

“Here Comes the Philosopher!” Elements of Humor in *Alien Love* by Asher Barash

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Abstract

At the center of this study is a discussion of humor and its manifestations in the novel *Alien Love* (1930) by Asher Barash, which portrays the relationship between Peretz Segal, a young Galician Jew returning from military service, and Frania Konsky, the daughter of his gentile neighbors. The research on this story focuses on the serene, idyllic atmosphere in which the plot takes place, with the underlying social tensions characteristic of intercultural relations between Jews and non-Jews. The explicit outbursts of tension in this story are quelled at times using humorous elements voiced by characters from Jewish and gentile society.

In the Jewish Hassidic community, where joy and humor are an integral part of the basic set of beliefs, the prominent characters in Peretz's family are the mother Miriam – called the 'aunt', Dobrish – Peretz's sister, Peretz Segal, as well as the cantor's wife – Eta Fruma, and Jewish Hassidic society in general. In the gentile community, the prominent characters are from the Konsky family – Frania and her grandmother, Grandma Shachanovska. The humor generated by these characters arouses laughter and ridicule. Sometimes this serves to ease the rising tensions and other times it is an indirect subtle way of expressing a certain truism.

Keywords: Asher Barash, Character, Humor, Jewish Humor

Introduction

Asher Barash (1888-1952) was a well-known author and poet, editor, literary critic, and translator.¹ He was one of the authors and poets whose work was produced in Eretz Yisrael in the early twentieth century. His adult literature deals with different topics in the life of the Jewish People in the Diaspora, particularly routine descriptions

¹ For biographical information on Barash see, e.g., *Kitvey Asher Barash* [Writings of Asher Barash], vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1952), forward to the book. For information on Barash as an author and an intellectual see Avner Holtzman, *Hayyim Nachman Bialik, Gdoley Haruach Vehayetzira Ba'am Hayehudi* [Chaim Nachman Bialik, Intellectuals and Creators among the Jewish People], (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2009), 198, and also Avraham Shaanan, "Asher Barash", *Milon Hasifrut Hahadasha Ha'ivrit Vehaklalit* [Dictionary of New Hebrew and General Literature], (Tel Aviv: Yavne, 1959), 162-163.

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of younger and older characters, both the downtrodden and the affluent who enjoyed a prominent social status in their community. Barash's descriptions show attention to the smallest details, and the theme of his works often focuses on portrayals of Jewish life in Eastern Galicia and in Eretz Yisrael.

Nurit Govrin, whose studies focus on a group of Hebrew writers whom she calls 'the family of forgotten authors', lists Asher Barash among them. She claims that their works have not received enough research attention. Govrin notes the complex tone and atmosphere of Barash's works as a whole and says that at first glance an idyllic, restrained form of narration is evident, one that "conceals tensions and mental storms". In her opinion, this form of narration lends his stories a dramatic air.² Other researchers who dealt with Barash's literary corpus as well, such as Mordechai Ovadyahu, Shalom Kramer, and Naftali Toker, refer to the stern and sometimes gloomy atmosphere that is evident between the lines of the stories, in contrast to the serene and calm atmosphere reflected outwardly. Ovadyahu speaks of the idyll in this story and its fragility: "This idyllic serenity... was only a prelude to the more fundamental, deeper, elegiac tune concealed within it..."³ Kramer discusses Barash's descriptions of life in the Diaspora, as a type of "serene and secure world... life proceeds on a steady course", and notes the narrator's sharp close observations of this world.⁴ Toker refers to the serenity described in Barash's stories and to the uniqueness of his Diaspora stories by using the scenery to form a delay in the plot. He says that Barash expands his scenery descriptions in order to extend the idyllic atmosphere, but this is only temporary and subversive and sometimes serves in fact as a subterfuge, alluding to some future event that is to breach the idyllic situation.⁵

In the current study I shall endeavor to show that Barash perceived humor as an essential tool and wove humorous threads and hues into his works, whether in the words of his characters or in the narrator's descriptions and comments. Humor, as we know, has many facets, some related to laughter and comedy and others, on the

² Nurit Govrin, *Sifrut Ivrit Bema'agaleha* [Reading the Generations; Contextual Studies in Hebrew Literature], vol. 5 (Gvanim, 1985, 2015), 365.

³ Mordechai Ovadyahu, "Mesos Boneh", *Moznayim* 10(1) (1940): 107.

⁴ Shalom Kramer, *Realizm Ushvirato* [Realism and its Decline], (Givatayim-Ramat Gan: Masada, 1968), 87-88.

⁵ Naftali Toker, *Hezyon Holot Veyarchetey Olam* [Vision of Sands and the World's Edge], (Givatayim: Masada, 1980), 52.

contrary, to the sad and the complaining, the pessimistic and critical. Arie Sover claims that humor is an essential tool underlying the existence of human society. Humor helps define "...the limits of its norms"; it is a communicative tool that makes it possible to convey messages between members of a community, helps form communities, and serves as a foundation for maintaining the sanity of the individual.⁶ Bergson positioned a similar claim at the basis of his discussion on the meaning of humor: "The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human". For example, we laugh at a human landscape drawing, at an object designed by human beings, at an animal whose expression appears to bear a resemblance to a human expression.⁷ The comic situation that arouses laughter in people is predicated, according to Bergson, on the "absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter".⁸ It seems that insensitivity, characterized by lack of empathy for another, might facilitate the development of complex situations that are indeed based on humor but also consist of other spheres, whether explicit or subversive, which may be ironic, ridiculing, or satirical. Namely, humorous situations may include a ridiculing feature charged with expressing a critical view of some social phenomenon.⁹

The story *Alien Love* (1930), which I would like to discuss,¹⁰ relates the story of Peretz Segal, a Jewish boy who returns from serving in the emperor's army, and the romantic relationship that develops between him and Frania, daughter of his non-Jewish neighbors. Their relationship is charged both for the reader and for the characters that play a part in the plot, from a social, cultural, and historical perspective.

This work received critical attention and was studied quite extensively. Shmuel Werses states that *Alien Love* is a romantic story that takes place in a unique multicultural social expanse consisting mainly of Ruthenians, Poles, and Jews. The

⁶ Arie Sover, "Humor – tzorech besisi shel ha'adam" [Humor – a basic human need], *Mar'ah* 5 24(7) (2010): 8-19.

⁷ Henri Louis Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Shovell Henry Bereton (Indypublish, 2002).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hillel Barzel, "Bialik Hatzohok: Parody im makama" [Bialik laughing: A parody and a maqama], *Mar'ah* 5 43(32) (2010): 35. For additional definitions of the term 'humor' see Roeckelein, Jon, E., *The Psychology of humor: a reference guide and annotated bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut, London: 2002, Greenwood Press, 87-9.

¹⁰ Asher Barash, "Ahava Zara" [Alien Love], *Writings of Asher Barash*, vol. 3 (Tel-Aviv: Massada, 1951), 255-353.

father of the main character, R. Zalman Leib, takes pride in his Polish speech and epitomizes the integration of Jews as a minority in this complex region.¹¹ Shalom Kramer speaks of the ease in which conflict can be incited between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. In his opinion, the love story of Peretz the Jew and Frania the gentile aims to assuage the tense atmosphere between the Jewish and Christian societies. Its bad ending alludes to the future conflict between the cultures, with Christianity to "...put an end to the House of Israel".¹² Naftali Toker speaks of the family structure in the story, which is partially based on Barash's own biography. He points to this structure as the foundation that guides Barash's stories: a widower father who marries a widow mother and together they raise their children and give birth to Nachuml, their joint son.¹³

This story includes expressions of humor and laughter. I wish to explore the use of humor and its contribution to the text. What is the nature of those situations that include humor? What is the nature of this humor and what is the role of the narrator in the humor generated by the plot? To what degree does humor help untie intricate knots in the plot and soften the story's dramatic atmosphere?

Verbal humor used by the characters

Mother Miriam, the "aunt"

At the beginning of the story we witness a moving encounter between the main character, Peretz Segal, who returns home at the end of his military service in the Emperor's army, and his beloved stepmother, 'aunt' Miriam. Miriam is portrayed as a quiet pleasant woman who supervises her household. Miriam, who hasn't seen Peretz for three years, comments on his non-Jewish appearance, his shaved beard, and Peretz replies that now they will grow back. He adds that he has brought a gift for each member of the family and his mother comments, jokingly, that he probably forgot to bring her a gift "just like his father". Her comment implies criticism of her husband who forgets to bring her gifts from his many travels. This seemingly sarcastic

¹¹ Shmuel Werses, *Hama'arag shel Bidyon Umetziut Besifrutenu* [The Interweaving of Fiction and Reality in our Literature], (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2014), 366.

¹² Shalom Kramer, *Realism and its Decline*, 90.

¹³ Naftali Toker, *Vision of Sands*, 138.

comment is in fact shrewd. By comparing Peretz to his father Miriam seeks to express her love for Peretz (as his step-mother), similar to her love for his father, her husband. When Peretz gives her the gift he remarks: "You have not changed, 'aunt', in any way." She answers: "Yes, the same R. Zadok's Adam's apple... Go on, go prepare your gifts for them. They might come in at any moment."¹⁴ In this dialogue the mother responds to Peretz's remark with self-ironic humor, using a term that alludes to her gauntness and slight build. This use of a term from Jewish culture, taken from a higher linguistic register, might hint at her intellectual background although the story contains no information about her schooling or prior occupation. Abrams, who categorizes satire as divided into stages and cites Horatius, says that satire voiced in the first person is direct satire, which aims to laugh at man's weaknesses. The writer speaks as a polite, moral person, and is not resentful of human weaknesses.¹⁵

In another situation, in Peretz's absence, Miriam comments on his relationship with Frania, the gentile girl, and refers to Peretz's behavior in spending much time with Frania: "Peretz placates the Kuneskis too much for the piglet..."¹⁶ This sentence, which creates a disproportionate comparison between human beings, the Kuneskis, and the animal they lost, the piglet, is humorous and critical of Peretz's behavior. Although Miriam utters this sentence as a joke, as it is perceived by her daughter Dobrish, her retort meets with a venomous reply by his brother Kobky, who is jealous of Peretz for the relationship with Frania. Kobky, who would have liked to experience such a relationship, says: "He may still stab their calf as well..." His remark is sarcastic and sharply critical of his brother and his growing relationship with the gentile girl. The animals mentioned, a piglet and a calf, the first considered forbidden and the second permitted by Jewish law, are reminiscent of the problematic relationship between Segal and Frania. In addition, the mention of the animals denigrates this relationship and lends it a disparaging air.

In another family incident, at the beginning of the meal concluding the Day of Atonement, with the entire Segal family present, sweet voiced Kobky is asked to sing but refuses. Miriam threatens, gracefully and jokingly: "I won't give him any of the

¹⁴ Barash, "Alien Love", 256.

¹⁵ Shlomit Bernholtz, *Itzuvim Satiriyim Kefunktzya shel Tmurot Betfisat Arachim Basiporet Hayisre'elit* [Satirical Designs as Functions of Shifts in Perceived Values in Israeli Prose], (PhD diss., vol. 1, Ramat Gan, 1984), 51.

¹⁶ Barash, "Alien Love", 272.

stuffed 'neck'. Its payback time: If he does not share his throat with us – I won't give him any of the chicken's."¹⁷ Miriam, who tends to speak positively of her stepsons, dares goad Kobky, who refuses to sing, and for this purpose she uses humorous means, linking enjoyment of the food she cooked to a repayment. In this statement two objects are set against each other: her son's throat, which produces pleasant sounds, and the stuffed neck of the chicken, a dish favored by Kobky, who refuses to sing. Placing the two parts of the neck against each other – the human neck and the animal neck – creates humor. Miriam, aware of the joke she is making, says that in this way she will make Kobky pay. Thus, she gives the same weight to the chicken necks and to the voice produced by her son's throat. The situation ends well when the stuffed chicken necks are served and once again Miriam turns to her son and asks: "Will you sing?" and he answers promptly: "After the meat!" So he does not give in and his prompt answer arouses laughter "on all sides". Miriam's words create a fun theatrical atmosphere and a pleasant easy feeling between the eaters. The joking in the presence of the family shows that they are familiar with Kobky's stubborn nature as well as with his affection for his mother's dishes. Her words are not intended to humiliate or shame him. On the contrary, she manages to find her way to the stubborn man's heart by setting a condition that is stated humorously in order to get her message across without doing any harm. This is done by using an exchange technique and utilizing well known information about Kobky's affection for her cooking.

Dobrish

When Peretz returns from the army he enters the cowshed, where he encounters the piglet belonging to the Kuneskis, the gentile neighbors. Peretz tries to drive the piglet away and when it returns once more to the cowshed he stabs it to death with a pitchfork. When the topic of the generous sum the father paid for the piglet comes up in the Segal home, Dobrish makes a comment that is directed at Peretz: "For such a sorry sum it would be worthwhile to stab a pig every day..."¹⁸ Also, when her sister compliments Peretz on his appearance, Dobrish gives her a look of "disparaging laughter". Dobrish ridicules and insults Peretz and seeks to put him in his place in order to ensure her senior status as the eldest sister after Kobky. This is evident when,

¹⁷ Barash, "Alien Love", 275.

¹⁸ Ibid., 262.

in the same incident, she gets up from her seat when her stepfather enters "and herself sits in Peretz's place, when he comes in."¹⁹ Dobrish's cynical attitude towards Peretz is doubly evident: it is expressed both verbally and nonverbally. In this way she seeks to test Peretz upon his return to the family and in order to establish her own standing within the family she does not spare her criticism from his aggressive behavior in the case of the piglet.

Dobrish's cynical statements, however, are aimed not only at Peretz but also at his brother Kobky Segal, who lives with her in the same house and in the past reneged on his commitment to marry her. When she sees him approaching the house she declares "Here comes the philosopher!".²⁰ What part of her words is humor and what is a simple factual statement? Does the sister wish, through this metaphor, to describe her brother's gait, engaged in ruminations? Is she alluding to his slow or disoriented pace or does she mean to remark metaphorically on Kobky's behavior, known as he is for being wordy and well-read?

The narrator describes Kobky when he enters the house as well dressed, with wise eyes. He looks at his younger brother and then remarks on his late return home. 'The philosopher' seems to be a designation that describes Kobky's image as an intellectual young man who is in no hurry to follow his father and establish a family of his own. Getting to know Kobky, it is clear that he is not quick to make decisions and that he takes his time in considering any matter related to his personal life. So it is not for nothing that Dobrish, with whom he was to become engaged, an engagement he cancelled after much deliberations, is the one who announces his arrival. Her words reflect criticism and mocking of a man who thinks slowly, considers each matter spiritually, and is not quick to decide about their shared future, while she awaits his opinion as to their relationship.

In another conversation, Dobrish and Elky discuss the developing relationship between Peretz, their stepbrother, and the gentile girl. Elky, who is in love with him, suggests that the relationship between the Jew and the gentile be allowed, saying that "we should not be so strict as to forbid lofty feelings such as friendship and even love." Dobrish is amazed and answers her sister:

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 257.

With a 'gentile'? Woe to our mother! If our father in his grave were to hear his daughter's views – he would be happy to be dead... You must have forgotten that our father was a scion of the Belz tzaddik....²¹

Her answer includes a macabre element, as she refers to the dead man as having human qualities, saying "he would be happy", a paradox that speaks of the dead man's joy at being dead. This macabre humor emphasizes Dobrish's strong rejection of Elky's idea that Peretz's relationship with Frania should be taken lightly and permitted. The tone of Dobrish's comment helps clarify her opinion and express it decisively.

Peretz Segal

Peretz's father says that Peretz conceals his feelings with "joking words".²² Notably, Peretz has returned from a military career in the emperor's army, where he served with gentiles, and his friendship with them probably included use of humor and laughter to bridge over tense situations.²³ The humor used by Peretz in his daily life in the present is evident when he is asked about fundamental issues such as finding a job, etc. In this way, Peretz uses humor as a means of camouflage and as a distraction from important matters.

In his first encounter with his brother Kobky and his stepsisters Dobrish and Elky he gives the girls gifts and his brother a cigarette case. When Kobky asks him whether he has taken up smoking Peretz answers him "in joking innocence": "No, I'm still young". At this answer his sisters "burst out laughing".²⁴ Peretz replied matter of factly, as Kobky's younger brother, but his answer, particularly the word 'still', indicates stagnation and standstill. Thus, the situation is characterized by pretense, as all those present know that Peretz is a mature young man recently dismissed from the army, with all the responsibility this implies. Sover refers to pretense as a feature that

²¹ Ibid., 272.

²² Ibid., 273.

²³ Arie Sover discussed the strong association between humor and physical and mental health, based on classical sources such as the Book of Proverbs and modern psychological theoreticians, as stated by Jung and the philosophy of Spinoza. Arie Sover, "Humor – a basic human need", *Mar'ah* 24(7), (2011): 19.

²⁴ Barash, "Alien Love", 258.

creates humor due to the play element it contains.²⁵ This is evident in Peretz's answer in contrast to the gesture of giving his brother a cigarette case, which creates humor and causes his sisters to burst out laughing.

Humor is also typical of Peretz in tough moments. For instance, after receiving the court's verdict that he is to be incarcerated for three days, he becomes aware of his status as a future prisoner: One way of coping with this new status with its potential of mental distress is by using humor as a means of defense. As Sover says, when one is "burdened by emotional stress" he might turn to humor in order to "view his difficulties from a humorous perspective".²⁶ On the day of the hearing the mother makes sandwiches for the family members that are to accompany Peretz to court. The father remarks "jokingly": "And if all three of us will be imprisoned – who will bring us food?" And Peretz "adds a joke of his own": "Elky will create a kitchen in jail".²⁷ This joking remark foreshadows the strengthening relationship between Peretz and his younger stepsister and it implies their consent regarding their joint future. His remark alludes to the family's unity, to his recognition that Elky is willing to make an effort for him. In addition, his remark indicates his appreciation of Elky and compliments her good housekeeping and cooking. In order to soften the intimacy formed by Peretz's humorous remark, the narrator states that Elky "did not avoid... her part in the joke and added: 'and we will also invite mother and Nachuml, and then the entire family can eat together. It will be a slight change. Everyone likes a change.'"²⁸ Elky's remark is aimed at the rest of the family, wishing to include them in the intimate experience that is anticipated by everyone and that is about to take place. Elky's addition is indeed an exaggeration, but it is said in order to dispel her embarrassment at Peretz's words. It also diminishes the intimate tone alluded to by Peretz's joking but meaningful sentence.

Elements of humor in Peretz's discourse with Frania

The romantic relationship between Peretz and Frania is characterized by the tension that often appears among young people who are attracted to each other. Their initial

²⁵ Arie Sover, *Bedarko shel Ha'adam Hatzohok* [Humor: The Pathway to Human Laughter], (Carmel and the Ashkelon Academic College, 2009), 132-133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁷ Barash, "Alien Love", 348.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

random meeting in the Segals' cowshed, in front of the stabbed and dying piglet, is replete with tense emotions of hatred and anger. But in their first encounter at the initiative of Peretz, when he takes up Pan Konsky's invitation to come to their house, he sees Frania in the garden, watering the flowers and singing. Peretz tells her that when he was a child he heard a story about an attractive precious object in the city of Lvov. This was an artistic display in the form of a water well, which had an intricate mechanism that was liable to fool strangers who were not familiar with the display. It was topped by the sculpture of a beautiful stone girl, reached via four steps. A jet of water would be released at each step ascended, every time from a different part of the stone girl's body, while at the fourth step the girl would enclose the climber in her arms, and jets of water would be released by her entire body, engulfing him. Local residents were familiar with the ruse and avoided climbing the steps, but visitors were caught in the trap and drenched to the laughter of the onlookers.²⁹ In this way, they became part of a show that aroused everyone's laughter.

Frانيا asks if this is a real place and Peretz laughs at her innocence: "Ha-ha-ha! How funny!" but says that he himself thought so but could not find the well when he searched for it. He continues laughing, his body shaking, and Frania is insulted. She is hurt and criticizes him for his crude joke: "I'm no longer a baby, to be made fun of... crude laughter! A soldier's laughter!" and he wishes to placate her and apologize to her but does not know how. Peretz's laughter expresses his excitement at the unexpected encounter with her and thus possibly his relief at speaking to her. The comic aspect of the story about the artistic site in Lvov, known for its humorous attraction, is based on his knowledge and familiarity with the wide world. The discrepancy between his knowledge of this site and her own lack of knowledge creates one-sided humor shared only by Peretz who laughs at her innocence.

However, it seems that Peretz is not making fun of Frania, as he himself admitted that he had believed the story as a child. Thus, his laughter may signify his efforts at strengthening his relationship with her, representing one of Peretz's ways of courting her.

Peretz's laughter and humorous style may be a way of concealing his embarrassment at the evolving relationship between a Jewish boy and a gentile girl in

²⁹ Barash, "Alien Love", 265.

an environment that does not see such a relationship positively.³⁰ Since humor might be interpreted as a light matter forming no commitment, it helps them maintain their relationship and get over their embarrassment.³¹

Unlike other characters, such as the sisters Dobrish and Elky, and similar to his stepmother Miriam, it appears that the humor voiced by Peretz does not serve to criticize and condemn others, rather to draw people closer by dissipating his own stress and that of the listeners. However, in the relationship with Frania with all its tensions, she interprets Peretz's use of humor as a patronizing response contrasting his wide knowledge with her own ignorance and narrow horizons.

Elements of humor reflected in the character of Grandma Shachanovska, Frania's grandmother

A major place is given in the story to the character of Grandma Shachanovska and to the description of her occupation as a well-known midwife, among both Jews and non-Jews. The narrator notes in an aside that she served as the midwife of "most of the town's young men and women (of which there are not many in this small congregation)".³² When a Jewish girl travels to Lvov to learn midwifery Frania's work diminishes and she expresses her anger at this. This remark indicates the underlying bitterness experienced by the midwife, who might take advantage of her granddaughter's wish to get back at Peretz for severing their relationship in order to take revenge on all the town's Jews, as representing her competitor, the Jewish

³⁰ This alludes to a double predicament: The interest they both show in each other that naturally causes them embarrassment, enhanced by the social-environmental difficulty of the Jewish Hassidic congregation, which forbids any romantic relationship with a member of another faith.

³¹ This story hints at the relationship that might evolve between them, as Frania is described as a beautiful attractive girl. The story of the stone girl might hint at the relationship of Peretz and Frania. If he shall get too close he might be ensnared by her and be disappointed and might even find it hard to free himself from her chains.

³² Barash, "Alien Love", 269. The narrator's humorous tone is evident in these words. In general, the narrator accompanies his characters by expressing his subjective views with regard to them. For example, in matters that involve a conflict, the narrator takes an empathic position that favors the Segals. As an intervening narrator, he allows himself to express his opinion at the tone of various situations and to note that it was funny or to remark that one of the characters' comments is humorous. Some of the chapter titles are funny and have a connotative association with events and characters in the history of the Jewish People who were persecuted over the ages by evil wishers. For instance, the title of Chapter 27: "Pan Deziki, or 'son of Hamdata' " (ibid., 336).

midwife. When she worked as a midwife, the babies' fathers would drop coins into the bath of the newborn, and she would curse and make everyone laugh. This description makes use of crude humor in the course of a major constitutive event in human life, childbirth. From the level of an intimate event characterized by loftiness and pathos, the event descends to that of a lowly happening characterized by bathos thanks to the midwife's language, for which she is rewarded by money and crude laughter.³³

Grandma Shachanovska is described as an active woman, strong despite her age, sturdy, who drinks "strong spirits like a drunkard, while not showing any sign of drunkenness." She takes interest in her surroundings not only in her occupation as a midwife, rather in any matter that comes to her attention. Her language is juicy and peppered with Jewish language and popular sayings. This description is humorous, as drinking alcohol appears to be an automatic act that has no physical effect on her.³⁴ The gender aspect has significance as well, as most of the female characters in *Alien Love*, both Jewish and gentile, are described as feminine, genteel, and normally quiet and polite when in the company of men. In contrast, Grandma Shachanovska behaves crudely and disregards social norms. Thus, she enters people's homes without announcing herself, interferes in matters that are not her business, and demands that her directions be followed.

The narrator's verbal description of Grandma Shachanovska adds to the humor portrayed by her character and even includes a disparaging dimension: he calls her a miser and a spendthrift, says that she deals in commerce, sells cow's milk and chicken eggs while her neighbors do not manage to do anything useful with them. Her daughter Yadviga explains her success by "speaking bad of her mother" and claiming that "she is clearly a witch". Thus, her daughter explains that "she keeps the chickens in a warm room on a bed of chaff and changes their bed daily..." and wraps her cow in a coat sewn from old clothes "and feeds it hot 'soup' thrice daily".³⁵ But the omniscient narrator intervenes and adds explanations of Grandma Shachanovska's success in parentheses, even adding that her daughter does not say this:

³³ Ibid., 270.

³⁴ On the principle of automaticity and mechanics see Bergson, *Laughter*, 33.

³⁵ Barash, "Alien Love", 270.

And she conceals the fact that her mother keeps her chickens in a warm room on a bed of chaff... and does not say that her mother sews her cow a coat... and feeds her hot 'soup' thrice daily...³⁶

By presenting two sources of information, the partial information brought by her daughter and the information added by the narrator adds humor to the grandmother's character.³⁷ The grandmother's concerned attitude and her devoted care of the farm animals is an attitude worthy of being displayed towards human beings. But the lack of proportion between her devoted care of the animals and her goal, to achieve maximal produce, also arouses ridicule.

Another ridiculed custom of hers is her habit to give gifts to the Konskys "not for the love of Mordechai". Thus, she buys gifts and keeps them for a long time, for two years, only giving them to her family, her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter, when she gets into a fight with one of them.³⁸ This mocking behavior is childish, and such a quality displayed by an old woman is a source of ridicule. Giving gifts guided by this consideration emphasizes the lack of proportion between her behavior and her age.

Her intervention in the relationship between her only granddaughter and Peretz should be analyzed accordingly. In this matter I shall seek to explore two events initiated by her and partly characterized by various forms of humor: Peretz, who is in a hurry to reach his parents' home, meets Frania's grandmother on the way, and she involves him in a discussion about her granddaughter. She approaches him pleasantly,

³⁶ The three dots are in the original. The narrator seeks to be precise and brings this information, but hints in this way that this is ridiculous. The punctuation adds to the humorous tone shared by the narrator, as one who refers to the issue of the grandmother's success and rejects the daughter's claim that she is a witch and that is why she does so well. According to the narrator, Grandma Shachanovska dedicates herself to her work and therefore succeeds. However, it is later apparent that the daughter called her mother a "witch" as an ironic designation that arouses laughter because it fits the grandmother's future behaviour when she intervenes in her granddaughter's relationship with Peretz (on this matter see more below). Elky, who holds Grandmother Shachanovska responsible for the lawsuit for Peretz's slaying of the piglet, also calls her "the old witch" (340).

³⁷ I discuss "the different meanings of information in parentheses in the works of Barash" in *Kriat hahaim, Reading the Life, A Study of Asher Barash Works*, Ariel University, 2017, 133-101.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 272.

in popular language, to draw him into the topic of the conversation, and says: "Don't be a *shaygetz*!" Peretz, who wishes to put an end to the encounter with her, says:

"Grandma" was probably called out to care for some woman in labor. Here is the medical bag under her sweater. The woman is crying out and the birth is near."

"No matter, she can yell a little. It is also possible to birth an adult (literally: a big one)... Here, I so wish to birth you for me and my family, to have you as a son...

Oh, it is not easy to birth a baby such as me. Don't forget, 'grandma', that if I kick – there is a nailed boot on my foot...³⁹

In this encounter both speakers contribute to the humor created, mainly through the linguistic forms they use. Peretz's description of the woman in labor, using rhymes (in the original version), creates a comic light atmosphere. This verbal form is subtle, considering his wish to shorten their random meeting as much as possible. The humorous reply of the grandmother, the professional midwife, is prompt and emphasizes the comic atmosphere. She refers to the woman's shouts professionally and explains that it may be a big baby, in which case her delay in reaching the woman's house is justified. She continues to speak, ignoring her purpose in leaving her house and her task of reaching the woman in labor, changes the subject, and compliments Peretz, expressing her wish: "I so wish to birth you for me and my family, to have you as a son..." as one who seeks him for her granddaughter. This statement alludes to Peretz as an object intended for her granddaughter.

With the conclusion of this part of the dialogue between the two, a conversation develops on enhancing the relationship between Peretz and the granddaughter. Grandma Shachanovska demands that Peretz maintain a committed relationship with her granddaughter and speaks her praise. This part of the conversation is devoid of

³⁹ Ibid., 327. The meaning of the word 'shaygetz': "1. (In Eastern European literature) (before World War II), a non-Jewish boy, a term used for a young gentile man. 2. Naughty (sometimes used affectionately) (popular)." Eitan Avneyon (ed.), *Milon Sapir* [The Concise Sapphire Dictionary], (Jerusalem: Hed Artzi / Eitav, 1997), 1048.

humor and it foreshadows the next event to take place in the presence of Grandma Shachanovska.

In this incident she enters the Segals' home unannounced, a dramatic and surprising conduct. She delivers a monologue, characterized by humor in its first part. She begins by ridiculing the idyllic atmosphere in the house and states that in her family things are stormier:

Here he sits, the handsome boy, the seductive soldier, the agitator, calm as can be. As though he did only good from the day he returned home, as though he did not murder a sweet innocent animal on the first day of his return, as though he did not use his glib tongue to seduce a well-born girl, a soft and pure young woman, a refined noble daughter, and bring upon her pain from hell! And why, said good people, did I help his late mother give birth to him? Why did these my hands accept him? If I had only known that he would sow such sorrow and hardship among those in his vicinity. Because he feeds good honest people only bitterness [...] Oh, if only I could deliver you now, miserable devil, I would decapitate you with one swipe before you had even uttered your first cry! [...] Remember, leprous dog! Remember!⁴⁰

These words are dramatic and arouse concern among those present. The grandmother uses ridicule, exaggeration, and euphemisms, and the contrast between the description of Peretz's calm and serene appearance and his terrible deeds enhances the ridicule in her diatribe. Her language is violent, replete with curses and blasphemy as well as macabre descriptions, and it attests to her strong feelings. In the first part of the monologue she addresses those present, while in the second part she addresses Peretz himself and others – those present, with whom she shares Peretz's romantic affairs and thus invades his personal space once again and seeks to embarrass him. The situation gradually becomes humorous, aware as we are of some details concerning Grandma Shachanovska's general behavior, as one who tends to get into fights with her own family, her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter, and punishes them accordingly. She is also known to enter various homes in the town

⁴⁰ Ibid., 313. The three dots are in the original.

unannounced and to remark on matters that bother her even if they are none of her business.

Furthermore, although she enters the Segals' home to reproach Peretz and revile him, she seems to be the one ridiculed and derided, as Peretz has no fear of her, although the Segals are horrified by her behavior. Aside from the dramatic aspects of the situation there are also comic aspects. In the chapter "The comic element in situations and the comic element in words" Bergson mentions the 'snowball' feature, which is "an effect which grows by arithmetical progression, so that the cause, insignificant at the outset, culminates by a necessary evolution in a result as important as it is unexpected."⁴¹ As seen by Frania's grandmother, her granddaughter's vague relationship with Peretz is enough reason to cause an uproar. However, her words exceed the subjective distress that led to her appearance and reveal her (anti-Semitic) opinions and views on Jews in general. Notably, this conversation is part of a chain of events that will join others in prompting Peretz to reach a decision to sever his relationship with Frania.

Elements of Humor reflected in the character of Eta Fruma, the cantor's wife

The character of Eta Fruma, the cantor's wife, is one of the most prominent generators of humor in the story. Similar to Grandma Shachanovska, she is an active woman, described as a "woman of valor". For example, she brings clothing from the city and offers "special deals" (as defined by the narrator) to Jewish as well as to "...gentile girls, all of whom know her and have much affection and trust in her."⁴² Similar to Grandma Shachanovska, she too takes upon herself a public role and intervenes unnecessarily in the private life of the locals, both Jews and non-Jews. Her children are married and do not live at home and she has time on her hands. These details might explain her busybody behavior and her intrusions on Peretz's personal space and interfering with his relationship with the gentile girl. Signs of humor are first evident in Eta Fruma's words when R. Zalman Leib Segal comes to her home and that of her husband, the cantor R. Tzalel, to invite him to the celebration that he intends to hold and to ask him to perform for the guests. R. Leib Segal is welcomed by the cantor, who wishes to entertain him and calls for his wife Eta Fruma to bring

⁴¹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 54-55.

⁴² Barash, "Alien Love", 292.

refreshments. She comes in and, disregarding the topic of their conversation, delivers a monologue in which she speaks out against the deeds of Peretz, son of R. Leib Segal, and criticizes his acts with the *shikseh*. She proposes that R. Zalman Leib excommunicate his son due to his grave sin and claims that she learned the Jewish law on the subject at her father's home.

Eta Fruma goes on to describe the immodest behavior of young Jews who embrace the customs of the Western intellectual life style. As an orthodox woman, her pain at the possibility that the young will leave the faith completely, and at the danger of intermarriage of which she warns in Peretz's case in particular, is understandable:

His son runs after *shikses* – and he holds celebrations for the pious... if my only son would act so I would cleave his brain, I would remove him from under the skies of heaven... Hear you, he came from the army and adheres to the impurity of the gentiles.⁴³

Her words express her derision at the son, but also at the father who perseveres with his religious actions, and she in fact ridicules the father's innocence for not being aware of his son's deeds. The speculative description of her only son is also a matter of laughter, as she uses blatant and aggressive words to describe her hypothetical response and to convince those listening.

In her speech, the cantor's wife demonstrates belligerence and a clear and decisive attitude. Her tone of voice and words are violent, and her character is strongly reminiscent of Frania's grandmother with her impromptu visits to local homes and interference in matters that do not concern her. The polite behavior of her husband, the cantor, serves to further stress her own comic aspects: In his occupation he uses his voice in a pleasing manner, and in his encounter with R. Leib Zalman he consistently takes a gentle and appeasing course to refrain from shaming him:

Oh, what is this! – said R. Tzalel in a very 'moral' tone – are this the 'refreshments' you have brought us, Fruma Eta? I was thinking of some

⁴³ Ibid., 292.

preserves of peaches, or of roses... and here you have come to reproach a guest in our home?⁴⁴

R. Tzalel responds to her harsh words with a gentle reply that contains subtle cynicism, using figurative language to stress the contrast in her behavior towards the guest.⁴⁵ He claims that she shamed R. Leib Segal by not entertaining him properly. Instead of hosting him as expected, she attacked and threatened him. Further on, when R. Tzalel asks his wife to refrain from interfering in business that does not concern her, she says to him: "What did you say, you old beast?... All you are capable of is to constantly ask for preserves of peaches..."⁴⁶ Her crude and insulting response, approaching public humiliation, has a diminishing dimension and equates her appearance and the matter for which she interfered in the dialogue within the same ethos.⁴⁷ In this way, she instructs Segal to sit until he has had two glasses of tea with preserves that she made, while she tells her husband to prepare tunes for Segal's celebration. The words used indicate her ordering tone and arouse ridicule. She insults the guest and in the same charged situation asks him to remain and have some refreshments and tries to force him to stay. R. Zalman Leib's polite refusal enhances the ridiculous aspect of Eta Fruma's behavior.

In the course of the celebration as well, Eta Fruma criticizes the young Jews. She listens to the Hassidic words voiced by the participants. She says to Peretz whom she encounters: "You younger generation, if I had you under my hands, I would whip you every second day... and I have already got into a fight with R. Zalman Leib on your behalf."⁴⁸ Her words show familiarity, she takes control of Peretz's personal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 293.

⁴⁵ And in order to ensure that the reader understands the cantor's tone, the narrator intervenes and marks the word "refreshments" with inverted comas.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 294. Eta Fruma addresses her husband in this form, "impure beast", in other opportunities as well. In a conversation with her neighbour she calls her husband an "old beast" and another time, in the same incident, she urges him to enter the house, while spitting and once again using the expression "old beast" (ibid., p. 338). The linguistic automatic forms contribute to the comic situation and do not necessarily have a diminishing effect on her husband the cantor.

⁴⁷ Bathos is one of the means with which the 'black comedy' is shaped. "...The black comedy usually does not bring matters to their conclusion. It has no values and portrays people that are more automatons than human beings, who act upon their desires and passions... One of the tools employed by the black comedy is the bathos. This is the sudden collapse of a high expectation, a fall from the supreme and high to the funny and ridiculous". Bernholtz, *Satirical Designs*, 72.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 309.

affairs, his personal relationship with Frania, and allows herself to comment on it. Her blatant and automatic expressions, for instance "every second day", arouse laughter and ridicule. Her comic behavior indicates that she is no threat to Peretz's relationship with Frania. However, using humor as a means of communication urges the recipient to listen, and thus it is an easier and optimal way of conveying serious messages.

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In one of the encounters between Peretz and Frania, after she hurt her leg, they talk about a book she loaned from him. Frania states that the book is full of humor: "He must read it: I'm telling him, so funny. Oh, when they sink in the mud!... You could drop dead from laughing. Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!".⁴⁹ Peretz did not read the book that he loaned from his sisters for Frania and Frania asks him why it took him so long to come and mentions the parable of the tortoise who went to draw water and it took him five days. Peretz apologizes and Frania says that she forgives him although she is not a priest. Both these statements use humor and figurative metaphors that lend the conversation subtlety. In addition, their conversation is light due to her humorous comments that seek to draw Peretz closer to her, to get him to visit her more often and thus form a stronger relationship. Later on Frania dares him to try and open her fist. He tries to do so and jokes that every finger he opens will be his.⁵⁰ She replies: " 'His', funny! How can it be his if it is connected to my hand?" Humor serves to draw the two closer and to ease the embarrassment and intimacy involved in this game of Peretz opening Frania's fingers.

Elements of Humor among the Segals

After the father and his son return home from a business trip. At home are Miriam, Elky, and Kobky, and it is tea time. Dobrish is visiting relatives and Elky waves a letter that arrived from her sister and declares that "we may soon have a family celebration". She is referring to her relative, a 30 year old insurance agent.

Kobky replies and says that Dobrish's marriage will free the way for Elky, her sister, to marry as well: "And Elky's course will open". Elky responds: "Go away. You're evil". The father says that he has no objection, unless – and he looks at his son Kobky

⁴⁹ Ibid., 281.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

to confirm his prior suggestion that Kobky will marry Dobrish. The son answers the father's "meaningful" glance at his eldest son: "Oh, no, no!... – If I have any intentions, it is only towards Elky..." and Elky answers: "As I said: You are an evil man... and if she goes with the agent – she won't be to blame [...]"⁵¹ The three dots concluding Elky's words serve to fill in for the verbal message that both the characters and the reader can add for themselves. In the sentence that Elky did not finish she meant to place the responsibility for her sister's possible fateful step of marrying another on Kobky who is evading his responsibility.

Potential spousal relationships in the family are one of the topics that Toker identified in this story as a fundamental element in Barash's stories,⁵² which cause the family much embarrassment. Hence, the conversation on this issue is important because the adult members of the family take part in it, and most of them are single.⁵³ As evident from Kobky's words, in their Orthodox society it is customary to marry off the older brothers/sisters and only then the younger ones. Any delay in the marriage of the older siblings affects the prospects of the younger siblings. Nonetheless, the embarrassment caused by this topic makes some of the characters speak in riddles: thus, the father who makes do with a "meaningful glance at Kobky". Hence, the humor in this conversation helps form a comfortable atmosphere, softens the discomfort, and makes it possible to further the discussion.

At the height of the suspense, when Peretz is in court with Elky and his father, three of Peretz's friends arrive as well. They look at Frania and one of them comments: "How old was the piglet when it died: one month old? Look, Peretz, now he will ask for the price of a six-month old, because if it had lived it would have been six months old." Peretz responds to their cynical words with a smile and his father comments: "You are such a group of clowns. Lets go inside – asked-suggested Gastrol – and we shall enjoy an entire drama for free" [...]"⁵⁴

Humor is a common tool in conversations held among the Segals. Moreover, it helps maintain a pleasant atmosphere between the characters in this family composed of two integrated units.

⁵¹ Barash, "Alien Love", 311. The square parentheses indicate three dots that appear in the original text.

⁵² See note 11 above.

⁵³ The brothers Kobky and Peretz, the sisters Dobrish and Elky, and Nachuml the child.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 350.

Elements of Humor at the celebration in memory of the Rizhinner Rebbe

As he does every year, on the 3rd of Heshvan R. Zalman Leib Segal holds a celebration in memory of the late Rizhinner Rebbe. The joyful atmosphere during the celebration follows the Hassidic tradition: an encounter of many hassids, from the most simple people to the heads of the community, who look forward to the event, which is characterized by a joyful and uplifting atmosphere. The story includes a detailed description of the preparations for the celebration: arranging the tables, laying the fragrant white tablecloths, a description of the furniture, the silver candlesticks, the aroma of the cooking dishes, the flavor of the borscht in garlic and the wafting smell of the roast, as well as the festive Sabbath clothes worn by R. Zalman Leib and his family.⁵⁵ This joyful atmosphere and the annual repetition of the event undoubtedly attest to the host's good and generous temperament and his intention to allow everyone to rejoice.

At the celebration people eat and drink and listen to words of Torah, all in an atmosphere of good will and happiness.⁵⁶ According to the Hassidic dogma,

After the hassid understands and internalizes the concept that 'the entire world is full of His honor' and that the world is a divine place and there is no disparity between the human material world and the perfect world of the Divine, he must be 'always joyful'.⁵⁷

This Hassidic event, whose main element is joy, not only creates an atmosphere of humor, rather even the décor is described humorously and reflects this happiness: "The whitewashed walls glistened with reserved joy."⁵⁸ Ascribing a human quality to

⁵⁵ Barash, "Alien Love", 303.

⁵⁶ Meals as a sociocultural event in the life of Hassids consist of various features, which include the blessing after the meal, washing one's hands before the meal, blessing the wine (Kiddush), etc. "At least one of the participants is from the sages, the description of the meal includes, in addition to eating, also mutual relations between the participants". Ruhama Weiss, *Ochlim Lada'at; Tafdidan Hahevrati shel Se'udot Besifrut Hazal* [Meal Tests: The Meal in the World of the Sages], (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010), 18.

⁵⁷ Shlomo Fisher, *Tnuat Hahasidut Vehahaevra Hayehudit Bemizrach Eyropa* [The Hassidic Movement and Jewish Society in Eastern Europe], (Jerusalem: The Institute for Creative Jewish Education, 1988), 85.

⁵⁸ Barash, "Alien Love", 303.

the inanimate wall adds to the humor, which seems like humor for its own sake rather than having a subversive purpose. During the entire event, the narrator remarks that "words of affection and joking"⁵⁹ on various subjects are heard. For example, R. Ahrale is asked to tell the audience "something on behalf of the Holy one" and his story about a renowned Rabbi concludes with the strong laughter of the Rabbi who "liked to laugh".⁶⁰ Spalding claims by Jon Roeckelein that

The true Jewish joke mirrors the history of the Jewish people-it is a reflection of their joy and anguish, their aspirations and defects, and all-too-brief periods of social stability and economic well-being. Jewish humor expresses their age-old desire for a world in which mercy, justice, equality and understanding will prevail, and it portrays their quest for eternal truths.⁶¹

Another aspect of humor is laughter, and a manifestation of one's ability to laugh at oneself is the hassids' laughter at their customs, "they told jokes about the hassids of Belz."⁶² Self-humor is a sign of modesty and humility and of treating humor as a mechanism that is good for one's soul. Bergson's claim that "laughter certainly has a social function" is very appropriate in the case of this celebration and its purpose, which had no intention of criticizing.⁶³

The first humorous situation occurs with the arrival of the first Hasid, R. Woptzi Hagarsy, who comes with his five hungry sons. Upon entering he tries to send them home and says loudly: "Go, go home... there's no celebration meal for children..." but his eyes smile deviously and they understand that he does not mean it and they scatter "around the house to avoid notice."⁶⁴ The discrepancy between his words and his eyes, with the different message they convey, creates humor. This adds to the compassion and appreciation for the father's attitude to his hungry sons, as he brings them to an event where food is generously served in order to feed them. In this case

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 305.

⁶¹ Roeckelein, Jon E., *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut, London: 2002, Greenwood Press, 108.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Bergson, *Laughter*, 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 303.

the humor softens the dismal reminder that R. Woptzi is poor and his family often goes hungry, and that the celebratory meal where they can eat delicacies from the butchered calf will satisfy his hungry sons.

The meal, to which five whole chapters of the story are devoted (13-17), is linked to the romantic relationships of Peretz and of the young Segals. Thus, when R. Zainwill the matchmaker enters Zalman Leib's house, he looks at the host and says:

May this be the first of many times of joy, may engagements and marriages arrive promptly, for the girls and for the boys – and may the matchmaking be done by me. I have not got yet even one cent out of him.

The matchmaker's words embarrass R. Zalman Leib, who answers him seriously: "With God's help he will earn enough."⁶⁵ The matchmaker opens with words of greeting to the host and blesses him that his children will be married. The matchmaker later ties his blessings to his profession and seeks to attract his host's attention to his wish to make a living by finding matches for the boys and girls he mentioned at first. His remark that he has not yet made any money off R. Zalman Leib is humorous because the matchmaker refers to his occupation in strictly financial terms. This remark causes R. Zalman Leib embarrassment, maybe because he himself is occupied with the subject and has already hinted to his children about the possibility of a match between them.

When the room fills with hassids and with sounds of laughter and talk, the matchmaker catches hold of Peretz and whispers to him that he has a "I have a nice mule for you... sweet boy, she is worth ten Frantias!".⁶⁶ Peretz does not reply to the matchmaker's words. It seems that the matchmaker allows himself to approach Peretz on a personal matter thanks to the joyful atmosphere in the room. His style of speech with Peretz and of the hassids with Peretz in general is picturesque and exaggerated. It includes objectification of women, who appear to be judged as a commodity; they are to be purchased according to their appearance, like animals. This language is also deprecating by its very comparison of women and animals. They are indeed valuable and have financial benefits, but their juxtaposition with the animals creates a

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

diminishment that excludes women and this is also a cause of humor. The matchmaker's words also arouse another matter concerning the comparison between the Jewish girl and the gentile girl. He says that the value of the Jewish girl is greater than that of the gentile girl. This commercial language too diminishes and objectifies women in general, but also intimates that the value of the Jew is greater than that of the gentile. This remark is possible in a Jewish social event such as this, as if it had been voiced in the presence of Ruthenians or Christians it would form tensions and entangle the speaker.

Conclusion

The humor in *Alien Love* by Barash is interwoven in the story in various forms, as a manner of expression employed by most of the characters, whether in a dialogue between two people or in a statement before several participants, before an audience, in different situations involving local life. These matters are often linked to the plot: the fate of the relationship between the main character, Peretz Segal, and the gentile Frania Kinsky. Humor appears to have a major role; softening and refining the tensions formed locally between Jews and non-Jews as a result of the love affair between Peretz and Frania. Sometimes humor appears as a subversive manner of expression and sometimes it is a subtle, gentle, and polite way of expressing tense views and hidden feelings.

In the sensitive intercultural circumstances of the Diaspora, in times characterized by tension that is inclined to bubble up between Jews and Christians and Ruthenians, the narrator utilizes mediating tools, those of humor. He uses them consciously to lead the characters carefully between the various events. This humor does not reduce the weight of the issues raised in the story. The humor interwoven throughout the story may also serve to draw in modern-Western readers and to teach them about the life of Galician Jews in the late 19th century. The narrator seems to be aware of this matter as well and for this reason he takes the role of mediator and often remarks (many times in parentheses) on the nature of the humorous words he puts in the characters' mouths, hinting at the desired interpretation, and seeking to guide the reader accordingly.

Nonetheless, as a story that to some degree reflects the life circumstances of Galician Jews, it encompasses events in which humor seems to have no place due to the danger they allude to, and it appears that even humor cannot detract from their significance. However thanks to the humor interwoven in these complex situations as well, it may be assumed that the characters will continue to conduct themselves in this expanse in the future as well, even after the three day incarceration, sometimes silently, and sometimes with humorous sentences used to soften, reconcile, and mediate between the threatening present and the unknown future.

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