



The Armour of Wit: Superiority Theory and the Defensive Functions of Humour in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*

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Abstract:

This research article investigates the defensive function of humour in Jesse Andrews' *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, specifically examining how the protagonist, Greg Gaines, utilises humour to navigate the trauma of terminal illness. The central research problem addresses whether humour in the novel facilitates interpersonal connection or serves as a psychological barrier to emotional intimacy.

Employing a theoretical framework that synthesises Thomas Hobbes's Superiority Theory and Henri Bergson's concept of Mechanical Inelasticity, the methodology involves a qualitative literary analysis of Greg's social strategies, parody films, and self-deprecating discourse.

Key findings reveal that Greg's humour acts as a defensive application of superiority. By parodying classic cinema and adopting a loser persona through self-deprecation, he robs others of the ability to ridicule him and maintains a state of social invisibility. Within the sickroom, humour functions as a tactical necessity to manage conversational gaps and deflect the emotional weight of Rachel's leukaemia. However, the study concludes that this shield eventually collapses. Rachel's death exposes the limitations of irony, forcing a transition from defensive detachment to authentic mourning. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that while humour provides a fragile survival strategy, it cannot indefinitely bypass the necessity of emotional vulnerability.

Keywords: Jesse Andrews, Superiority Theory, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, Trauma, Young Adult Literature, Defensive Humour.

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Introduction

Humour has a complicated place in narratives of illness and adolescent grief. It can create intimacy, reduce fear, and give speakers a language for experiences that otherwise seem unspeakable. It can also become a method of avoidance, a way of transforming another person's suffering into a manageable performance (Frank; Morreall). This ambiguity is especially important in young adult fiction, where adolescent protagonists often confront institutions, bodies, and emotions they cannot fully control (Trites 7). Young adult illness narratives frequently ask how a young person can speak about mortality without being absorbed by sentimentality, medical discourse, or heroic models of endurance (Elman; Gregory). Jesse Andrews' *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* enters this tradition by making its narrator, Greg Gaines, aggressively resistant to the consolations usually associated with cancer stories.

In the novel, the protagonist Greg Gaines is a high school student, who prides himself on being socially invisible. His strategy for survival is to be acquaintances with everyone but friends with no one. His only real connection is with Earl Jackson, whom Greg refers to as a "co-worker" rather than a friend. Together, they spend their time making low-budget, terrible parodies of classic films. Everything changes when Greg's mother forces him to spend time with Rachel Kushner, a classmate who has been diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukaemia.

Existing criticism has approached Andrews's novel through adolescence, identity formation, existential anxiety, and the conventions of young adult illness fiction. Such readings rightly emphasise Greg's immaturity and the novel's refusal of sentimental cancer romance. Less attention, however, has been paid to the specific mechanics of Greg's humour. This essay addresses that gap by combining Hobbes's superiority theory with Bergson's account of the comic as rigidity. Hobbes explains why Greg's jokes feel empowering: laughter allows him to experience a fleeting "Eminency" over others or over his former self (Hobbes 46). Bergson

explains why those jokes become ethically and emotionally limited: comedy arises when the mechanical is imposed upon living flexibility, and laughter operates as a social corrective directed against inelastic behaviour (Bergson 23). Read together, these theories show that Greg's humour is both affective and formal. It gives him a feeling of mastery, and it does so by converting fluid emotional situations into repeatable comic routines.

The article proceeds in five movements. First, it conducts a literature review of the available scholarship on young adult literature and humour, secondly, it establishes a theoretical framework that synthesises Hobbes and Bergson. The three analytical sections then examine parody as a shield, self-deprecation as a defensive performance, and sickroom humour as the point at which Greg's comic armour begins to fail. The conclusion argues that Andrews's novel contributes to humour studies, trauma studies, and young adult studies by showing not that humour is false, but that humour becomes damaging when it hardens into a substitute for relation.

Literature Review

Scholarship on young adult literature, illness narrative, and trauma converges on a shared problem. Adolescence is often represented as a period in which the self must negotiate power before it can narrate itself. Trites argues that adolescent fiction repeatedly stages power as something young protagonists encounter through institutions, bodies, families, and social codes (Trites 7). Cart's account of the field complements this view historically by showing how young adult fiction has increasingly made death, sexuality, illness, and psychological pain central rather than marginal subjects (Cart 34–35, 60–61). These approaches are useful for Andrews because Greg's narration is not merely comic decoration. His voice is a method of power management. He wants to define himself before school, family, illness, or friendship can define him.

Illness-narrative scholarship complicates that adolescent struggle by asking what happens when the body itself becomes an institution of constraint. Frank argues that illness is experienced and understood through three dominant narrative forms which are restitution, chaos, and quest, which reshape how individuals make sense of both their lives and their identities (Frank 75–77), while Sontag argues that illness becomes ethically problematic when it is burdened with symbolic meanings that obscure its material reality and the lived experience of the patient (Sontag 43–44). These arguments pull in slightly different directions. Frank is interested in the narrative forms through which illness is made speakable; Sontag is suspicious of the symbolic excess that can make illness mean too much (Frank 75–77, Sontag 43–44). Andrews' novel sits precisely between these concerns. Greg cannot avoid narrating Rachel's leukaemia, but he repeatedly tries to prevent it from becoming the kind of morally uplifting cancer story he distrusts.

Work on adolescent cancer narratives sharpens this point. Elman's critique of "teen sick-lit" argues that the genre has often used disability and terminal illness to produce intense affect while relying on narrow conventions of whiteness, heterosexuality, and medicalised adolescent suffering ("Nothing" 175–92; *Chronic Youth*). Christian James Gregory's study of contemporary screen illness narratives extends this critique into film, arguing that recent young adult "sick-flicks" have made some progress in depicting disease more directly but still often treat terminal illness as a coming-of-age device rather than as a full medical and psychosocial experience. Gregory also notes that *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* belongs to a cluster of narratives in which artistic practice mediates the male protagonist's relation to the ill girl. These observations matter because Andrews both uses and resists the genre's conventions: Rachel's leukaemia places the novel inside the cancer narrative, but Greg's abrasive humour refuses the expected movement toward romance, inspiration, or beautiful suffering.

Trauma theory helps explain the psychological pressure behind that refusal. Herman argues that traumatic experience fundamentally disrupts trust and relationships, making the establishment of safety the essential first stage of recovery before traumatic memories can be meaningfully integrated (Herman 267–68). Caruth, in a different but complementary register, stresses belatedness and indirect return: trauma is not always available to consciousness in direct form (Caruth 4-5). Greg's narration is not a clinical case study, but these frameworks clarify why his language circles pain through jokes, deferrals, and self-accusations. The novel's comedy is therefore not separable from its grief. It is one of the forms grief takes before Greg can recognise it as grief.

Humour theory provides the vocabulary for this defensive form. Hobbes's account of laughter as Sudden Glory remains foundational because it links laughter to comparison, elevation, and the pleasure of not being the one exposed (46). Bergson, by contrast, locates the comic in rigidity, repetition, and the intrusion of the mechanical into living flexibility (Bergson 4). Later humour theorists help specify the social stakes of that combination. Morreall's work on humour as cognitive and emotional play explains why comedy can loosen the pressure of painful situations, while Billig's emphasis on ridicule and social discipline reminds us that laughter often polices as much as it liberates. The present essay therefore retains Hobbes and Bergson as its central theorists while using later scholarship to frame humour as both relief and regulation.

The critical gap is consequently narrower and more consequential than a simple absence of attention to Andrews. Existing scholarship has examined adolescence, power, identity, illness narrative, sick-lit convention, cancer melodrama, and trauma's indirect forms. It has also given literary critics a rich vocabulary for laughter's superiority, social discipline, and cognitive play. What remains unexplored is Greg Gaines's humour as a defensive psychological mechanism whose power depends simultaneously on Hobbesian elevation and Bergsonian

rigidity. This essay argues that the novel's anti-sentimental force lies not only in its refusal of conventional cancer narrative, but in its exposure of the comic habits by which Greg keeps suffering at a distance.

Theoretical Framework

This research deals with two theories: Henri Bergson's mechanical inelasticity and Thomas Hobbes's sudden glory. In his book, *Human Nature*, Thomas Hobbes writes,

I may therefore conclude, 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: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance except, they bring with them any present dishonour. (46)

To complement the why of laughter, Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* provides the how. Bergson argues that laughter functions as a social corrective aimed at Mechanical Inelasticity (Bergson 6). According to Bergson, the comic arises when we perceive "something mechanical encrusted on the living"(Bergson 14), Where living means a human being and mechanical arrangement, on the other hand, is a thing. What, therefore, incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing (Bergson 20). Society demands wide-awake adaptability and elasticity from its members, and laughter is the social gesture used to repress eccentric, rigid, or repetitive behaviour. Crucially for this study, Bergson notes that laughter is accompanied by an "absence of feeling"(Bergson 4) and demands a "momentary anaesthesia of the heart"(Bergson 4)

Synthesising these two theories, we can view laughter as a social corrective which is triggered by failure of human fluidity. Bergson provides the mechanism of the comic where a living being mimics a mindless machine. Hobbes provides its emotional payoff, a triumph of

that very rigidity. In the case of a traumatic incident that happens in our life, using humour we create a psychological buffer where we protect ourselves from the hurt. This theory argues that by laughing at the tragedy, we conquer it and place ourselves above it.

Parody as a Shield

In Jesse Andrews' *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, the protagonist Greg Gaines along with his friend, Earl Jackson create 42 mediocre parody films, which serve as a crucial shield for Greg's delicate social standing. They began their filmmaking career by recreating Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, a project that took three months. They created parody versions of several critical films such as Kurosawa's *Ran*, *Apocalypse Now* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

In *Earl, The Wrath of God II*, the setting is changed from the jungle to Greg's Pittsburgh home. Instead of a conquistador searching for El Dorado, it features Earl searching for "Earl Dorado" while ad-libbing dialogue over a funk soundtrack. In *The 400 Doses*, a parody of Truffaut's *400 Blows*, they lean into drug-related humour and Absurdity. *A Fistful of Peanuts* is a take on Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, where they take epic cinematic themes and shrink them down to the mundane. *Hello, Good-Die* is a James Bond parody which serves as an important film for the duo because it introduced their use of sock puppets. The film is noteworthy for the line "The most beautiful thing about you is that you're not a sock puppet"(Andrews 128). By shrinking epic cinema to parodies and repetitive absurd sock puppet routines, Greg and Earl are exhibiting Bergson's something Mechanical Encrusted upon the living.

These movies can be seen as exercise in intellectual and social superiority. By parodying the great masters of cinema, Greg and Earl try to distance themselves from the social tiers of Benson High school. Instead of engaging with the unpredictable, fluidity of the high

school life, Greg prefers rigid, controllable scripts of classic cinema. Bergson argues that a comic character is one who "automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings" (Bergson 42). By retreating into a private world of bad film adaptations, Greg creates a mechanical loop of inside jokes, allowing him to maintain Hobbesian superiority while successfully achieving Bergson's anaesthesia of the heart.

Their films are mostly mocked or hated by their peers, but this rejection is proof of their own superiority. They keep their films secret, not showing them even to their parents. He justifies this by saying that they are not good enough but, the real reason is it helps him to maintain a private world. The world contains only them and the movies, where Greg is an expert in the field. By refusing others to see his parodies, he has absolute control over the discourse of the movies and himself.

He also tries to be superior by trying to belong to every group but not actively engaging with anyone. He tries to exist in a state of superiority by being the observer rather than a participant in the groups. By not engaging in the groups actively, he can get access to the groups yet not deeply attached to any one of them.

I didn't join any group outright, you understand. But I got access to all of them. The smart kids, the rich kids, the jocks, the stoners. The band kids, the theatre kids, the church kids, the gothy dorks. I could walk into any group of kids, and not one of them would bat an eye. Everyone used to look at me and think, "Greg! He's one of us."
(Andrews 8)

Greg views himself as a social scientist, categorising people with geeky labels. By staying at margin at all times, he ensures that he is the never target of ridicule. He uses this strategy where he is the one who is watching others and judging, not the one being judged.

For Greg, this state is both win and loss. Maintaining a neutral attitude is very difficult as it prevents him from forming genuine friendships. His filmmaking with Earl stands as the only exception. His friendship with Earl acts as a private collaboration where he can feel a sense of control and even superiority over a world which he is too afraid to fully engage with.

Self-deprecation as a Tactic

In the novel, Greg Gaines employs a tactful strategy where he self-deprecates, which serves as a sophisticated social defence mechanism. This act cannot be seen as a sign of low esteem, it is an exercise in intrapersonal superiority which helps to maintain control over his narrative and protect himself from the volatility of high school life.

Right from the beginning, Greg presents himself as a social and physical wreck. He describes his physical appearance as unsatisfactory and probably a fungus eating his brain. He characterises himself, pale, overweight and possessing a rat face. (Andrews 21)

By adopting the loser persona, Greg robs his peers of the ability to insult him. If he has already criticised himself with terms like mentally defective and pasty, no one else can gain Sudden Glory, the triumph of feeling superior to another, at his expense. Greg's self-insults are a calculated performance. One of his effective tactics is to make fun of his previous self and mock his younger self. By doing that, he shows the readers that he is in on the joke, effectively positioning himself as the observer rather than the victim.

One of my few effective conversational tactics is to throw previous versions of myself under the bus. Twelve-year-old Greg was a jerk to you, you say? He was a jerk to everyone. And he had like thirty stuffed animals in his room! What a loser. (Andrews 57)

The core of Greg's strategy is the retention of power through self - inflicted ridicule. When Maddison Hartner attempts to compliment him, he goes into excessive modesty mode where he convinces he is a jerk.

Nothing is stupider and more ineffective than Excessive Modesty Mode. It is a mode in which you show that you're modest by arguing with someone who is trying to compliment you. Essentially, you are going out of your way to try to convince someone that you're a jerk. (Andrews 173)

He calls himself "the Thomas Edison of conversational stupidity"(Andrews 173) to avoid the vulnerability of being truly known or liked. By insisting he is a "Jackass" (Andrews 292) and a "colossal dick," (Andrews 190) Greg ensures that expectations on him remain zero. If he makes everyone believe that he is fundamentally worthless, he can never truly fail, because failure is his baseline. Greg's insistence that he is a "colossal dick" is not just a block against others feeling "Sudden Glory" at his expense; it is a manifestation of comic rigidity. Bergson notes that the comic character often crystalises into a stock character, "a ready-made frame into which we are to step"(Bergson 7).

By adopting the fixed persona of a loser, Greg simplifies himself, substituting a mechanical identity for his actual dynamic self. Furthermore, his strategy of "Excessive Modesty Mode" operates like a machine. An automatic, defensive reflex that triggers whenever someone tries to breach his emotional walls.

This strategy of making fun of himself reaches a breaking point in the novel, when Rachel Kushner is diagnosed with Leukaemia. As her sickness intensifies, Greg starts to deprecate himself more, which acts as a psychological buffer against the trauma. This can be seen through his description of himself as an ineffective and useless friend and his description

of his and Earl's final film as "sickening depressing chaos" (Andrews 261) and "the worst film ever made"(Andrews 259)

By leaning into the idea that he is a melodramatic jackass and an Emotional Moron, Greg attempts to mitigate the guilt of Rachel's impending death. In this way, his self-deprecation serves as a final, desperate attempt to maintain neutrality in a situation where neutrality is no longer possible.

Humour in Sickroom

The sickroom of Rachel Kushner becomes the ultimate testing ground for Greg Gaines's philosophy of social superiority and emotional detachment. In the novel Humour in the sickroom is not used as comic relief but as a crucial social and psychological tool that helps Greg navigate the unbearable awkwardness around Rachel. As Rachel's condition worsens, the clever banter and ironic distance that Greg has spent years cultivating begin to fracture, eventually collapsing entirely during the creation and screening of the Worst Film Ever Made. Bergson explicitly states that laughter has no greater foe than emotion, noting that to produce a comic effect, one must impose silence upon pity and affection

Throughout Rachels illness, humour serves as a connecting point in their relationship. Greg enters the sick room with his absurd comedy, trying to navigate the horror of leukaemia with his humour. The humour is not his way to pass time, it serves as a tactical necessity. For Greg, making Rachel laugh is the way to prove his utility. Greg does not know how to talk to a girl who is dying. He finds it difficult to offer her comfort, lacks emotional maturity for deep conversation and he doesn't want to participate in the traditional cancer narrative. Instead of offering reassurance or support, he fills the silence with jokes, film references, absurd observations and self-mocking commentary. Humour becomes a way to manage conversational gaps that would otherwise force him into emotional honesty. "The reason was that cheering

Rachel up was one of the things I had gotten really good at, and when you're good at something, you want to do it all the time, because it makes you feel good". (Andrews 180).

Greg attempts to force this momentary anaesthesia of the heart into a space defined by mortality and tragedy. When Rachel's physical weakness becomes undeniable, Greg's instinctive distraction with comedy is an attempt to substitute the mechanical, jokes, film references, and repetitive banter, for the agonising reality of her decline

Humour also acts as an emotional shield. Whenever Rachel's physical weakness becomes visible or her mother's grief becomes palpable, Greg instinctively deflects with comedy. He changes the subject, makes a joke, or turns to meta-commentary about how bad he is at handling the situation. These moments show that humour protects him from confronting the reality of death.

Rachel, however, uses humour to exert superiority over her failing body. She rejects the traditional cancer narratives where the protagonist is painted in a passive role. Her humour is the refusal of world's pity. She recognises the performative nature of Greg's excessive modesty and often uses his own tactics against him. She does the listening while he babbles to avoid silence. Humour is not entirely selfish or defensive. When Rachel laughs, the sickroom briefly stops feeling like a place of illness. Their shared laughter creates a fleeting return to normal teenage interaction. For a moment, they are not the dying girl and the friend visiting out of obligation, but simply two adolescents talking nonsense. Humour restores a sense of ordinariness inside an extraordinary and painful context. It becomes a way to preserve Rachel's identity as a person rather than reducing her to a patient.

The breaking point arrives when Greg speaks with Rachel and realises that she is going to die. Even though he says she will get better before the camera, he did not even believe what he was saying. When the film is screened for the entire school, the shield of neutral superiority

which he has maintained for many years is shattered. He is no longer an invisible observer. He is being criticised and judged by the people who finds his experimental grief as weird and confusing.

Greg is forced to face the grief he had avoided for the long time, when he has to face Rachel's death. He realises that Rachel's film was not about her at all, but his arrogance and his failure to truly know the person he was watching die. In this silence, the walls he once built, finally collapse. He can no longer stand above the grief; he must sink into it. Bergson warns that,

“Highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter” (Bergson 4). As Rachel begins to die, the situation demands genuine emotional unison, rendering Greg's mechanical, unsociable comedy obsolete and ultimately causing his defensive superiority to collapse

The collapse of Greg's superiority in the wake of Rachel's death marks the transition from defensive irony to authentic mourning.

Thus, in the sickroom scenes, humour serves multiple purposes: it manages awkward silence, resists sentimental expectations, shields Greg from emotional pain, restores moments of normalcy, and reveals his psychological limitations. Andrews shows that in the face of terminal illness; humour is not about laughter alone; it is a fragile strategy for surviving a situation that feels emotionally impossible to face directly.

Conclusion

The significance of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* lies in its refusal to make humour either redemptive or merely cruel. Andrews presents comedy as an effective resource used by adolescence, but he also exposes the damage caused when comedy becomes armour. Greg

Gaines survives high school by laughing from a distance. He parodies canonical cinema, classifies peer groups, ridicules earlier versions of himself, and turns sickroom discomfort into a stage for comic competence. These strategies work because they give him the Hobbesian pleasure of sudden elevation over embarrassment, sentimentality, and grief. They fail because they become Bergsonian mechanisms, repetitive, inelastic routines that cannot respond fully to Rachel as a living person.

This reading contributes to humour studies by showing the value of combining superiority theory with Bergson's account of rigidity. Hobbes identifies the power relation inside Greg's laughter, while Bergson identifies the formal and social cost of that laughter when it hardens into inflexible habit. Integrating subsequent theories of humour as both play and social discipline as explored by scholars like John Morreall and Michael Billig further clarifies the dual nature of Greg's jokes, illustrating how a single punchline can simultaneously relieve internal pressure and aggressively enforce interpersonal distance. Together, these approaches reveal dimensions of comic defence that any single theory would leave incomplete. The novel is not only about a boy who jokes because he is immature; it is about a comic system that rewards detachment until detachment becomes ethically unbearable.

Furthermore, this essay expands the scope of trauma and illness-narrative studies by demonstrating how the anticipation of profound loss can dictate adolescent behaviour. Greg's humour illustrates how traumatic anticipation can generate indirect speech, displaced affect, and compulsive performance. His jokes do not heal grief, rather, they are structural delays, meticulously engineered to postpone the inevitable moment when grief must be faced. At the same time, Rachel's role prevents the novel from becoming a simple account of Greg's emotional education. Her laughter, irritation, and perception insist that the ill adolescent is not merely a lesson for the healthy protagonist.

Finally, the article contributes to young adult literary studies by reading Andrews's anti-sentimental style as more than tonal rebellion. The novel uses adolescent comedy to examine power, vulnerability, and the fear of being known. Greg's character arc does not conclude with a simplistic rejection of humour in favour of sombre seriousness, which would falsely imply that maturity necessitates the complete abandonment of comedy. Instead, his evolution marks a transition from rigid, defensive humour toward the brave possibility of expression that actively invites exposure. His ultimate decision to write the book following Rachel's death signifies a profound shift: narrative and genuine connection can only begin where the armour of wit finally shatters. It is a movement away from seeking superiority over pain, culminating in the difficult, necessary admission that pain has irrevocably altered the self.

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