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# What Makes Us Laugh? A Study of Traditional Humor Theories in Jeff Kinney's Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck

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## **What Makes Us Laugh? A Study of Traditional Humor Theories in Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck***

**Marwa Taher**

Move over, Harry Potter . . . There's a new set of titles dominating the bestseller list for kids' chapter books, and there's nothing 'fantasy' about these. (Andrea Yeats on NPR's All Things Considered cited in Kinney's cover copy 2013)

The aim of this research paper is twofold. First, it intends to shed light on Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series as illustrated fiction books that differ from comics, graphic novels and picture books due to its distinctive writing modes. The paper then moves to unveil the secret behind the growing popularity of the series which involves humor as the dominant factor behind its popularity. Second, the researcher aims at showing that the three traditional theories of humor: Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory can account for the source of laughter, without any conflict, in one work. Although philosophers and psychologists have different views on these three theories, regarding the issue which of them triggers laughter in us, I will prove that there is no contradiction between them. For this purpose, I have selected Jeff Kinney's eighth novel *Hard Luck* (2013) as it is considered the launching platform from which the rest of the books show no sign of decline in the process of selling rate. More importantly, it envelops the three traditional theories of humor whereby I can show their validity without any discrepancy. Thus, the present paper aims at paving the way to acknowledge the categorization of the causes that lead to laughter. The three theories are valid without having any kind of conflict that might show the slightest ascendancy of one theory over the other.

The series of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is an international bestselling series for kids that has gained extraordinary popularity. Funny, hilarious, cool, and humorous are all terms for describing such series and are the main reason for its popularity. The author of the series Jeff Kinney is a leading *New York Times* bestselling author and was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the world of the year 2009. The secret behind the great success and popularity of the series has motivated the writing of the present paper.

### **A Glance at the Author Jeff Kinney and His Series**

Kinney is an online game developer and designer. He designed the online Poptropica, which is run through Pearson Education, Inc. He manages this site in addition to writing the *Wimpy Kid* books. The idea of being a children's author never occurred to Kinney. In college, Kinney drew a cartoonish character very similar to Greg through a comic strip called "Igdoof" in the campus newspaper. He wished to become a newspaper cartoonist; however, he was not very good at drawing in a professional manner. After college, he tried to get his comic strip syndicated, but his failure of breaking into real cartooning sparked in his mind the idea to take a different route so as to get published.

### ***Diary of a Wimpy Kid: A Novel in Cartoons***

The series is about a middle grader protagonist "Greg Heffley" who continuously tries to be cool and to gain popularity. The books are not graphic novels or comics; they are somewhere between them. Alverson (2016) considers the *Wimpy Kid* books as some new "hybrid" form as "it includes blocks of prose, but it's not really a picture book". The first *Wimpy Kid* book is labeled as a "novel in cartoons" although later books in the series do not advertise this

categorization. The main elements /characteristics of the comics and the graphic novels such as the story panels, the gutter and closure, lines, text and color are not found in the series, whereas comics and graphic novels incorporate narrative boxes to tell the story and speech /thought balloons that convey what the characters are thinking or saying, the *Wimpy Kid* series incorporates simple cartoon illustrations with legible hand-lettered texts and often the punch lines captured in dialogue balloons. Unlike the “sequential art” images which characterize comics, the images which Kinney use, suit the events of the stories that Greg recollects and end immediately after performing their role in helping readers to visualize Greg’s events more clearly. In this respect, Taber and Woloshyn (2011) state explicitly that the series of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*—as well as the books like them—“are not as reliant on images as graphic novels, but do rely on images more than illustrated books” (p. 229).

Jeff Kinney depends chiefly on the combination of words and pictures for telling Greg’s stories—they complete each other as they constitute a comprehensive coverage for the successive events and stories recollected by Greg. In fact, the pictures are extremely indispensable for if they were not drawn, the meanings would be certainly incomplete. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series has simple, cartoonish character through its stick figures. The drawings are black and white. In fact, they act as a “catalytic agent” that clarify the words and supplement them as well. In his treasurable book, *Understanding Comics : The Invisible Art* (1993) , Scott McCloud writes with a special emphasis on this point : “The work of writer / artist who work in black and white communicate with their readers “more directly” [because] “meaning transcends form” [when] “art approaches language” (1993, p.192) . He also maintains in the first place that there are numerous methods through which pictures



and texts can mold a special environment for the process of reader interaction—"word specific, picture specific, duo specific, additive, parallel, montage, and interdependent" (1993, pp.153-155). With the exception of the two forms of parallel and montage, the *Wimpy Kid* series use the above mentioned methods scattered randomly in the text books. However, the series rely mainly on what McCloud calls the "most common type of word picture combination" (1993, p.155). This combination highlights the indispensability of the usage of the words and pictures together for the accomplishment of the whole meaning of the text. Such a unique reading technique, makes Kinney's readers' minds float softly from one combination to another making them alert and ever ready to interpret the cartoonish pictures accompanying the texts.

Above all, the *Wimpy Kid* series encompasses distinctive writing genres that differentiate it from other picture books, comics and graphic novels. From now and then, Greg uses different modes of writing such as; advertisements, school assignments, newspaper clippings, photographs, and his distinctive as well as unique mode "space writing" in do-it-yourself books. These books give a good chance for the readers to write in the blank spaces that they plentifully provide, thus awakening and encouraging the sleepy artist undiscovered in them. Most importantly, Greg sometimes uses online interactive experiences for telling his stories and thereby triggering the even unwilling or reluctant readers for taking part in the process of reading engagement. On all these grounds, the *Wimpy kid* series is to be seen as a new distinctive literary genre of its own. First I will discuss the popularity of the series and then I will proceed with the analysis.

### **The Secret behind the Incredible Popularity of the Series**

Because of its high interest to middle grade readers and its low

level reading skill requirements, the *Wimpy Kid* series has attained incredible popularity. The mystery behind the popularity of the *Wimpy Kid* series may go back to what Scott McCloud (1993) has figured out in *Understanding Comics*. He claims that the degree of universality of picture books depends on the degree of the simplicity of their drawings. He goes on to uncover the secret that the drawings of more realistic features will appear to the readers as a series of disjointed images much more than a series illustrating one story (pp.31, 90-91). Greg's drawings are immediately digestible, clarifying texts "if necessary" and thus facilitate the process of reading engagement. The readers are often given the opportunity to delve into the realm of thoughtful reflection thinking of what or how they would do if they were in the same situation or reflecting on similar experiences they have gone through.

One more reason of the series' popularity shows itself clearly when Jeff Kinney frankly confessed in an interview that he had taken into his account the case of making his books timeless. He points out:

I made a rule that all things that happened in the book could have happened 20 years ago or could happen 20 years from now. I was always turned off by old comic books that my dad had that had technology or something anachronistic that didn't exist anymore, so I try to make them very general. (Renaud 2013, ANS 2)

Kinney also unveils another secret that is certainly considered the central reason that the series is irresistible for young kids. When asked if any of Greg's stories are autobiographical, he replied: "A lot of the things that happen in the books happened to me, or people in my family" (Renaud 2013, ANS 10). The fact that the events and stories recollected in the series are based on actual events from the author's own experience adds the flavor of authenticity which

certainly appeals to child readers. Thus, in accordance with the above confession, Greg (the protagonist of the series) clarifies for his readers at the very first page of the *Wimpy Kid* (2007) book that “[I]t is a JOURNAL, not a diary,” that “this was MOM’s idea” and that he has no plans of “writ[ing] down [his] ‘feelings’ in [t]here or whatever” (2007, p.1). When readers get to know that they are about to read the experiences which Greg has gone through, most of which really happened to Kinney himself, they are charged with curiosity to devour whatever truths the experiences enfold.

What makes the series one of the most international bestselling series is not only the hilarious situations the readers read incessantly, but the incredible assimilation the reader feels himself/herself with the protagonist. Greg Heffley, the protagonist, is in fact the reader himself/herself. When Kinney was named as one of Time’s 100 Most Influential People of 2009, a sixth grader student at that time wrote a brief article on Jeff Kinney praising the *Wimpy Kid* series. He innocently made it clear that middle scholars “love these books because of Kinney’s ability to vividly describe the life and problems of an average-middle scholar, with picture and language that capture our sense of humor and perspective” (Simpson 2009).

The series sheds light on how kids perceive and criticize grown ups’ behavior and understands well their nature—a fact that most parents and grown-ups totally ignore. Hence, Kinney has brought into surface the complicated relationship between kids and adults as well as kids and kids. Moreover, it highlights the most irritating problem that annoys probably, every kid—the wide gap of understanding between adults and kids. Actually, many grown-ups do not understand kids’ needs; they do not know how to express their love, concern and interest to kids. They think of what “they” [emphasis added] love or think important, not what kids love or feel

interested in, and impose it on them. Such a universal problematic issue makes of the series one of “coolest and most appealing” [emphasis added] books in the century for kids.

In the ninth *Wimpy Kid* book, *The Last Straw* (2009), Greg recalls the many traditional and uncool ways his teachers celebrated with them. During the Valentine’s Dance, Greg and many of his classmates are forced to fill into the gym and sit in the bleachers, listening to classic kids’ songs. Humorously enough, Greg writes criticizing the teacher who has chosen the songs as “SERIOUSLY out of touch with what kids are listening to those days” (2009, p.94). The picture just below the words portrays Greg and his colleagues sitting in the bleachers with sad, gloomy faces listening to the classical Hokey Pokey kids’ song from the cassette. The song words are written in a zigzag balloon to reflect their feelings of irritation and annoyance that have been accumulating against “authority figures” –teachers. Greg then delves more deeply into grown ups’ nature showing children’s ability in understanding adults’ psychology .When none of the kids reacts to the song , Mr. Phillips, the guidance counselor, and Nurse Powell start the dance themselves in the middle of the gym. The picture, this time, shows Mr. Phillips and Nurse Powell extremely happy with their dance. Ultimately, Mrs. Mancy, the principal, has made the best of a bad job; she resorts to a well-known trick usually made by teachers to encourage students to do what they (teachers) want. Greg recalls: “Mrs. Mancy grabbed a microphone and made an announcement. She said that everyone in the bleachers was REQUIRED to come down onto the floor and dance, and it would count for 20% of our Phys Ed grades” (2009, p.95). The above example, though humorous, brings into surface one of the central problems that causes a wide gap between adults and kids—teachers and adults care for what pleases them, not of what pleases kids or they lack the skills of showing their love concern to kids or perhaps are ignorant of them.

## Humor: The Main Secret behind the Popularity of the Series

As early as the middle ages, controversy sparked over the definition of humor. Defining humor is a hazardous task as it is somehow elusive. However, it can be generally defined as something that makes people laugh or smile. Many psychologists and philosophers have tried to give an accurate definition of humor, but no one has succeeded in giving a satisfactory definition of it. J. E. Roedelein (2002), professor of psychology for over thirty years, uses multiple capacities of what humor is in *The Psychology of Humor*. It is "ironic that we are daily exposed to humor, and the world's literature abounds with examples, yet humor eludes precise definition" (2002, p. 9). He goes to an extent of saying that attempting to define it is a challenge. As humor is multifaceted, it is "often used with the greatest degree of looseness" (2002, p.9). *The Free Dictionary* defines humor as "The ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is amusing, comical, incongruous, or absurd" (Humor 2019, online).

Many researchers assert that humor is based on cognitive ability rather than emotion. In his treasurable book *Humor: Its origin and development* (1979), Paul McGhee clarifies that humor can be affected by the level of cognitive development, cultural differences, generational differences, gender and personal preferences. As for children, McGhee maintains in the first place that types of humor which incorporate cognitive incongruities are understandable for children and hence cause children to laugh. He writes: "prior cognitive mastery or a firmly established expectation of 'how things should be' is a basic prerequisite for humor" (1979, p.38). In a similar jugular vein, Rod A. Martin (2007) is of the view that humor is a form of social interaction which is grounded on the degree of cognitive ability. In the *Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (2007)

Rod A. Martin proposes humor is:

A broad term that refers to anything people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus , and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it. (p.5)

At the other extreme, Joshua Shaw (2010) has taken a different approach. He firmly believes that humor is not “cognitively laden” as most people believe. He gives amazingly clear windows on individuals who undergo humorous experiences without the interference of previous cognition of these particular situations. The example of (a one-year-old laughing at a pratfall or laughing at a silly voice) is typical in this regard. He then proceeds to explore the possibility that “feelings of mirth” or an “emotion of humorous amusement” can define humor. He further declares that those feelings are explained “in terms of one’s internal experience of certain bodily states.” Shaw thinks that laughter helps us identify “the bodily states that typify humorous amusement” (2010, pp.121-122).

Humor is used in many fields for making communication easier and for achieving the concerned goals. It is not only used in the therapeutic field, but it is also used in education, commerce, business, politics and sports. On the psychological level, humor has many benefits. The scholar, Avner Ziv, is of the view that humor is a form of communication that has a diverse cultural nature but it has “four basic functions” which enhance and foster the social and the psychological developments in all cultures. To aptly quote his words:

The function of humor may vary from culture to culture and that humor has four basic functions: first to achieve

group solidarity; second to reduce conflict and reduce malice; third to control, perpetuate or challenge norms and stereotypes; and forth, to induce pleasurable experiences. (as cited by Klein 2009, p. 11)

Similarly, Martha Wolfenstein (1954), believes that humor helps cope with the trials of daily life: "Joking is a gallant attempt to ward off the oppressive difficulties of life, a bit of humble heroism, which for the moment that it succeeds provides elation, but only for the moment" (1954, p.11). Actually, Freud (1905) is said to be the first who described joking as a mask or a venue through which repressed sexual or aggressive emotions can find its outlet. He furthermore, stressed that there is a distinct connection between humor and a client's healthy adjustment. In accord with this view, Buckman highlights (as cited by Dziegielewski *et al.*, 2003) the therapeutic use of humor. He considers that humor is the healthiest functioning defense mechanism and that it joins the client and the therapist in accomplishing the painful work of therapy. A notable personal experience taken from *The Secret* (a best-selling 2006 self-help book) by Rhonda Byrne (2006) throws light on the validity of this view. Byrne recounts a personal story by Cathy Goodman about her defeat of cancer by using laughter as "the best medicine". To quote her words:

*I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I truly believed in my heart, with my strong faith, that I was already healed. . . . One of the things I did to heal myself was to watch very funny movies. That's all we would do was just laugh, laugh, and laugh. We couldn't afford to put any stress in my life, because we knew stress was one of the worst things you can do while you're trying to heal*

*yourself. From the time I was diagnosed to the time I was healed was approximately three months. And that's without radiation or chemotherapy. (pp.128-129, italics in original)*

Now that we have a rough idea of humor and its nature, an intriguing as well as an inevitable question poses itself—*Why do we laugh?* To answer this question, the research paper shifts to the well-known traditional theories of humor: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. After defining each of these theories as well as throwing light on the challenges that faced each approach, I will prove through some hilarious situations from the selected novel *Hard Luck* the validity and the equal efficiency of the three theories.

The novel abounds with many examples of the Superiority and the Incongruity theories. The Relief theory is not much found, but it still exists. The title of the series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is an evident example of the Superiority Theory. Most of us have been timid in some situations when we were small kids, and that is why it attracted many readers all over the world. Either we feel superior to the kid protagonist, or we console ourselves as we find someone else coward just as we had been once before. Actually, it depends on the reader's nature.

### ***Hard Luck and the Superiority Theory***

The Superiority Theory is simply defined as the excitement we feel when we see other people (object of amusement) suffer from some trouble whether in themselves or from the outside. Such excitement motivates us to laugh at them because of our feeling of superiority over them or over a former state of ourselves.



Many authors have claimed that the negative view of laughter as having a malicious superiority nature goes back to Plato. Plato's *Philebus* (1997) and *The Republic* (1997) stand as evidence. In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues that pain and pleasure are the main components of humor (1997, 48 a). He then finally sums up the whole argument in a few words highlighting humor's mischievous nature as follows: "if we laugh at what is ridiculous about our friends, by mixing pleasure with malice, we thereby mix pleasure with pain. For we had agreed earlier that malice is a pain in the soul, that laughing is a pleasure, and that both occur together on those occasions" (1997, 50a). As for the *Republic* (1997), Plato evidently shows his rejection to laughter because it is an emotion that is totally out of man's self-control. In this respect, Morreall (2009) writes:

In his *Republic*, when setting up rules for the education of the young Guardians of the ideal state, Plato singles out laughter as something to be avoided [...]. So that the young Guardians are not given bad models to follow, literature should be censored to eliminate all mention of the gods or heroes as overcome with laughter (p.10).

The 17<sup>th</sup> century political thinker, Thomas Hobbes (1987), adopted a position similar to Plato; he is said to be the first modern philosopher to adopt the Superiority Theory. In his treatise *Human nature*, Hobbes (1987) acknowledged "that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" 1987, p.20.

Hobbes is of the view that laughter emerges from our sense of joy. It can either arise from our feeling of achievement or be caused by

the conception of our own ability. The gratification we get through our realization of our superiority over others is what constitutes our joy. Others' frailties, imperfections and deficiencies are all vehicles that help to glow our vigilant sense of superiority. The aggravation of our self-image constituted via comparison makes us joyous and hence we laugh at others' weaknesses.

Despite its bad reputation, humor theorists advocate the role of superiority humor in moderating life stress and lessening aggressiveness. Gruner (1978) contends that it actually lessens aggressive behavior by allowing "a great deal of emotional expression that would otherwise have to remain unexpressed and 'bottled up inside' us or else released in less socially accepted ways" (1978, p.35). On the positive side, Meyer (2000) is of the view that humor is a binding bridge in composing, unifying and promoting a group unity: "Laughing at faulty behavior can also reinforce unity among group members, as a feeling of superiority over those being ridiculed can coexist with a feeling of belonging" (2000, p.315).

As any other theory, the Superiority Theory did not appeal to some critics. Francis Hutcheson (1987) claimed that it was fragile due to two challenges. The first is that there is no relation between feeling superior and feeling humorous. In other words, it is not necessary for experiencing humor to feel superior. We can find something funny but not feel any sense of superiority. For more clarification, sometimes we laugh at jokes that mainly depend on word play. Thus, consider the coming common joke: Why is 6 afraid of 7? Because 7, 8, 9. For the first while, you would not be able to understand that the number "8" is not a number but the past of the verb "eat". Realizing the underlying trick is what amuses us, and

there is nothing that testifies our superiority in it.

The second challenge is that self-comparison and sudden glory are neither necessary nor sufficient for laughter. To put it frankly, human beings feel themselves superior, by nature, to all other creatures, so what is funny in that? Moreover, feeling superior to someone does not trigger laughter, he thus writes:

It must be a very merry state in which a fine gentleman is, when well dressed, in his coach, he passes our streets, where he will see so many ragged beggars, and porters, and chairmen sweating at their labor, on every side of him. It is a great pity that we had not an infirmary or lazaretto to retire to in cloudy weather, to get an afternoon of laughter at these inferior objects: Strange! – that none of our Hobbists banish all canary birds and squirrels, and lap-dogs, and pugs, and cats out of their houses, and substitute in their place asses, and owls, and snails, and oysters to be merry upon. (p.29)

Accordingly, if we are in a position of superiority regarding others' misfortunes, feelings of sorrow, passion and pity will be dwelling upon us, not laughter. To this refutation, I may add: Do teachers feel humorous and laugh while teaching, only because they feel superior to their students? I am not in favor of Hutcheson's argument, I am only bringing into surface all of arguments that may arise against Hobbes. As a matter of fact, I am inclined to agree with Hobbes simply because some (not all) people laugh at other's inferiority. Those who feel jealous, or suffer of a deficiency in their integrity, or perhaps have experienced some tyranny at the hands of the subject of ridicule, or lack self-confidence etc., may laugh out loudly

at the victim. Similarly, if other people—who do not have any of the before mentioned conditions—laugh, so they are laughing due to the incongruity of the situation (the Incongruity Theory). The Relief Theory cannot go under that categorization as it has its own peculiar characteristics. The appliance of the theories in the novel will corroborate their equal efficiency.

Many humorous situations in the series embody the Superiority Theory. In the novel, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck* (2013), Greg Heffley, the kid protagonist of the series and of course of the selected novel is a middle school boy who has been exposed to constant situations of sheer bad luck. First of all, his best friend, Rowley Jefferson, has abandoned him for the sake of a girlfriend called Abigail. As a timid boy kid, making new friends is such a huge burden that he is exposed to many embarrassing, ridiculous and funny situations. The first part of the novel abounds with many unsuccessful hilarious attempts that Greg has been continuously doing for making new friends. Every sincere attempt he does turns out to be comic mishaps or hard luck.

Greg's mom felt sorry for her son that he hasn't got any friends. She has been giving him tips on how to make new friends at school. Unfortunately, all of her tips haven't worked out and some of them turn against him. Greg has been trying to persuade his mom that "NOWADAYS popularity is based on stuff like what kind of clothes you wear and what kind of mobile phone you have" (p.50). After all of her attempts have come to nothing, Greg's mom is finally convinced of her son's stuff about popularity with kids. She has decided to take him out for clothes shopping. To guarantee success this time for her son making new friends, Greg's Mom has agreed to buy him branded shoes.

Taking extra care not to get his shoes dirty before showing them off to his colleagues at school, he accidentally steps in dog poop when he walks on the grass to his way to school. On that day, they are having a pop quiz in Geography, and he arrives twenty minutes late, so all of his classmates glimpse his stylish branded shoes. Things were fine until he begins to notice a strange terrible smell that he can't bear. To his surprise and disappointment, he discovers that the awful smell comes from a dog poop sticking underneath his shoes. On account of Mrs. Pope's advice, the Geography teacher, he puts his shoes in a plastic bag and returns to his seat. The entire class burst out laughing when they have seen Greg carrying his shoes in a plastic bag without caring about his feeling. They are all joyous and are moved to laugh freely at such an embarrassing situation without considering how much pain they have caused him. All of a sudden, Greg's dignity, glory and happiness are lost.

At this point, the Superiority Theory crystallizes itself so clearly especially when Greg added: "Usually, I find poop as funny as the next guy, but that when someone ELSE steps in it" (p.70). Even Greg himself would laugh at someone who might step in a dog's poop. Such a clear and a frank confession is the core of the Superiority Theory that laughing at other's misfortunes explains a feeling that one gets at the inferiority of others accompanied with a sense of one's supremacy.

Greg's classmates are jealous at the time they notice him wearing his new stylish branded shoes. They must have felt that he is displaying his superiority over them and this have made them felt less important and kind of hurt them. Thus, when Greg's classmates have figured out his ridiculous situation, they seize the opportunity of triumphing over him and hurting his pride as well by laughing

out so loudly at him. Such a raucous laughter is an assertion of their superiority over him and a way of expanding their ego at his expense. Though this seems morally objectionable, one may recall Gruner's view on the benefit of superiority humor. Greg's classmates resort to laughter as an outlet to their bitter emotional expressions of jealousy and envy. If they were not discharged, they would have been "released in less socially accepted ways" (1978, p.35).

### **The Relief Theory and the Novel**

Another humor theory that can explain the source of laughter in this novel is the Relief Theory. It is traced back to Lord Shaftesbury, and was later advocated by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. The Relief theory is built up upon the idea that laughter relieves pent-up nervous energy. In other words, accumulated inappropriate energy of emotions is relieved through laughter. According to Spencer, emotions take the physical form of nervous energy. In his essay "On the Physiology of Laughter" (1911), Spencer explains that laughter results due to psychic energy:

A large mass of emotion had been produced; or, to speak in physiological language, a large portion of the nervous system was in a state of tension. [...] The excess must therefore discharge itself in some other direction; and in the way already explained, there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter. (pp. 106-107)

Spencer notes that the emotions that find release are those regarded as inappropriate, and the nervous energy is vented through the muscles connected with speech. We experience

humorous amusement as a result of some kind of relief, such as of energy, stress, or emotion. The buildup and release of this energy explains our tendency to smile, laugh, and clap when presented with something funny. Thus, this view revolves around the physical sensation we feel when finding something funny.

In fact, Freud was attracted to Spencer's work because it included psychic energy as a component of the mechanics of laughter and added his psychoanalytic psychological theory to it (e.g. humor serves as an outlet for the energy caused by repressed emotions). In his 1905 book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* he calls laughter energetic "discharge," writing: "Whatever brings a psychical process into connection with others operates against the discharge of the surplus cathexis and puts it to some other use" (1905, p.279). In coping with Spencer's explanation of laughter, Freud believes that in all laughter situations we save a certain amount of psychic energy that we have summoned for psychic purpose but which turns out to be not needed, and this surplus energy is discharged in laughter.

Though it is certainly a daring venture to cast doubt on any of Freud's accounts, his theory to explain laughter or humor did not appeal to many philosophers and psychologists. Morreall writes in "Philosophy of Humor" (2012) indicating that only "few contemporary scholars defend the claims of Spencer and Freud that the energy expended in laughter is the energy of feeling emotions, the energy of repressing emotions, or the energy of thinking, which have built up and require venting" (2012, p.45). On the whole, the Relief Theory is seldom used as an explanation of laughter, but this does not mean its futility or even its deficiency.

The Relief Theory shows itself clearly from the very first page.

As it is mentioned before, Kinney intends to make his readers sympathize with Greg Heffley. Greg's overburdening problematic issue is introduced in the very first pages. Deserted by his best and only friend Rowley, Greg has to find and make new friends. Greg recounts how much he and Rowley have been close friends and that they have many things in common. Now as a broken heart boy, he recounts how Abigail—Rowley's new girlfriend—has easily taken his place and that Rowley no longer needs his friendship: "I just don't get how you can go from being someone's best friend to getting kicked to the curb. But that's exactly what happened" (p.6). Every time the reader reads how Rowley has been helpful to Greg and that Greg now loses gradually all of those benefits, emotions of pity and sorrowfulness accumulate in the readers: "The other reason it stinks that Rowley isn't with me is because, with the school year winding down, the teachers have really been loading us up with homework lately" (p.12). In another part in the same page we read: "My body's not built to carry that kind of weight, but Rowley is practically a pack animal, so it's no problem for Him" (p.12).

Getting worse is the recess period. The recess can be either the best period you can enjoy during your schooldays, or it can be the most boring and embarrassing period you wish it is over very soon. Friends are that thing which makes it very interesting. Now, being deserted by Rowley, Greg finds himself in a complete loss: "I used to hang out with Rowley during recess, but those days are over. It's probably time for me to strike out on my own, but the problem is I don't know where I am supposed to go" (p.31). Probably, Greg is not the only kid who has trouble joining in with others at recess, so the school administration has done a quick and simple change by turning the "bully reporting station on the playground into a 'Find a friend station'" (p.43). Greg seizes the opportunity and in no time



sticks himself to the station. To his complete astonishment no one comes to ask for his friendship except Mr. Nern, who out of pity walks over to him with a box of checkers.

The arrival of Mr. Nern is what makes readers laugh. Instead of getting a kid as a friend, Mr. Nern—an unacceptable friend—asks for his friendship. According to the Relief theory, we laugh because the nervous energy of our pity has become superfluous and “utilizable” and hence we laugh it off. Reading Greg’s predicament at finding new friends, we might feel pity for him. But the appearance of the unexpected and the unwanted—Mr. Nern—as a temporary solution makes us laugh. So the nervous energy of our pity, now superfluous, is released in laughter. This explains Spencer’s and Freud’s Relief Theory.

### **The Incongruity Theory and the Novel**

The dominant and commonest definition of the Incongruity Theory is of the view that humor generates from surprising unexpected things of odd nature. It is the intellectual recognition of what does not fit into normal mental patterns that causes laughter. In fact, this theory has been proposed by some prominent philosophers such as Aristotle, James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, and Schopenhauer. Although each philosopher has his own theory which is really distinguishable, I would like to show that they all work successfully and are valid through their application in the novel. I will go through these theories in a way that serves the overall meaning of story not due to the earliest philosopher who came up with the theory.

Immanuel Kant [1724-1804] is said to be the first developer of this theory. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) he sheds light on the nature of laughter and its causes. According to Kant,

laughter happens as a result of the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. We laugh at absurdities because of our physical response which cherishes and pleases us. It is the intellectual recognition of absurd incongruous ideas that creates our pleasure and hence laughter. He believes that the physical occurrence of laughter is enjoyable because “nothing is taught” by the end of a joke. Accordingly, he develops a peculiar theory of his own to explain our weird and exciting reaction to that intellectual recognition of incongruity. Kant (2007) illustrates his theory with the following explanation of the response to the punch line of a jest:

It is remarkable that in all such cases the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation. . . to this sudden transposition of the mind, now to one now to another standpoint in order to contemplate its object, may correspond an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines which communicates itself to the diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel). In connection with this the lungs expel the air at rapidly succeeding intervals, and thus bring about a movement beneficial to health; which alone, and not what precedes it in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at a bottom represents nothing. (p.60)

The Incongruity Theory is scattered throughout the novel; its hilarious effect is experienced from all of the diverse views of its philosophers. Greg still suffers from the lack of friendship. He has

known another lonely unpopular guy called Fregley. Unfortunately, Greg is totally disinterested in that guy to the extent that he considers not walking by Fregley's house on his way to see Rowley is the only good thing that happened to him in the past two weeks. Then, all of a sudden, an amazing idea strikes his mind. He decides to befriend Fregley so as to "mould him into EXACTLY the type of friend" he wants (2013, p.77). Moreover, there is a great benefit of Fregley which Greg considers as a guaranteed thing. He has noticed that the most popular guys are those who have a "funny sidekick" and that girls never show any kind of interest in them.

Accordingly, he can see Fregley as his molded funny comrade who would not constitute any kind of threat to him. Making a great use of him, Fregley so willingly proves to be Greg's honest assistant. He warns him of dog poop on their way to home, and he pulls his wheelie case so frequently. The Incongruity Theory shows itself so clearly when they got near the Mingo kids' woods. Greg tells us that he knows nothing about them but that they consider the woods as their home and live like "a pack of wild animals" (2013, p.17). Taken by surprise, they are chased by the whole pack till finally they are able to elude them and got to the bottom of their street. Greg's satisfaction at their successful attempt of evasion is soon succeeded by a deep sense of disappointment when he realizes that Fregley has thrown all of his books when the Mingo kids have been chasing them and thus handed him the case "EMPTY". Curious to know the reason behind such a strange act, Greg is struck with an absurd explanation that makes readers instantly laugh "I asked him why he'd gone and done THAT, and he said he was hoping they'd stop and READ them" (2013, p.83).

Thus, what amuses us in Fregley's reply is that our expectation

was strained for a while and then was suddenly dissipated into nothing. Curious to know why Fregley has thrown Greg's books, our suspense is temporarily strained, and then suddenly is transformed into nothing. Fregley's reply does not satisfy our reason but dissipates our thoughts. Thus, the confusion of our ideas generates a physical disturbance of our internal organs which pleases us.

Apart from Kant's theory on humor, James Beattie (the first philosopher to use the word incongruous to analyze humor) regards laughter as an expression of joy that "always proceeds from a sentiment or emotion, excited in the mind, in consequence of certain objects or ideas being presented to it" (1779, p.304). He further adds that our laughter "seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage" (1779, p. 318).

Similarly, Arthur Schopenhauer in his famous article "The World as Will and Idea" asserts that laughter "always arises from nothing other than a suddenly perceived lack of congruence between a concept and the real objects that are in some respect or other thought through it, and it is itself just the expression of this lack of congruence" (2008, p.53). He believed that it often occurred when a generalization is applied to two objects that are only similar in one respect and when a generalization is applied to some object that unexpectedly fits the description. So, according to Schopenhauer, humor arises when there is a difference between our conception of a thing and what we discover it truly to be through our perception. Thus, it is the disorder that we notice between our concept of the way things are actually are and our sense-perception of how those same things appear before us is what causes humor.

The following hilarious situation that occurs between Greg and

Fregley best illustrates Beattie's and Schopenhauer's views on humor that it is derived from the intellectual recognition of an incongruity. When Greg goes to Fregley's house to accompany him to school and knocks on the front door, nobody answers and he is about to leave. Just then he hears "some noises inside like a bowling ball falling down the stairs" (2013, p.84). When Fregley opens the door, he appears in a quite abnormal case which really astonishes but amuses us. In the picture below, we see Fregley wearing his shirt upside down and his pants falling down around his ankles. He explains to Greg that it is all done accidentally while getting dressed. The cause of our laughter is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between the standard and normal concept of a shirt and a pants being worn in their proper position and our sight perception of them in complete disorder.

Humor scholars claim that the roots of the Incongruity Theory go back to Aristotle. Although he did not use the term "Incongruity", there is a notable passage from the *Rhetoric* that singles him out as the first to plant the seeds of the Incongruity Theory. In the *Rhetoric*, a handbook for speakers, he declares that there is a type of comedy in which speakers rely on the element of surprise whereby a "speaker says something unexpected, the soundness [or truth] of which is thereupon recognized ". He also stresses that these unexpected statements should cherish the quality of being so distinguishable and unique, explaining that they should "be true without being common-place" (1984, p.3.412b). In the light of such illuminations, Aristotle clears that speakers can guarantee their audience to laugh by creating an expectation in them and then violating it.

The verbal humor which Greg uses in the coming situation, together with the reader's expectation that has been violated,

creates our laughter, and thus accords with Aristotle's concept of humor that "it includes incongruity for its basis". Realizing how much fun Fregley's appearance could make, Greg decides to win the approbation of girls at school by bringing Fregley over to one of the girl's table. When Fregley has displayed the funny scene by doing the same thing with his shirt and pants again, none of the girls shows any sign of amusement. The situation of the girls is, however, humorous especially when Greg comments that "we must've picked the wrong table" (2013, p.86).

The following hilarious situation adds, again, to the confirmation of the validity of Aristotle's concept of humor. Greg does not give up making the best use of Fregley to his benefit. He is totally convinced that Fregley would never constitute any kind of threat to him regarding his "dreamed of" popularity. Considering him as his sidekick, Greg asks him if he knows any tricks to display before the schoolgirls. Fregley pulls out a piece of gum, takes off his shirt and put the gum in his belly bottom. Taken by surprise, Greg and the girls are astonished seeing him chewing it. The news about Fregley's talent begins to spread all around and in no time he becomes very popular and was surrounded by many school guys to the extent that Greg couldn't find a place for him to sit by Fregley. What amuses us in this situation is the incongruity between Greg's expectation of attaining popularity at Fregley's expense and the real case that happens later. His expectation has been violated the time Fregley attained popularity due to Greg's successive attempts of having him as his funny sidekick.

To conclude, this paper has examined Kinney's series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as a new literary genre, which has its own distinctive features. It has also shown the secret behind its popularity and that humor is the dominant feature that makes the series very appealing

to kids. The researcher has proven that the three traditional theories of humor account for our laughter but each has its own cause(s). The Superiority Theory accounts for our laughter at others' misfortunes. It comes into play when Kinney's readers laugh out loudly, together with Greg's classmates, at Greg after realizing his predicament of his new stylish branded shoes. It is the ecstasy of joy that has motivated them to laugh because of their feeling of superiority over someone who has constituted a kind of threatening to their highly-estimated self-images. Similarly, the Relief theory is experienced by readers when an inappropriate energy of emotions has been accumulated in them and then released through laughter. The humorous amusement that Kinney's readers experience due to the outlet of their superfluous energy of repressed feelings of pity, best explains the theory.

The paper has also shown the validity of the diverse views concerning the Incongruity Theory. Readers cannot help but laugh out loudly whenever they read a situation that hinges on Kant's theory. Their laughter results from the straining of their expectations that are suddenly dissipated into nothing, or when their expectations, according to Aristotle, are violated. Readers also laugh in other situations when they experience an intellectual recognition of an incongruity—a theory advocated by Beattie and Schopenhauer. It should be clear by now that the three theories of humor: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory explain the arousal of laughter equally and efficiently in the series under study. In other words, an account of humor that cannot be attributed to a particular theory can be attributed to any of the other two. To sum up, the novel *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck* testifies the validity of these theories for causing laughter without any discrepancy.

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