is also expressed by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (1790/1987) in a passage where he, interestingly, also links laughter and the absurd: "Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake)" (Kant et al. 1987: 203). A joke, then, according to Kant provides a kind of mental exercise, which may not lead to tangible results, but nevertheless has a pleasurable effect on the human body (Kant et al. 1987: 203-205).

[65] McGhee considers incongruity to be "a necessary condition for humour, but not a sufficient one" (1979: 10), much like John Morreall does (2009: 13). And while this belief is shared by many humour theorists it is certainly not uncontested. See, among others, Gruner 2000 and Latta 1999.

[66] Aristotle's views on humour and wit are also frequently considered to be a "precursor" of sorts of superiority theory, just as they are of incongruity theory. This already points to the often arbitrary nature of these specific labels "since many theories can fall into more than one category" (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 4).

Another influential philosopher contemplating humour, or more specifically laughter, was Arthur Schopenhauer. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/1966), Schopenhauer explains that laughter "results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation" (59).[67] When abstract conception does not match concrete perception, humour ensues, says Schopenhauer. Defining humour in those terms, again, seems to hint at a relationship between humour and the absurd, especially when considering that the latter gives expression to the incongruity owing to the difference in one's personal goals, desires and beliefs and those expected or imposed by the outside world (Cruickshank 1970: 51). Whereas Schopenhauer situates the incongruity that causes laughter between subjects' sensory perception and the way in which we give these perceptions abstract form in our mind (Morreall 2013: 4), Kierkegaard, like Kant before him, feels humour, or the "comical" to be exact, is caused by a contradiction between expectation and experience (Kierkegaard and Hannay 2009: 49).[68] And our awareness of the comic is particularly informed by incongruity that surprises us (Oden 2004: 10).

Such a brief account of how philosophy entwines incongruity and humour does not do justice to the complexity and richness of the philosophers discussed above, but it does bring to the fore certain recurring ideas that have significant bearing both on the study of humour in general and on the study of humour in literature specifically. A first idea is that there seems to exist some innate relationship between the concept of humour and the absurd. The exact nature of that relationship, however, is less clear. It would be careless to suggest that all

[67] While Schopenhauer does believe incongruity to be at the heart of the humorous experience, he also incorporates some of the basic tenets of superiority theory: when we are mocked, says Schopenhauer, it hurts because it highlights the discrepancy between our own conception and perception of reality and that of others, revealing what we believed to be true to be false or inaccurate. We find humour enjoyable because it is testament to the triumph of our powers of perception over conscious thought (Morreall 2013: 4).

[68] Kierkegaard's treatment of humour is of course (see chapter one) firmly rooted in his discussion of religion (Christianity), and consequently also the absurd, situated as humour is at the "*confinium* between the ethical and the religious" (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Oden 2004: 23).

jokes are absurd, nor that all absurd situations or events are humorous. That many seemingly intuitively pick up on a connection between these two concepts owes to the notion of incongruity as a defining feature. If and how that incongruity is ultimately resolved will be explored in greater detail in the following section of the chapter.

A second idea that emerges from this brief overview is the idea that incongruity is presented as indispensable to the humorous experience which follows from the interplay between expectation and experience. And while it is certainly hard to deny that the conflict between expectation and experience can indeed generate humour, it is also true that there exist other cognitive responses that are characterised by such a conflict, such as horror, or surprise which can, but need not elicit humour. In the context of literature, specifically, incongruity is often caused by a comparison of textual information with a reader's schemata, which as we know essentially amount to structured representations of events, objects or actions gained through (personal) experience (Emmott 2014: 2).

Take for instance the following passage from Adams's *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980), when Arthur and Ford Prefect meet with a group of Golgafrinchans to discuss "fiscal policy". The lazy Golgafrinchans have decided to "adopt the leaf as legal tender" in order to increase their wealth (Adams 1995: 298). This brilliant plan, however, does not entirely work out as intended, but they soon arrive at a solution:

> "But we have also," continued the management consultant, "run into a small inflation problem on account of the high level of leaf availability, which means that, I gather, the current going rate has something like three deciduous forests buying one ship's peanut." Murmurs of alarm came from the crowd. The management consultant waved them down. "So in order to obviate this problem," he continued, "and effectively revalue the leaf, we are about to embark on a massive defoliation campaign, and …er,

> burn down all the forests. I think you'll all agree that's a sensible move under the circumstances." The crowd seemed a little uncertain about this for a second or two until someone pointed out how much this would increase the value of the leaves in their pockets whereupon they let out whoops of delight and gave the management consultant a standing ovation. The accountants among them looked forward to a profitable autumn. (Adams 1995: 298-299)

This passage is interesting for multiple reasons. It engenders expectations in its readers, only to subsequently frustrate them. These expectations are prompted by the initial similarity between fictional world and real world. Although this passage takes place approximately two million years ago, it is set on Earth, features physically recognizable characters (humanity's supposed ancestors) and uses concepts familiar to modern readers, such as the economic system. Choosing leaves as legal tender, however, does not conform to our schematic expectations and rather strikes us as absurd. So too does the manner in which the Golgafrinchans intend to deal with the problem of inflation, without considering the possible consequences of their actions. The incongruity of the joke, then, is mirrored in the incongruity between storyworld and the world as we know it, to use Oring's words. And it is exactly readers' inability to resolve that incongruity, according to Oring, that makes this excerpt an example of absurdist humour.

A case can be made then that absurdist humour, certainly in literary texts, can exacerbate the incongruity between abstract concepts and the actual perception of these concepts, as posited by Schopenhauer. Interestingly, though, it can do this by emphasising the gap between fictional world and real world, but also by illustrating that the reality of the storyworld is not always as far removed from our own, no matter how absurd it may seem. Both strategies are often used concurrently. In the example above, a great many similarities are established between fictional world and readers' experiential world. The schema "economic

system" codifies our procedures of exchanging and acquiring all manner of goods. Most societies use some form of currency to purchase what they want or need. In order to do so, a consensus must be reached in order to assign value to that currency. This is a tightly regulated process. But the choice for paper money is essentially as arbitrary as using leaves. In many respects then, our schema shares default slots with the textual schema. What might be more incongruent to readers' experience is how that unit of currency is managed, and how it dictates their entire fiscal policy, with all its possible ramifications. So, by changing a vital parameter or slot of the schema "economic system", the text sets in motion a series of events which all serve to highlight the incongruity between fictional world and reality. This dual aspect of similarity and difference means that absurdist humour is ideally suited to help us better understand the relationship between incongruity and its resolution, which is central to the humorous experience, since absurdist humour operates in much the same way. Yet at the same time, the example above also makes clear that there is more to absurdist humour than just incongruity (leaves vs. money) and that there are a host of other contextual parameters that determine our humorous response (the characteristics of the Golgafrinchans as a race, Arthur and Ford Prefect's response, the parodic style, etc.), which I will return to after first exploring the interplay between incongruity and its resolution.

3.3 Incongruity and Resolution

One of the first to consider resolution as essential to the humorous experience was psychologist Jerry Suls.[69] Suls explains humour appreciation as a two stage process: in a first stage a listener/reader's expectations "about the text" are "disconfirmed", a process which is followed by a second stage in which "the perceiver engages in a form of problem solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punch-line follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts" (Suls 1972: 82). Suls also emphasises that the incongruity must be sudden and surprising, necessary features which distinguish jokes from riddles, for instance. Riddles can also be surprising but they are not incongruous as the resolution follows logically and coherently from its original premise, something which is lacking in jokes (Suls 1972: 84).

Suls's insistence on the surprising nature of incongruity echoes, among others, Kierkegaard. It might also explain why many humour theorists remark on the (close) relationship between humour and the absurd. Something which is considered as absurd is generally something which is far removed from our everyday experiences, often surprising us. Such an explanation, however, fails to account for the fact that repetition can still elicit humorous responses. This is especially true for literary humour where a recurring type of humour or joke can engender text-specific schemata that mitigate surprise yet still generate humour. Suls's distinction between riddle and joke also proves somewhat unconvincing as people can sometimes perfectly predict the punchline of a joke and still be amused, suggesting that there exists at least some form of logical continuity between set-up and pay-off.[70] One of the problems with much of the research on

[69] Suls is also one of the first to attempt to explain in greater detail how resolution might be achieved (Suls 1972: 86-88). Although he does neglect to elucidate how the "nature of the resolution (i.e. the content of the cognitive rule) may contribute to the humour" (Ritchie 1999: 84).

[70] Superiority theory seems better equipped to explain this, as in this case humour ensues from our 'superior cleverness' of having predicted the punch line, thus 'beating' the joke teller.

incongruity is that both the concept of incongruity and resolution are rarely "clearly defined" and that both terms can often be understood to mean different things to different authors (Ritchie 1999: 78). This lack of operational efficiency is something that linguistic scholars explicitly wish to address by developing more formal theories of humour.

Highly influential in this field were and still are Victor Raskin and Attardo. Much of the groundwork for contemporary linguistic theories of humour was laid in Raskin's seminal book *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985) in which he developed the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH).[71] The SSTH is strictly geared toward the analysis of verbal humor, to "joke carrying text[s]" (Raskin 1985: 44). It postulates that a text is humorous if:

> (i) **The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts**.
> (ii) **The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite** […]. **The two scripts with which some text is compatible** are said to **overlap fully or in part on this text**. (Raskin 1985: 99, his emphasis)

Raskin illustrates his theory with the following joke: "'Is the doctor at home?' the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. 'No,' the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. 'Come right in'" (Raskin 1985: 100). This joke text reveals an incongruity between the patient's question and the doctor's wife's answer. A patient visiting a doctor activates a specific script (which Raskin terms "DOCTOR"), which initially is reinforced by the patient's "bronchial whisper" intimating illness. But the doctor's wife's behaviour is incongruent with the world information attached to this script. She might invite the patient in, but he would not be able to achieve his presumed goal of receiving treatment. The

[71] While Raskin's SSTH can also be classified as an incongruity theory, he specifically wanted to distance his theory from "a specific implementation of the incongruity theory particularly popular in the 1970s" (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011: 130).

combinatorial rules no longer make sense, says Raskin, and we start looking for a new script to interpret the interaction between the doctor's wife and the patient. A second script ("LOVER") is activated and we infer that the pair are engaged in an illicit affair.[72]

Raskin's insistence on the two scripts overlapping constitutes a marked difference between the SSTH and Suls's two-stage incongruity resolution model. The former posits that humour is derived from the simultaneous activation of opposite scripts whereas the latter states that humour is only realised when the incongruity has been removed (resolved) and consequently one script has been replaced by another. In *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, Raskin deliberately limits himself to "the most elementary kind of verbal humor", consisting of jokes "created by one overlap of just two opposite scripts" (Raskin 1985: 46).[73] He does, however, indicate that the SSTH should also be equipped to handle more complex and longer joke texts, while at the same time allowing for the possibility that his theory might have to be amended to better deal with "the more sophisticated kind of humor" (Raskin 1985: 46).

Attardo (1994) had already remarked that the SSTH seemed to be excluding different types of text by exclusively focussing on a specific "joke format" (1994: 208).[74] He conceived of the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) which he felt better suited to account for a larger variety of texts as it includes more areas of linguistic theory in the form of Knowledge Resources (Attardo 1994: 222-223). The GTVH, then, expands on the SSTH by including six hierarchically organized (top-to-bottom) knowledge resources. The first one is the "script opposition", which essentially amounts to the incongruity of the two

[72] An extended analysis of this joke in terms of Raskin's model can be found in Raskin 1985, pages 117 to 127.
[73] That the focus on short and specifically designed jokes could be problematic is also highlighted by John Morreall (2004).
[74] Raskin himself has stated that the "*purview"* of the SSTH is "*textual humor"* and is "most easily applicable to short canned jokes" (Raskin et al. 2009: 288, his emphasis).

opposing and (partially) overlapping scripts of the SSTH.[75] A second knowledge resource is the logical mechanism, allowing recipients to resolve the initial script opposition or incongruity (Attardo 2001: 25). An example of a logical mechanism would be role-reversal. A script opposition can be resolved when we realise that the roles attached to a particular script have been reversed.[76] A third knowledge resource, the situation, refers to "what the joke is about," "the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc." (Attardo 2001: 24). The next knowledge resource is the target of a joke, who or what we laugh at. Unlike script oppositions, the target is not a mandatory knowledge resource but rather functions as an "optional parameter", simply because not all jokes are aggressive (Attardo 2001: 23-24). The fifth knowledge resource is the "narrative strategy" and describes how the joke is presented, how it is organized (not to be confused with literary genre, stresses Attardo). The final one is "language", which "is responsible for the exact wording of the text and for the placement of the functional elements that constitute it". Jokes, says Attardo, can be easily paraphrased and, as long as the meaning remains intact, retain their humorous quality (2001: 22-23). Every joke, then, can be analysed by simply filling in these parameters.

The GTVH is not only suited to analyse short jokes but can also be used to study humour in literature, according to Attardo, by identifying individual jokes in the text. All humorous elements are then mapped along a vector and assigned to progressively overarching structures.[77] While the GTVH proves fruitful for the analysis of short jokes, it is less suited to the analysis of literary texts of greater length as it considers the humour of these texts simply as a linear sequence of

[75] Attardo later refines the concept of incongruity by distinguishing three levels of incongruity, see Hempelmann and Attardo 2011.
[76] Attardo expands on the notion of logical mechanisms in a 2011 article with Christian Hempelmann.
[77] These individual humorous elements are called lines and include "punch lines" and "jab lines", the difference between the two being that punch lines only occur in text final position whereas jab lines can occur in any other position in the text. Three or more lines can be "formally or thematically linked" by means of textual or intertextual references to form a "strand" thus allowing readers to spot emerging patterns within the text (Attardo 2001: 79-89; Attardo 2008: 110-111).

jokes (Ermida 2008: 109). Such a view, however, does little to further our understanding of the role humour fulfils in a literary text and its impact on the interpretation of that text. This is perhaps unsurprising as the objective of the GTVH is to elucidate why a particular text is funny and it is not particularly interested in the reaction to or interpretation of the humour in a text (Attardo 2001: 30).

The focus on individual jokes essentially mimics the goal of the SSTH to try and understand how a "joke works" and to try "*understanding it the way people do*" (Raskin et al. 2009: 289, his emphasis). But such an approach ultimately proves insufficient as it fails to relate these humorous sequences to the narrative context. It is precisely for this reason that Theresa Hamilton feels the need to supplement the GTVH with Thomas Cooke's concept of the "comic climax", which "adds a global perspective on the narrative and the interaction of narratological elements" (Hamilton 2013: 8).[78] A similar sentiment is expressed by Katrina Triezenberg when she explains that the "GTVH and its extensions are not sufficient to successfully describe the workings of humorous literature" (Triezenberg 2004: 412). Like Triezenberg, I do not doubt the importance of the notion of a script opposition as a prerequisite for humorous utterances (2004: 412), but, unlike Hamilton (2013: 72, 83), I do doubt the overall suitability of the GTVH and its knowledge resources for literary analysis.

Some of Attardo's operational parameters are only loosely defined, a problem he himself is cognizant of (Attardo 2001: 207-208) and which he later addresses, at least as far as logical mechanisms are concerned (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011). Additionally, one might call into question the added value of some of the knowledge resources to literary analysis, as currently conceptualised. In his own analysis of Oscar Wilde's short story 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime'

[78] Hamilton does this in her doctoral dissertation, entitled *Humorous Structures of English Narratives, 1200-1600* (2013), which offers a study of English narratives from different genres ranging from the fabliau to parody and tragic narratives.

(1887), the knowledge resources of logic mechanism, narrative strategy and language are frequently left open or simply considered irrelevant (Attardo 2001: 163-199). The way in which value is assigned to language is indicative of this issue. As indicated earlier, language merely points to the direct "wording" of the joke and any joke can be freely rephrased "without changes in its semantic content" (Attardo 2001: 22). Attardo illustrates this as follows:

(1) "How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table." (2001: 22)
(2) "The number of Pollacks [sic] needed to screw in a light bulb? Five – one to hold the bulb and four to turn the table." (2001: 22)

To Attardo, the meaning of the joke has remained "intact", specifically because the punch line has remained unchanged (2001: 22). From the linguistic point of view, substituting the neutral term Poles for the disparaging Polack need not impact the meaning of the joke, but both within the context of everyday social interaction and the literary text, however, such a change impacts our interpretation of the joke.

A similar argument can be made for the other knowledge resources. Vandaele for instance, remarks that the GTVH "finds story-world participants a relatively unimportant 'prop,' and even less central as potential 'targets' of humor" (Vandaele 2012: 97). In literary texts, however, humour is predominantly generated by characters, their actions, and how these actions are received and perceived by both characters and readers (Vandaele 2010: 736-737).[79] These considerations pertaining to the suitability of the knowledge resources do not necessarily constitute a critique of the GTVH as a formal theory, but they do suggest that this model cannot simply be adopted for the purpose of analysing

[79] See also Hamilton, on the importance of "narratological categories, such as character, setting, action, dialogue" as a source of humour (2013: 75).

humour in literary texts contrary to what has, certainly initially, been purported. Attardo seems to admit as much by indicating that the study of complex texts and their multiple incongruities is something that is yet to be explored in later research (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011: 130). He has also intimated that "the role and significance of such traditional narratological concerns such as characters, point of view, narrator, etc. in humor is almost entirely to be determined and assessed" (Attardo 2008: 121).

Some of the criticism levelled at cognitive theories of humour in general seems to apply to the GTVH and its suitability for literary analysis as well. Michael Billig, for instance, feels that cognitive theories evince a tendency to reduce jokes to their base components, to the detriment of their humorous quality. They also tend to neglect the social context in which jokes are shared (Billig 2005: 66). But to understand how humour works we need to understand not only how the joke works, but how people experience it (Driessen 1997: 223). The GTVH, particularly, fails to adequately account for the importance of the socio-cultural context for humour (Hamilton 2013: 24). A similar argument can be made for literature. Within the literary context the "function(s) of a joke" (Lewis 2006: 41) or any other expression of humour can only be understood in the context of the literary text as a whole. The insistence on the importance of (the social and cultural) context stems from the belief, as expressed by Simon Critchley, that humour, ultimately and undeniably, is a shared experience (2002: 80). And while Critchley of course refers to the interaction between live human beings, literary humour is no less a shared experience, whether that be between reader and character, between characters, character and setting, or any other possible constellation. In order to understand the role of (absurdist) humour in literary texts, we need to not only consider incongruity at a linguistic level, but also at the conceptual level by focussing on the interaction between readers, the literary text and the context. Schema theory, in my opinion, offers the means to do just that.

3.4 Schema theory and Absurdist Humour

The second chapter has already detailed both the history of schemata and their role in text comprehension and literary interpretation. Schemata are useful because they help us navigate standardised situations and minimise cognitive expenditure. They also serve as repositories of knowledge, experiences, and memories which can be amended as new information or new experiences are encountered (Schank 1995: 7-9). During the reading process readers have to be able to meaningfully connect important information, which they then have to be able to evaluate and interpret in order to form a coherent story, a process facilitated significantly by schemata (Schank and Abelson 1977b: 423). Schemata, then, enable readers to better understand a literary text because they provide them with a frame of reference which they can use to make sense of what is going on in the text (Eco 1989: 105).

Schema theory has also left its mark on cognitive theories of humour[80], most notably in the SSTH where scripts are defined as "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it" (Raskin 1985: 81). By integrating scripts into the SSTH, Raskin aimed to remediate a perceived shortcoming of semantics of the Katz-Fodor kind which only looked at text "in isolation" and to account for different aspects important in text processing, such as the "knowledge of the world, of language, […], the situation in which the text occurs," and "the participants in the situation" (Raskin et al. 2009: 290). This might hold true when analysing short jokes, but, as seen earlier, it is less so the case for humour in longer and more complex narrative texts. Although Raskin remains convinced of the explanatory power of the SSTH, the GTVH, and its latest evolution in the form of the Ontological Semantic Theory of Humour (OSTH)[81], he does single out absurd jokes as instances of humour that require

[80] See for instance Norrick 1986 or Wyer and Collins 1992.
[81] See Raskin et al. 2009.

more effort to analyse as they generally present a greater challenge for people to fully grasp them (Raskin et al. 2009: 306).

The distinction Raskin makes here between absurd jokes and other jokes is similar to the one referenced in the first paragraphs of the chapter, namely that absurdist humour is a specific type of humour that lacks resolution. That absurdist humour is awarded special status by linguistic theories of humour is interesting, especially in light of the many humour theories that tend to consider the absurd and humour as inextricably linked (Kant, Schopenhauer, Chafe (2007), Brodwin (1972)). It should be pointed out, however, that the absurd is not always understood the same way by different theoreticians, undoubtedly owing to the exigencies of their respective fields of research. For intellectuals like Kant, Schopenhauer or Kierkegaard, the absurd is obviously conceptualised in relation to their overarching philosophical project.[82] Conversely, in cognitive humour research, the absurd is generally described in terms of mental and cognitive acuity (specifically the (in)ability to reconcile certain incongruities). Interestingly enough, these seemingly contrastive positions are both particularly relevant to understanding and interpreting absurdist humour.

Will Noonan suggests that there exist two varieties of absurdist humour: one that mirrors the existential absurd and gives expression to the feeling that life is without purpose, a worldview inherent to the absurd. This bleak perspective on life is often accompanied by a sombre type of humour. The second strand centres around the absence of logic or a disruption of the causal chain, both of which lean towards nonsense (Noonan 2014: 1). This second strand and nonsense humour are often equated (Hamilton 2013: 26; Ermida 2008: 74; Ruch 2008: 49; Moura 2010: 13), unsurprising perhaps as they are both generally defined as consisting of "logical non sequiturs" (Davis 1993: 100) and thus are characterised by an

[82] We have extensively covered Kierkegaard's view on the absurd in the first chapter.

absence of logic. This is why Arthur Berger subsumes absurdist and nonsense humour under the same technique.

According to Berger, four base categories of humour techniques can be discerned. One collects forms of humour focussing on language such as the pun or hyperbole. A second pertains to instances of physical or non-verbal humour. The third relates to matters of identity and existentialist issues, of which Berger considers Caricature, Impersonations and Stereotypes to be examples. And the fourth category brings together techniques that defy logic or the causal chain (Berger 2012: 17-18). As Berger focuses on techniques rather than on specific forms or genres of humour specifically, there is something to be said for his four basic categories. However, absurdist humour as a form of humour does not limit itself to one technique, quite the opposite. As we have seen from the numerous examples from *Catch-22* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, absurdist humour incorporates many different techniques such as hyperbole, caricature, repetition, or coincidence, to name but a few.

It is clear that much nuance is lost if one simply equates absurdist humour to nonsense humour. There are, in fact, some significant differences between nonsense and absurdist humour. According to Wim Tigges, literary nonsense is defined by the strained relationship between being meaningful on the one hand and being incomprehensible on the other hand, that readers find difficult to handle. And this tension is highlighted linguistically (1988: 55). This emphasis on the verbal nature also constitutes the most important difference, says Tigges, as in "nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality" (1988: 128, his emphasis).[83] In other words, nonsense seems to primarily operate on a linguistic level highlighting the creative power of

[83] Tigges's interpretation of the absurd is influenced by the philosophy of Camus and the work of Martin Esslin. He states that the absurd "is the art form that conveys meaninglessness, which is contrary to the purpose of nonsense to avoid complete absence of meaning" (Tigges 1988: 130).

language, whereas the absurd operates on the conceptual level. Absurdist humour reveals a world that is familiar and yet at the same time unfamiliar.

The interplay between familiarity and unfamiliarity also lies at the basis of what Jerry Palmer calls the "logic of the absurd" (1994: 96). Much like Suls before him, Palmer believes that most jokes in a first stage create an incongruity. After noticing the incongruity, readers are forced to simultaneously entertain two diverging logical pathways. They then arrive at an interpretation of the absurd joke, assessing its message to simultaneously be extremely unlikely and barely possible. Unlike nonsense humour which is entirely implausible (Palmer 1994: 96-97). That readers frequently find themselves vacillating between high implausibility and low plausibility is exacerbated by the way in which the events causing absurdist humour are received in the storyworld. In an article exploring the "odd talk" that is characteristic of many absurdist texts, Paul Simpson explains that it is not so much the breakdown of the "structural level" of discourse that causes incongruity, but rather the "mismatch between context and utterance", between "communicative strategy and discourse context" (Simpson 1998: 39-40). He goes on to say that the incongruity that readers experience when reading absurdist literature is not only caused by the strange actions or the aberrant behaviour of literary characters themselves but also by the fact that these are almost always received without any surprise and considered to be normal within that fictional context (Simpson 1998: 42, 47).

Absurdist humour challenges readers' inability to swiftly and easily reconcile literary text and experience (Safer 1989: 94). It is caused by an incongruity that defies the expectation of (logical) causality. The incongruity is not so much situated at the linguistic level, but owes its existence to the way in which readers engage with the literary text. Let us return to the Golgafrinchans and their new, leaf-based economy. At a purely grammatical or semantic level there is nothing odd about this passage. We know what leaves are and are familiar with the basic economic principles described here. What does stand out, however,

is that the former has been integrated into the schematic structure of the latter. The incongruity here, then, is one of a conceptual nature. Readers possess a schema of how the (Western) economic system functions. Money, recognised as legal tender, can be exchanged for goods and services. Highly simplified, inflation occurs when money decreases in value, when it gets you less bang for your buck, so to speak. This can be caused by a disturbed relationship between the market mechanisms of supply and demand (for example, when supply is unable to meet demand, or when production costs rise significantly), or through the creation of a surplus of money. A legitimate strategy to counter inflation, assuming that consumption and population remained 'steady state', would be to halt the production of new money or reduce the amount of money in circulation.

In the Golgafrinchans' society, money has (seemingly) arbitrarily been replaced by leaves, which strikes readers as absurd (even though the paper money we use has no more intrinsic value than leaves). But seeing as leaves are so readily available, they are suddenly faced with a "small inflation problem", a problem which in itself is not all that surprising and in keeping with our schematic knowledge. Their proposed solution of controlling the amount of leaves in circulation is, once again, seemingly congruent with our schematic expectation. That the solution is taken to such an extreme, however, is somewhat more unexpected. The impromptu decision to "…er, burn down all the forests" is not only stupid but also very short-sighted, as the leaves will decay and they will have burned their best means of generating new money. The crowd, primarily motivated by greed, go along with the plan after only the briefest moment of contemplation.

The text, then, offers a set of, at first glance, logical responses to a particular problem analogue to what readers can expect on the basis of acquired knowledge of how the real world works: the Golgafrinchans decide on a new currency, an overabundance of money causes inflation, and a plan to combat said inflation is formulated by removing excess money. Adopting leaves as a means

of currency, however, is far removed from readers' everyday experiences and expectations, especially as it culminates in a plan to burn down the forests, a response well beyond all proportion. It is precisely by simultaneously creating a certain amount of overlap as well as a few striking differences between fictional world and real world, that the scene described above generates absurdist humour. What makes it even more absurd is that there was no need to create a new source of money in the first place. Prior to the Golgafrinchans debating the finer points of fiscal policy, Ford Prefect asks them why they would need money "if none of you [the Golgafrinchans] actually produces anything?", and naively (and ironically) points out that money "doesn't grow on trees you know" (Adams 1995: 298), adding yet another layer of humour through its reference to readers' proverbial knowledge.

In a similar way, absurdist humour is also created by playing with readers' expectations based on genre schemata, particularly those pertaining to science fiction. Science fiction in general, says Stockwell, has the advantage that its fictional worlds can "encompass all the events and inventory of our own actual world [analogous to Marie-Laure Ryan's principle of minimal departure (1991)] plus all the imaginary features of non-actual worlds" (Stockwell 2003: 195). *The Hitch Hiker's Guide* makes clever use of this stratagem by grounding the extraordinary in the ordinary, the mundane even. Recall the unfortunate Agrajag who was reincarnated as a bowl of petunias, a rabbit or a fly. The novel incorporates many elements characteristic of science fiction such as teleportation, interstellar flight, or supercomputers. But in most cases, there exists no direct correlation between technological advancement on the one hand and intelligence and resourcefulness on the other hand. No race in *The Hitch Hiker's* fictional universe epitomises this discrepancy more than the Golgafrinchans. Their space ship was deliberately set to crash on Earth, in order to strand the less desirable third of Golgafrinchan society on this planet, those remaining at home being later "*wiped out by a virulent disease contracted from a dirty telephone*" (Adams 1995:

274). Genre schemata are inverted here as the Golgafrinchans are utterly helpless despite the technology that brought them there. They cannot even make fire, or decide on what colour the wheel should be if they ever get round to inventing it in the first place. Their overall stupidity does not match readers' expectations based on the level of technology they possess and their antics are a continuous source of absurdist humour.

I have only focussed on one rather short passage, but many more such examples can be found in the novel. As a consequence, readers might start to expect the unexpected, providing them with a set of intratextual schemata possibly mitigating the incongruous experience. The manner in which these abstract incongruities are concretised, however, remains striking enough to generate absurdist humour. The analysis of the fragment above also illustrates why an analysis strictly in terms of the SSTH/GTVH does not do justice to the richness of the text. Literary humour cannot be broken down into small and isolated packets, nor is it a strictly linear process, as evinced by Ford Prefect's comment about money growing on trees which causes humour only when reinterpreted in light of subsequent events. So too does the absurdist humour in this passage not stem from a single script opposition. Rather it is realised by activating in its readers a specific schema. The text then substitutes a vital parameter of the schema (leaves for money) that generates a new set of absurdist incongruities "blended in the same assemblage", to quote English philosopher James Beattie (1776: 349), which work in concert to create the humorous effect. This is only exacerbated by the Golgafrinchans' handling of the situation, highlighted stylistically, which stands in stark contrast to the disbelief of focaliser Ford Prefect, who is happily ignored by the Golgafrinchans.

The opposing positions held by these two narrative entities are reflected in the reader having to simultaneously entertain a scenario which is highly improbable when considered from the point of view of Ford Prefect, but nevertheless plausible within the broader context created by the fictional world.

The humorous effect also hinges on the characterisation of the Golgafrinchans and their society as rather vapid and superficial. This group of Golgafrinchans were forced to relocate to earth approximately two million years ago, actually making them humanity's ancestors adding yet another (contextual) layer of meaning which, again, enhances the humorous experience, even more so when we consider that we already know how their story ends (with their inevitable downfall as Earth is destroyed two million years later to make way for an intergalactic bypass). While on earth they also manage to negatively influence the supercomputer Deep Thought's search for the "Ultimate Question to the Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything". The text here invokes a storyworld very similar to our own but with some jarring differences, supporting Oring's assessment that absurdist humour exposes a disparity between storyworld and our own experiential world (2003: 25). The question, however, remains whether or not that disparity/incongruity can, or indeed has to, be resolved?

Much like incongruity, resolution is rarely defined unambiguously and varies according to the different incongruity resolution models. According to Attardo, there exists a difference between "the enabling mechanism", inherent to the joke text, and "resolution itself (which is a dynamic process)" (Ritchie 2009: 320). The means through which we move from static text element to dynamic resolution, however, remain unclear. The issue at stake across varying incongruity resolution models is whether or not the initial incongruity is fully (Suls), partially (Attardo, Oring), or simply not eliminated.

People have a propensity to strive for logical coherence, to make sense of their surroundings. They do this by looking for familiar patterns, by engaging with the world (fictional or not) based on what we know, what we are "used to" (Davies 2014: 122). This knowledge and these experiences are made accessible in the form of schemata. Absurdist humour disrupts this process by challenging the confines of everyday logic (Zijderveld 1971: 28). We do, however, "dislike failing to understand" (Schank 1995: 60). Resolution then might be conceived of

as not only dealing with how humour works but also with why. To that end we need to try and ascertain the function of absurdist humour, which in the context of the reading process is inextricably linked to the literary interpretation.

The passage discussed above contains a "joke text" that hinges on an incongruity (leaves vs. money as legal tender) which most conventional humour theories, such as the GTVH, would catalogue as absurdist humour as there is no logical mechanism that satisfyingly explains why leaves would serve as a substitute for money. This at first glance innocuous joke provides the impetus for the creation of multiple new and equally absurd incongruities. But rather than being treated as a localised phenomenon, this joke text and its absurdist humour must be understood and can only be fully appreciated in relation to the narrative context created by the novel. In order to make sense of the events and characters' responses to them, readers rely on their schemata, which incorporate both general and text-specific knowledge (such as genre conventions). Absurdist humour is a product of that interaction and here serves to enhance and emphasise the discrepancy between the storyworld and the real world. The choice of using leaves as currency now makes sense and the incongruity is resolved at the moment of interpretation.

This type of resolution, which is of a hermeneutic nature, should also be understood as a neurocognitive process. As Paul Armstrong explains in *How Literature Plays with the Brain* (2013), the hermeneutic circle is a corollary of a human's brain structure. The "recursive, circular interdependence of part and whole in interpretation", he states, simply follows from the way in which we perceive and comprehend the world surrounding us (Armstrong 2013: 55). In order to successfully navigate our world, people constantly formulate expectations about what will happen next on the basis of (relatively) stable patterns and categories, i.e. schemata. Armstrong, however, remarks that the human brain's persistent search for stability entails a contradiction, namely that the brain must maintain a constant equilibrium between constancy on the one

hand and being able to accommodate variability on the other hand so that it can satisfactorily assimilate new or diverging information (2013: 74). Consequently, we can only process new, or unknown, information if we can relate it to knowledge we already possess, and then build on that affinity. Similarly, when readers are presented with new or anomalous information they do not delete existing schemata but rather reconsider and broaden them so that they can more easily process this new or aberrant information (Armstrong 2013: 73). The structure of the brain, then, says Armstrong, is designed to handle contradictory or diverging readings. He further specifies that understanding text is a matter of assembling constituent interpretations into a larger whole, but that these constituents in turn are influenced by the overall interpretation. And thus do comprehension and the reading process mirror the hermeneutic circle (2013: 78-79).

As I have illustrated, absurdist humour operates along much the same lines. By playing with similarity and difference (or implausibility and probability), absurdist humour challenges the schematic predictions and assumptions readers make in their search for textual and interpretative coherence (Armstrong 2013: 86). At the moment of interpretation, then, we recognise absurdist humour as a narrative strategy that forces us to relinquish the schemata that organise and structure everyday life. As a consequence, we are compelled to more closely consider and ultimately reinterpret the text. The absurdist episode describing the Golgafrinchans and their economic system cleverly combines the two strands of absurdist humour by alerting readers to the dangers of human greed and short-sightedness (which humanity seems doomed to repeat) through the breakdown of logic processes allowing readers to resolve the initially perceived disparity between fictional world and referential world. The incongruity of absurdist humour can thus be resolved when considered within the context of the literary text. Yet at the same time it is also instrumental in creating that same context, as

it forms an integral part of the narrative structure in terms of characterisation, setting, and plot development.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on a specific type of literary humour, namely absurdist humour. It started by tracing the roots of the concept of incongruity in Western philosophy which revealed three recurring considerations which also proved relevant for later studies of humour as well as for the study of absurdist humour in particular. The first hinted at the close connection between humour and absurdity. The second indicates that the incongruity giving rise to humour defies or violates expectations, and thirdly, that it generally does so in a surprising manner. The fascination with incongruity and its subsequent resolution carried over to more recent research in a wide variety of scientific disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and linguistics.

Traditional humour research has a tendency to focus on short, often specifically designed jokes. Linguistic theories of humour such as the SSTH and the GTVH nevertheless claim that they are equally well equipped to analyse humour in longer and more complex narrative texts. Whilst this might be true in theory, it proves less obvious in practice, mostly because these linguistic models and the field of literary studies are at cross-purposes. The SSTH and the GTVH are predominantly interested in providing a formal theory describing the mechanisms underlying humour, eschewing the hermeneutic inclination associated with literary analysis. Consequently, they do not sufficiently account for the specificity of the narrative context.

Exploring the role and function of absurdist humour in literature, I have posited that absurdist humour (or humour in general for that matter) cannot be understood by reducing the text to a linear succession of individual jokes. Literary humour can only be understood in terms of the reading process, of how readers

engage with literary texts, a process facilitated by schemata. In a first step, absurdist humour was delineated from nonsense humour by defining its specific features. Absurdist humour is caused by a conceptual incongruity between the fictional world and the experiential world of the reader causing him or her to simultaneously juggle contrasting interpretations of the fictional world as highly implausible and barely plausible. This is only exacerbated by the way in which events are received and acted on by fictional characters, which further defies or violates readers' expectations. Finally, the traditional view of absurdist humour as a type of humour that remains unresolved was challenged by suggesting that resolution be equated with (literary) interpretation and removing it from the single level of the text to the higher ontological level of the reader interpretation. The case of absurdist humour also illustrates why literary humour cannot be studied in isolation, entwined as it is with the narrative structure of literary texts in terms of plot development, characterisation, and setting. Chapters four through six will substantiate and further develop this thesis in in-depth analyses of three novels.

4. Cry Havoc and Let Slip the Gogs of War: Absurdist Humour and Characterisation

Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* (2006) chronicles the adventures of Charlie Asher, owner of a thrift shop in San Francisco and recently widowed father. As if losing his wife was not enough, Charlie is chosen to be a Death Merchant, someone who collects the souls of the recently deceased and ensures that they find new owners. Adding to the stress of his new-found profession is the election of Sophie, his baby daughter, as the "Big D" or the new death. At the same time, Charlie also has to contend with the nefarious machinations of the demon Orcus, aided by Orcus's own hellish version of the three stooges, the Morrigan, Celtic avatars of death. This would be much to swallow for any person, let alone for an obvious Beta Male such as Charlie. That there can be no doubt that Charlie is indeed a Beta Male is obvious from the opening pages of the novel. The point is lovingly driven home by his sister Jane who is possessed of a self-assured personality that Charlie can only dream of.

Still mourning his wife's sudden demise, Charlie fears he is unqualified to take care of his daughter until Jane sets him straight: "'Take her, bitch!' Jane barked in Charlie's ear—sort of a whisper bark. It had long ago been determined who was the Alpha Male between them and it was not Charlie. She handed off the baby and cut to the stairs" (Moore 2006: 14). This good-natured banter is symbolic of the relationship between the siblings, as is the following exchange: "[Jane] held the baby up by her face, then looked down in adoration, Mother of Jesus style. 'What do you think? I should get one of these, huh?' 'You can borrow mine whenever you need to.' 'Nah, I should get my own. I already feel bad about borrowing your wife.' 'Jane!' 'Kidding! Jeez. You're such a wuss sometimes. Go sit shivah. Go. Go. Go'" (Moore 2006: 17-18). The social roles that govern the interaction between brother and sister have been inverted in this passage,

deviating from the conservative social norm. This deviation and its accompanying incongruity are compounded by the playful allusion to Jane's sexuality, which pits her attributed membership to a social category, i.e. Alpha Males, that her biological sex precludes her from against the overly stereotypical portrayal of a lesbian as sharing an abundance of "manly" qualities.

Drawing on stereotypes and the expectations they engender is a recurring strategy in *A Dirty Job* to create humour. Stereotypes, of course, can be considered as exemplary intensifications of socio-culturally defined patterns of expectation and can therefore best be understood through means of schema theory. Using socially defined categories, such as social standing, ethnicity, or profession, *A Dirty Job* immediately primes certain expectations in the minds of its readers pertaining to its cast of characters. There are the retired cop, the Goth school girl, the homeless man, the lesbian, the Russian matriarch, and many more. The text then subverts or redefines these expectations resulting in the absurdist humour that is characteristic of *A Dirty Job*. It does so through the process of schematic association between seemingly disparate and opposing schemata, through inverting or subverting default slots of frames and scripts, through the reductio ad absurdum of key characteristics, as well as through the creation of its own intratextual schemata. *A Dirty Job*, for instance, creates entirely its own character definition of what constitutes the Beta Male and how Charlie relates to or fits in with that classification.

In this chapter, I discuss how the nexus of absurdist humour and characterisation enhances our understanding of the novel and how the different levels of cognitive processing involved in the resolution of incongruity lie at the heart of the humorous experience. Considering absurdist humour in *A Dirty Job* in the context of schema theory proves fruitful because the incongruity it exposes needs to be resolved at the moment of interpretation, often to humorous effect (Norrick 1986: 230). In *A Dirty Job*, the narrative development is framed by an absurd premise, namely the anthropomorphic representation of Death. The

absurdity resides in the fact that, making abstraction of religion for a moment, there is no such thing as Death. Yet, bringing religion back into the picture, the anthropomorphisation of death has had seemingly universal appeal in a broad spectrum of cultures throughout history. Such a need to make tangible what is inherently elusive ties in with the human need to make sense of one's surroundings. If death is imbued with purpose and agency, then that would signify that there is some governing force in the universe bestowing meaning and purpose on human existence. This position is entirely opposite to Camus's and indeed the literary absurd. *A Dirty Job* mirrors that tension between purpose and senselessness by characterising Charlie as a largely ineffectual avatar of Death, whose successes are not achieved through the deliberate application of skill but rather through random luck, to the reader's enjoyment. Illogicality and irrationality, then, are seemingly inherent to the narrative structure of the novel, yet the characters take it in stride and their actions suggest that there is nothing out of the ordinary going on, thereby heightening the incongruity of the absurdist experience. *A Dirty Job*'s hallmark absurdist humour serves as a literary strategy that highlights characters' behaviour and personality, proving instrumental in conveying the major themes of the novel. The profound interaction between absurdist humour and characterisation, then, ultimately impacts interpretation as well as requires a higher level of cognitive processing on the part of the reader. The reading has to go beyond the text, drawing on and playing with readers' knowledge and assumptions. This in turn forces them to continuously revise, recontextualise and reinterpret what they know or think they know. In order to demonstrate the mutual interaction between characterisation and absurdist humour, I first turn to cognitive literary theory on characterisation, specifically the notion of character categorisation. Our continuous search for meaning extends to our desire to understand characters' motivations and their actions. To facilitate this process, readers have at their disposal a variety of schematic categories with

slots containing salient and stereotypical information. That reliance on schemata when interpreting characters can, however, be easily manipulated to comic effect.

4.1 The Beta Male in His Natural Environment: Character Categorisation

Reading is a highly complex process and the same holds true for readers' engagement with literary characters in particular. Characters in a novel, or in any other literary text for that matter, are more than just fictive representations of real people or than a "paradigm of traits described by words" (Jannidis 2013: 13). In order to describe the interaction between a reader and a literary character one needs to account for information provided by the literary text and the context, and for the knowledge that the reader brings to the table. Cognitive theories of characterisation attempt to do just that and try to describe "in detail the cognitive and affective operations of information processing". They posit that literary characters are best considered as "text-based constructs of the human mind, whose analysis requires both models of understanding text and models of the human psyche" (Eder et al. 2010: 5). When readers try to understand and interpret the actions and motivations of literary characters, they, largely, rely on knowledge that comes from outside the text. Generally, stories give the account of actions of characters and to truly understand a story, readers have to be able to match characters' desires, intentions and motivations on the one hand with their actions on the other hand. Readers then expect characters to undertake certain actions, based on motivations they have attributed to these characters (Schneider 2001: 608).

This suggests that characters and readers' interpretation of them are highly dependent on readers' contextual knowledge at the time of reading. So, when readers think about or construct a mental image of literary characters, they draw on both textual information and on their own schematic knowledge concerning "human nature; social categories; prototypes and stereotypes; knowledge of

patterns of social interaction; groups and roles" (Eder et al. 2010: 14). This social knowledge is supplemented by what Eder et al. describe as "media-specific knowledge", which pertains to the specificities of the medium through which the message is conveyed. In terms of a literary text, such media-specific knowledge refers to knowledge about literary genre, intertextuality, or "modes of narrative" (Eder et al. 2010: 14). The paratext – which I will return to later on in this chapter – surrounding *A Dirty Job* primes readers to its absurdist theme as well as to its humour. This qualification of the novel as absurd or absurdist can, for example, influence how readers expect its characters to behave, as absurdist texts have a propensity for defying logic, societal norms and even literary conventions (Bennett 2015: 25). Such an assessment, however, would in no small amount depend on a reader's familiarity with absurdist texts such as *A Dirty Job*.

Research in the field of social psychology has illustrated how social contact results in the creation of schemata that provide people with a stable repository of knowledge and experiences aiding them in future interactions (Schneider 2001: 612). Categorising people, as based on previous experiences, facilitates our response to other people's actions. What is interesting is that our interaction with literary characters is not all that different: "readers routinely and unreflectively use characters' behavior to link them to particular categories" (Gerrig 2010: 361).

Patrick Colm Hogan categorises literary characters as either "socially normative" – characters that conform, to a high degree, to certain "social categories and their associated norms" – or as "individualistic" – characters that do not fit neatly into any preconceived category and usually go against reigning social norms (Hogan 2010: 144-145). The distinction Hogan makes, here, reveals an important aspect of readers' interaction with literary characters. Readers have a heightened sensitivity to any kind of behaviour that they perceive to be different from the norm for a member of a specific category, and they judge and evaluate literary characters accordingly (Gerrig 2010: 365). So, when readers construct a mental model of a literary character, they start from their schematic knowledge

in a top-down process that relies on categorisation. This does not mean, however, that these categories and their membership are unchangeable. As we gather more textual information, it might prove harder to satisfyingly match character to category. If such is the case, rather than make use of a top-down process, readers will rely on a bottom-up process where individual pieces of textual information are incorporated in the mental model of the character in a process called "personalization" (Schneider 2001: 617-619).

Schneider distinguishes three different types of categorisation: one based on social categories, one on literary categories and a third one based on text-specific categorisation. Social categories equate to the function a literary character fulfils in the story, such as a doctor or a soldier, or to socio-culturally determined categories of identity, such as a Goth. Social categories are more strongly linked to our real-life knowledge and context. Literary categorisation, says Schneider, occurs when a reader identifies, or partly recognises, in a character "features of a literary stock character", such as the wise mentor in a *Bildungsroman* or the damsel in distress. Readers will then draw on their schematic knowledge and its predetermined character slots. Text-specific categorisation, finally, occurs when a literary character is described, usually by the narrator, as having a trait so central to his or her personality that we expect and predict that character's behaviour to reinforce this personality trait (Schneider 2001: 619-620). The best example in *A Dirty Job* would be Charlie's categorisation as a Beta Male. While "non-expert" readers are most likely to engage in social categorisation, all three strategies can be employed simultaneously. In fact, "categorization effects can be increased if social, literary and text-specific categorization act in combination and accumulate their respective categorization potential" (Schneider 2001: 623). Of course, many more categories than these three can be discerned. One could, for example, differentiate between abstract categories such as characters with agency as opposed to those without it. However, readers' experiences are rarely restricted

to such abstract notions of literary character and readers have the tendency to fill in their mental representations of characters more concretely, provided the text itself allows for such a strategy. Schneider's three distinct categories are well suited to literary analysis as they account for both the reader's input and textual information and how these two interact.

As I have already stated, categorisation is not a static nor an unchangeable process. New information provided about a character can possibly lead to the character no longer fitting a specific category. If so, then the mental model of the corresponding character has to be modified or amended through a process of "*individuation*". Individuation, says Schneider, is a fairly common process, as a character that would never change throughout a story could be considered uninteresting, unless, of course, this solidity of character is a deliberate strategy, for example, to invoke a comic effect (Schneider 2001: 624). However, if the new information provided about a character is in direct contrast to the expectations engendered by category membership, then a process of "*decategorization*" ensues. The increasing incongruity between characterisation and readers' schematic expectations becomes too pronounced, heightening readers' awareness, and ultimately results in readers no longer being able to reconcile literary characters to the categories they had first assigned them to (Schneider 2001: 624). As we will see, the process of decategorization is something that readers of *A Dirty Job* will have to contend with frequently. Finally, categorisation can also be "blocked" by using certain strategies. Literary characters can be introduced into the narrative without any explicit commentary on the part of the narrator, or quite the opposite by providing contrasting descriptions of a character, whether it be by the narrator or other characters that make up the storyworld (Schneider 2001: 625).

4.2 *A Dirty Job* and Its Absurdist Humour

A fairly recent novel, *A Dirty Job* has not received the critical attention that *Catch-22* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide* have, and certainly not in terms of literary scholarship. Yet there is little doubt that Moore's novel shares many of the hallmarks of absurdist literature that earn it a place in the absurdist canon. At the heart of *A Dirty Job* is the existentialist question of how to give purpose to our lives. What is the meaning of it all? The answer the novel gives is both decidedly absurdist and humorous. Charlie Asher, the protagonist, finds purpose in becoming a Death Merchant, a collector of souls. His life's goal becomes one of facilitating the demise of others, in a totally random manner. Charlie only reluctantly comes to grip with this. Having had little or no choice in the matter, he seems to fit the description of the absurdist hero to a t.

Readers are already primed to the novel's inclusion in the absurdist canon prior to their reading of the text. From the outset, the paratext informs readers about both the absurdist and humorous qualities of the novel. The front cover of the paperback edition published by William Morrow[84] cites a review by the *San Francisco Chronicle* describing the novel as coming "close to that perfect mix of absurdist humor and genuine human feeling". The back cover reinforces this framing as it places *A Dirty Job* and its distinctive humour in the tradition of the Marx Brothers and stresses its literary kinship to fellow American author of the absurd Carl Hiaasen.[85] The opening pages also contain an endorsement from *Florida Roadkill* author Tim Dorsey, praising Moore's "designer-brand insanity" as well as his humour (Moore 2006).[86] The literary reviews, then, certainly cast *A Dirty Job* within the literary genre of the absurdist novel while at the same time almost universally applaud its zany plot and absurd humour.

[84] This is also the edition used throughout my dissertation.
[85] Whose novel *Sick Puppy* is analysed in detail in the sixth chapter.
[86] Chapter six explores the relationship between absurdist humour and plot in *Florida Roadkill*.

Readers too have made the association with other novels and authors of the absurd, some of which are also included in the corpus. On literary website *Goodreads*, one reader suggests that people who enjoy "absurd humor in the vein of Douglas Adams" will surely find *A Dirty Job* to be to their liking as well (Jessica 2018). Another, once again, draws parallels between Moore's novel and Hiaasen's work (Nancy 2015). The appreciation for Moore's particular brand of humour in combination with the absurd is a recurring theme in readers' responses. For Alistair, *A Dirty Job* represents the "best absurd fiction", making it a really fun read (2011). An experience shared by Allison who felt the book "was hilarious, odd, absurd and highly entertaining" (2010). For most readers it would also appear that this enjoyment is directly linked to the literary absurd. Alex, for one, indicates that it was specifically the absurd situations detailed in the novel that made it a worthwhile read (2017) and Darla (2013) explains that "the more absurd" the text got "the more [she] laughed".

It is interesting to try and reconstruct what readers mean exactly when using the terms absurd or absurdist humour. I will also do this for the readers' responses to *Florida Roadkill* and *Sick Puppy* in the fifth and sixth chapter respectively. By illustrating how the absurdist humour characterising these novels resonates with readers, the analyses aim to extend beyond the confines of my personal reading experience. When explaining why she thinks *A Dirty Job* is such a funny novel, Laura indicates that it is "joyously absurd without tailspinning off into the realm of TOO absurd (i.e., not quite as many WTF? moments)" (2009, emphasis in the original). A similar experience is reported by Monica who feels that "[e]verything is absurd and nothing is absurd", making the text "funny" and "hilarious" (2014). What both readers express here is a quality that in my dissertation I have defined as integral to the experience of absurdist humour, namely that it must situate itself on the borderline between low probability and high implausibility. In other words, absurdist humour cannot succeed if it is too far removed from the realm of possibility. It must hover at the fringes of our

experiential frame of reference and consequently draw on the schemata that help us navigate reality and that facilitate the reading process. This is succinctly captured in TrudyKJP's evaluation of *A Dirty Job*, specifically when she states that "[e]verything turns absurd and crazy and yet it seems just like real life" (2015). Much of the absurdist humour in the novel owes its success to the literary characters, their actions, their motivations, and how they respond to the absurdity characterising the fictional worlds. Some readers, for instance, suggest that the success of the absurdist humour is directly linked to the characterisation of protagonist Charlie Asher but also to the host of supporting characters (Jalice 2013; Angie 2007; Allison 2010).

The importance of characterisation and characters for the successful realisation of absurdist humour, then, certainly merits closer attention. While the focus of this chapter will be on the relationship between characterisation and absurdist humour, I would like to point out that analysis will, by necessity, also touch on the other narrative concepts under scrutiny here, namely plot and setting. After all, the narrative plot of a novel constitutes a sequence of actions performed by the characters in a specific fictional setting. Additionally, the plot is integral to setting up the absurd premise of absurdist novels such as *A Dirty Job*. This premise informs how characters behave and react to the events described by the text and is in turn realised by these character responses. Plot, setting and character all join together in the creation of absurdist humour. Throughout this chapter I will occasionally highlight examples where this cross-over is most poignant. Similarly, the subsequent two chapters will also refer back to the importance and impact of characterisation on absurdist humour.

4.3 Blending Absurdist Humour and Characterisation

We have seen that readers pick up on and respond to the absurdist humour of *A Dirty Job*, certainly with respect to the characters' crazy antics and their often-exaggerated personalities. That these characters are experienced as such can be explained in terms of the characterisation categories introduced earlier. The novel primes readers to assign specific categories to characters by highlighting important and default slots of the relevant schematic networks, only to then complicate category membership by undermining other default slots. This is a recurring strategy in *A Dirty Job*. To illustrate how this technique creates absurdist humour, I will focus on the character of Ray, even though the technique extends to the characterisation of the other characters of the novel. Ray is one of the employees working for Charlie in the thrift shop. He is a retired police officer and a "thirty-nine-year-old bachelor with an unhealthy lack of boundaries between the Internet and reality" (Moore 2006: 23). While working as a cop, Ray took a bullet to the neck and as a consequence he can no longer turn his neck. He rents an apartment in Charlie's building, and in exchange for paying rent, helps out Charlie in the shop. In terms of schematic associations, Ray is a highly complex character, as indeed are most of the cast of *A Dirty Job*. He is a man, single, socially awkward, suffers a physical disability, etc. Each of these categories or labels carries with it its own set of expectations that the text can play with. Ray was left physically disabled after being wounded in a gang shout-out, meaning that for the last six years he has been unable to look "over his shoulder without using a mirror" (Moore 2006: 39). Combining the frames of physical disability and that of a police officer bestows on Ray a heroic status of a police officer injured in the line of duty and while protecting the community. This status is somewhat diminished when we learn that Ray works for Charlie so he does not need to pay rent. It is a transaction kept off the books, so that Ray does not have to pay taxes and so that he does not compromise his generous

disability pension which he receives from the city. His injury has also made Ray somewhat self-conscious, which in turn has impacted on his social life and his relationships, making it harder for Ray to meet potential partners, in real-life at least. It is clear that a multitude of frames are operational concurrently in the minds of readers when interpreting literary characters. The text, however, can prime readers to give (temporary) precedence to one specific frame or category over another. By giving ample information on Ray's past occupation, the text activates a specific frame in the minds of the readers, namely that of a cop. Despite being retired, the text actively reinforces Ray's membership of that particular social category:

> Ray reacted to the world as a cop, and while many women found that attractive initially, they expected him eventually to leave the attitude, along with his service weapon, in the coat closet when he arrived home. He didn't. When Ray had first come to work at Asher's Secondhand, it had taken two months for Charlie to get him to stop ordering customers to "move along, there's nothing to see here." (Moore 2006: 40-41)

Unfortunately for Ray, he is not the sharpest tool in the shed, although one might attribute that to an extreme gullibility rather than to outright stupidity. Having been married and divorced three times, Ray scours the internet for the perfect woman, preferably one from the Philippines. Browsing through websites such as the ominously named DesperateFilipina.com, he seems oblivious to the fact that most of the profiles he finds are obviously fake and designed to swindle naive men out of their money. A particularly funny episode is Ray's interaction with his new "squeeze" Eduardo. When Ray proudly shows her picture to Charlie, the latter is somewhat baffled: "'Dude, her name is *Eduardo*.' 'I know. It's a Filipino thing, like Edwina.' 'She has a five-o'clock shadow.' 'You're just being racist. Some races have more facial hair than others. I don't care about that, I just want

someone who is honest and caring and attractive.' 'She has an Adam's apple'" (Moore 2006: 176).[87] The absurd humour derived from such passages is integral to the characterisation of Ray. It is unlikely from the reader's perspective that someone could be that obtuse, yet at the same time it is not beyond the realm of possibility. The passage also illustrates the mutual dependency between absurdist humour and characterisation. The humour adds to the characterisation of Ray, but at the same time also derives from the mental representation of Ray readers have already formed. This strategy is in full effect when Ray suspects Charlie of being a serial killer. Under the pretence of getting Charlie a date, Ray takes him to the gym where they ogle beautiful women. Ray, however, has ulterior motives: "Ray was an ex-cop, watched people more closely than really was healthy, had too much time on his hands and didn't get out much himself" (Moore 2006: 169). By explicitly referring to Ray's past occupation, the text deliberately activates a precondition header as well as an internal conceptualization header in the mind of the reader.

Ray's suspicions evoke a script that describes or at least allows readers to form expectations of how the interaction between cop and suspected perpetrator might unfold. Within that script the roles of the participants initially appear to be clearly assigned. Ray still casts himself as a cop and as the good guy, wanting to uphold the law by, ironically, taking the law into his own hands. Charlie, in the meantime, is made out to be the perpetrator. Ray, however, handles his interrogation so clumsily that it sheds doubt on both his hypothesis and his competence. Charlie, too, is confused about Ray's motives, so much so that he now thinks that Ray might be stalking one of the women in the gym. Both Ray and Charlie now simultaneously fulfil the role of hero and miscreant within the same script. This absurd incongruity and the resulting absurdist humour are

[87] Ray ultimately gets fed up with false profiles on the DesperateFilipina website, so he starts looking for "lonely first-grade teachers with master's degrees in nuclear physics on *UkranianGirlsLovingYou.com*" (Moore 2006: 286, emphasis in the original).

reinforced by the fact that neither character actually voices their suspicions. They are internalised and remain so until the end of the scene where the schematic association is taken to its extreme as both characters' inner consciousnesses merge: "'No, the fuck puppets are fun to look at, but there's some normal women who come here, too.' *Who won't talk to me either,* Ray thought. 'Who won't talk to you either,' Charlie said. *Because they can tell that you are a psychokiller.* 'We'll see in the juice bar after our workout,' Ray said. *Where I'll sit at an angle so I can watch you pick your victim. You sick fuck,* they thought" (Moore 2006: 172, emphasis in the original).

Of course, some of the humour is caused by the dramatic irony as the reader is aware of Charlie's dealings as a Death Merchant, of which Ray has no a clue. This does not, however, detract from the absurdity inherent to Ray's characterisation. Ray followed Charlie on his way to retrieve a soul vessel but loses sight of him. When he returns to the shop, he tells Lily he thinks Charlie is a "serial killer with ninja powers" (Moore 2006: 184). When asked by Lily if he is not imagining things and misinterpreting the situations, Ray again states he "was a cop, I notice these things" (Moore 2006: 185). He calls the cops on Charlie, but later realises his mistake and apologises to his boss, once more explaining that his overly suspicious nature is the product of his years on the force. When introducing Ray or describing his actions, the text presents the reader with specific preconditions and instrumental headers that activate the social category of a police officer and all the expectations that this brings with it. In the example above his experience as a cop provides the justification for the investigation plan, which can be broken down into several interconnected scripts. First there is the interrogation script in which Ray tries to surreptitiously question Charlie. In the follow-up of this episode his previous profession also serves as an instrumental header as it calls for the script of the chase to be activated, also part of the investigation plan. Ray suspects Charlie is stalking his latest victim, so in turn decides to follow his boss around. But whereas in the frame of a seasoned

police officer, such activities would be expected to be carried out with a certain amount of skill, Ray is revealed as not being up to the task. Ray's characterisation is further, and ironically, complicated by the text. When Charlie is shot by one of Audrey's flesh puppets, Ray hypothesises that the assailant would have to have been monkey-sized. Unfortunately for Ray, his very astute reading of the crime scene is laughed away by Charlie.

The incongruity between Ray's actions and the expectations associated with his assigned social category are made all the more poignant by the intratextual schemata that readers construct, and which reveals Ray to be an absolutely terrible judge of character. The discrepancy also points out how Ray is a character of extremes, which gives rise to absurdist humour. Ray is presented with situations that border on that threshold between the improbable and the implausible so characteristic of absurdist humour and his extreme reactions to these situations only add to the humour. A good example is Ray's parking policy, which also reveals how narrative setting and characterisation are intertwined in the creation of absurdist humour. When Ray decides to follow Charlie, he hails a cab in order to continue his pursuit. Even though Ray owns a car, he cannot use it:

> Ray had a car, a nice little Toyota, but the only parking place he could find was eight blocks away from his apartment in the parking lot of a hotel managed by a friend of his, and when you got a parking place in San Francisco, you kept it, so Ray mostly used public transportation and only drove the car on his days off to keep the battery charged. (Moore 2006: 180)

In this example, the setting of San Francisco activates the frame of a heavily urbanised area. Having difficulty finding a parking spot in such densely populated environment is something most readers can relate to. Ray's goal, then, of securing

for himself a parking place in San Francisco appears sensible. His plan to achieve said goal, however, is not. In an argument that follows logic to its absurd conclusion, Ray feels it is better to not use his car lest he should lose the parking space he now has, even though having your car stationed so far from your actual residence is not all that practical to begin with. But owning a car and never using it, is counterproductive as it undermines the default value of a key slot of the frame car by divesting it of its utility. Moreover, Ray's reasoning is proven to be flawed as he does take the car out on essentially useless trips just to keep the battery charged. Such an insouciant use of his car is at odds with his being in a fret over his parking space. If he can park his car there after these trips, then surely he could also have done so after his pursuit of Charlie. Certainly considering the manager of the parking lot is a friend of his.

The setting here brings with it a problem inherent to most every metropolis. It is a problem that through schematic association extends well beyond the confines of the fictional world crossing over into readers experiential frame of reference. What is different however, is the manner in which the fictional character responds to and tries to solve that problem. The justification for Ray's extreme plan relies entirely on a reductio ad absurdum which is incongruent from the perspective of the reader, but nevertheless congruent with the characterisation of Ray. This means that readers experience schema reinforcement relating to specific slots while simultaneously experiencing schema disruption for other slots. The schematic association of the fictional setting with readers' referential frame ensures that, while the discrepancy is noticeable, readers' 'real' schema is not restructured. This strategy lies at the core of the successful realisation of absurdist humour as it anchors the reading experience and the readers' interpretation on that divide between low probability and high implausibility so characteristic of absurdist humour.

Another example of that strategy is when Charlie decides to visit an Asian massage parlour. In and of itself an innocent enough activity. Charlie, however,

has been prompted by his sister Jane and her girlfriend Cassie to go out and seek sexual companionship. And so Charlie "said good-bye to the daughter he adored and went out to find a total stranger with whom to be intimate" (Moore 2006: 195). This precondition header interacts with the locale header of the massage parlour to activate a specific script in the mind of the reader. In popular culture, such massage parlours are often associated with the sex worker industry. The massage in such a script is just a front and clients really visit the parlour to receive sexual favours from the masseuses. That such a transaction is fairly common-place is confirmed by Charlie who explicitly mentions that he just wants a massage and nothing more. Such a request however is not part of the standard script, or so it seems. Charlie is asked to sign a document that stipulates that:

> tipping was encouraged, but did not imply any services beyond a massage, and that if he thought he was getting anything but a massage he was going to be one disappointed White Devil. She made him initial each of the six languages it was printed in, then she winked, a long slow wink, exaggerated by very long false eyelashes, and performed the internationally accepted blow-job mime, with round mouth and rhythmic tongue pushing out the cheek. "Lotus Flower make you bery relax." (Moore 2006: 196)

The text continues to pile on the cultural stereotypes and clichés reinforcing the sex service script. Lotus Flower speaks little to no English and continues to ask Charlie if he wants a happy ending, obviously in clear breach of the earlier signed multi-lingual contract. Instead of sexual relief, Charlie pays and generously tips the masseuse to listen as he unburdens himself of "all the worries, all the fears, all the regrets" that he cannot communicate to anyone else (Moore 2006: 197). Rather than fulfilling the role of prostitute, as the original script demanded, the masseuse takes on the role of a psychiatrist with Charlie maintaining his role as

client. Ironically, Charlie's need for sexual relief is met by the most unlikely of sources. As he leaves the parlour, Charlie is lured into a dark alley by an enticing voice:

> "Sometimes," she said, hissing the last s, "a rough fuck down a dark alley is the best medicine for a weary warrior." Charlie looked around: the party a block ahead, the guy reading his newspaper under the streetlamp two blocks back. No one down the alley waiting to ambush him. "How much?" he asked. He couldn't even remember what sex felt like, but all he could think about right now was release—a rough fuck down a dark alley with this…this goddess. He couldn't see her face, just the line of a cheekbone, but that was exquisite. "The pleasure of your company," she said. (Moore 2006: 199)

Once again, the script of sexual business transaction is activated by the locale header. In popular culture, a seedy and dark back ally is often the place for such an illicit encounter. Unbeknownst to Charlie, however, he is not receiving sexual gratification from your run of the mill prostitute as the scripts might lead the reader to believe. His sudden seductress turns out to be Babd, one of the Morrigan, demonic entities out to steal human souls so that they can reclaim their place on earth as avatars of Death. Momentarily, then, this script requires Babd's role as one of the main antagonists of the story to be inverted. She quickly reverts back to her original role, however, as she attempts to behead Charlie. Yet this episode activates a duality in Babd's personality allowing her to occupy two opposing roles simultaneously throughout the story. This also means that readers are never entirely sure which Babd he or she will be presented with. This ambiguity contributes significantly to the absurdist humour. Babd is unsuccessful in killing Charlie, as he is saved in the nick of time by inspector Rivera who drives off the Morrigan by shooting her. As Rivera approaches Charlie, he tells him to

cover himself up: “Charlie looked down and saw that the front of his jeans had been shredded as if by razors. ‘Thanks,’ Charlie said. ‘You know,’ Rivera said, ‘this could have all been avoided if you’d just taken the happy ending like everybody else’” (Moore 2006: 201).

To analyse how the absurdist humour reaches its full potential, it is best to consider these back-to-back scenes in the novel as one episode. Both scenes are linked together through a host of schematic associations. One such association is made through the social category as the text simultaneously suggests that both the masseuse and Babd are health worker as well as sex worker. From the start of the scene, it is strongly implied that the masseuse’s primary job is to provide sexual favours for the patrons of the massage parlour. Midway through the scene, however, the lines between distinct categories becomes blurred as she now also fulfils the role of a psychiatrist listening to Charlie’s troubles and woes. The text creates additional schematic overlays between the two frames and scenarios. Charlie has to lie down, albeit on a massage table rather than on the stereotypical couch. He is disrobed for his massage, in the literal sense, but ultimately also in the metaphorical sense as he bears his soul to Lotus. Despite the similarities, there are also pronounced incongruities. Lotus Flower has the role of psychiatrist thrust upon her by Charlie. While most of her clients wish for a happy ending, she does not really care one way or the other, as long as she gets paid. Moreover, she does not really speak English and does not really understand what Charlie is telling her. The only comfort she can offer him is that he will end up feeling “bery relax”. The precondition header for the sexual transaction script seems to have missed its mark. But as soon as Charlie leaves the massage parlour, the locale header of the dark alley in combination with Babd’s voice being described as soft and sexy reinitiates this script. The internal conceptualization header assigns the specific roles to Charlie and Babd: he is the client looking for a sexual thrill and the demoness assumes the role of willing prostitute. But Babd takes on a double role in this scenario. As one of the main antagonists in the novel, it is incongruous and

absurd that she should be the one to offer Charlie the sexual release he apparently craves. Even within the context of her role as prostitute, Babd's behaviour is atypical as she does not desire any payment for her services.

4.4 Babd: Avatar of Deathly Pleasures

Babd, then, vacillates between different roles in this passage, and indeed throughout the novel in its entirety. For the reader, this inconstancy results from the incongruity between Schneider's three categories. Her behaviour is incongruent with that of a prostitute (social category), with that of an antagonist (literary category) and with that of a demonic avatar of death (text-specific category). Adding to the absurd humour is how both Charlie and Rivera react to the situation. Rivera's timely intervention is not only pertinent to the plot, but also to the realisation of absurdist humour, albeit more indirectly. Rivera, hitherto, had been characterised relatively straightforward as the very capable, no-nonsense cop who immediately noticed something off about Charlie. Now faced with something he does not quite understand, Rivera nevertheless does not hesitate to act and to save Charlie. Much like Babd, Rivera's subsequent characterisation maintains this duality: on the one hand he is a skilled and pragmatic detective, and on the other hand he is now involved in a fight against supernatural forces which he thought impossible to exist and which he does not understand. Rivera assumes the mantle of absurd hero, to some extent, as he refuses to give up and continues to fight against forces that are beyond his comprehension. As a character, Rivera becomes almost a metaphor for the tension between the plausible and the implausible that is indicative of absurdist humour. Even considering the intra-literary schema readers construct on the basis of the plot and its absurd premise, the characters' response to the events are sufficiently incongruent with readers' expectations to merit closer attention. Despite having just shot someone, what he initially assumes was a woman, eleven

times and then watch her or it fly away, Inspector Rivera maintains the equanimity to crack a joke at Charlie's expense. Charlie, too, seems to take his brush with a rather embarrassing death in good stride.

This example also illustrates why it pays to opt for a broader approach to literary humour that considers the text as a whole. The precondition header (Charlie's search for sexual relief) at the start of the example activates a script that does not play out as readers expect, but ultimately, and five pages later, the end goal is achieved albeit in an absurd manner. Where the initial plan was to lift Charlie's spirits and reinvigorate him, the natural conclusion of the script nearly costs him his life, which most anyone would agree is detrimental to one's general state of well-being. The literary strategy of schematic association plays a significant part in communicating the absurdist humour to the reader. Frames specific to the fictional world are combined with those relevant to readers' experiential world and consequently undermine the boundary between the two. Babd, who is based on the eponymous war goddess from Irish mythology, is one of the major characters opposing Charlie's plans. As a creature from hell, Babd firmly belongs in the realm of the supernatural, yet her characterisation erodes that distinction as she is imbued with thoroughly human characteristics, as are her sisters for that matter.

Her supernatural provenance is contrasted with her thoroughly earthly behaviour. She has a preference for silly expletives, calling Charlie a "fuckface" (Moore 2006: 200), she likes to crack jokes, and is concerned with utterly mundane matters (such as keeping the sewers where they live clean). Though still a fictitious creation, she is nevertheless humanised. The incongruity in Babd's characterisation, then, is predominantly situated on the level of the text-specific schemata. She is a demoness but with distinctly human characteristics to the point where they undermine those associated with preternatural hell-spawn. This incongruity is mirrored at the level of the literary schema as Babd is far from your standard antagonist. She shows feelings of lust and affection towards Charlie, and

even displays signs of an altruistic nature, even if rather absurd, as she believes handing out hand jobs to dying warriors is "the least I could do" (Moore 2006: 203). Her position as antagonist of the novel is eroded as her behaviour does not correspond with the default slots of the standardised literary schema of the villain. This incongruity combined with the irreverence with which Babd and the Morrigan in general tend to respond to the narrative developments contributes significantly to the absurdist humour characteristic of *A Dirty Job*.

At this point, one might ask if the analysis here does not place too much emphasis on the mimetic interpretation of these characters to the detriment of synthetic and thematic components, to use James Phelan's terminology (1989). Of course, readers are generally aware of the artificiality of literary characters. But as we have seen in the second chapter, readers rely on much the same cognitive processes when engaging with literary characters as they would with real people. This approach, then, is largely informed by the text itself. Schemata allow readers to fill in information that is not explicitly mentioned in the text. *A Dirty Job* heavily relies on that tendency by consistently introducing ethnic, racial, social and cultural stereotypes, which it subsequently may or may not undermine itself. And by repeatedly exposing the reader to these stereotypes, he or she cannot help but to reach back to the default slots assigned to the relevant stereotype in a network of schemata when comparing how they stack up to the characterisation.

4.5 Yo Momma So Dead That …: Absurdist Humour and Stereotypes

As mentioned, *A Dirty Job* abounds in the use of all manner of stereotype. This begs the question how the text balances overly reductive stock representations of characters and a more nuanced portrayal through the use of direct and indirect characterisation. If the characters amount to nothing more than literary representation of socio-culturally defined stereotypes, then the characters will

quickly become boring and readers will lose interest. However, by incorporating stereotypical representations into the characterisation, *A Dirty Job* also creates opportunities for absurdist humour to materialise. Through cultural and social stereotypes, readers have a vast repository of schematic knowledge at their disposal to fill in any blanks. A reliance the text can capitalise on by substituting or inverting default slots of the stereotype, forcing readers to confront these very same stereotypes. Charlie's sister Jane, for example, a lesbian who only dresses like a man and even steals Charlie's expensive suits.

There's also Lily, a Goth girl who would "go out in the alley to smoke clove cigarettes and stare into the Abyss. (Although Charlie noted that the Abyss looked an awful lot like a Dumpster)" (Moore 2006: 16). The Goth stereotype is reinforced by Lily's morbid fascination with death – she is even described as "some creepiness child prodigy" (Moore 2006: 24). The dour and dejected demeanour often attributed to the Goth stereotype is also on display as is their contempt for the problems of other mortals (Moore 2006: 113, 183). When Lily finds out that Charlie (rather than she herself) is a Death Merchant, she bemoans her lot in life, "having gone from dark demigod to local loser in an instant", to someone who has no options left but to go to junior college (Moore 2006: 78). There are Jewish stereotypes personified by Charlie's in-laws, or by six-year-old Sophie accusing Cassie, Jane's girlfriend, of being anti-Semite because she will not let Alvin and Mohammed join her in the bath. There are Charlie's neighbours Mrs. Ling and Mrs. Korjev. The first one is not shy about voicing her thoughts on the White Devil, despite caring lovingly for Sophie, and tries to cook every creature she comes across. Even one of the squirrel people as apparently "duck in pants" is an ancient Chinese recipe (Moore 2006: 267). For Mrs. Korjev, a stereotypical Russian matriarch, every problem or situation can be qualified, faced or solved by being or acting like a bear.[88] And many more. It is interesting

[88] Which Charlie makes fun of on pp. 157-158.

to note that these stereotypes are often introduced through means of direct characterisation and counteracted through means of indirect characterisation. Initially, Jane is seemingly characterised solely in terms of her sexual preference. But readers soon learn that she is a strong, capable woman, that she has a deep love for her brother and baby Sophie and that she is highly supportive and protective of the ones she loves. In no way am I suggesting that these character traits and being a lesbian are mutually exclusive, only that they are used to counterbalance the one-dimensionality inherent to all manner of stereotypes. It is also at this nexus of direct and indirect characterisation that much humour is generated, absurdist and otherwise.

One interesting case is the characterisation of Charlie's fellow Death Merchant Minty Fresh. Minty is an "extraordinarily tall black man dressed completely in mint green" who owns a music store (Moore 2006: 74). When Charlie visits Minty's shop, he recognises Minty as the man who came to collect his wife's soul vessel and loses it. Minty overpowers Charlie and ties him to a chair as he tries to explain to Charlie what it means exactly to be a Death Merchant:

> Mint Green Death sighed heavily. "I guess we're going to be here awhile. I'm going to make some coffee. Do you want some?" "Sure, try to lull me into a false sense of security, then spring?" "You're tied the fuck up, motherfucker, I don't need to lull you into shit. You've been fucking with the fabric of human existence and someone needed to shut your ass down." "Oh, sure, go *black* on me. Play the ethnic card." Mint Green climbed to his feet and headed toward the door to the shop. "You want cream?" "And two sugars, please," Charlie said. (Moore 2006: 77, emphasis in the original)

After being told by Minty how things stand in colourful language, in a seeming literary imitation of Samuel L. Jackson, Charlie suggests a direct link between Minty's racial and cultural background and his speech. The racial stereotyping of Minty Fresh is reaffirmed throughout the novel. When Minty saves Charlie by running over one of the Morrigan with his car, Minty's primary concern seems to be that they have damaged his car, a Cadillac Eldorado. Unacceptable as far as Minty is concerned: "'I will tolerate the rising of darkness to cover the world, but you *do not* fuck with my ride'" (Moore 2006: 317, emphasis in the original). Charlie seemingly intuitively links Minty's love of his car, and the car itself, to Minty being a pimp, certainly in combination with Minty's apparel, which Audrey comments on too (Moore 2006: 326). To Charlie, the stereotype is so prevalent that he tries to mimic the corresponding speech pattern when discussing their most recent encounter with the Morrigan: "'I mean, they got the badonkadonk out back and some fine bajoopbadangs up front, know what I'm sayin', dog? Buss a rock wid a playa?" He offered his fist for Minty to buss him a rock, but alas, the mint one left him hangin'" (Moore 2006: 318). Minty, of course, is unimpressed with Charlie's efforts: "'Your Negro-osity is uncanny. I had to keep checking to make sure you're still white'" (Moore 2006: 319).[89] Charlie's racial stereotyping does not limit itself to Minty, something which, again, Minty cannot really appreciate: "'Maybe it's Oakland,' Charlie said. 'What's Oakland?' 'The Underworld.' Oakland is not the Underworld!' Mr. Fresh leapt to his feet; he was not a violent man, you really didn't have to be when you were his size, but—" (Moore 2006: 83).[90]

It is obvious that Minty Fresh is none too pleased with being stereotyped. It is equally evident that the text itself deliberately seeks to activate these

[89] Charlie gives it another go when recounting his encounter with Babd in the alley: "'Yeah, she got all up in my grille and shit—had to cut da ho loose'" (Moore 2006: 320). After that Minty asks him to stop doing that.
[90] Oakland is a large city in the San Francisco Bay Area with large African American and Latino communities and that during the early 2000s had one of the highest crime rates among major US cities. A lot of the criminal activities were linked to gang violence.

stereotypes in the minds of its readers by having characters repeatedly refer to them. Sometimes it appears they do so with the express goal of illustrating exactly how absurd those stereotypes can be and to show they can even be hurtful. *A Dirty Job* routinely uses absurdist humour to bring across those points. I have already mentioned Mrs. Korjev's inappropriate use of the phrase "like bear" to qualify all manner of situation as when she saw Sophie running down the hall "naked and soapy like bear". The text establishes this as a sort of running gag at the expense of the Russian matriarch and the referential schema merges with the intratextual schema which is pursued into the extreme as to render it absurd. Occasionally, however, the text will introduce an incongruity between the cultural stereotype and intratextual schemata.

When Alvin and Mohammed, Sophie's guardian hell dogs, first materialise, Charlie asks Mrs. Korjev to babysit Sophie. Prior to this interaction between Mrs. Korjev and Charlie, the text activates a particular stereotype by introducing her as "the great Cossack grandmother […] swearing in Russian" (Moore 2006: 157). As she sees the massive hounds, she is taken aback: "'Is giant dog in there.' 'Yes, there are.' 'But not like normal giant dog. They are like extra-giant, black animal, they are—' 'Like bear?' Charlies suggested. 'No, I wasn't going to say "bear," Mr. Smart-Alec. Not like bear. Like volf, only bigger, stronger—' 'Like bear?' Charlie ventured. 'You make your mother ashamed when you are mean, Charlie Asher.' 'Not like bear?' Charlie asked" (Moore 2006: 157). The stereotype is also reinforced stylistically through the incorrect grammar and pronunciation of Mrs. Korjev's utterances (verb-subject incongruence, omission of articles, volf rather than wolf, etc.), but also by her appeal to the authority of the mother figure to chastise Charlie. Ironically, this is probably the only time in the novel where her catchphrase "like bear" would be fitting, as Alvin and Mohammed actually resemble a black bear in shape and size, as does their voracious appetite. By pushing the stereotype into the territory of absurd hyperbole, the incongruity between the two schemata highlights that Mrs.

Korjev is hurt by Charlie's mocking just as it highlights her devotion to baby Sophie and her well-being.

The same is true for Minty Fresh. He too is presented as a character of extremes, in terms of his physical appearance (being over seven-foot-tall), his eccentric dress sense, the huge Desert Eagle guns he carries, etc. The text works hard to create the image of a cool cat and draws heavily on the cultural and racial stereotypes to maintain that image. However, when Minty and Charlie storm into Audrey's Buddhist centre, they are subdued and tied to a chair, in a scene very reminiscent of the time when Charlie was captured by Minty. As Audrey makes coffee for her hostages, Charlie thinks she's the "'nicest captor I've ever had'" (Moore 2006: 327). Prompting the question from an indignant Minty what he means by that. "'Nothing,' Charlie said. 'You were a great captor, too, don't get me wrong'" (Moore 2006: 327-328). It is absurd that Minty's feelings are hurt simply because he is no longer the best captor Charlie has ever had. It is also incongruent with the portrayal of Minty up until that point. Again, it highlights that there is more to the character than the stereotypes would suggest. The stereotypes are activated in readers through explicit mentions in the text. By relying so heavily on stereotypes for its characterisation, *A Dirty Job* initially seems to reinforce readers' schemata as they are largely paralleled by the intratextual schemata. At some point, however, the text introduces an incongruity between these two, resulting in a schema disruption for the reader. This disruption is often the direct consequence of the absurdist humour stemming from the incongruous experience of pushing the stereotypical features to the extreme. It forces readers to step back and consider exactly what these stereotypes entail and how restrictive they can be. As a consequence, readers may re-evaluate their existing schemata and modify or discard them altogether. *A Dirty Job*, however, does not only rely on stereotypes to communicate its message to its readers. It is not above creating its very own stereotype.

4.6 From Beta Male to Absurd Hero

We have seen how *A Dirty Job* uses stereotypes to generate absurdist humour, but also to get across a message that it is unproductive to reduce characters, or people for that matter, to one exaggerated feature. Next to hyperbole, the novel also subverts or inverts default slots to evoke absurdist humour. Babd's wavering between foe and friend has also been mentioned, but there is also the example of little Sophie. Of primary importance in Charlie's mind, and that of his friends and family, has been his daughter's protection. As a baby and a toddler later on, Sophie certainly appears to be unable to fend for herself. At the end of the novel we find out how wrong we were. Sophie turns out to be the Luminatus: rather than needing protection she ends up saving everyone, switching roles from helpless victim to omnipotent saviour. And all that at the tender age of six years old. Sophie's characterisation already hints at how stereotypes and role-reversal work in concert to generate absurdist humour. But to really see how social categories, stereotypes and role reversals combine to generate absurdist humour and contribute to communicate the literary absurd, we need to take a closer look at the narrative path laid out for the novel's protagonist.

From the very first page, *A Dirty Job* does its best to cast Charlie in a very specific social category:

> Charlie Asher walked the earth like an ant walks on the surface of water, as if the slightest misstep might send him plummeting through the surface to be sucked to the depths below. Blessed with the Beta Male imagination, he spent much of his life squinting into the future so he might spot ways in which the world was conspiring to kill him—him; his wife, Rachel; and now, newborn Sophie. But despite his attention, his paranoia, his ceaseless fretting from the moment Rachel peed a blue stripe on the

> pregnancy stick to the time they wheeled her into recovery at St. Francis Memorial, Death slipped in. (Moore 2006: 3)

What might be perceived as a flaw or a form of weakness actually works to Charlie's advantage. His social standing, or perceived social standing, allows him to avoid unwanted attention. It also means that he is easily dismissed. When Charlie first starts seeing the soul vessel light up, he calls out to a man carrying an umbrella because it is glowing red. This causes the man to turn around at which point he literally gets flattened by a bus. Feeling guilty, Charlie confesses to Lily that he killed a man: "'I—think—I—just—killed—a—guy,' he gasped. 'Excellent,' Lily said, ignoring equally his message and his demeanor. 'We're going to need change for the register'" (Moore 2006: 23). *A Dirty Job* wastes no time in creating a very specific schema pertaining to Charlie's status as a Beta Male.

> Beta Males according to the text have survived not by meeting and overcoming adversity, but by anticipating and avoiding it. That is, when the Alpha Males were out charging after mastodons, the Beta Males could imagine in advance that attacking what was essentially an angry, woolly bulldozer with a pointy stick might be a losing proposition, so they hung back at camp to console the grieving widows. (Moore 2006: 31)

The main problem Beta Males are faced with is their overactive imagination which has been rendered somewhat obsolete by modern day society which means that a lot of them turn into "hypochondriacs, neurotics, paranoids, or develop an addiction to porn or video games" (Moore 2006: 32). Their social standing also means that they have no direct access to the very status symbols that grant one entry into a higher social class, such as money or power. They have only recourse to their imagination. The schema of the Beta Male, then collects a host of

stereotypes with socially undesirable or unpropitious features such as that of the best friend who will never get the girl (Moore 2006: 36), the nerd's awkward sexual endeavours (Moore 2006: 7), gay men and their fashion sense (Moore 2006: 88), the awkward teen with an excessive interest in pyrotechnics (Moore 2006: 116), being physically unassuming (Moore 2006: 159), the passive aggressiveness of the unassertive man (Moore 2006: 162), the Beta Male being incapable of heroic acts, as it is not in their DNA (Moore 2006: 309), never finding success in love (Moore 2006: 310), and so on.

Charlie, however, turns the most important characteristic feature of the Beta Male, namely his unbridled imagination, into an asset. He seems to take everything in stride. Which is somewhat surprising, as one does not exactly discover he is a servant of Death, or possibly even Death himself, every day. His Beta Male imagination also allows him to cope with the sudden appearance of two enormous hellhounds bent on protecting his daughter. Or with the squirrel people, meat puppets animated by the souls of the recently deceased who go around stealing soul vessels. Even within the context of the plot, the equanimity with which Charlie handles these events is absurd, all the more so as the text attributes this remarkable gift to the Beta Male genetic code. At the same time, however, we also see Charlie deviating from stereotypical Beta Male behaviour.

When addressed by the Morrigan, hiding in the sewers, Charlie is not really fazed. Not even when the sisters threaten to "crunch [Charlie's] bones in [their] jaws like candy" (Moore 2006: 113). Uncharacteristically for a Beta Male, Charlie holds his nerve and fires off one facetious remark after the other before throwing a couple of large fireworks down the sewer. Even though Charlie's penchant for fireworks is not out of character for the Beta Male, he displays quite some bravery and indeed audacity in dealing with the Morrigan. Both traits that are not immediately associated with the Beta Male schema the text has hitherto created. Charlie's journey to self-determination occurs incrementally, through small acts of rebellion that start off in line with what readers can expect from a

Beta Male but that are soon diametrically opposed to this text-specific schema. Whereas the Book of Death mandates that Death Merchants use a number two pencil, Charlie "'got a number three pencil.' 'You rogue! Asher, hello, Forces of Darkness—' 'If the world without this Luminatus is so precariously balanced that my buying a pencil with one-grade-harder lead is going to cast us all into the abyss, then maybe it's time'" (Moore 2006: 111). Soon, though, his refusal to tow the party line has more serious consequences. He repeatedly contacts Minty Fresh, even though the Book forbids contacting fellow Death Merchants. He again breaks that rule by staying in contact with a Death Merchant from Phoenix. And he neglects to collect the soul vessels assigned to him in a timely manner. All of which cause the Morrigan to grow in power and become increasingly more dangerous.

Charlie, then, undergoes a significant character evolution, making him more of an absurd hero than a Beta Male as the text insists he is. When he tries to get rid of Alvin and Mohammed, circumstances force him to leave his Beta Male passiveness behind. Unlike the previous pets Charlie gave Sophie, the two dogs have no intention of kicking the bucket. So Charlies tries to gas them by having them breathe exhaust fumes and he even feeds them bug spray. Charlie only relents because Sophie becomes increasingly attached to the hounds and so he no longer throws "Snausages [a type of dog treats] in front of the number 90 crosstown express bus. (This decision was also made easy when the city of San Francisco threatened to sue Charlie if his dogs wrecked another bus)" (Moore 2006: 161). The Beta Male gene still holds sway, as Charlie is somewhat cowered by the litigious, and absurd, posturing of the city, aggrieved by the fact that Alvin and Mohammed come out on top after running into a fifteen-ton bus. As the story progresses, Charlie becomes more and more assertive. When he goes to collect Irena Posokovanovich's soul vessel, he finds that she is not actually dead. Rather ironically, Charlie believes himself to be the Big Death himself, courtesy of his Beta Male imagination, and decides to take matters into his own hands. He

identifies himself to Irena who does not believe him as he does not seem tall enough to be Death. This upsets Charlie greatly: "'Death! You're fucking with death! Capital *D*, bitch!' Well, that was uncalled for. Charlie felt bad the second he said it. 'Sorry,' he mumbled to the door" (Moore 2006: 282). The last vestiges of his apologetic nature quickly subside, however, as he absurdly tries to lure Mrs. Posokovanovich outside by pretending to have broken his leg only to be pepper sprayed in the face. He then fakes a gas leak as he positions himself to drop a cinder block on the poor woman's head, only to be stopped in the nick of time by inspector Rivera.

Charlie's ultimate rejection of the Beta Male straight jacket the text has constructed for him, is when he decides to face the Morrigan head on. Only a few chapters before, inspector Rivera explicitly asked Charlie not to do anything heroic to which Charlie responds that it is not in his DNA (Moore 2006: 309). Through the implication that heroism is genetically encoded, this precondition header links back to the text-specific schema of the Beta Male which has consistently been described in the text as a gene that dictates how certain people behave. The header, however, does not lead to the expected script. Rather than waiting for some Alpha Male to take care of things, Charlie decides to head into the sewers for the final confrontation himself.

A Dirty Job introduces an incongruity in the characterisation of Charlie. As the plot progresses, so too does Charlie. From an angsty, awkward nerd doing his best to stay out of sight and survive, he transforms into a courageous awkward nerd willing to sacrifice himself to keep safe the people he loves. He exhibits behaviour that is increasingly incompatible with that of a Beta Male. Yet, the text consistently emphasises Charlie's membership to that text-specific category throughout the novel. An important strategy in conveying that character development to the reader is the use of absurdist humour, just as the absurdist humour could not be realised without the discussed characterisation techniques.

Much of that derives from how Charlie reacts to the events.[91] No matter how outlandish or absurd, Charlie just rolls with the punches, never giving too much thought about what is happening exactly. As seen in the third chapter, this attitude heightens the absurdity of the narrative and is essential in the successful realisation of absurdist humour.

But whereas at first his Beta Male imagination functions as a coping mechanism, even within the already absurd premise of the novel, it later puts him in harm's way. This shift in characterisation is mirrored by an inversion of the original incongruity between social and text-specific category on the one hand and literary category on the other hand. Generally, a Beta Male is understood to be rather submissive and someone who prefers to hand the reigns over to others. *A Dirty Job* does its best to not only reinforce that schema in the mind of the reader, but to also add to it through the construction of its own text-specific schema of a Beta Male and the consequences of being one.

Opposed to this Beta Male schema is the literary schema of the hero. And Charlie is certainly no hero, he cannot be as his DNA will not allow it, as the novel routinely points out. As the plot unfolds, however, Charlie becomes less and less of a Beta Male and his actions are more in line with those of a hero, an absurd hero to be precise. This transformation is made apparent to readers by the increasing contrast between Charlie's direct and indirect characterisation. By explicitly assigning Charlie to the category of a Beta Male, he is imbued with these specific characteristics in the minds of the readers. At first, this overt characterisation is congruent with the rest of the textual information. Through the process of indirect characterisation, the text introduces more and more incongruities that challenge the default slots initially assigned to the text-specific schema of the Beta-Male. Charlie's actions, for instance, show him to have acquired character traits that are diametrically opposed to those of the Beta Male,

[91] Consider for example the interaction between the Emperor of San Francisco and Charlie when he learns he is a Death Merchant (Moore 2006: 64), between Charlie and the Morrigan, or between Charlie and the dogs.

such as bravery or recklessness. The incongruity is reinforced through the responses of the other characters to Charlie's development. By using the other characters as focalisers, the text offers readers a new perspective on Charlie's actions, urging them to restructure or refresh their mental representation of the character Charlie and/or decategorize him as a Beta Male. The text-specific schema is no longer the dominant paradigm as it is replaced by the literary genre. Along the way, Charlie sheds off the role of hapless victim and decides to take matters into his own hands. This role reversal, here, is a drawn-out process that helps communicate the absurdist humour as well as the literary absurd. Much like Camus's and indeed Galloway's absurd hero, Charlie does not cower in the face of overwhelming odds, even if it takes him a while to collect his nerves. With the death of his wife, Charlie had lost his reason for living. Taken away from him by a cruel and uncaring universe, Charlie is at a loss. Again, randomly, Charlie is forced into the role of a Death Merchant. He is not a very good one, unfortunately. He struggles to find meaning in the role the universe bestowed upon him. Charlie, however, finds strength and meaning not in some grand order of things but in the love for his daughter and friends. It might take him some time to realise that there is still Sophie who needs looking after, even though the text ultimately dispels that notion as well, but it is for her sake that he accepts his fate and goes to face the Morrigan, certain that he is going to die. Pretty much left to his own devices, his only companion on this journey of development is the absurdist humour. For Charlie specifically, it first offers him a strategy for dealing with his sudden existentialist quandary and later provides him with a strategy to cope with the grim reality of his situation. Consequently, it also informs readers that Charlie no longer fits the schema of the Beta Male and that therefore he has to be decategorized and reassigned a new category, namely that of the absurd hero. In true absurdist fashion, *A Dirty Job* has a final surprise to spring on its readers. Charlie, as it turns out, is not the Luminatus or the Big D: "'You shouldn't be here, honey,' Charlie said. 'Yes, I should,' Sophie said. 'I had to fix this, send

them all back. I'm the Luminatus.' 'You…' 'Yeah,' she said matter-of-factly, in that Master of All Death and Darkness voice that is so irritating in a six-year-old" (Moore 2006: 378). Even at the end there is room for an absurdist quip. The absurdist humour also helps communicate the thematic message of the novel. The absurdity of the many, often outrageously exaggerated stereotypes reminds readers that we are in fact all human and that there is more that unites us than divides us. Rather than relying on external forces to grant meaning to our existence, we would do well to take comfort in the small things, such as the love for our friends, or the love for a daughter. Charlie's self-sacrifice might in the end have not been necessary but is all the more valuable for it.

4.7 Conclusion

In the analysis, special attention was given to the mutually dependent relationship between absurdist humour and characterisation in *A Dirty Job*. When readers engage with literary characters they simultaneously rely on both extra-literary and literary schemata. This means that when we try to interpret or understand the actions and motives of fictional characters, we tend to compare or contrast the textual information to the referential and experiential schemata in our cognitive arsenal. *A Dirty Job* makes use of this reading strategy by drawing on social, ethnic, literary and cultural stereotypes to generate absurdist humour. Through this process of schematic association, the text maintains the balance between low probability and high implausibility that is integral to the experience of absurdist humour. On the one hand the novel introduces characters that, at first glance, are congruent with the social or literary categories readers are familiar with. Subsequently, however, the text introduces an incongruity between a reader's experiential frame of reference and the textual information, either by magnifying one stereotypical feature to its absurd extreme or by substituting or inverting default slots in the respective schemata. *A Dirty Job* is not above creating its own

text-specific schemata, only to engender expectations about characters' actions and motivations in its reader which it then frustrates at a later time. The absurdist humour is also integral in bringing across the existentialist theme of the novel, as personified by Charlie's character development, revealing absurdist humour to be its constant companion. His character does not only generate absurdist humour but is in turn constituted by it. Having explored this relationship between absurdist humour and characterisation, the following chapter will look more closely to how plot and absurdist humour relate to each other.

5. This is Just Absurd: Absurdist Humour and Plot

Tim Dorsey's *Florida Roadkill* opens with a humorous, if somewhat disturbing, scene detailing the murder of serial womanizer and orthodontist George Veale III. George is killed, rather inventively, in a seedy motel in South Florida:

> Inside was an evidence theme park. A six-foot Rorschach pattern of blood and bone across the wall near the bathroom. Bound securely with braided rope and sitting upright in an uncomfortable motel chair was the late, luckless John Doe, his mouth covered with duct tape and eyes wide. The end of a shotgun was tied to his throat and the exit wound in the back of his neck could hold a croquet ball. His chin rested on the shotgun barrel, the only thing keeping his head propped up, and he wore a baseball cap with the *Apollo 13* emblem. The other end of the twelve-gauge Benelli automatic shotgun was wrapped to a sawhorse with more tape. A string attached the trigger to the shaft of an electric motor. From the side of the deceased's chair hung a bare copper wire with a small model space shuttle dangling on the end. Circling the wire was a metal collar cut from a beer can. A wire ran from the collar to a car battery. Another wire ran from the shuttle to a solenoid switch and the motor. (Dorsey 1999: 2-3)

Despite this vivid description, the exact circumstances of George's death are not revealed to readers until the fourteenth chapter. When the real space shuttle takes off from Cape Canaveral, the vibrations topple the little replica in the motel room and set up a harmonic resonance. This in turn creates a current that winds up the string attached to the trigger. This depiction calls to mind a Rube Goldbergmachine. Only, the characteristic ingenuity of such a contraption is here in service to an ultimately nefarious purpose. The absurdist humour realised in

this scene stems from the specific imagery (a hole the size of a croquet ball, the Rorschach pattern of blood), and is complemented by the absurd and elaborate method of execution containing intertextual humour and irony. The victim is forced to wear an *Apollo 13* cap, a film that famously tells the (true) story of three astronauts that had to overcome great adversity to survive a catastrophic flight and finally managed to return to earth. It is ironic then that George is killed by a space shuttle (large and small) while wearing that cap. But what makes this scene really absurd is the response of the law enforcement officers who arrive first on the scene:

> The television was on the NASA channel. Live video of two astronauts spacewalking during their third day in orbit. The cops looked over the room, gave each other a high five, and burst out laughing. One radioed for the detectives and lab guys. The other grabbed the remote control, looking for something good on TV. (Dorsey 1999: 3)

This is not the response most readers will have expected from two police officers after coming upon such a crime. It certainly does not conform to the standard script detailing proper procedure during the investigation of a crime. This script is activated through a variety of headers. The prologue establishes the death of George Veale III and acts as a precondition header for the arrival of the police officers. Their roles too are determined by the internal conceptualization header as they arrive on scene to investigate the murder. For readers, then, the police officers' presence and behaviour are framed by a specific Memory Organization Package (MOP) which classifies laughing when taking in such a gruesome scene as incongruous. The absurdity is compounded by the fact that they consider this murder solely from a personal point of view, i.e. how will this affect them. The circumstances of the murder immediately suggest that something extraordinary has taken place here and the two cops are only too happy to relinquish

responsibility for the investigation. The opening scene then sets up a seemingly absurd fictional universe that promises to take the reader on a wild journey, moving from one absurdity to the next and driving the entire narrative plot.

This chapter explores in greater detail the relationship between absurdist humour and plot in absurdist literature, using *Florida Roadkill* as an example. Firstly, narrative plot will be considered in terms of the text-reader interaction. As readers construct the plot of a literary text, they supply missing (or deliberately withheld) information and make inferences and predictions about future plot developments. Consequently, they rely significantly on both their world schemata and literary schemata. As plot can be considered as a sequence of actions performed by characters in a specific setting, scripts as conceived of by Schank and Abelson have a prominent role to play in the analysis of *Florida Roadkill*. In their search for textual coherence, readers turn to scripts that codify standardised actions and responses. In absurdist literature, this reliance is problematised as default values of scripts are inverted or undermined, driven to their logical breaking point, or replaced by absurd intratextual schemata. While the focus of this chapter rests on absurdist humour and plot, it is worth noting that characterisation and setting are integral to both the realisation of the plot and the humour. Characters' actions after all constitute the plot. Therefore, their plans and goals and how they go about achieving them contribute significantly to the absurdist humour.

Like most absurdist texts, *Florida Roadkill* has a tendency to skew the successful realisation of the reading process as it introduces and emphasises one or more incongruities between the fictional universe on the one hand and the real world that readers use as a frame of reference on the other hand. Key in establishing that incongruity is absurdist humour. In *Florida Roadkill* specifically, absurdist humour is inextricably linked to the development of the plot as it connects a series of seemingly random and serendipitous events and encounters. In doing so it creates a plot that constantly teeters between the high

improbability and low plausibility that is so characteristic of absurdist humour. Concurrently, the text, through its abundant use of absurdist humour, enables the reader to construct a more or less coherent plot both within the immediate literary context and at the moment of literary interpretation. The synergy between absurdist humour and plot also resonates with the philosophical absurd. There is no seeming logic to the occurrence of events and everything appears to be left up to chance. Yet Serge and the others persist in the pursuit of their goals, whatever they may be. But before returning to Serge and his absurd peregrinations that form the plot of the novel, I will first briefly consider *Florida Roadkill*'s categorisation as an absurdist novel and how readers have responded to its characteristic absurdist humour.

The paratext of *Florida Roadkill* is less explicit in casting the novel as absurdist than is the case for *A Dirty Job* and *Sick Puppy*. The blurbs from literary reviews collected in the 1999 William Morrow edition, however, do all comment on the specific brand of humour that characterises the novel. It is, in various reviews, described as "wildly hilarious" and "wildly funny", recounting events with "[t]**wisted hilarity**" and "[o]**ver the top outlandishness**" (Dorsey 1999, emphases in the original). Another quality, highlighted for instance on the back cover of *Florida Roadkill*, is how it creates humour by presenting the "bizarre" as "downright commonplace", a key element of absurdist humour as previously defined in the third chapter of this dissertation. The link with the absurd and absurdist humour is also established by the recurring comparison between Dorsey's novel and Carl Hiaasen's writing, as in the review by the *Chicago Tribune,* the *Saratosa Heralds-Tribune,* or American author Les Standiford. Readers too have remarked on the similarities between Hiaasen and Dorsey's *Florida Roadkill*. Darla for example indicates that she read the novel on the recommendation of a friend who was aware of her love of Hiaasen's oeuvre (2013). The novel itself emphasises its affinity with known authors of the absurd through a variety of literary schemata. These intertextual schemata combine with

culturally specific schemata to frame the reading experience. Serge, for instance, visits a bookstore "where Carl Hiaasen was autographing stacks of green books. Waiting in line, Serge wagged a latent tail" (Dorsey 1999: 178). A similar reference is made in the text to another author of the absurd, namely "Miami humor columnist Dave Barry" (Dorsey 1999: 198). Through both these (and other) intertextual references the text primes its readers to adopt an interpretative frame that is aware of and open to the presence of the absurdist theme and absurdist humour.

It is not surprising then, that readers on literary website *Goodreads* are quick to identify the experience of the absurd as integral to the humour of *Florida Roadkill*. Some readers rate the book as "quite absurd" and find the absurd plot to consist of a collection of "very funny situations" (Scott 2017). For Francis his enjoyment is directly linked to *Florida Roadkill* being "one of those really absurd books" where you just "keep laughing" (2015). A similar experience is shared by Aran who feels the novel tells a "funny story, in an absurd way" (2018). The plot is integral in conveying the absurdist humour to the reader. One reader expressly mentions that the events which make up the plot are "all told in such a matter-of-fact way that you just HAVE to laugh at the absurdity of it all" (Brad 2018, emphasis in the original). In the following paragraphs I explore in more detail that relationship between plot and absurdist humour that readers seemingly intuitively pick up on.

5.1 What is Going On? Plot and Schemata

Plot is a broad narrative concept which in this dissertation will be conceived of as a continuously developing narrative structure (Kukkonen 2014: 2). In other words, plot provides the framework that imposes order on the events of the novel, the characters' actions and their motivations as they are considered during the reading process. It is a progressive and dynamic process as readers will

continuously try to integrate new information and events with what has gone before in order to arrive at a coherent narrative. While the details of this opening scene of *Florida Roadkill* may not make much sense initially, later chapters provide more insight into both the motivations and the circumstances behind the murder. Such coherence, however, is only attained within the fictional context. When readers consider the events from the perspective of their referential frame constituted by their schemata, the absurdity remains as poignant as ever.

Much of the cognitive effort readers have to expend when constructing a narrative plot consists of gap filling. Such insights are not new to cognitive literary theory but have a long tradition within the field of literary theory and date back to, among other, early phenomenological works. Roman Ingarden, for instance, believed that readers draw on past experiences to fill in "indeterminacies" in the literary text, objects, events or actions that can only be inferred indirectly (Ray 1985: 33). Wolfgang Iser too felt that completing these "open spaces" (or *Leerstellen* as he called it) in the text form an integral part of the reading process. Taking inspiration from Husserl's concepts of *Protention* and *Retention*, Iser describes how readers strive to connect sequences of sentences into a larger coherent whole. In doing so we continuously balance the information we have just acquired from the text with what we expect will happen next. This is not always a straightforward process, however, as some texts (deliberately) problematise the interplay between Protention and Retention (Iser 2001: 225-226). So, in order to establish this sought-after coherence and textual consistency, readers rely on personal knowledge and experiences to bridge any gaps.

This is a very apt description of the manner in which readers construct the plot of a text. They process the textual information at hand, attribute motivations to these actions and to the characters involved, as well as hypothesise about future actions. In the example above, there is little doubt that we are presented with a murder scene. We know the victim was shot in the head with a shotgun but can

only guess as to the function of all the props that litter the scene, described in some detail. We are equally left in the dark as to the identity of the victim or the motives for his murder. This in itself is not altogether surprising as such a narrative development follows a fairly common and traditional pattern even (certainly within a literary genre as the detective or mystery novel). In absurdist texts, like *Florida Roadkill*, though, such narrative processes are often complicated. This becomes evident from the style, tone and detail that characterise this passage and which immediately signal that the events narrated and the questions raised here are not as conventional as one might think. The absurdist humour is instrumental in communicating that deviation from the norm, if you will. Nothing makes that more obvious than the behaviour of the two cops. Yet this is almost exclusively left up to the reader to infer. While having much in common with the hermeneutic (literary) theories, schema theory is better suited to form a picture of how readers might structure textual information and relate this to the extra-literary context that informs their reading of the text. Additionally, schema theory, grounded as it is in sociology and psychology, offers the advantage that it can account for the reading experience of "real readers". As such it at all times remains aware of readers' socio-cultural background and biological materiality rather than simply assume that readers conform to some idealised interpretative agent presupposed by the literary text.

Of course, plots in absurdist text rarely follow a temporally linear path and readers have to contend with the fact that many events are presented out of sequence. That is why Sternberg (1978), while also considering plot in terms of the information exchange between text and reader, postulates that the reading process is driven by "the informational gaps between the represented time and the communicative time" (Bernaerts et al. 2013: 7-8). He identified three "cognitive effects" that might come into play during the reading process as readers try to establish causal and temporal ties between the events being recounted. The first effect, surprise, occurs when readers find out that their mental

representations are incomplete or when the text does not conform to their expectations. It is the moment in the text when readers are confronted with the (missing) information that determines if they experience either a sense of curiosity or suspense. The reader's curiosity is piqued when the events referenced or detailed in a specific passage are situated prior to the moment of reading. When, in contrast, the missing information is yet to be provided by the events still to come, readers will generally experience a feeling of suspense (Kukkonen 2014: par. 3.2). In Sternberg's terminology, the example above evokes suspense as the details (the why and how) of George's involvement only become apparent in later chapters, culminating in his murder in the fourteenth chapter. If, however, one was to have skipped the prologue and the first chapters then George's actual murder might raise some curiosity pertaining to the specific circumstances of his death.

Florida Roadkill has a relatively long prologue (pp. 1-18), certainly compared to the rest of its chapters. This is because the prologue serves as a narrative plot device that already sets up most of the plot as well as introduces a significant number of the characters that feature in the novel - even though not all characters are given the same level of exposure in the subsequent chapter. What all these major players have in common is that they are presented to the reader in an absurd but thoroughly humorous context. There are the three (purportedly) Latino cartel hitmen who viciously beat a redneck to a pulp in a petrol station using a "honey-mustard barbecue sauce" bottle, a "dry cell battery, meat tenderizer" and even a "Parrot Gardens car deodorizer" (Dorsey 1999: 7). Again, it is the response of the literary bystanders that makes tangible the absurdity of the situation. Ellrod, who "like all Florida convenience store clerks, had the Serengeti alertness of the tastiest gazelle in the herd" (Dorsey 1999: 4), for instance, calmly serves the three men as they purchase some hot-dogs and drinks, only twitching his legs somewhat under the counter in response to what he has just witnessed (Dorsey 1999: 7).

Next, we are introduced to Sean Breen and David Klein who, travelling together in one car, are swerving to avoid running over a tortoise that is only moments later flattened by Serge (arguably the protagonist of the novel) and his sidekick Coleman. George and the tortoise, however, were not the only casualties to feature in the prologue. Self-styled playboy and perennial loser Johnny Vegas crashes his boat into a sandbank as he tries to get it on with a drugged-out co-ed. Next to the boat Johnny and his would-be conquest discover two bloated corpses with a chain tied to a concrete block around their necks: "Sue gave a prolonged, blood-clotting scream, which Johnny took to mean she was no longer in the mood". This does not deter Johnny as he puts "his arm around her shoulder to console her, and began sliding his hand toward her breast" (Dorsey 1999: 13).

Serge, Coleman, David, Sean and the three Latinos all meet up, without realising it. As they all head out for the Florida Keys, they end up stuck in a traffic jam that soon spirals out of control as a shoot-out erupts between the two drivers involved in the initial collision:

> Twenty cars back from the accident, Sean Breen and David Klein opened their doors for shields and prepared to run. Ten cars back, three Latin men sat in a bulletproof Mercedes limousine playing three Nintendo GameBoys. One car back was a yellow Corvette. Coleman and Serge stared at the boat in the middle of the road and the foam shooting into the air from the Budweisers. (Dorsey 1999: 14)

While David and Sean display a healthy response and look for cover, the hitmen who are a lot closer to the incident remain unperturbed (which also makes sense as they find themselves within the relative safety of their bulletproof limousine). Serge and Coleman, however, have no such safety blanket and are much closer to the shooters to boot. Serge's phlegmatic response is to ask Coleman for a beer, a wish the latter happily obliges: Coleman "waited a few seconds for a break in

the gunfire and ran out in the road in front of the car, grabbing one of the few cans that wasn't blowing suds from the seams. He jumped back in the car and handed it to Serge. Serge stared at him. 'I meant from the cooler'" (Dorsey 1999: 14-15).

The prologue immediately sets up the action to come and steers readers' expectations in a specific direction. Sean and David are presented as the straight shooters, proverbial fish out of water in the absurd scenarios they keep landing in. Yet still happy to go along with the narrative flow so to speak. The Latino cartel members are presented as highly volatile yet brutally competent assassins, which will turn out to be a not entirely accurate depiction. As for the larger part of the novel, Serge and Coleman receive the most attention in the prologue. From the get-go, Coleman is portrayed as an imbecilic dope-head acting as a foil to the seemingly cool and collected Serge. Serge, for example, is furious that Coleman ran over the turtle. He finds it completely immoral and apprehensible to kill another living thing. Serge's self-acclaimed moral high ground, however, is highly ambiguous as readers find out. Serge's behaviour and his motivations resonate with a host of different frames and the expectations that go with these frames allowing him to navigate freely between the different instantiations of the CON GAME script that structure the plot of the novel.

5.2 A Cunning Plan: MOPs and Absurdist Humour

As a successful orthodontist, George Veale III has his hands insured to the tune of five million dollars. As soon as Serge finds out about this, he coerces George to participate in an insurance scam. Serge cuts off some of the dentist's fingers and tells him to pretend it was a gardening accident. The scam works as the insurance company believes no one would be crazy enough to cut off their own fingers. Terrified of Serge and fearful for his life, George tries to run off with the money. This sets off a series of unlikely events as a wide variety of characters try

to get their hands on the money. The outcome of one event more often than not sets off a new chain of events that are just as unlikely as the previous ones, or even more so.

These individual events in and of themselves contain much absurdist humour, a humour that is exacerbated by the link it establishes between the characters of the novel, their actions and their motivations. The plot of *Florida Roadkill* is relatively straight-forward and centres on the con game. CON GAME is a recurring script throughout the novel and links together multiple memory organization packages (MOPs) as the scam takes on various guises. There is the insurance scam, a kidnapping scam, a money laundering scam, and so on. The plot becomes ever more convoluted, however, as the different MOPs become increasingly intertwined. Default slots, such as victim and perpetrator, are continuously inverted, ultimately rendering them almost entirely interchangeable. Boundaries between narrative threads are further eroded with the emergence of scams within the scam, that in turn impact yet other scams making up the plot of *Florida Roadkill*. From the very start the reader is primed for the CON GAME script.

Consider for example the first chapter, that tells of the swiftly developing romance between Wilbur Putzenfus and Sharon Rhodes. Sharon is described as a tall blonde woman who could put *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models to shame. Wilbur, in contrast, is a short, pasty man and amounts to a "hundred and fifty pounds of unrepentant geek-on-wheels" (Dorsey 1999: 20). Wilbur asks Sharon to marry him after she publicly performs oral sex on him at the beach two minutes after having met him. We then get some more background information on Wilbur who works as an insurance denial expert at the Family First Health Maintenance Organization where he handles "the really difficult patients, the ones who demanded the company fulfil its policies" (Dorsey 1999: 21). Wilbur is a high-flyer within the company as he develops new strategies to prevent clients from receiving the insurance pay-out they are entitled to. He is especially adept at

dealing with the terminally ill as they do not really have the time or wherewithal to dispute the claim anyway. Wilbur is also the proud creator of the "Putzenfus Gambit" which entails a strategy of a complete refusal to cooperate and stonewalling clients by claiming that they are not allowed to disclose any information (no matter how trivial). The misery of his clients has brought Wilbur considerable wealth. Parts of his wedding were paid for by preventing "CAT scans that would have found a tiny bone fragment that later paralyzed a fourth grader. The medical evidence in that case was so overwhelming, Putzenfus considered his denial of the claim a moral victory" (Dorsey 1999: 22). The absurd Putzenfus Gambit is in that sense very similar to a catch-22 and the baffling administrative apparatus that upholds it, even though, to the reader, its operational procedures are entirely devoid of logic.

Through activation of the CON GAME script, readers are perhaps not too surprised when Sharon decides to marry Wilbur. Even if she did decide to marry him after only just having met him. The notion of a beautiful young woman marrying a wealthy but otherwise unappealing man simply for his wealth, is in itself somewhat of a cultural stereotype and fits in nicely with the CON GAME script and works as a precondition header. Readers' suspicions, primed by this header and the script it activates, are further fuelled and ultimately confirmed by the discrepancy between Wilbur's elate exuberance on the one hand and Sharon's uninterested and boorish behaviour during their wedding and honeymoon on the other hand. This internal conceptualisation header alerts readers to the incongruity as the roles, or slots, Sharon and Wilbur occupy do not correspond the schema of a newly-wed couple but do fit in with that of the con game. She is primarily concerned with snorting cocaine and cuckolding Wilbur, and such behaviour is in keeping with what one might except from these characters (or one might say caricatures) as they were sketched in the text. Initially, certainly, this episode seems to confirm expectations rather than subvert or frustrate them. It is

at the moment when we learn the exact circumstances of Wilbur's death that we can truly appreciate the absurd and humorous quality of this first chapter.

When driving home, Wilbur is shot in the neck with a small calibre rifle. He does not even notice it at first, thinking he was bitten by a bug. All in all, it was an innocuous wound that was not life-threatening but which still needed some medical attention. Unfortunately for Wilbur, though, his medical insurance is provided by the very same company he works for. It was even more unfortunate that his doctor, of dubious medical certification, was trying to get tickets for an NFL match promised by Family First HMO as an incentive for keeping tests and specialised examinations to a minimum. In order to secure the tickets, the doctor decided to close the office and not take on any more patients that day. As Wilbur was already waiting on the examination table, the doctor decided to quickly see him and concluded that the wound would be fine with a simple Band-Aid. The bullet, however, was still lodged in his neck and caused blood poisoning. Wilbur went to the hospital where it was revealed that he did not qualify for emergency treatment unless approved by his physician who of course could not be reached:

> When the hospital clerk raised her voice that the man urgently needed care, the agent said he would have to transfer her to somebody higher up. The admitting clerk then listened to a recorded personal greeting from Claim Denials Supervisor Wilbur Putzenfus before being dumped in voice mails. (Dorsey 1999: 25)

Being denied the immediate treatment he needed, by himself no less, Wilbur dies. In a final ironic twist, his death ends up costing the company half a million dollars in life insurance rather than the two to three thousand dollars his treatment would have costed. Wilbur's role as victim in the scam Sharon is playing on him becomes somewhat ambiguous. He made his fortune from the suffering of others. Next to a script opposition of VICTIM/PERPETRATOR, an opposition

INNOCENT/GUILTY is introduced linking two different MOPs: one where Wilbur is scammed, and one where he defrauds his clients. This relationship is further highlighted through multiple oppositions between MOPs. Whereas Wilbur is all powerful, safely hiding behind the anonymity of his office telephone, he is powerless to resist the machinations of this femme fatale. In his job he displays considerable skill in sniffing out cheaters, yet he is oblivious to Sharon's true purpose, and so on. While evoking humour by themselves, these script oppositions between both MOPs generate absurdist humour when considered within both the context of the plot and the absurdist theme of the novel. Wilbur ultimately receives his just desserts as he dies due to a policy he instituted himself. His death, however, was ultimately not due to some grand design but rather down to sheer randomness. Wilbur's bullet wound was in itself not life-threatening, and Sharon's and Nigel's poorly executed plan to kill Wilbur was doomed to fail. An uncaring universe, however, decided otherwise and no amount of well-laid-out plans could have avoided it, as there is no escape from the absurdity of life. Absurdist humour is not only created by this plot twist, but it also drives the plot onwards as it connects individual plot threads throughout the novel.

The second chapter starts with the unfortunate passing of prominent high society figure Celeste Hamptons. Not just the police are on the scene, but also representatives from the mayor's office, the county commission and even the state administrative level. The man wielding the highest authority, however, is Charles Saffron, the CEO of New England Life and Casualty. Saffron is a somewhat shady figure, a behind-the-scenes facilitator between the pillars of Florida state politics and industry.[92] Celeste poisoned herself as she drank a large glass of pesticide believing it to be perfectly safe. The Florida State Department

[92] Saffron will feature prominently in later parts of the novel as he tries to recuperate a large sum of insurance money that was paid out to George Veale but which somehow ended up in the possession of Sean and David, although unbeknownst to them.

of Agriculture decided there was no harm in using a pesticide called malathion to spray citrus crops with. They were, however, overzealous in dispersing the chemical agent and sprayed residential neighbourhoods as well as fields and orchards. The state also dismissed Tampa citizens' fears and told them that they "didn't need local approval and to just sit down and shut up. They repeated in lockstep mantra, 'Malathion is so safe you can drink it'" (Dorsey 1999: 28). Tests conducted by local activist groups concluded differently, though. In response, the state of Florida hired Malley the cuddly Dancing Malathion Bear to promote their use of the pesticide. Malley surely convinced Celeste, much to Charles's disbelief:

> In Celeste Hamptons's living room, [Charles Saffron] tore into the deputy secretary. "Who the hell's bright idea was it to say it was safe enough to drink?!" "But we never thought anybody would actually do it!" said the agricultural official. "She wanted to prove it was safe, support her friends in the citrus lobby. She was planning to make a public service commercial. Drank a whole ice tea tumbler of the stuff." He pointed at an empty glass on the counter with a lemon slice on the rim. "Of all people! She knows we're liars!" said [Saffron]. (Dorsey 1999: 29)

We then learn that Celeste's husband had also died, only five months prior after getting his shoelace caught in a lift, the "[f]irst case on record" (Dorsey 1999: 29). Celeste quickly remarried to a young Brit. This precondition header might trigger alarm bells with some readers in light of the events of the previous chapter. The CON GAME script is once again activated. Only now the stereotype of the old man marrying the young girl has been reversed as if the novel wishes to say that we are all victim in the absurdist con game of life, with the conceit being the search for purpose and meaning from some external force. As it turns out, the reader was warranted in his or her suspicion as Saffron, too, voices his concerns

about young Nigel Mount Batten. Saffron acknowledges that Celeste was not the sharpest tool in the shed, but is hard-pressed to believe that even she would be stupid enough to drink a glass of pesticide. But rather than have Nigel arrested, as the agricultural attaché proposes, Saffron just wants him gone from Florida. No matter how you spin it, he says, the bottom line would still be that the supposedly harmless malathion led to Celeste's demise. Unhindered, Nigel Mount Batten flees the scene of the crime post-haste.

The two insurance scams are subsumed under the mantle of the CON GAME script when it turns out that Mount Batten is in fact Sharon's lover. He and Sharon conspired to kill their respective spouses in order to cash in on their life insurance policies. As the money disappears, however, their relationship becomes fraught. And so, Sharon decides to get one over on her partner. She takes out a life insurance policy in his name and murders him by dressing him in a tight pair of jeans and dumping him in the bath: "The paramedics arrived too late the next morning and found a stone-stiff Nigel in the tub, with an expression that couldn't quite believe Sharon was killing him with a pair of Levi's 501s" (Dorsey 1999: 35). Sharon ultimately did not get the money. The insurance claims adjusters suspected foul play, but rather than alert the authorities they made her sign a document and wave all her rights to a settlement (Dorsey 1999: 71). The different MOPs, all centring on the CON GAME script become even more entangled, as the insurance company aligns itself with Sharon and assumes the role of perpetrator rather than victim. It is no coincidence that the insurance company simultaneously occupies opposing slots, as readers were already primed to this situation via way of Wilbur.

In the context of the capitalist market it is not altogether surprising that large insurance companies, with Wilbur and Saffron as their representatives, are primarily concerned with making a profit rather than with the well-being of their client base. In fact, it is somewhat of a cliché that such companies actively try to prevent having to pay insurance claims. In Wilbur's company, every appeal is

met “with the predisposition that no claim would get by, regardless of legitimacy, company rules, reason and especially fairness. When cornered by an airtight argument, Wilbur responded with a tireless flurry of Byzantine logic” (Dorsey 1999: 22). Should that tactic fail, Wilbur could still resort to his eponymous strategy of refusing to interact with the client.

The absurd simplicity of the Putzenfus Gambit and its disproportionally high success rate is indicative of the absurdist humour characterising *Florida Roadkill*. While highly improbable, the text presents readers with a plot thread that is still possible, even if only remotely. Both the incongruity and the absurdist humour are reinforced by the fact that Wilbur’s death is not merely a case of bad luck but an inherent consequence of the system that Wilbur himself has helped bring about. In the fictional world of *Florida Roadkill* such absurdity is presented with an almost stoic forbearance as Family First’s HMO pays half a million dollars “to a slightly bereaved Mrs. Putzenfus, who, for unexplained reasons, held Mr. Putzenfus’s sparsely attended funeral in Tahiti” (Dorsey 1999: 26). The strategy of undermining and subverting default slot extends to other institutions as well. The representatives of the state and local body politic are present on the scene of Celeste Hamptons’s murder, as are several law enforcement officers. Despite being vested with power by society, they are all too happy to cede all authority to Charles Saffron. Rather than upholding the law, they facilitate transgressions against it, or at the very least turn the other eye. As a result, *Florida Roadkill* creates a world where opposing slots become interchangeable and can be occupied by one and the same character or institution. Distinct MOPs are mashed together. This results in a cascade of absurd events that structure the plot of the novel.

At this point one might wonder if the recurrence of this pattern does not itself constitute a literary schema and as such fails to surprise readers as the outcomes conform to their expectations. The absurd events are not limited to the first two chapters but are prevalent throughout the novel. Another example, for

instance, is that of George Veale III, our victim from the prologue. George is throwing a party where he meets David and Sean, blows a parrot "through a plate-glass window by indoor artillery fire" (Dorsey 1999: 50), gets drunk and meets Sharon in a strip club. But while the underlying pattern may become predictable to readers, the literary actualisations of that pattern are not. Part of the reason for this is that while the precondition headers, activating the CON GAME script, are relatively obvious to readers, the instrumental headers are far less obvious, certainly initially. Wilbur seemingly gets stung by an insect and Celeste apparently poisons herself by accident. It is only after the facts that readers learn that these events fit in with the CON GAME script as Sharon and Nigel orchestrated the events to fulfil their goals. But as we know, things do not work out entirely according to plan. What else could one expect in the absurd fictional world of *Florida Roadkill*.

The text at regular intervals introduces flashbacks and flashforwards that connect the various strands of the plot. It is a strategy that allows the text to alternate between curiosity and suspense, to use Sternberg's terminology. It is interesting that in terms of suspense, readers' expectations concerning characters' plans and goals more often than not prove correct. The absurdity resides in how they have ended up in those situations. Next to his position as chairman of Life and Casualty, Saffron engages in less savoury activities as well, in order to supplement his income. He uses company resources to invest in "cocaine trafficking, extortion, tax fraud, arms dealing, the occasional murder of a material witness, and campaign contributions to the Republican and Democratic National Committees" (Dorsey 1999: 122). Once more, the CON GAME script takes centre stage. Saffron's criminal enterprises are also linked to the body politic which gladly looks the other way in favour of additional funding. In this manner, the text reinforces the mental image of a storyworld where such corruption is commonplace and the absurd plot of *Florida Roadkill* can freely develop.

The absurdity extends to Saffron's relationship with the cartel. One night in the Keys, he saw four men beating up one guy who then got shot in the belly. Saffron stepped out of his hiding place and asked if he could join. He kicked the dying man in the stomach and shot him five times in the face. Saffron and the cartel members later bonded over the cold-blooded murder and they struck up a business arrangement. It was not long before other cartels came knocking on his door as a "good reputation is the best advertisement", says Saffron (Dorsey 1999: 124). Being forced to pay out five million dollars to George Veale for the loss of his hands, however, has landed Saffron in quite the pickle because the cartel wants its money back.

Hailing from the island nation of Costa Gorda, an island so small "it rented a post office box and a conference room on the island of Grenada", the Mierda Cartel was "the sixty-eight-largest cocaine producer in the world. Which was last place" (Dorsey 1999: 165). Out of pity the citizens of Grenada pretend to be intimidated by its resident cartel, which coincidently was the laughing stock of the drug-trafficking industry: "At ribbon-cuttings, never an introduction; at banquets, never a trophy. In the yearbook they were named 'most likely to be extradited.' The rare modicum of respect came when they flew into Tampa International, where they were mistaken for the thirty-fourth-largest cartel in the world" (Dorsey 1999: 165).

In previous chapters, the cartel members (i.e. the three Latino hitmen) have repeatedly been mentioned as being dangerous and violent. To readers they therefore conform to the stereotypical schematic representation of a drug trafficker and their default slot assignments. Now, however, the text calls those default values into question as membership of the cartel is schematically associated with membership of some kind of social club. It is suggested that drug cartels around the world host social gatherings where they enjoy food and each other's company, where they hold ceremonies and hand out awards. It is even hinted at that they all have some common rite of passage that is equivalent to a

high school graduation where they all sign each other's yearbooks. The default assignments of the frame SOCIAL CLUB come to stand for those of the frame CARTEL. Rather than a dangerous environment, the cartels are associated with a convivial atmosphere of camaraderie where a group of like-minded people come together to have a good time. There is even room for some good-natured ribbing. The idea that there exists a ranking of cocaine cartels further undermines the default values attributed to the frame CARTEL. The Costa Gorda cartel in particular is mocked as it is ranked last, an effect that is reinforced by their name "Mierda" cartel, literally meaning that they are a "shit" cartel. Through such absurdist schematic associations, the threat the cartel poses seems to be invalidated.[93]

Yet almost concurrently, the text also indicates that, while ranked last they may be, the Costa Gorda cartel is nothing to be trifled with. Four heavily armed members have entered the offices of New England Life and Casualty looking for Saffron and their missing drug money. But here too the text plays with the Latino cartel member stereotype present in the mind of readers through popular films such as Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1983) and its legendary character Tony Montana.[94] The staff of New England L and C, for instance, are "surprised they could see no chest hairs or gold chains" (Dorsey 1999: 164). The text continuously vacillates between the incompetence their ranking suggests and the brutal efficiency with which they pursue their money. At first, they coerce Saffron's employees into giving up his whereabouts. But the hostage situation quickly devolves into a party where the employees are lined up and forced to do cocaine and imbibe shots.

[93] Another example constitutes the description of the cartel driver of the limousine. As they are sat in their car cleaning their guns, they hear something about the World Series on the radio. Excited they immediately drop what they are doing and rush to the baseball stadium: "The driver had taken the antikidnapping driving course in Bogotá during Cartel Safety Week" (Dorsey 1999: 193). Again we have the inversion of default assignments through the schematic association of Cartel membership and an activity such as Safety Week. It is highly ironic that drug cartels should participate in an antikidnapping course as they are the ones most likely to conduct kidnappings in the first place.

[94] Such an image of how Latino gangsters are depicted or perceived in the Florida/Miami context, will certainly be prevalent in the mind of a reader familiar with American pop culture.

The incongruity alerts the reader to the script opposition between the HOSTAGE script and the PARTY script. These two scripts are simultaneously activated and maintained through the emphasis on the act of coercion in both scripts. Readers would not expect this element to be present as a slot in the PARTY script. The 'party' gets slightly out of hand as the hostages begin to both ask questions and give tips on how to best smuggle drugs across the border. Then suddenly they hear a loud noise of breaking glass. One of the cartel members had been skateboarding through the office on an ottoman to disastrous effects: "Forty-two floors below on Ashley Street, a Costa Gordan in a suit lay on the sidewalk in a bed of glass ground to diamonds. The roof of a parked Jaguar was caved in from an ottoman" (Dorsey 1999: 168). This is a pattern that is repeated throughout the novel, so much so that the qualifications of the cartel as competent or incompetent become interchangeable. In the end they are dispatched by Serge, one at a time, in an almost farcical manner that finally seems to shift the balance to incompetence. With the demise of the cartel members, the CON GAME script structuring the plot extends beyond the discourse world as the reader, too, has been deceived through the activation of specific stereotypes, in this latest instance that of South-American drug-runners. It turns out that the Latino gangsters were not Latino at all. They are actually "Uzbekistanians. Part of the new Russian mob in south Florida. They rented a postal drop in Grenada and tried to go native" (Dorsey 1999: 269).

All these scenes illustrate how the absurd skirts the boundary between the implausible and the possible. Consequently, the incongruity between readers' expectations of the characters' actions and the actual consequences of these actions in the text is highlighted to humorous effect. It is this absurdist humour that ties together the plot, spurs it on even. The absurdist humour is ingrained in the narrative structure of *Florida Roadkill* – and indeed in that of the other novels of the corpus – and prevents the plot from falling apart into a random sequence of isolated events that merely hinge on coincidence.

5.3 Absurd Stereotypes in Service to the Plot

We have seen how making default slots interchangeable erodes separate MOPs that readers might have formed. As a consequence, the CON GAME script that unites these MOPs takes centre stage. There is however such a quick and seemingly random succession of events that it can be hard for readers to keep on top of the plot development. As we are, to a large extent, denied clear, coherent causal chains between plot threads, readers have to rely substantially on their schematic knowledge to unravel the plot of *Florida Roadkill*. The text facilitates as well as complicates this reliance by incorporating a lot of socio-cultural stereotypes, often taking (by definition already exaggerated) features to absurd extremes, in terms of the characters as well as their actions that constitute the plot.

We have already mentioned Wilbur who might, certainly initially, resonate with readers' stereotypical image of a nerdish male who has enough intelligence to succeed professionally but who is entirely unequipped to navigate the quagmire of social and interpersonal relations. Sharon, in turn, is solely described in terms of her beauty, casting her as a stereotypical gold-digger. Yet both care only about one thing: wealth and the comforts it buys. Still, stereotypical representations also allow for surprises. Sharon, for example, laments that she lacks Nigel's creativity in disposing of their victims: "About the only thing she was an expert in was slutty clothes" (Dorsey 1999: 34). The text here again introduces a contrast between the straightforward internal conceptualization header, activating a script that casts Sharon and Nigel as partners in crime, and an instrumental header readers will probably only identify as such after the facts.

Sharon turns her vestimentary expertise into a deadly weapon in the most absurd sense. She ends up killing Nigel with a pair of tight jeans leaving the reader to wonder whether this was a feat of ingenuity on Sharon's part or just plain stupid. Sharon's plans and goals might be clear to readers, and in line with the stereotype, but the means she uses to achieve those goals are far less congruent

with readers' schematic expectations as the instrumental headers are deliberately held vague and indeed absurd. The characters in *Florida roadkill*, however, do not just conform to one stereotype. They are an amalgamation of various stereotypes. These stereotypes can share default slots, but can equally entertain opposing slots. Providing an overarching pattern to these different stereotypes is the CON GAME script which we have already discussed. Much of the absurdist humour in text, then, is derived exactly from the interaction between these stereotypes and how they affect the plot.

A case in point is the depiction of Mo, a Florida State senator, a right-wing, ultra-conservative homophobic radio host and a private detective. In terms of stereotypes and the schematic expectations that accompany them, Mo is a complex character. Most of the stereotypes are linked through an interconnected chain of shared slots. It is not that far a reach to assume an ultra-conservative in the deep South to be homophobic. Other stereotypes are less easily reconciled, such as Mo being the presenter of a highly popular radio talk-show, a private investigator and a State senator. There is little that, at first glance, seems to connect these stereotypes, but Mo is not your typical senator and his election to the senate was somewhat of a miracle:

> Mo's success was based on demographic research that showed talk radio audiences were predominantly male, bitter, undereducated, untraveled, did not know how to figure percentages and unfailingly blew all major life decisions. Research also showed Mo's ratings spiked when he called homosexuals "fudgepackers," which he had to do constantly to fill airtime because he did not possess talent or knowledge. (Dorsey 1999: 48-49)

The result was perhaps not so much a miracle as it was a consequence of accurately assessing the expectations of his audience. An audience that coincidentally combines several schemas and that conforms to the stereotype of

the disenfranchised, male citizen of the American Deep South. A stereotype already evoked in the novel through recurring locale headers that never allow readers to forget where the narrative action plays out (and thus firmly linking plot to narrative setting). The text, then, aligns Mo with his audience through the "homophobe" frame, underscoring that Mo was elected not on ability or merit, but through use of a hollow and inflammatory rhetoric. The absurdist humour is made all the more poignant by the knowledge that Sean contributed significantly to Senator Grenadine's election as he managed the latter's advertising campaign. Sean's success in getting Mo into office was, however, unintended.

Sean was given the account by his superiors at the advertising company as nobody believed the negative news cycle surrounding Mo could be turned around. The company just wanted to earn some money. Sean, however, "went at it with an appreciation for the absurd, and he employed the Big Tobacco Theorem: Tell reality-defying lies with a straight face. He didn't consider it dishonesty but low comedy" (Dorsey 1999: 170). And the more Sean tried to sabotage the campaign, the more traction it gained. The text introduces an instrumental header which activates a SABOTAGE script, meant to allow Sean to realise his goal of scuttling Mo Grenadine's senatorial campaign. The roles of this script and its associated internal conceptualization header are reversed as, unfortunately for Sean, all his efforts are in vain, at least from his own perspective. The absurdist humour of this scene, once again, ties together several plot threads. Sean was also involved in the malathion promotional campaign (indirectly) leading up to Celeste Hamptons's untimely death.[95]

The absurdist humour here does more than structure the plot, it also communicates the absurdist theme of *Florida Roadkill*. No matter how hard Sean tries to throw a spanner in the wheels of Mo's campaign, he cannot prevent his

[95] Sean came up with the campaign featuring Malley the Malathion Bear. The end result, however, was perhaps not as successful as the promotional campaign ended somewhat abruptly with Malley falling off a teacher's desk during a school visit and "projectile-vomiting out the mouth hole of the bear mask" as he became intoxicated on the fumes (Dorsey 1999: 172).

election. The absurdist humour heightens the incongruity between Sean's personal goals and desires and his (fictional) universe which does not care about those goals. Reminiscent of Camus's absurd hero Sisyphus, Sean accepts the absurdity of Mo's election, and consequently his own defeat, but nevertheless is not dispirited by it. Even when Grenadine, after a scandal broadcasted on live television, is re-elected. Mo called on his voters to help him "stop the sodomites who break Jesus' heart" (Dorsey 1999: 50).[96] Here, too, the locale headers are reinforced through the stereotype of the God-fearing homophobe.

The absurdist humour then hinges on the incongruity introduced by the text itself in the sense that the heterodiegetic narrator's disparaging assessment of Grenadine's moral fibre and his political agenda is obviously not shared by the voting public in the novel, who by association are portrayed as a bunch of first-class idiots. Thus, the text ambivalently intertwines literary and extra-literary schemata. That such corruption and incompetence exist in the various political strata of Florida had already been revealed early on in the novel as State officials offer no resistance to Charles Saffron and have no concern for the well-being of their constituents. At the same time the narrator's indignation still marks it out as aberrant and reprehensible behaviour. For readers too, that ambiguity exists. Grenadine's comportment simply does not conform to how the general public expects its chosen representatives to behave. Consequently, it is unlikely that such behaviour of a real-life politician would pass without any significant consequences or cries of public outrage. Unlikely, but not impossible. Perhaps somewhat cynically, schematic representations of politicians can in the public eye devolve into stereotypes where the corruptive influence of power replaces the

[96] Mo's scandal was that he enjoyed himself a little too much with a couple of female escorts. He got himself, or more precisely his private parts, stuck in a Jacuzzi and had to be cut out live on television. Contrary to what one might expect, this did little harm to his political career: "In the face of all contrary facts and accounts, Grenadine called a press conference in his hospital room and claimed he'd been attacked by a platoon of perverts who'd molested him in an unspeakable manner because of his courageous, God-fearing work in the legislature. The attack emphasized the need to vote for him and stop the sodomites who break Jesus' heart. The performance brought convulsive laughter at the television stations. Grenadine was reelected in a landslide" (Dorsey 1999: 50).

aspirations of serving the community. Within the frame of POLITICIAN the motivational slot is no longer one of PUBLIC SERVICE but one of PERSONAL ENRICHMENT. Thus, Mo becomes part of the overriding script structuring *Florida Roadkill*'s plot, namely the CON GAME. His entire career is based on lies and deception, both his political career and that as a private investigator.[97] I have focussed here on but one character, but the schematic complexity evident in the characterisation of Mo Grenadine is found in a host of other characters, such as Charles Saffron or the cartel members to name but a few. The text exploits socio-cultural stereotypes by presenting characteristic traits of these stereotypes in an overly exaggerated and absurdist form, taking care, however, to remain situated at the balance point between being highly implausible yet possible, characteristic of absurdist humour. That characters are drawn up out of a variety of stereotypes, allows them to easily switch between roles as demanded by the plot. At the same time, it also means that the certainties that usually are part and parcel of a stereotype are eroded. The various stereotypes remain linked through the dominant CON GAME script structuring the plot. As a consequence, the default slots linking stereotypes and their associated schemata become interchangeable. In *Florida Roadkill*, everything is a scam, and nearly everyone can simultaneously be both perpetrator and victim. They must all suffer the whims of their fictional universe, which in true absurdist fashion is indifferent to their wants and plans, as reflected in the plot of the novel.

[97] As a PI, Mo specialised in "fabricating evidence to deny insurance claims of legitimate and generally poor accident victims, some of whom were now his listeners" (Dorsey 1999: 49). Mo is tasked by Charles Saffron to track down the suitcase containing the five million dollars. At the same time, the intelligence of Mo's voters is once more called into question as they continue to support him even though his shady and felonious practices may have caused them direct harm. Mo might not be the greatest senator, but he is a surprisingly competent private detective. He manages to track down both Serge and Coleman several times, as well as David and Sean. Mo, somewhat poetically, meets his end at the hands of Serge and Coleman. They catch him red-handed as he searches their hotel room. They poison Mo by pouring a bottle of rum directly down his rectum. His only hope is to receive an emergency enema. He stumbles into a gay bar shouting out for an enema, but unsurprisingly the patrons are not really inclined to help him. He is thrown back out onto the street and is finally run over by the Key West Conch Train.

5.4 It Is All a Con: Condensing and Expanding the Absurd

Florida Roadkill collects a series of seemingly disparate plot threads, each representing an absurd microcosm. To successfully convey the absurdist humour, these absurd fictional universes have to be sufficiently far removed from the original ones, but at the same time not so outlandish that they are rendered inconceivable. It is a balance that *Florida Roadkill* maintains to great effect. A case in point is the retirement complex at Puerto Lago Boca Vista Isles and what goes on there. For readers somewhat familiar with US popular culture, Florida's status as a retirement haven will resonate all the more strongly. With its warm climate, extensive and appealing shoreline and its lack of state income tax, inheritance tax and estate tax, Florida is generally portrayed as the best place for senior citizens to reside once retired.

The locale header here activates a set of expectations in readers, but these expectations are not entirely met as the RETIREMENT script is subsumed under the plot and its CON GAME script. Residents of the Vista Isle community were promised a carefree retirement by head honcho Max Minimum who runs the place for Florida developer Fred McJagger. Despite the grand claims, Vista Isles amounts to nothing more than entire rows of trailers arranged around an artificial square lake, filled up with dirty water. This is a far cry from the idyllic Florida beaches painted in the brochures. At Vista Isles, they sell an impression, a fake one, and they go to great lengths to maintain that illusion. In order to keep the swans and ducks on the lake, Max breaks their wings. Yet his usefulness does not lie in his ability to manage obstinate aquatic fowl. Instead he proves himself valuable as he is able to swindle old people out of their hard-earned money through "fine print and outright fraud" (Dorsey 1999: 83).

Minimum's tactics consist of a mixture of extortion, bullying and lying. He demands exorbitant maintenance fees knowing that the residents are unable to escape them as they are contractually forbidden from moving their trailer

somewhere else. His proudest achievement is his air-conditioning scam. Minimum introduced free air-conditioning inspections. But these inspections would invariably turn up a large number of malfunctions that had to be repaired at great cost. And if "the residents didn't believe the imaginary problems, the repairmen were coached to go out to the unit and break something" (Dorsey 1999: 84). The roles primed by the internal conceptualization header of the REPAIR script are inverted to fit in with the CON GAME script. Upon refusal to pay up, Minimum's crew would result to physically assaulting the residents of Vista Isles as well as threaten to take away their homes. Minimum goes about his duties without scruples and with great aplomb as he felt that "no sacrifice was too small to pass on to someone else" (Dorsey 1999: 84).

But Minimum's reign of terror is not without consequences. Stella and Mortimer, a retired couple trying to get away from constricting environment that Vista Isles has become, happen to come across three failed bikers: Ringworm, Stinky and Cheese-Dick. The last gang they tried to join threw them out and stole their bikes. Stella, Mortimer and the bikers strike up an unlikely friendship as they find out they share a hometown in Dayton, Ohio. When next morning Stella and Mortimer are once again faced with an impromptu air-conditioning inspection, even though the system works fine, she introduces the bikers as her sons. They make short work of the youth, who ends up in the emergency room. Not one to cower, Minimum retaliates with even more harassment. The bikers however are not intimidated as they continue to protect the residents who in turn ply them with copious amounts of food and drink and even buy them new Harleys.

Both McJagger and Minimum are flabbergasted as they see a "pack of sixty motorized scooters" pass by "the window […]. Stinky, Cheese-Dick and Ringworm were in front on Harleys, leading the residents two abreast down the center line. Most of them wore leather jackets with macramé patches" (Dorsey 1999: 94-95). Absurdly, the bikers have decided to form their own gang and have

enlisted the residents of Vista Isles. Their joint resistance does not last very long. McJagger, keen to sell more trailers to unsuspecting newcomers, buys off the bikers with a free trip around the Keys on his sailboat: "'What's the catch?' asked Ringworm. McJagger pulled a real military .45 from a spring-release frame under his desk. 'Don't come back for a week or I'll shoot you.' 'You're a fair man,' said Stinky" (Dorsey 1999: 99).[98]

In the examples above absurdist humour is once more realised by substituting and amalgamating default-assignments of (culturally) specific schemata. Schemata that are relevant to the plot are activated and are integrated with schemata that pertain to the setting, here specifically Florida. With its moniker The Sunshine State, Florida is famed for its beaches, its subtropical climate and its high number of US citizens over the age of 65 who have decided to retire there. But in the Vista Isles community the default value assigned to each of these defining slots has been inverted. The compound is far removed from the actual coast line. There are no appealing sandy beaches lining the artificial lakes, only dirt grey landfill. The lakes themselves are dirty and smelly. The crippled swans and ducks also make a mockery of the captivating and diverse wildlife that Florida is famed for. The gated community does not provide the crime-free environment so desired. Rather than settling into a comfortable life of retirement, the inhabitants of Vista Isles are consigned to a trailer park where they are forced to live out their retirement in misery.

These incongruities experienced by readers are once again mirrored in the discrepancy between the expectations of the retirees and their actual accommodations. Yet the reality of their living arrangements does not incite them

[98] The trio will soon regret agreeing to the deal as things do not end well. Stinky accidentally kills Cheese-Dick with a signal flare during a moment of crisis. Ringworm and Stinky had greatly overestimated their nautical and navigational skill, rendering them pretty much lost at sea. After getting totally drunk they wake up the following day on the deck of a different boat, tied with their hands behind their backs and a chain connected to a cement block wrapped around their necks. They have become prisoners of "a long-gone fetish aficionado getting off" with a "Barbie in his mouth", who proceeds to tip the cement blocks over the railing dragging Stinky and Ringworm to the bottom of the ocean (Dorsey 1999: 173). That fetishist ultimately turns out to be Minimum. The different plot strands come together. He later tries to kill Saffron, Sean and David in exactly the same way.

to take action to ameliorate the situation. Absurdly, they exhibit an extreme form of herd mentality where they just all lay down and suffer the abuse. Their act of rebellion, spearheaded initially by the three bikers, seems to coalesce through mere coincidence, as so often in *Florida Roadkill*. After the bikers have been bought off and have set sail, things seemingly return to normal, at least in the fictional world of *Florida Roadkill*, at the park and Minimum continues his harassment. But when Minimum brings a female octogenarian to tears a threshold is reached:

> In Trailer #865, a widower in a walker went to the closet and put on his Eight Air Force bomber's jacket with a small flak tear under the arm. […] A few onlookers noticed the gun barrel through a screen on Trailer #865. They whispered and the crow slunk out of the line of fire. Minimum, concentrating on his intimidation, was the only one without a clue. The doctor said the shot couldn't have hit Minimum's kneecap more directly or done more damage, even though the veteran told police repeatedly that he was aiming for his heart. (Dorsey 1999: 113-114)

Ironically, after being shot, Minimum is forced into a long period of rehabilitation during which he will have to move about using a walker. Much to the amusement of the residents, some of whom "tried to hook the legs of his device with their canes" (Dorsey 1999: 114). The media fall-out almost costs Minimum his job as various media outlets jump on the poor living conditions forced on the poor residents of the retirement park. This threatens McJagger's new twenty-million-dollar investment. Minimum carefully interjects that he was only doing what was asked of him and tries to cast himself as the aggrieved party in this conflict.

The schemata activated in these passages form an associative network of mutually dependent schemata that both reinforce each other and heighten the incongruity between text and reader. Through its discursive choices the text

activates a script of a militarised conflict between a group of retired people and a caretaker. The term phalanx, for instance, acts as an internal conceptualization header in which Minimum's punks are presented as a tightly organised military unit. This war imagery is reinforced in the mind of the reader through the military history of the widower who shot Minimum. The CONFLICT script is then subverted by inverting the positions of strength. The phalanx was a powerful and highly efficient military unit in ancient Greece. In the current day, too, the punks should have the advantage as they are physically far superior to the band of geriatrics that oppose them, many of whom suffer some form of debility. Yet they prove ineffectual in managing their opposition. It is in fact the retired war hero that settles matters as he shoots Minimum in an unsuccessful murder attempt. He is, however, hailed as a hero, a champion of the retired folk.

The residents of the Vista Isles Resort had been trapped in their own little absurd universe. Within that universe, there seemed to be only one rule: how to take as much and give as little as possible in return. The retirees are hard-pressed to rationalise why someone would treat them like that. They have done nothing to deserve these hardships. They are, unfortunately, just participants in the absurd con game that is life. And as luck would have it, they were cast in the role of victim. They do try to push back, to wrest back some control over their lives. In order to do so, they turn to an outside source for help: the bikers. But as Camus said, resistance must come from within. The bikers, too, are caught up in the con game. When they are presented with an opportunity to cast behind the mantle of perennial losers that society has cast on them, they opt for the quick gain and leave the people at the resort to their own devices. In an approximation of the absurd hero, one retired man takes matters into his own hands. The war veteran, however, only partially succeeds and the residents are only granted temporary reprieve. Sisyphus's boulder, represented by McJagger's greed, still looms at the top of the mountain, just waiting to begin the cycle anew. The absurd microcosm that is the Vista Isles community seems to suggest that there is no escaping the

con. And yet, *Florida Roadkill* offers up its own version of the absurd hero, or two versions to be exact. Let us start with the most unlikely of protagonists, Serge.

Serge was confronted with the absurdity of life from an early age. His father, Pablo, was a Jai Alai player[99]. He was not a very good player, but he had one specific skill. He could hit the ball harder than anyone, sending his opponents scurrying for cover whenever he ventured onto the court. His skill ended up killing him as he struck the ball so hard, it ricocheted off the wall hitting him in the back of the head and killing him instantly. Lacking a good role model, Serge turned to a life of petty crime. Serge is an interesting character in many ways. Like Mo Grenadine, he evokes a host of varying, often contradictory, schematic responses in readers. He is also one of the most significant players in terms of the plot, as it is his scheme to scam the insurance company by cutting off George's fingers that sets in motion the plot of the novel. The subsequent chase for the suitcase full of money provides the impetus for the many absurd events that make up the plot. Serge's multiplicity makes it hard to typecast him in terms of schematic attributions. At time he resonates more closely with the frame of a killer, a loyal friend, and eco-warrior, a lover, etc. More often than not, the text foregrounds these contrastive frames, which generate a lot of the absurdist humour of *Florida Roadkill*. Case in point are Serge's encounters with a French tourist and the captain of a boat that he and Coleman charter.

When the French tourist damages some precious coral on a diving trip, onlookers urge him to get off the vulnerable coral. But apparently, the tourist does not speak English, causing Serge to lose his temper:

> "Really? I speak French," said Serge. "Get off the *fucking* coral!" He pulled a Smith & Wesson from the gym bag and shot the water around the diver. The tourist looked up, saw he was taking the gunfire he'd been

[99] Jai Alai is a sport similar to the Basque game pelota, but played on a larger court.

> expecting ever since landing at Miami International, and dove in the water. “Eurocentric bastard!” said Serge. (Dorsey 1999: 207)

Some time later, Serge, still in pursuit of the money, charters a boat from captain Xeno who “got to be a captain by simply buying a boat, which Serge thought was a hell of a loophole. Serge insisted on addressing him as “Ensign,” and Xeno hated him the second they met. This put Serge in the company of every other paying customer Xeno had ever had” (Dorsey 1999: 240). When Xeno refuses to take on board a group of Cuban refugees, Serge takes umbrage and stages a mutiny of sorts. He picks up the Cubans and exiles Xeno on a rock out at sea while singing *Refugee* by famous Gainesville (Florida) band Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. He also yells that “‘We don’t like bigots in this country!’ ‘Yeah,’ yelled Coleman. ‘We don’t like Cubans either!’ Serge turned and gave him the stink eye. ‘Sorry,’ said Coleman” (Dorsey 1999: 242). After rescuing them, he forces the Cubans at gun point to have fun snorkelling, even though they do not want to.

Serge seems to be able to adopt and maintain opposing frames at the drop of a hat, moving effortlessly between xenophobe and humanitarian. The text draws attention to this schematic shape-shifting in different ways. It offers a humorous metafictional self-reflection on Serge’s actions in the sense that it mocks the stereotypical views Europeans have of Americans and vice versa. This is illustrated by the French tourist expecting to be shot as soon as he set foot on American soil and by Serge fulminating against the tourist’s arrogant and inconsiderate comportment. Readers are again alerted to the absurdist incongruity as Coleman explicitly mirrors Serge’s earlier bigotry. The absurdity is heightened by the fact that Serge forces the Cubans to have fun at gunpoint, which does not only seem rather counterproductive, but also undermines his indignation at captain Xeno refusing to take them on board.

Whereas the Vista Isles community represented one of the many absurdist microcosms of *Florida Roadkill*, Serge's peregrination expands the absurdity of the condensed narrative spaces to the fictional universe at large, and consequently to the plot of the novel. The absurdist humour, though, is not only important for structuring the plot but also for foregrounding the absurdist theme of the novel. Serge puts everything into getting his hands on the money. Yet his plans consistently fail to come to fruition. His failures are indicative of the fact that there is no master plan, as no such plan can exist in an absurd universe. Meeting Sharon and George Veal, for instance, was not planned but it did, however, plant a seed in his head. As much as he tries to seize control, he cannot dictate how his story will play out as he faces the ultimate opponent, one all must face, namely the absurdity of life and its inherent randomness. There is no grand narrative or grand design to life that we can derive purpose from. That purpose must be crafted by the individual. Serge is certainly adept at setting goals for himself, even if nothing comes of them. Despite the many set-backs and disappointments, Serge does not give up, he just dusts himself off and tries again. The many frames Serge incorporates seemingly allow him to weather the absurdist storm. In that sense, he resembles the absurdist hero. Ultimately though, Serge is doomed to begin the cycle anew. He does revolt against the absurdity of life, but he deludes himself, thereby compromising the search for personal truth that drives the absurd hero. He refuses to truly recognise what he has done and to take responsibility for his actions. Near the end of the novel, Serge and Coleman make the headlines on the television news where they are described as serial killers. Serge is outraged: "'What do they mean, "serial killers"!' said Serge. 'Veale, okay. But Sharon was self-defence and the scalper [a man selling tickets to the game at exorbitant prices on the parking lot of the stadium]—I mean, that was the World Series! You can call me a murderer, fair is fair, but as soon as you put "serial" in front of it, everyone automatically thinks you're crazy'" (Dorsey 1999: 220).

As such, the text seems to discard Serge's path of resistance to the absurd. Yes, life is absurd but that does not mean that one should leave behind any semblance of morality. Consider David and Sean who, like Serge, have coasted through the absurdist plot of *Florida Roadkill*. While faced with the same absurdity Serge was faced with, they have never lost their humanity. While Serge gets cross at Coleman for flattening the turtle, David pulls over and faces heavy traffic to save a turtle. David and Sean's friendship has been forged in the fight against bigotry and has gone from strength to strength ever since, no matter the adversity thrown in their path. That is not to say that the duo is without its faults. David can lose his temper when his loved ones are threatened, and as we have seen, Sean contributed to some questionable campaigns, but they own their flaws and mistakes. Aware of their limitations, they nevertheless persevere in the face of absurdity. As a true absurd hero must.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the relationship between absurdist humour and the plot of absurdist novels, here specifically Tim Dorsey's *Florida Roadkill*. The plot does not only generate absurdist humour, but in turn also relies on absurdist humour for structure. The text repeatedly draws attention to the literary absurd and its inherent humour. Through use of intertextual schemata, *Florida Roadkill* inscribes itself in the literary genre of the absurd. In trying to reconstruct the plot, readers rely considerably on their schematic knowledge. This reliance offers opportunities that *Florida Roadkill* seizes on to generate absurdist humour. Throughout the plot of the novel, several scripts are introduced, such as an INSURANCE FRAUDE script, a MURDER script, an INVESTIGATION script, and so on. All these scripts, however, are eclipsed by the CON GAME script which dominates the plot, forcing readers to restructure initially activated scripts to fit that of the CON GAME. The script oppositions that are brought to light in

this process generate absurdist humour as well as underscore the absurdist theme of the novel. The chapter also expanded on the mutual dependency between plot and characterisation to realise the absurdist humour. Characters in *Florida Roadkill* consist of a complex network of schematic associations as they encapsulate a variety of different, often opposing frames that are evoked concurrently. The text also introduces a great many stereotypes that, once more, require restructuring in terms of their default slots in order to fit the CON GAME script, and which are thus specifically used in service to the plot of the novel. *Florida Roadkill*, finally, portrays a host of absurdist microcosms, detailing individual plot threads. These microcosms do not only reveal the overarching pattern of the plot but also serve a thematic purpose as they highlight the absurdist message of the novel. Through the concept of the absurd hero, the chapter explained how Serge is served up as such an absurd hero. The schematic ambiguity of the character, however, calls for that qualification to be reconsidered. The text intimates that while resistance to the absurdity of life is important, one must not lose sight of a moral compass guiding that resistance. This moral code is one aspect that also informs the last novel to be analysed in this dissertation, specifically how it governs the protagonist of *Sick Puppy*'s interaction with the narrative setting of the novel, and how that interaction creates absurdist humour.

6. The African Hunting Plains of Florida: Absurdist Humour and Setting in *Sick Puppy*

In the opening chapter of Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy* (2003), political fixer Palmer Stoat is poised to shoot and kill an endangered black rhinoceros: Palmer "fired from a distance of thirteen yards and used a Winchester .458, which knocked him flat on his back. The rhinoceros wheeled, as if to charge, before snorting twice and sagging to its knees. Its head came to rest under a spread of palmettos" (Hiaasen 2003: 1). For most readers this scene of a man hunting a rhinoceros will most likely evoke a scene detailing a safari hunting party set on the African plains. The attentive, and perhaps botanically well-informed, reader however will have noticed something incongruent with such a setting. The palmettos that overhang the rhino's head are plants most commonly found in North-America and not in Southern or Sub-Saharan Africa, which is the natural habitat of the black rhino. The incongruity of the scene becomes even more pronounced as Palmer Stoat triumphantly moves over to the rhino carcass to have his picture taken with his latest hunting trophy. On closer inspection he notices that the animal he just shot, a privilege for which he paid thirty thousand dollars, has two fake plastic horns glued to the stubs of its original horns. It is soon revealed that Palmer is not roaming the African plains but instead finds himself on a ranch in Florida. The rhino he just shot at close range was not even a wild animal but "had spent its entire life as tame as a hamster, the featured attraction of an Arizona roadside zoo" (Hiaasen 2003: 3).

The absurdist humour that is evident in this example is a direct result of the manner in which the text plays with readers' expectations pertaining to the setting of the narrative action. The formidable beast, seemingly ready to make a run for Palmer is nothing but a harmless, old and docile zoo animal. The wild and evocative setting of the African continent is substituted for the safe and controlled

environment of a Florida ranch. To top it all off, the rhino is robbed of its iconic and potentially lethal horns which are substituted for cheap plastic fakes. It is clear that the setting plays an important role in the creation of the incongruities that lie at the heart of the experience of absurdist humour, not only in this opening passage but throughout the entire novel. It should be equally clear that, as I have repeatedly stated in this dissertation, no absolute distinction between the narratological concepts of character, plot and setting can realistically be maintained, and it would prove counterproductive to try to do so. In this case, the schema does not just activate expectations regarding the narrative space, but also about the assigned roles of the HUNT script such as hunter and hunted, and the actions to be performed. However, the narrative setting functions as the backdrop against which the narrative plot can unfold. It also provides the (fictional) space in which the characters operate and it determines as well as is determined by these characters' actions. As such the narrative setting and its relation to the absurdist humour characteristic of so many absurdist novels certainly warrant closer attention. Especially as it is important for readers to have a good grasp of the various narrative spaces, how they relate to the characters and how these characters navigate and negotiate the fictional world (Bridgeman 2007: 55). Even more so when one considers that the most striking "thematizations of space" often "involve alternative or logically inconsistent worlds" (Ryan 2014: 10). It is not surprising then that narrative space can contribute significantly to the experience of absurdist literature which capitalises on that logical inconsistency between storyworld on the one hand and readers' experiential frames of reference on the other hand. The reader forming a mental representation of the setting based on the activation of schematic references to the African plain is suddenly forced to adjust that representation and faced with a series of incongruities pertaining to the default slots of the original HUNT script. This confrontation between schematic expectation and textual information does not only engender absurdist

humour but also points the readers' direction towards the ecological theme of the novel, which in turn is directly connected to the philosophy of the absurd.

6.2 Roaring with Laughter: *Sick Puppy* and Absurdist Humour

Much as *Florida Roadkill* and *A Dirty Job*, *Sick Puppy* has been recognised for its abundance of absurdist humour. This is immediately made clear when one picks up the book. The reviews by literary magazines and national newspapers included in the 2003 Vision edition, used in this dissertation, comment in some form or other just how funny this book is. With descriptions ranging from "venomously funny" to "over-the-top fun of the highest measure" (Hiaasen 2003), *Sick Puppy*'s humorous credentials seem well-established. Most professional reviews, however, do not make explicit that the novel is also absurdist, favouring instead adjectives such as perverse, zany, offbeat, unpredictable, quaint, etc. to indicate that the novel skirts the boundaries of what society generally considers normative. There is, however, one notable exception. *The New York Times Book Review*, not incidentally printed on the back cover, classifies *Sick Puppy* as a delightful read that "begins with an absurd premise and then gets even nuttier" (Hiaasen 2003). On the website *Goodreads*, in contrast, most readers explicitly connect the humour to the experience of the absurd and express their appreciation for this specific type of humour. Juliana, for example, identifies Hiaasen as "a master of sentence, character and humor of the absurd" (2013). Reader Frank Vasquez for his part describes *Sick Puppy* as an "[a]bsurd, scathing, humorous tale" (2014). One reader even makes the connection with *Catch-22* deeming the protagonist Twilly Spree a character that "Joseph Heller would have been proud of" (Nathan 2007).[100]

[100] For some however, that absurdist humour can be a little too much (Sue Evans 2017; Tory 2009).

When considering these reader responses to the novel, it is worth trying to gauge from the context what exactly these readers mean when they use the word absurd to describe *Sick Puppy*. A recurring element in their classification of something as absurd seems to be that it must in some way diverge from the norm. *Sick Puppy*'s characteristic humour is typified as "outlandish" (Stacy Macy 2013), "off-beat" (Michelle 2010) or "off-the-wall" (JD 2010). While largely implicit, their experience of absurdist humour shares elements with the definition of absurdist humour that I have presented in this dissertation. Some examples are a reader's belief that the absurdist humour stems from the fact that they centre on narrative actions that are deemed "unbelievable" (Larkin 2014). This experience is shared by another reader who, interestingly, goes on to specify that the comedic success of the novel resides in Hiaasen's ability to create "interesting characters in absurd, but realistic situations" (Mark 2016). For these readers at least, absurdist humour is a (literary) phenomenon that situates itself on the verge of the impossible and the implausible. In the context of *Sick Puppy* specifically, one reader goes as far as to connect this experience to the narrative setting, claiming that Twilly Spree's "exploits are so absurd that they are only believable because they take place in the state of insanity known as 'Florida'" (Nathan 2007). This last comment is particularly interesting as it not only indicates the role of setting but also points toward the importance of schemata in literary interpretation. For this reader at least, knowledge of real-life Florida is measured against and integrated with the fictional narrative setting, to great humorous effect. Before going into detail of how absurdist texts such as *Sick Puppy* realise that effect, I will first elaborate on the narrative concept of setting.

6.3 Setting the Stage: Theorising Narrative Space

When using the term narrative setting, I am referring to the narrative space that constitutes a "physically existing environment in which characters live and move" (Ryan 2014: 5). Essentially, in this dissertation the narrative setting encompasses the specific location where a specific narrative action takes place at a specific time in the literary text. In this chapter I will detail how absurdist novels, such as *Sick Puppy*, present a narrative world that is largely congruent with readers' experiences of how the real world operates, but that nevertheless concurrently allows for striking incongruities, both in terms of its internal logic and with regard to the affordances inherent to the narrative space itself. Readers intuitively try to understand how characters negotiate narrative space (Bridgeman 2007: 55). Specific story spaces engender specific expectations in readers but can also mandate how characters are supposed to act in the fictional context.[101] I will also give special attention to the use of stereotypical characteristics of narrative locations and how cultural-specific schemata impact and enable a narrative environment in which absurdist humour thrives.

I have already hinted at the relationship between space and time. Certainly, in everyday life, these two concepts have been inextricably linked ever since Einstein conceived of the theory of general relativity. In a literary text that link is sometimes less explicit but nevertheless present. The challenge then, as Gabriel Zoran has intimated, is to elucidate how "a world existing in space" can be given literary form and thus be "structured in time" (1984: 312). Although wishing to acknowledge the importance of time in the (literary) experience of narrative space, in this chapter I will predominantly focus on the spatial aspect of narrative space rather than on the temporal aspects. That is not to say time will be completely ignored as it has bearing on the schematic knowledge that readers rely

[101] As has already been indicated, how characters react and respond to certain events in the literary text is an important factor in the experience of absurdist humour.

on during the interpretative process, for example in terms of socio-cultural specific schemata. *Sick Puppy* portrays the state of Florida as a place where corruption and shady business are allowed to thrive and where they seem to be ingrained even in all level of state politics. This image may or may not resonate more with readers who are aware of the political ties between federal and state leadership as the then governor of Florida was a brother of the president. In the context of this dissertation however, such time-specific knowledge will be assumed to be integrated into the broader schematic framework. It is assumed that the (hypothetical) reader is cognizant of the extraliterary and sociocultural context surrounding the novel, which results in a reading experience congruent with that of the implied reader. In any case, it is clear that the concept of narrative space encompasses more than just textual descriptions but rather consists of a coming together of many different elements (Zoran 1984: 313).

In and of itself narrative space is a broad category that can further be refined. Zoran distinguishes three horizontal levels of narrative space. What he calls the total space constitutes the world evoked by the literary text. The "spatial complex" and the "spatial units" make up that complex (Zoran 1984: 322). Zoran equates a basic spatial unit to a scene and links this to his vertical differentiation of narrative space. A unit of space on the topographical level, for example, is Toad Island, the place where a real estate developer plans to build a luxury resort. Something which Twilly tries to prevent at all cost. Toad Island forms a clearly delineated space that is separate from other spatial units such as the ranch where Palmer Stoat shot the rhinoceros. These distinct spatial units combine to create the spatial complex. Within the spatial complex non-contiguous spatial units are connected on the level of the narrative action or the plot. The situation on Toad Island for example is discussed at various locales throughout the novel such as on a golf course. While the narrative action is focussed on the golf course, the spatial unit Toad Island can be activated in the background as it is part of the spatial complex that the reader has formed on the basis of the literary text. Of

particular interest here, however, is Zoran's concept of total space as it in some sense also surpasses the confines of the text itself. As this space needs to be integrated within a larger framework, it does not only deal with the "assumptions of the text about the nature of the world in general" (Zoran 1984 329-330), but also incorporates extra-textual knowledge, or in other words is also dependent on readers' schematic knowledge. Total space then amalgamates "different ontological areas" as it provides the setting for the narrative action to unfold but also serves as a "continuation of the real space of the reader" and his or her "external field of reference" (Zoran 1984: 332). In *Sick Puppy*, the state of Florida could be considered to be such a total space as readers integrate textual information with any additional spatial or other information they might possess (for instance concerning the Florida shoreline which makes it a hotspot for real estate developers, its nature and wildlife, etc.).

A similar idea is expressed by Ruth Ronen who considers narrative spaces to be "the products of the integration of dynamic bodies of spatial information" (1986: 421). Ronen introduces the concept of frames as spaces that are constructed via textual means. Her use of the term frame as the (fictional) surrounding of literary characters bears some resemblance to Emmott's contextual frame theory (as covered in the second chapter). But whereas a contextual frame covers the entire configuration of characters and narrative action in a specific time and place, Ronen uses frame as a strictly spatial concept (1986: 422). What Ronen's frames have in common with Emmott's contextual frames, however, is that both are presumed to be continuous unless indicated otherwise by the literary text. Frames can also be entertained concurrently allowing readers to switch between background frames and foregrounded frames as in the earlier example of Toad Island in *Sick Puppy* (Ronen 1986: 424-426). The ability to switch between frames is directly tied to the distinction that Ronen makes between narrative setting on the one hand and narrative space on the other hand.

Up until this point I have used the concepts of setting and space rather interchangeably. A setting consists of an immediate frame or frames. Ronen, however, specifies that the setting pertains to the "*topological focus"* of the story and consequently centres the "*actual immediate surrounding*" of fictional entities, characters and narrative action.[102] Narrative space, or frames, can be mentioned in the text but need not serve as the setting (Ronen 1986: 423). Twilly's first ever dream, the first he can remember at least, puts him on Marco Island Florida running along the shoreline, but in reality he is in a hotel room with Desie. According to Ronen, Marco Island is a frame (narrative space) but does not function as a setting as no 'actual' narrative action happens there. It only features in the novel during flashbacks and Twilly's dream.[103] A consequence, then, is that narrative spaces extend to include spatial metaphors, similes etc. In the example cited above, the comparison between the rhino and a tame hamster impacts the activation of the spatial frame as it calls to mind a domesticated but caged animal, thus forcibly limited in its freedom of movement. Similarly, the image of the Arizona roadside zoo, evokes a spatial representation of an improvisatory and rather squalid zoo. Consequently, the stylistic choices of the description itself also generate absurdist humour as they reinforce the incongruity of the rhinoceros's tameness versus the proud ferocity of a majestic rhinoceros roaming the African plains. In this chapter, I follow Ronen's distinction between narrative space and narrative setting. I purposefully use the term narrative space rather than frame as to not confuse it with Marvin Minsky's frame theory as introduced and discussed in chapter three.

[102] Ronen's differentiation between frame and narrative setting seems to be the inverse of Ryan's. Ryan divides narrative space into five categories. The first category she labels "*spatial frames"* which to her frame the "immediate surroundings of actual events" whereas the setting is attributed a more general meaning as it relates to the "socio-historico-geographical environment" where the narrative action is set (Ryan 2014: 2-3).

[103] That is not to say that frames in dreams or in interior monologues cannot contain valuable information, but that information is "collateral" as it is not relevant to the actual immediate surrounding of the narrative action (Ronen 1986: 429). In that sense Ryan's "story space" is more inclusive as it also accounts for the spaces that are introduced via characters' dreams, their thoughts or even their memories (2014: 3).

Ronen is aware of Minsky's concept of a frame which she interprets as stores or networks rather than as encyclopaedic knowledge. These repositories of knowledge, which I call schemata, are important says Ronen because when literary texts include a stereotypical situation, that situation is never completely detailed (Ronen 1986: 432), leaving the reader to fill in the blanks on the basis of their schemata. This reliance is an important part of the interpretative process as readers "require a minimal level of spatio-temporal stability" in order to make sense of the text, says Bridgeman (2007: 63). Interestingly, Ronen also mentions that texts themselves can create frames that incorporate "elements associated by convention" (Ronen 1986: 433), as indeed absurdist texts often do (consider for example *Catch-22* and its abundant absurdist humour). What the text establishes as convention is not necessarily conventional in our extra-literary frame of reference. This then may result in a possible clash between stereotypical schemata and those that are unique to the literary text. For instance, properties attributed to a space by the text may be incompatible or even impossible in terms of its encyclopaedic counterpart (Ronen 1986: 434). What Ronen highlights here basically amounts to the incongruity that is so characteristic of absurdist literature and its absurdist humour.

Ronen also emphasises that space within literary texts is hierarchically organised in the sense that specific spatial constellations can be grouped into higher spatial units (Ronen 1986: 435-436). For instance, a country can contain states, which in turn contain cities, which contain districts, which contain suburbs, etc. The distinction between macro and micro spaces is not absolute but fluid. As macro spaces consist of micro spaces it follows that they share certain characteristics. Conversely, macro spaces to some extent dictate the confines of its constituent micro spaces. Macro and micro spaces, then, operate as communicating vessels. This is also the case in *Sick Puppy*, as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs where the macro space, if you will, encompasses several micro spaces and exerts its influence. The schema of the American Dream

for instance is closely tied to the geographical space of the United States which is a superordinate of Florida where the narrative action is set. The hierarchical organisation of narrative space is mirrored in the cognitive organisation of the absurdist humour. The dominance of the macro space is made tangible through the AMERICAN DREAM script which demands the scripts activated in the various micro spaces to subscribe to the exigencies of the macro space script. The resulting incongruities generate absurdist humour, which in turn foregrounds the absurdist and ecological themes of the novel. There exist different total spaces that draw on different sets of schematic expectations. In this concept of total space, fictional worlds are more than mere textual representations as they are the result of a collaborative process between literary text and reader (Ronen 1997: 283).[104]

6.4 Living the Dream: Framing the Macro Space

The narrative space of a novel can have a significant impact on the interpretation of that novel, even if it does not function as the narrative setting – as defined by Ronen. This is certainly the case for *Sick Puppy* where the setting consists of several concrete locations in Florida, such as Toad Island or Palmer Stoat's villa, but where superordinate narrative spaces, such as the United States, are largely left implicit. The distinction between narrative spaces and narrative settings is also how I will delineate what I call macro spaces from micro spaces. Specifically, in *Sick Puppy*, I consider the country, the US, as well as the state of Florida to be macro spaces. While the narrative action is set in Florida, the state itself does not function as the actual immediate surrounding. The reader, however, is aware that the cities, towns, etc., where the characters live and go

[104] Total space then largely overlaps with the notion of storyworld where textual information concerning all types of space are supplemented by readers' socio-cultural knowledge and their (personal) experience of everyday life. The storyworld also collects separate story spaces in "a coherent, unified, ontologically full and materially existing geographical entity" (Ryan 2014: 3).

about their business are framed by a larger spatial entity. The schematic knowledge readers possess concerning that geographical entity has direct bearing on the process of literary interpretation. In much the same vein, readers also know that Florida is itself part of a larger whole, without needing the text to make this membership, so to speak, explicit. But as holds true for the schematic associations readers attach to their mental representation of Florida, the socio-cultural specificities that come with the awareness that the narrative action unfolds within the confines of the US impact and facilitate even the experience of *Sick Puppy*'s absurdist humour.

The outward image that the United States have traditionally, and to this day still, projected is that America is the land of opportunities. Everyone can make it there as long as they put in the effort and realise their potential. This philosophy is encapsulated in the concept of the American Dream. There is only one place where anyone can make something of themselves and that place is America. This belief has become so widespread via different media such as film, music and literature, but also through political discourse, that the American Dream now almost occupies a default slot in the stereotypical schematic representation of America. And because it has become so common place, it has become a stereotype that can easily be subverted.

In *Sick Puppy* there are several characters that seem to be the embodiment of the American Dream. One such man is Florida Governor Dick Artemus. Artemus worked his way up from car salesman to become the "multimillionaire owner of seven Toyota dealerships, all prosperous" (Hiaasen 2003: 151). Not satisfied with being the mayor of Jacksonville, he decides to run for governor of Florida. Artemus enlists Stoat's help to get elected and Palmer is pleased that Dick "turned out to be glib, sufficiently charming and presentable, with the obligatory flawless dentition and mane of silver-gray hair. The man could actually win this thing, Palmer Stoat thought—Artemus was three inches taller and ten times better-looking than any of the Democrats" (Hiaasen 2003: 151).

Naturally, the campaign was successful and Artemus was appointed governor of Florida.

In this short passage there are several headers working together to activate the AMERICAN DREAM script. There is the allusion to Artemus's financial success and his business acumen which serves as an instrumental header. This is reinforced by a locale header (the seven Toyota dealerships) that alerts readers to Artemus's preferred arena. Both highlight that he is a self-made businessman and his prosperity allows him to take his dream even further. What is interesting here is how two schemata become intertwined as the characteristics or requisites of being a good businessman are projected onto the frame of the (successful) politician. The initial internal conceptualization header switches from car dealer to politician.

Although the locale moves from the car dealership to the political stage, the qualities that served Dick so well in the former environment also put him in good stead to succeed in the latter. This link between these two schemata is enhanced by the parallel development of his two chosen careers. Not content with one car dealership, Dick acquires seven. Similarly, just being mayor of Jacksonville does not quite cut it, spurring him on to run for state governor. It is not altogether surprising then that certain default slots of both the frame for a successful 'car salesman' and a successful 'politician' share the same values, or so the text suggests at least. Rather than owing to a strong work ethic, Artemus's success stems from his insincerity (his glib demeanour) and his physical attributes. Moreover, his height and his superior looks gain him the seat. These superficial traits supersede qualities such as intellect, ability, and community spirit. Artemus is motivated by self-interest and not by the desire for public service.

Through association, the slots defining the ideal of the American Dream have been subverted. Assets such as hard work, a positive attitude and providing a valuable service have been replaced by more negatively laden qualities. This is

not just the case for Dick Artemus. The inversion of the American Dream is a recurring event in the novel. Twilly's grandfather accrued his fortune through copper mining up in the mountains of Montana, uprooting the fauna and flora as he went along. That callous disregard for the environment was proudly carried on by his son, Twilly's father, who would not rest until every inch of the Florida coast line was adorned with high-rises. Much the same holds true for Palmer Stoat and Robert Clapley, the developer behind the proposed resort on Toad Island, and so on.

How does all this relate to the narrative space? The continuous undermining of the American Dream means that the stereotypical (and self-proclaimed) representation of America as the land of opportunity is jeopardised from the outset. Firstly, the inclusivity of the American Dream is challenged. All the (seemingly) successful characters in *Sick Puppy* are Caucasian males. That level of material wealth seems well beyond the reach of members of ethnic minorities. Highway Patrol Officer Lt. Jim Tile, for instance, experiences first-hand how Artemus abuses the power his Office grants him when he orders Jim to track down former governor Tyree so that he can blackmail him to find and deal with Twilly. Realising the American Dream also seems to be beyond the grasp of the female characters. Desirata Stoat, Palmer's unhappy (third) wife, initially feels that her best strategy for success is to attach herself to men who can provide her with a comfortable lifestyle, even if she does not really love them.

Secondly, all the wealthy men listed above have accumulated their wealth and power through shady deals or at least through morally questionable means. Clapley made his money in the drugs trade, smuggling marihuana and other narcotics. He decided to become a 'legitimate' businessman but does not shy away from resorting to bribery, collusion and sending his personal enforcer after Twilly. Philandering "Little" Phil Spree built his many resorts with a total contempt for the rules and regulations, something which ended up costing him his real estate license. Palmer Stoat's entire business model is built on facilitating

shady back-deals and circumventing legislation to serve his personal needs as well as those of his clients. Through repeated exposure the reader is made aware that the ideology behind the American Dream has been perverted and that it is no longer something to aspire to. Nothing makes this clearer than Robert Clapley's pet project.

Clapley takes the idea that anything is possible if you want it badly enough, a staple of the American Dream, to extreme and indeed absurd heights. He is not just a drug dealer or an aspiring real estate mogul. He also has a very particular fetish ever since he was a child, namely that he is obsessed with Barbies. So much so that he takes them with him everywhere he goes. Even when Clapley was running drugs, his favourite doll was "zipped snugly into the fur-lined pocket of his leather flight jacket" (Hiaasen 2003: 106). No longer content with toy versions of the dolls he longs to create two flesh and blood examples: Katya and Tish, a.k.a. Barbie One and Barbie Two. The two Eastern-European women are out-of-work models pursuing their own version of the American Dream. They were brought, or better yet bought, to the US by "a bisexual German real estate tycoon" who had "chosen them from an array of more than one hundred who had appeared on an audition videotape mailed to him by a 'talent agency' in Moscow" (Hiaasen 2003: 104-105). Their arrival into the States then is portrayed as just another business transaction and in and of itself constitutes a thorough and cynical commercialisation of the American Dream.

Katya and Tish initially enjoy the lifestyle Clapley's money buys them but when their visas are about to expire they are desperate for any solution that allows them to extend their stay in Florida. And so they "appealed to their generous new boyfriend, Bob, who suggested he might be able to fix their immigration problems in exchange for a favour; not a small favour, though" (Hiaasen 2003: 105). Clapley will solve their problems if they agree to be cosmetically and surgically transformed into actual life-sized Barbie dolls. Unwilling to relinquish their carefree and luxurious lifestyle, Katya and Tish agree to Clapley's proposal.

A host of different schemata combine here to create absurdist humour. There is the script opposition between human and artificial/object as the girls are made to resemble toy dolls. By specifically trying to emulate Barbies, the text also activates extra-textual schemata associated with the dolls. This iconic toy, at least in Western culture, has in the past decade increasingly been lambasted for presenting young girls with an unrealistic and exclusionist beauty ideal, and has been accused of contributing to the objectification of women. The schematic association between Katya and Tish on the one hand and the Barbie dolls on the other hand, reinforces the idea that women should be malleable. The conventional RELATIONSHIP script with its motivational slots 'attraction' and 'love' is replaced by a BUSINESS DEAL script through the initial opposition human/object and both scripts are subsumed by the AMERICAN DREAM script inherent to the macro space.

Clapley then is the ultimate exponent of the belief that anything can be bought and that anything can be made whatever the cost. The girls' vision of the American Dream, however, is also criticised as the slot for 'achievement' switches values from active to passive. They wish to be provided for rather than support themselves. The text makes no secret of the would-be-models' desires and the introductory passage in which we meet the girls serves a precondition header as it justifies, albeit in an absurdist manner, the script that codifies the agreement between the two women and Clapley. Both parties approach the transaction as nothing more than a business deal. The associated script draws on the capitalist core tenet that the market is regulated by supply and demand. That demand, however, is rather absurd, predicated as it is on the desire to materialise a childhood obsession. The position of the suppliers, in this case Katya and Tish, is also called into question as the commodity they offer is not only their own body but also their right to self-determination. The economic principles that underlie the schema of the American Dream are once again undermined as Katya and Tish

are considered as nothing more than trade goods which dehumanises them and forces them to relinquish ownership of their body.

The arrangement between Clapley and his two live-in dolls takes on even more absurd proportions. Palmer Stoat convinces Clapley that rhinoceros horn is a powerful and natural substitute for Viagra. While proving to be a dud for Clapley, the girls however "think it's some kind of supercharged jingle crack" (Hiaasen 2003: 257). Wanting more, they have reclaimed ownership of their body as leverage to renegotiate the terms of their deal. They will only agree to additional plastic surgery if they are provided with more powdered rhino horn. This means that once again the trade script is subverted. The girls offer their most valuable possession, themselves basically, for something that is ultimately worthless as the rhinoceros powder is only a placebo contradicting all mercantile logic and ultimately devalues their moment of self-assertion. As a narrative space, the frame of the US is attributed a variety of schemata that activate the AMERICAN DREAM script in the mind of the reader. The text repeatedly foregrounds this relationship between script and geographical space, reinforcing the cultural stereotype of America as the land of opportunity. As a narrative space, the US do not only provide the setting in which this script can play out. The macro space also dictates the characters' actions and primes readers to interpret these actions and the motivations behind them in light of the dominant script associated with this macro space. The macro space itself, then, embodies the incongruity characteristic of absurdist humour as it facilitates the goals and aspirations encapsulated in the American Dream. At the same time, the narrative space is presented as a place where anything goes, and where the ambition to achieve personal and professional self-betterment is perverted. From whichever perspective one looks at it, either Clapley's or the girls', the commercialisation of the American Dream has become so extreme as to render it nothing more than a hollow rhetoric used to justify any depravity. Within that narrative (macro) space of the United States, the state of Florida takes a special place.

6.5 The Sunshine State: Florida as the Market Space

Sick Puppy portrays Florida as a capitalist nirvana where state legislation can be brushed aside and where any dream can be made a reality. Palmer does not have to go to Africa to hunt big game, he can do that right here in Florida. It is also the place that Clapley chose to locate his real estate project as a means of laundering his money. Much emphasis is placed in the novel on the special relationship between real estate developers and the state of Florida. Twilly's father for instance "was a real estate specialist. If a property wasn't on the sea or the Gulf, Little Phil wasn't interested. He would buy and sell beach until there was no more beach to buy or sell, then pack up the family and move to another town where, Little Phil typically would exult, 'the coast is clear!'" (Hiaasen 2003: 33). Depending on the knowledge of Florida readers possess, this need not be surprising. In popular culture Florida is often praised for its warm climate and its beautiful beaches. It is also often portrayed as *the* best place to retire to in the United States.[105] These citizens need a place to live, consequently the proliferation of condominiums seems sensible. So, the depiction of Florida as a narrative space seems reasonably congruent with a hypothetical reader's frame of the state. Again, though, that rationale is driven to its absurd extremes.

In *Sick Puppy*, real estate developers are presented as almost inherently shady and nefarious people. This link is clearly made through schematic association. Clapley starts his career as a drugs trafficker and subsequently decides to move into property development. What Clapley does, is adopt the same business strategies that made him so successful in his initial profession in order to succeed in his second vocation. This means that his frame, if you will, remains the same, only the slot marking his core business changes from 'drugs trafficking' into 'real estate developing'. This is obvious from the tactics Clapley employs,

[105] According to the US Census Bureau, Florida has the highest percentage of people over 65 of all the states (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/geo/chart/fl/AGE775217).

such as sending Gash after Twilly for the perceived slight of delaying his plans or bribing state officials to look the other way. In the mind of the reader, then, Clapley's behaviour means that both frames are integrated into one. That such unlawful activity is par for the course in Florida is illustrated through the intervention of Palmer Stoat who facilitated the bribing of Dick Artemus and other government officials.

By blurring the lines between frames, Florida is presented as a narrative space that is highly conducive to such illegal activities and becomes increasingly incongruent with readers' mental representation of the State. This development of the narrative space is repeatedly made clear, as in the case of Krimmler, the site manager on Toad Island:

> Krimmler began each day with the mission of flattening, burying or excavating something substantial. Nothing gladdened his soul so much as the sharp crack of an oak tree toppling under a steel blade. Nothing fogged him in gloom so much as the sight of earth-moving machinery sitting idle. (Hiaasen 2003: 292)
>
> […]
>
> It was inevitable Krimmler would end up in Florida, where developers and bankers bought the politicians who ran the government. The state was urbanizing itself faster than any other place on the planet, faster than any other place in the history of man. Each day 450 acres of wild forest disappeared beneath bulldozers across Florida, and Krimmler was pleased to be on the forefront, proud to be doing his part. (Hiaasen 2003: 293)

It is also evident from the abrupt end to former governor Clint Tyree's political career. Tyree follows an environmental agenda. That was one thing, "even the Republicans had learned to rhapsodize about the Everglades! – but to rail so vituperatively against growth in a state owned and operated by banks, builders

and real-estate developers" bordered on suicidal (Hiaasen 2003: 272). Florida is not run by the people's chosen representatives but by corporate interests. Even within the superordinate narrative space of the United States, Florida is exceptional in that it is characterised by an absurd intensification of the American Dream. It fulfils a special role in the novel in terms of its absurdist humour in that it provides a backdrop that intermingles textual schemata with readers' real-world knowledge to heighten the incongruity at the heart of the absurdist experience. Such an effect, however, is not limited to the level of macro spaces or narrative frames but also functions on the level of the micro spaces or narrative settings.

6.6 From Macro to Micro

When Twilly first kidnaps Boodle/McGuinn and takes Desie along for the ride, Palmer, who is still in the dark about the whole affair, finds himself at Swain's, a high-end bar he frequents, to celebrate brokering the original deal for the development of Shearwater Island. Two different frames are activated in this particular setting. Firstly, there is the intratextual frame of the character Palmer Stoat that readers have formed at this point. Secondly, through combination of an instrumental (the celebration) and a locale header, the frame of a bar is also accessed. Based on these two frames a script is activated guiding reader's expectations of how Palmer will behave in the narrative setting provided by Swain's. At first the narrative action seems to conform to readers' expectations. Palmer is drunk and ends up "at a small party in the owner's private salon with two bottles of Dom," some cigars and a call-girl (Hiaasen 2003: 86). The schematic expectations associated with the frame of a bar are also confirmed. There is a lot of alcohol involved, there is an exuberant atmosphere and, as it is a high-end bar, the private salon seems in character. Even the presence of a call-girl is not too far-fetched, certainly as it is quite a common trope in popular culture. Given Palmer's predilection for giving in to his more hedonistic

impulses, it is no big surprise that he initiates contact with the call-girl. There is however something peculiar about the "voluble prostitute" as she

> made Stoat show his voter's card, because she only did registered republican. Stoat was so bewitched by the woman's ideological fervency that he couldn't properly concentrate on the sex. Eventually the halting encounter dissolved into a philosophical colloquy that lasted into the wee hours and left Stoat more exhausted than a routine night of illicit intercourse. (Hiaasen 2003: 86)

After his debate, Stoat stumbles home and falls asleep in a guest bedroom, unaware that Desie is not at home.

It is clear that the interplay between frames, scripts and schematic expectations border closely to and even stray into the territory of characterisation. Yet the narrative setting here contributes significantly to the incongruity. Within the scope of the bar frame there are specific slots that determine the roles attributed to characters and which are made explicit via internal conceptualisation headers. The bartender for example pours drinks, the waiters or waitresses serve them, the customer consumes, and the call-girl is there to offer a very particular service. Or at least a reader might reasonably expect so. However, just as on the level of the micro spaces, we see that these default roles have been inverted, and more specifically that the script of a trade or service transaction does not follow the rules as dictated by the conventional market mechanism of supply and demand.

At this point in the novel, readers are already well aware of Palmer's appetite for carnal activities. We also know that he is willing to pay good money for it – his entire marriage with Desie essentially boils down to a business deal in which he provides her with a comfortable lifestyle and she offers sex and

functions as a "trophy-wife" in return.[106] As has become evident, in both the superordinate frames of USA and Florida, money is king. You can have anything you want as long as you pay the price. Then suddenly, within this script of a business deal within this specific narrative setting, readers are presented with a call-girl who wilfully flouts such conventions. Conventions which incidentally are at the core of her 'business model', selling her body to those willing to pay for it. Even the act itself remains unsuccessful and the exchange is no longer one of the flesh but of the mind. Palmer was surprised, as undoubtedly is the reader, to "hear the call girl go on so earnestly about the failure of affirmative action and the merit of prayer in public schools and the dangerous liberal assault on the Second Amendment" (Hiaasen 2003: 87). In an equally ironic and absurd twist, this call girl ends up being one of the few characters in *Sick Puppy* not willing to sell her political principles and integrity.

The intricate relationship between narrative setting and characterisation is also made apparent by the associated schematic expectations of the former which serve to underscore the incongruities of the latter. When Desie returns home after her voluntary abduction, Palmer takes her out to a fancy restaurant to make up for the fact that he did not even notice she was gone in the first place. Palmer's table manners, however, leave something to be desired and are obviously not the norm within the fictional world as the reactions of the disgusted diners attest to: Palmer

> ordered two dozen oysters, slurping them with such sibilant exuberance that customers at nearby tables had fallen silent in disgust. Now Palmer was arranging the empty oyster shells around the rim of his plate, six

[106] Desie and Palmer's relationship, then, adheres to the same schematic pattern as the one between Clapley and his girlfriends, only taken to less absurd extremes. The amalgamation of the RELATIONSHIP script and the BUSINESS DEAL script becomes an intratextual schema in its own right. It also applies, for instance, to the relationship between Twilly's parents. At the same time, the text also offers a counterweight to this schema through the description of the relationship between Desie and Twilly, deviating from the standardised pattern created by the text itself.

> identical piles of four. He was chattering away, seemingly unaware of his deviant tidying. Desie was as perplexed as she was embarrassed. Wasn't this the same slob who had, on the drive to the restaurant, lobbed an empty coffee cup and three handfuls of junk mail out of the Range Rover? (Hiaasen 2003: 158)

Palmer's exceedingly noisy and sloppy eating habits are not out of character based on previous textual information, even though they are incongruent within the narrative setting of an up-scale restaurant. What is surprising though is his almost obsessive need to neatly stack and order the empty oysters. Such tidiness is not only contrastive to how he devoured the shellfish but also to his propensity to litter all over Florida, which put Twilly on his trail in the first place. This episode is but one in the novel that demonstrates how Palmer's behaviour in one narrative setting is incongruent with how he acts in another.[107] But the narrative setting does not only tie into characterisation but also into the narrative plot. The Wilderness Veldt Plantation offers a good illustration of how narrative setting, plot and characterisation truly come together to create the absurdist humour that is so characteristic of *Sick Puppy*.

Towards the end of the novel, Palmer Stoat, Dick Artemus, Robert Clapley and councilman Willy Vasquez-Washington go on a "hunting trip" to the ranch to smooth out the last wrinkles in the development deal for Toad Island. As we have already seen in the earlier example, the Wilderness Veldt Plantation offers nothing but a fake safari experience, and not a really good one at that. This is revealed early in the novel and the intratextual schemata readers form based on that information is only reinforced as *Sick Puppy* progresses. Clapley, for instance, orders Palmer to arrange a cheetah hunt for him to make up for the delay

[107] From cowering when he is threatened by Mr Gash, Clapley's hired gun, to bullying one of Dick Artemus's political aides over the phone only to act conciliatory when he finds out who the aide's father is.

of the real estate project. The ranch however, located as it is in Florida, has trouble fulfilling this illegal demand:

> Durgess said: “You gotta be kiddin’”. “I Wish.” Asa Lando knew he was in trouble. It was his responsibility to procure animals for the hunts. “First off,” Durgess began, “this ain’t no cheetah.” “I know—” “It's a ocelot or a margay. Hell, it can't weigh no more'n thirty-five pounds.” Asa Lando said, “No shit, Durge. I got eyes. I can see it ain't no cheetah. That's why I woke you outta bed.” “Second of all,” said Durgess, “it's only got two goddamn legs.” (Hiaasen 2003: 351)

They face the same problem when trying to source another rhinoceros so that Clapley can acquire a new supply of rhino powder. The best they can do however is a geriatric rhinoceros from Buenos Aires who is hardly able to move. Although Durgess and Lando are not particularly happy with the situation, they are confident that their clients are sufficiently thick and inexperienced to really object. They are predominantly interested in the trophies. Heads on the wall do not tell the story of where they came from and how they got there. The locale header in this example serves an intriguingly double function as it activates a script pertaining to the hunt but is also specific to the Wilderness Veldt Plantation which undermines the conventional script. The spatial description of the scene reinforces the incongruity. Clapley need not worry about not being able to take down the rhino: “it would not and could not escape, due to the insurmountable barbed fence that enclosed the Wilderness Veldt Plantation” (Hiaasen 2003: 485). The image of a fenced-in rhinoceros could not be farther removed from the vast openness of the African plains. Emphasising the enclosed spaces also ironically foreshadows Clapley’s end, for if the rhino were to have had alternative avenues of escape, it might not have impaled Clapley. Unlike the locale header, the instrumental and precondition headers are more in line with both the characters’

motivations and readers' knowledge. Palmer wants to finalise the deal to salvage his reputation, Clapley wants the rhino powder to win back his Barbies, Artemus wants some relaxation time and to keep all parties happy, and Vasquez-Washington, although he does not want to be there, is motivated by his ego.

The Plantation also serves as the narrative setting where all parties come together for the first time. Twilly and former governor Tyree have made their way over to the ranch as Twilly contemplates more extreme measures, shooting Clapley, to prevent the bridge to Toad Island and consequently the entire Shearwater Project from being built. They have taken McGuinn with them. Always in the mood for some innocent fun, the Labrador escapes just as Clapley and Stoat take aim at the rhinoceros, that Durgess and Lando had only just transported to its resting place under a tree using a fork lift. Where prodding it with a stick or making loud noises failed, McGuinn succeeds. Spurred on by the Labrador biting his dangling tail, the old rhinoceros suddenly and unexpectedly bursts into life and runs towards the hunting party. The guides, Asa Lando and Durgess have the good sense to run away as their "awe at the decrepit pachyderm's resurgence was outweighed by their aversion to violent death" (Hiaasen 2003: 486). Clapley and Stoat however decide to brave the charge and take aim. Unfortunately, for them at least, they miss. The behemoth impales Clapley on its massive horn and tramples a dazed Stoat. Twilly and Tyree come down to the scene to survey the damage and collect McGuinn, who Twilly admits has "been a very bad boy" (Hiaasen 2003: 493).

This short summary does not really do justice to the absurdist humour running through this somewhat gruesome but poetic scene. Part of that humour stems from initially describing the scene from the perspective of McGuinn, a recurring strategy in *Sick Puppy*. In this particular instance, the anthropomorphic portrayal of the dog prompts readers to interpret his actions using the same schemata they would for a human being. This results in an absurd but funny incongruity owing to the different headers. McGuinn only wants to play and he

sees the other characters and animals as wilful participants in that game. The text here introduces an internal conceptualization header casting the participants in designated roles related to the playing of a game. At the same time, the locale header triggers another script, that of the (safari) hunt, where the players are attributed distinctly different roles. One could however consider the hunt to be a specific type of game but with a significant discrepancy in outcomes. A game can have winners and losers but in the scenario of the hunt losing equals death.

This is also what happens in *Sick Puppy*, but again with an unexpected twist. As Clapley and Stoat half shoot each other, they are still dazed and confused when the rhino prepares another charge: "The rhinoceros had cut back unexpectedly and now was rumbling up from behind the scattered hunting party; prey turned predator" (Hiaasen 2003: 488). Again, the default slots of the script have been inverted and the hunted has become the hunter. The manner in which Clapley and Stoat meet their end is ironic as well as absurd: the immobile and docile "El Jefe" has become the raging hand of Nature's justice. This scenario teeters on the edge of high implausibility and low plausibility as absurdist humour is wont to do. The humorous effect is reinforced by a precondition header that was introduced to readers the moment El Jefe arrived on the Plantation. About seven years of age, back in Argentina, the rhino killed a tourist who thought he could ride on the animal's back without consequences. This outburst of violence is in stark contrast with his current state, however. So much so that Lando and Durgess deliberately market El Jefe as "a *killer* rhino" (Hiaasen 2003: 399) in a half-hearted attempt to cover up that shooting the animal should present no real challenge. The text here, then, seemingly deliberately undermines the precondition header only to have it turn out as some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy near the end of the novel thus heightening the incongruity between the opposing scripts. The narrative setting of the Wilderness Veldt Plantation is

integral in conveying that incongruity to the reader as it suddenly acquires a genuine 'wildness' it has never known before, in spite of its name.[108]

In its role as narrative setting the Plantation acts as a microcosm of its superordinate narrative spaces, the State of Florida and the USA. Through schematic associations, readers are steered to re-evaluate and reinterpret the scripts evoked on the level of the micro space in light of the dominant AMERICAN DREAM script of the macro space. The values idealised in the ideology underlying the American Dream are undermined as its defining slots are inverted or even subverted. The Wilderness Veldt Plantation prides itself on being able to deliver any hunting experience their clients desire catered to their comfort provided they have got the money to pay for it. Right from the bat, though, this is revealed to be a fraudulent business model. They only manage to procure old or deformed animals torn from their natural habitat and brought into this artificial environment. Their inherent value is stripped away and they are reduced to nothing more than a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. It is apt then that the ranch is the stage for Clapley's final act. He is the epitome of the 'self-made man' who believes his money can get him whatever he wants. Clapley's dogged obsession with his Barbies overrides his natural instinct for self-preservation and ultimately leads to his death, giving credence to Clint Tyree's "indefatigable faith that Nature eventually settles all scores, sets all things straight" (Hiaasen 2003: 491). This of course ties into the overall ecological theme at the heart of *Sick Puppy* and the thematization of narrative spaces, as will become evident from the following paragraphs. Florida is famed, in the text as in the real world, for its natural beauty and its diverse wildlife. This descriptive of the narrative space as an ecological treasure trove is contrasted with a depiction of that same narrative space as the place where capitalist and business interest rule supreme. This results

[108] The plantation is not the only narrative setting that serves in this capacity. The same is also true for Toad Island, where the narrative setting is directly tied into the plot development. It literally provides the means for both Krimmler (drowned) and Mr. Gash's demise (crushed and buried).

in an absurdist situation where the latter encroaches on the former even if both narrative spaces occupy the same physical space. The two cannot coexist, certainly not in the mind of Twilly.

6.7 The Thematization of Narrative Space

Twilly, the protagonist of *Sick Puppy*, is a complex character, continuously walking the thin line between eco-activism and ecoterrorism, but his motives are pure and simple. Having witnessed from a young age the devastating effects unbridled greed can have on Nature, Twilly sets out on a path, even if somewhat unconventional, to protect Nature and to raise awareness for its conservation. In conveying its environmentalist message, it is unsurprising that narrative spaces take pride of place in the novel. Florida, for instance, is a state that is often lauded for its exceptional natural beauty. The Everglades located in the south of Florida is such a region and most people will at least be familiar with the name. These tropical wetlands are integral to the ecosystem of Florida but are under threat of the encroaching industrialisation and real estate development.

This vast area of land also features in *Sick Puppy*. It is here that Clint Tyree, affectionately called Skink, has chosen to reside after withdrawing from public life. It is also where he has pulled off some of his most amazing and rather absurd feats. When a dozen Japanese "eco-tourists" go missing during a short canoe trip, a state-wide panic breaks out. After three days they finally re-emerge from the swamplands, tired but unscathed. All twelve were employees of MatsibuCom, a Japanese construction company that imports its wood from the US at great cost to the local environment. During the search, the police come across "the bullet-riddled boats" which "all but vanquished hopes that the MatsibuCom executives would be found safe. It now appeared that they'd been abducted by either psychopaths or terrorists—a far more devastating scenario, publicity-wise, than a simple crocodile attack" (Hiaasen 2003: 231). Upon their return to civilisation,

none of the men or women wants to talk about what happened to them. We subsequently find out that it was Tyree who kidnapped them. Asked what he had done to them Tyree says: "'Nothing. We talked. We hiked. Went for a ride. Nibbled on some llama cutlets. I showed them a few sights, too. Immature bald eagle. Butterfly hatch. Baby crocs.' Skink shrugged. 'I believe I broadened their horizons'" (Hiaasen 2003: 242).

The implication here is that the inherent beauty of the Everglades and Southern Florida was enough to instil upon the Japanese business people the importance of nature conservation. They just had to take their time to appreciate it, even if under gentle coercion. The text here uses narrative spaces to create a dichotomy between nature on the one hand and political and business interests on the other hand. One is pure and good, the other corrupt and immoral. Through schematic associations *Sick Puppy* also conflates narrative space with literary character. The novel demonstrates this by assigning Tyree the same default slots as Nature itself. Tyree lives in the swamps and eats only the roadkill he finds. He also acts as Nature's self-appointed champion and has gained mythical status in the fictional world. Living as a recluse in the wild has seemingly imbued Tyree with the virtues of his surroundings. He is harsh but never cruel, he exudes a powerful and animal magnetism, and more. Through the schematic association with Tyree, Nature as a narrative space also gains agency, almost to an absurdist degree, something which I will return to shortly.

Sometimes, however, no direct agency is required for Nature to assert itself. Throughout the novel, Toad Island, or Shearwater Island as Clapley hopes to call it, often functions as the narrative setting, making it the focal point of the narrative action. Though itself pretty unremarkable, Toad Island provides the scene for most of the clashes between the eco-warriors and the political/business interests. There is, however, something odd about Toad Island in that it has successfully withstood repeated attempts of land development: "The human population of Toad Island was 217 and in decline. Repeated efforts had been

made to develop the place, and many of its remaining inhabitants were casualties of those doomed enterprises" (Hiaasen 2003: 55). Among them we also find self-styled mayor of Toad Island Nick Fishback. Together with "a small core of embittered landholders masquerading as environmentalists" (Hiaasen 2003: 56) they are trying to force Clapley's hand to considerably overpay to purchase their plots on the island, just as they themselves had previously done. The media report on Fishback's stand against big money after which he deftly rebrands himself as "a crusty and reclusive defender of Nature who had settled on the island purely for its grandeur, not to make a real estate killing (Hiaasen 2003: 58). Fishback is of course a fraud and is quite happy when Clapley's crew begin burying the toads, intending on using the media outcry as leverage to strong-arm Clapley. Fishback succeeds in his goal, but ultimately his success sets in motion Clapley and Stoat's undoing. Toad Island is a stoic setting seemingly wearing everyone down. Dr. Brinkmann, the biologist who was hired to make sure that no endangered species populated the island, was killed there, as were Krimmler and Mr. Gash. As a narrative setting, Toad Island provides the stable centre to the ebb and flow of the opposing forces. The repetitive and absurdly humorous events taking place on the island constitute one of the dominant intratextual schemata in the novel and anchor the ecological theme in the minds of the readers.

The absurdist humour does not only serve to reinforce that theme but also highlights the existential quandary of trying to find meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe that lies at the heart of the philosophical absurd, as defined in the first chapter. Narrative spaces in *Sick Puppy*, such as Florida, the Everglades or Toad Island, contribute to that experience of the absurd in various ways. They do so collectively, under the umbrella-concept of Nature, as well as individually, like Toad Island, by providing the protagonists with a reason to revolt against a society they want no part of. The Everglades, for instance, are a haven for Tyree, allowing him to live on his own terms, free from societal restraints and expectations. Traces of the philosophy of the absurd are to be found

in the novel, such as Camus's belief in the need to revolt against the absurdity of life, or the incongruity between one's personal desires and a world that is indifferent to those desires. The interaction between characterisation and narrative spaces and settings contributes to communicating the literary absurd to readers. How Twilly perceives, lives in and engages with fictional spaces is frequently relayed in absurd terms. Learning that his uncle's bank has financed business ventures inimical to Nature's preservation, prompts him to blow up one of the bank branches. Similarly, when Twilly is first trying to teach Palmer a lesson for littering, he dumps a waste disposal truck's entire load over Palmer's convertible. Content with himself, he reflects on the anger management classes he had to take and thinks to himself that anger "wasn't such a complicated emotion" after all (Hiaasen 2003: 28). Twilly's reactions to perceived threats to the environments take on extreme and absurd proportions.

But Nature itself also conveys this absurdity inherent to human existence. Thus, once again the narrative space is anthropomorphised through schematic association. This is exemplified by Toad Island, an unassuming stretch of land that has nevertheless withstood repeated assaults. Although heavily scarred, it seems to outlive its antagonists and to come out triumphant. Yet, there is always someone new waiting to claim the land. The text impels readers to construct an intratextual frame of Toad Island that shares its slots with that of the absurd hero, albeit largely implicitly. Twilly's interaction with the various narrative spaces in *Sick Puppy*, however, also marks him out as an absurd hero but one who possesses an agency denied to the frame of Toad Island.

At virtually every turn Twilly is opposed by corporate and political interests and for every victory he attains a new battle is waiting to be fought. The young eco-warrior knows this. When lying in wait at the Plantation, he and Tyree debate who is best suited to shoot in order to save Toad Island. Shooting Dick Artemus would be a "'[w]aste of ammo. They got assembly lines that crank out assholes like him'". Stoat is not really an option either as "'Tallahassee has more

lobbyists than termites'" (Hiaasen 2003: 479). Even the ultimate demise of both Stoat and Clapley offers no respite. Councilman Vasquez-Washington has been taking photographs of the entire event and holds them as leverage over the Governor, renewing the cycle of political ambition and corruption. Although Twilly is aware that his unconventional efforts are ultimately nothing but drops in the ocean, he does not relent:

> And he thought of the two couples in the Firebird, laughing and drinking but plainly oblivious to the two unkempt, deeply disturbed men riding their bumper. How else to explain what happened next—an Altoids tin casually ejected through the Firebird's sunroof. It glanced off the windshield of the pursuing station wagon and landed, as trash, in the water. Twilly clicked his tongue impatiently. "Well, Governor? Shall we?" He thought: Oh, what the hell. "Anytime you're ready, son." (Hiaasen 2003: 507)

Twilly then is presented like a modern-day Sisyphus in the Camusian sense. Twilly will not submit to the capitalist doctrine and thirst for urbanisation that govern both his macro and micro space. This does not mean that he avoids facing reality, a strategy favoured by former governor Tyree. On the contrary, Twilly remains proudly defiant even though the deck is stacked against him. He does not give in to despair but focuses his resistance on the things he can change. Like Sisyphus, however, Twilly is doomed to repeat his ordeal as the ecospace of his beloved Florida is under constant attack, but does so gladly and boldly, as an absurd hero should.

6.8 Conclusion

Sick Puppy's typical absurdist humour relies heavily on the narrative spaces. The novel introduces many locations that are, to varying degrees, familiar to readers. As such, readers do not only draw on textual information to form mental representations of the fictional world, but also on their personal experiences and general knowledge. This total space, to use Zoran's terminology, essentially boils down to the referential schemata on the one hand and (intra)textual schemata on the other hand. Each spatial frame, however, contains specific information in its default slots, which can, despite the large overlap between textual and extratextual frame, alert the reader to certain incongruities. Sometimes they reveal how key slots have been inverted, substituted, or have been exaggerated to absurdist extremes. Through schematic associations, the text endows different narrative spaces, entities and characters with shared characteristics, but as these shared slot assignments are more often than not incompatible, they serve to underscore the incongruity. These conceptual incongruities vacillate between high implausibility and barely being plausible and are responsible for both the absurdist and the humorous quality of *Sick Puppy*. The absurdist humour then highlights the incompatibility between the referential and the textual schemata and forces readers to re-evaluate and even refresh their personal schemata.

Narrative space and setting do not only contribute to the characteristic absurdist humour of the novel but also help communicate the existentialist concerns at the heart of the experience of the absurd. Owing to its zeitgeist, the existentialist unease does not materialise in the direct aftermath of a brutal and violent conflict, as it did for Camus, but focuses on man's relationship with his environment. Consequently, *Sick Puppy* thematises narrative spaces to drive home its ecological message. Readers are primed for this experience right from the start as the paratext of the novel already remarks on both the humorous quality of the novel as on its environmentalist agenda, thus possibly framing readers'

interpretation. In sum, my reading shows how the reader's cognitive response to absurdist humour is not simply instrumental but vital to literary interpretation.

7. Conclusion

The previous chapters have offered a new attempt at delimiting and analysing the workings of absurdist humour in absurdist literature. To conclude this endeavour, I wish to look back and highlight the main aims, stakes, and results of my study. What is it that typifies the procedure of absurdist humour in theory and in practice? How does it operate in narrative contexts and in literary texts in particular? What can we learn from the individual analyses in those respects? What can we conclude about schemata and the interpretation of humour and to what extent has my approach proven to be valid?

7.1 Humour and Narrative

To try and understand the role of absurdist humour in absurdist literature, one must first consider how humour operates. As detailed in the second chapter, most, although not all, cognitive theories of humour try to explain humour in terms of incongruity and its resolution. Incongruity is generally also considered to be central to the experience of absurdist humour, one of the differences setting it apart from other forms of humour is that the incongruity is not or only partially resolved, which I will return to later. Undeniably, incongruity contributes significantly to the successful realisation of absurdist humour. This incongruity can be realised through a variety of mechanisms, as we have seen. Following Berger's typology of humour, these mechanisms can be divided into four basic categories: language, logic, identity and action. A classic example of a more language-oriented joke would be the pun, such as for instance Douglas Adams's well known quote that "you can tune a guitar, but you can't tuna fish. Unless of course, you play bass". Often, though, these mechanisms will be working in concert, reinforcing one another. In *Catch-22*, for example, Lt. Scheisskopf's

love for parades takes on such extreme proportions that he ties his men's arms to their sides so they would not swing about. Scheisskopf's unit "won the parade, of course, hands down, obtaining permanent possession of the red pennant and ending the Sunday parades altogether" (Heller 1995: 92).

Here language is combined with the identity and action category to humorous effect. "Hands down" implies that they won the competition with great ease but also incorporates a physical dimension as it simultaneously refers to the physical act of the lieutenant tying up his men's hands and arms so they cannot move them while marching. It is also ironic that this method proves successful, so successful in fact that there will be no more subsequent parades. Thus Lieutenant Scheisskopf has instigated the end of parades, the only thing that gave his life meaning. It should also be clear that the lines between these categories are not cast in stone. Language is inherently ideational and touches on identity as well. A good example of that is the use of metaphors to engender humour. Think only of Ellrod, the store clerk from *Florida Roadkill* who "like all Florida convenience store clerks, had the Serengeti alertness of the tastiest gazelle in the herd" (Dorsey 1999: 4). All categories therefore are prevalent in the novels. However, as this dissertation focusses on absurdist humour, special importance has been granted to the conceptual or ideational level as the defining, overarching mechanism of absurdist humour. For that reason, I turned to the narrative level at which these concepts are implemented and the fictional world in particular, with its constituents of character, plot, and setting.

Literary narratives present the reader with a fictional world that resonates with readers on multiple levels. Absurdist texts activate sets of frames, scripts and scenarios familiar to their readers but that ultimately are revealed to be partly to readers' experiences and schemata. By highlighting the similarity between fictional world and the experiential world of the reader, absurdist novels encourage readers to make assumptions and predictions about characters' actions,

their motivations as well as about the plot development based on the schemata that govern readers' interactions in everyday life.

Concurrently, however, absurdist texts then deviate from that schematic expectation, meaning that they are no longer congruent with how one would expect the events to unfold or characters to develop in the real world, while often still maintaining the logical coherence within the fictional world. This incongruence can manifest itself in a disruption of the causal chain which generally also stretches the readers' limits of plausibility. In *Florida Roadkill*, the serendipitous nature of the plot development is not altogether removed from the realm of possibility but nevertheless strikes readers as implausible. A more concrete example is when the cops high-five one another while surveying the murder scene in the opening pages of the novel. In *Sick Puppy*, an example can be found in Krimmler's, the foreman on Toad Island, seemingly disproportionate hatred for all things nature: "Nothing gladdened his soul so much as the sharp crack of an oak tree toppling under a steel blade" (Hiaasen 2003: 292). His dislike for nature stems from a childhood trauma when his brother stuffed a chipmunk down his trousers and the animal bit him in the testicles. Now he strives for a world without trees, filled with concrete and glass. The logical correlation between his supposed trauma and his hatred for trees especially is tentative. Yet his excessive behaviour is not altogether out of the realm of possibility either. In much the same way, the Emperor of San Francisco's response to Audrey's accusation that Charlie is Death in *A Dirty Job*, does not follow conventional logic. Rather than being incredulous or shocked, he offers some relationship advice: "'You know, son,' the emperor said, 'I am not an expert in dealing with the fairer sex, but you might want to save that bit of information until the third date or so, after they've gotten to know you a little'" (Moore 2006: 64). Absurdist humour then has the tendency to rely more on conceptual incongruity rather than on strictly verbal or linguistic incongruities. This is also what sets it apart from more conventional types of humour such as puns or even nonsense humour.

Absurdist humour is always to be found where fictional world and referential world converge. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically it is also where these two meet that the discrepancy between the two is made most obvious. Characters act and stories develop while seemingly respecting the causal chain when considered within the narrative context. At the same time, literary interpretation is a process that relies both on the narrative as well as the extra-literary context. All the absurdist texts under scrutiny in this dissertation complicate this process as they seemingly intimate that both worlds are irreconcilable. Absurdist texts do this by incorporating a variety of literary techniques that tie in directly to the structure of schemata. Default slots are reversed, and hyperbole is used to foreground the apparent illogicality of characters' actions as well as the consequences of those actions. A telling example was Milo Minderbinder's entire story and character arc. But this technique is also commonplace in the other novels of the corpus. One needs only consider Clapley's extreme entrepreneurial, capitalist persona and motivations in *Sick Puppy* or Ray's seemingly outlandish paranoia in *A Dirty Job*. These examples already reveal the close relationship between absurdist humour and narratological categories such as character or plot.

Absurdist humour, then, undeniably forms part of the narrative structure of absurdist novels. As such it significantly impacts the interpretation of these novels. In order to further investigate that relationship, I have chosen to approach this question through three basic narrative concepts, namely plot, characters and setting. Although treated in separate chapters, these concepts are inextricably linked. Somewhat simplified, plot is made up of the actions performed by one or more characters at a specific time and place in the story. Special attention is given to the narrative characters because of the prominent role they play in both the creation and experience of absurdist humour. This is not altogether surprising, as one of the key features that sets apart absurdist humour from other types of humour is the way in which the characters respond to absurdist events, as

perceived by the reader, as being completely normal. An obvious example is *Catch-22* where characters routinely react to the absurd situations that befall them as being perfectly ordinary. What is portrayed as normal within the narrative context created by the text, however, remains highly incongruent to the reader.

Much of the absurdist humour of Heller's novel derives from the contrast between the fictional world and readers' schemata of the real world. Integral to the realisation of that fictional world is the setting. Absurdist texts tend to create a storyworld that, largely, is highly congruent with readers' own experiential world. At the same time, the text introduces a series of incongruities conveyed through the characters and how they navigate the narrative setting. This strategy has not only proven highly successful in communicating the absurdist theme to the reader but also the characteristic absurdist humour. Together, character and setting drive the absurdist plot forward. A close reading of the novels comprising the corpus shows that they all share the same narrative strategies to generate absurdist humour, allowing, however, for often subtle, varying degrees. As has been the thread running through my dissertation, however, these differences should not be overstated. All novels of the corpus use similar and multiple techniques to realise absurdist humour, but sometimes more prominence is given to one specific technique.

In *A Dirty Job*, for example, absurdity and absurdist humour are inherent to the plot, in the sense that the story centres on Charlie who is portrayed as a representative of Death on earth. The overall plot then hinges on the integration of the supernatural into the 'real', in a reality that is, largely, familiar to readers. This blend of the improbable and the plausible is also a defining feature of absurdist humour, which in turn ensures that the plot of *A Dirty Job* consistently foregrounds its own absurdity. In response, the characters' responses to the events of the plot are relatively muted, sometimes even understated. In *Sick Puppy*, by contrast, greater emphasis is placed on the extremes, both in terms of characters' personalities as well as their actions. Both Clapley and Twilly, to name but two,

verge on the point of caricature. The absurdist humour here is largely driven by the disproportionate responses of characters to the events of the fictional world. Unsurprisingly then, hyperbole is a preferred technique to create absurdist humour in *Sick Puppy*. *Florida Roadkill* holds the middle ground so to speak, in the sense that it has its share of exaggerated characters, such as Serge, but also in that its absurdist humour is largely driven by a (logical) breakdown of the causal chain, both in terms of characters' actions and motivations as in its seemingly meandering plot. Despite these variations there is more that combines the novels of the corpus in their use of absurdist humour than sets them apart. They all have in common that the absurdist humour is part of the narrative structure in terms of plot, setting and character, which only serves to reinforce the theme of these absurdist novels. Throughout most of the analyses, literary characters and characterisation, and to a lesser extent setting, have been a focal point. This is because the relationship between absurdist humour on the one hand and characters and setting on the other hand is more direct than the link between plot and absurdist humour. It is also a logical consequence of the fact that plot has been conceived of as a sequence of actions performed by characters at a specific time and place.

7.2 Schemata and Interpretation

Integral in defining this interaction as well as the impact of absurdist humour on its interpretation by readers are schemata. As my theoretical overview showed, schemata have long since been used in cognitive and experimental psychology to describe how people process and access information. While the focus has predominantly been placed on comprehension, schemata also have an important role to play in the interpretative process. The difference between comprehension on the one hand and interpretation on the other hand may seem slight, cognitively speaking, but is nevertheless significant. This certainly holds true for the literary

experience as was evident from the literary analysis in the preceding chapters. In terms of comprehension, schemata facilitate the processing of the text. By acting as a frame of reference for events described in the text, they allow readers to draw comparisons between textual information and readers' knowledge and (personal) experiences. This in turn enables readers to formulate predictions about future developments in the story. In a similar vein, schemata aid readers in forming mental representations of narrative spaces, characters and plot development and help them to better navigate the fictional world and understand what is happening. It is clear then that the line between comprehension and interpretation is not always clear-cut, as these cognitive processes are inextricably linked. One way to mark the difference in terms of the reading process is to consider literary interpretation as the act of attributing meaning, as I have argued. By necessity, (literary) interpretation must be preceded by some form of comprehension, and can in turn improve comprehension.

In *Florida Roadkill*, for instance, there is little confusion as to the function of the hotel where Serge, Coleman and, for a while Sharon, spend the night in pursuit of Sean, David and the money. We understand that he is motivated by his desire to stay out of grasp of the law and his pursuers. More surprising is when he murders Sharon, especially in the absurdly intricate manner he does so. By its very nature, Serge's unpredictability defies readers' schematic expectations. In combination with Serge's actions, the hotel becomes a place where seedy underworld events can take place, in itself a popular stereotype within American pop culture. At the same time, and combined with Serge's absurd method of execution, the hotel also takes on metaphorical meaning, or at least can be interpreted as having such meaning. Inherently as well as in its literary form the hotel embodies the ephemeral nature of human life, becoming a microcosm of sorts mirroring the absurdity of life. It serves as the backdrop for the randomness and seemingly cruel actions of Serge and his companions. A haphazard confluence of events and actions against which nothing can be done. Yet Serge

refuses to roll over and admit defeat. An absurdist "anti-hero" taken to the extreme, this interaction serves to reinforce the absurdist and even existentialist theme, certainly as conceived of by Camus. At the same time, *Florida Roadkill*, through the characterisation of Sean and David, deviates from Camus's absurdist philosophy as it points out the importance of moral values when successfully navigating the absurd universe.

Throughout my dissertation, I have shown that schemata are instrumental in making that step between comprehension and interpretation. They activate a wide range of semantic networks that can serve to reinforce certain key characteristics or default slots as well as undermine them, forcing readers to search for new meaningful ways to connect data and consequently arrive at (new) interpretations. Literary and textual schemata are compared against their real-life counterparts and subsequently linked by more abstract conceptual schemata. The readers' reactions to *Florida Roadkill* already hint at this. A recurring response was that much of the humour derives from the unexpected ways in which characters and events seem to be connected. This initial reading (comprehension) of the text is generally followed by the appreciation for the intricate web constructed between events and how these connections are interpreted as reinforcing the absurdity of life as well as generate the novel's characteristic absurdist humour. This is not only the case for *Florida Roadkill* but also for the other novels discussed in this dissertation.

Any interpretation is built on an interconnected network of schemata. Obviously, this is not a one-directional process. Schemata, from their earliest introduction by Bartlett, are constructed through top-down as well as bottom-up processes. Schemata then steer interpretation but are, in turn, equally influenced by interpretation. An oft cited criticism of schemata is that they are too computational in design, in the sense that they represent the brain as operating similar to a computer, converting external input into seemingly disconnected output, unidirectionally. In such a view, schemata are highly internalised and

operate in isolation. Such a view however, is undeniably in contradiction with schemata as described and conceptualised in this dissertation but also in the source material. It goes without saying that schemata cannot account for every facet of the reading process, but to this day no analytical model can. Schemata do however account for how readers engage with textual data and can describe the interaction between literary text and extraliterary information. As they are essentially culturally determined, schemata also enable an analysis of a more general (if still hypothetical) perspective on the reading process and literary interpretation. This makes them ideally suited to analyse the interpretation of absurdist humour in absurdist literature.

7.3 Interpreting the Absurd

Absurdist humour forces readers to more closely consider the interpretative process and question the schemata that constitute their interpretative frame of reference. This also bears on the existentialist theme all these absurdist novels share. As already pointed out by Camus, humour is essential in bringing across that philosophy, or world view rather, to the reader.

In defining the literary absurd, I have started from its philosophical roots in Kierkegaard's existentialism and ended with Camus's conceptualisation of the absurd. Existentialism manifests itself in the literary absurd through the emphasis it places on the human subject and his or her search for meaning and purpose in life. This existentialist question is also at the heart of Camus's absurd, although Camus and Kierkegaard arrive at entirely different conclusions. For Kierkegaard, man's existence is inextricably linked to the divine. Purpose is given by God and we must strive to reach the religious stage in order to fulfil that purpose. For Camus, no such God exists. The universe is nothing but the backdrop in which we must struggle to reconcile with the realisation that we are essentially destined to live a life devoid of meaning. What Camus means is that meaning is not

something that can be bestowed by some external force. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, man must find meaning in his resistance against that inescapable fate.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I posited that the existentialist search for coherence and meaning is at the heart of the absurdist novel. This holds true for the novels of the corpus as well, albeit in slight variations. In *Florida Roadkill*, for instance, emphasis is put on the inherent absence of meaning. Serge and the other characters seem to navigate their world in a purely random manner. Surrendered to the whims of the universe they, and especially Serge, try to eke out their own little space where things make sense (in so far as such a space exists at all). In *Sick Puppy*, Twilly finds meaning in safeguarding that which has no seeming grand design of its own, the environment. Nature and its fauna and flora do not seek deeper meaning to their lives. They just exist, stoically weathering the human and capitalist onslaught. Nature remains pure, unsullied by baser human motivations. Twilly's goal is to ensure Nature's preservation in an environment oblivious to, or wilfully disregardful of, its needs. This link to the philosophical absurd and the existentialist tenets is also present in *Catch-22* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The entire plot of *Catch-22* centres on Yossarian trying to escape the absurdity of war. Again, his environment is utterly insensate to his wishes and desires. In fact, it seems to actively thwart him. Yet Yossarian struggles on. In *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, too, the question as to what exactly is the meaning of life, is at the heart of the novel. The absurdity of the question is highlighted by the answer itself, 42, which precedes a question no one can really put into words. The supercomputer designed to figure out the question was destroyed moments before fulfilling its task, millions of years in the making, foregrounding the futility of such endeavours. The existentialist philosophy is undeniably part and parcel of this absurdist novel. Even though Kierkegaard's absurd leap of faith to put one's trust in a divine power is conspicuously absent.

A Dirty Job does incorporate supernatural elements, but the Morrigan as well as Charlie's newly acquired powers are but anthropomorphisations of Death, underscoring the finality of life. That is not to say there are no religious references in the novels of the corpus. To take *A Dirty Job* as an example once again, there are numerous references in the text to Buddhism and some of its teachings. But these too are decidedly human-centred as they aim to provide disciples with the means to overcome suffering and eventually death. In most of the other novels, religious references are merely part of American popular culture, or are specifically designed to undermine religion's (in particular the Catholic Church as dominant institution in Western culture) position as an authoritative voice professing to know the meaning of life. This is not unsurprising as religion has increasingly lost its grip on Western society during the last half century and its dogmas are less ingrained in Western readers' schemata, or at the very least not in the same way. The Church's inability to offer any counterweight to or rationalisation for the atrocities of war is also remarked on by Camus. This strengthened his belief that there is no higher being to offer comfort.

While existentialism's focus on man and his place in the world resonates strongly in all of the novels of the corpus, they are nevertheless much closer to Camus's philosophy of the absurd. The protagonists of all the novels share with Camus the refusal to meekly undergo their fate. Yes, life is absurd. But one must rail against this absurdity. Galloway's absurd hero, then, as inspired by Camus's philosophy, is given literary form throughout the novels of the corpus. The protagonists do not cower but resist any notion of a predetermined fate. To communicate this subversiveness and rebelliousness to readers, humour is a preferred strategy. The analysis of absurdist humour has shown that it frequently undermines the schemata structuring the reading process. The incongruity characteristic of absurdist humour serves a double function. Its apparent incompatibility with readers' schematic references prompts readers to re-evaluate what they have read and what they know (or think they know). At the same time

absurdist humour foregrounds the literary absurd making it more relatable to readers. As we have seen, absurdist humour situates itself at the threshold of the impossible and the barely possible. Maintaining some semblance of familiarity with readers' schemata, absurdist humour highlights the absurd while also making it more manageable. It allows readers to take a different perspective on the absurdity of life which, certainly to Camus, is all-pervasive and inescapable.

7.4 Theoretical and Methodological Implications

To my mind, there is no doubt that absurdist humour is essential to the literary absurd. This is also why I have repeatedly stressed that absurdist humour, or indeed any form of literary humour, must always be considered in the context of the literary text in its entirety. Dominant cognitive and linguistic theories of humour, such as the GTVH or the SSTH only focus on short jokes. Such an approach is certainly warranted within their specific scope. Scholars like Raskin or Attardo set out to capture humour in one rule or in a set of rules, so that if parameter A is met or condition B is fulfilled, the result is humour. While undeniably valuable and insightful, it is equally undeniable that such an approach runs the risk of being overly reductive in trying to describe the humorous experience in terms of a formula. Humour, however, is an extremely complex phenomenon and its finer nuances are not easily charted, but therefore no less important. One might in turn argue that this is exactly why such a reductive and essentialist approach is the only viable option. To a certain extent, that criticism holds true. At this point however, I would interject that there is no such thing as a 'baseline' for humour. What might work to analyse puns or one-liners, proves less successful when trying to explain more complex forms of humour such as literary and absurdist humour, despite claims made by Raskin, Attardo or other like-minded scholars.

Literary humour merits its own approach which takes into account its complexity, or at least tries to. It is perhaps the inherent paradox of humour that it necessitates a holistic approach which considers in equal measure the source material (the text), the reader, and the context in which the text is read, many of which are to some extent intangible. I make no grandiose claims as to the completeness of the approach proposed in this dissertation. There are however certain aspects which I have focussed on for good reasons. Firstly, I have directed my attention towards a very specific type of humour, namely absurdist humour. I have proposed an operational definition of absurdist humour and have delineated it from nonsense humour to avoid the conflation both types of humour must endure in most humour research. Secondly, I have focused on the importance of context, both literary and extra-literary by incorporating schema theory. And thirdly, I have aimed to elucidate how absurdist humour impacts not only readers' comprehension of absurdist novels but also their interpretation of these novels.

The importance of context for understanding humour is particularly important for the study of absurdist humour in absurdist literature precisely because it is part of the narrative structure. I have therefore consistently considered the excerpts from the analysis in the context of the entire novel by relating them to the setting, the plot and character development. Incorporating the context of readers has proven more challenging and remains undeniably speculative. Although I have drawn on literary criticism and readers' responses it has proven to be not feasible in the scope of this dissertation to unambiguously ascertain readers' mood or frame of mind at the time of reading, nor their level of general and/or specific knowledge, all of which have bearing on the humorous experience. Schema theory alleviates this concern to some extent as it offers a framework of interpretative paths, even though these too are socio-culturally specific. It is true that the analysis ultimately is an extrapolation of my individual reading experience and consequently the empirical reader becomes aligned with

the hypothetical reader. I still stand by the methodological approach as the humorous experience is framed within the context of both the literary text and that of the reading experience which not only elucidates how humour works but also how it impacts on the interpretative process.

In terms of the narratological component of my research, I have limited myself to three essential but very broad components and how they relate to absurdist humour. The underlying rationale was that the scope should extend beyond generic analyses along the lines of 'this is a funny book' without delving deeper why and how this is so. Absurdist humour is more than a superficial phenomenon in absurdist literature. An integrated methodological framework of humour theory, cognitive literary theory and narrative theory has proven its merits as they all offer complementing perspectives on shared features, namely incongruity and schemata. Of course, in the scheme of things this dissertation has been limited in scope. Its focus on English (and predominantly) American absurdist literature begs the question whether or not the privileged status of absurdist humour extends to other literary tradition such as the French, German or non-European traditions, certainly in light of Camus's own views on the importance of humour for the absurd. Similarly, the methodological framework could also serve to explore the relationship between humour and other literary genres such as nonsense or surrealist texts. It could also serve as a basis for more empirically oriented research on the impact of absurdist humour on readers, in order to reduce the interpretative leap as much as possible.

In conclusion, I can only hope that what readers take away from this dissertation, if anything at all, is that absurdist humour is not only essential to conveying the literary absurd but also that it makes the novels discussed here thoroughly enjoyable. At least that has been my experience, which I have attempted to share here. And although, unlike Yossarian's fellow airman Clevinger, I do not purport to know everything about literature; I have, luckily, never failed to enjoy it.

Note

The third chapter is a slightly modified version of an article entitled “Problem Solved? Absurdist Humour and Incongruity-Resolution” published in the *Journal of Literary Semantics* (see Couder 2019).

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