
AN APPLICATION OF THREE BASIC THEORIES OF HUMOUR TO KINGSLEY AMIS' LUCKY JIM

Öğr.Gör.Dr.Sena TULPAR

Buca Eğitim Fakültesi

Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü

ÖZET

Çalışmamızda gülmecenin üç temel kuramı olan "belirsizlik", "aykırılık/uygun olmama" ve "üstünlük" kuramları temel alınarak Çağdaş İngiliz Edebiyatı yazarlarından Kingsley Amis'in *Lucky Jim* adlı romanı incelenmiştir.

SUMMARY

In our particular study, one of the authors of the contemporary English Literature, Kingsley Amis' novel entitled *Lucky Jim* was analysed through three basic theories of humour; i.e. "the theory of ambivalence", "the theory of incongruity" and "the theory of superiority".

INTRODUCTION

Kingsley Amis present a serious subject richly blended with humour. Actually, in this particular novel Kingsley Amis has the intention of introducing the campus life and interrelated relationships between professors and research assistants. In a way, he attempts to rise the curtain to display the covered up private lives of the academics. What the author plans to reflect is quite a limited aspect of the campus life only. That's to say, he picks rather an awkward research assistant called Dixon, and a scatter-brain professor named Mr. Welch, who on every possible occasion

threatens Dixon with dismissal from his job. The reader who knows the genre of this novel expects to read a serious material, but the author tends to convey his underlying seriousness through abundant humorous characters, occurrences and encounters enriched with a slight tinge of ironic remarks and situations as well.

The events taking place seem to be fairly commonplace, but the impact of each mishap on Dixon's shaky career prospects gains a great deal of significance as the novel unfolds. The reader feels the quite similar amount of fear like Dixon when several times he runs the risk of being expelled from his office. The author has drawn the character of Dixon with utmost care to reflect his simplicity that from time to time reaches the limits of stupidity. In the majority of cases, Dixon deserves the sympathy and mercy of the reader because of his naivety and good-will and these particular characteristic features of Dixon cause him to be an easy prey to the others' manipulations and exploitations.

The professor of history, Mr. Welch who has already secured his academic career now tackles social activities where he performs music and entertains people coming from the circles of his artistically gifted son called Bernard. Dixon is expected to take great pains to please every member of the professor's close relatives besides the professor himself especially Mr. Welch's irritable wife gives Dixon the hardest time of his life.

In this particular study three well-known theories of humor will be employed as our source of reference. These main theories embrace "the theory of incongruity", "the theory of superiority", and "the theory of ambivalence".¹

Applying the main theories of humour to Lucky Jim:

Dixon finally happens to know the unavoidable reality about his personality and career prospects. He admits that he has not been cut out for university teaching. This bitter realization stands as a good example for the theory of ambivalence. Dixon comes to accept the reality gradually, but he cannot let things slide. He studies hard night after night to prepare his speech about 'Merry England', but he can't abstain from drinking heavily before appearing in front of the audience. He seems to be victimized by Christine's uncle, Gore Urquhart who offers him a sip of Irish whisky to gather his courage but Dixon hardly knows where to stop. As it is

1-D.H.Monro, *Argument of Humour* (Melbourne: Melbourne Uni. Press, 1951.)

guessed the lecture proves to be a complete failure for both Dixon and Professor Welch. Mr. Welch sends a note informing him that he will not be able to recommend the renewal of his contract for the next academic term. The following quotation indicates how Dixon prepares his own downfall:

"..... Welch felt he ought to let him know, unofficially, that when the Council met next week he would be unable to recommend Dixon's retention on the Staff."²

Mr. Welch's parties offer a great deal of pleasant time to the guests. One of the amateur musicians turns over two pages accidentally and the listeners are supposed to close their ears. This piece of example indicates the origin of laughter when an incongruity crops up unexpectedly.

"The young fellow playing the violin had the misfortune to turn over two pages at once, and the resulting confusion my word"³

Another instance of incongruity can possibly be observed in the way Mr. Welch is trying to move his car. The noise coming from the engine or gear happens to produce the funny sound of tinkling bottles as if they were rubbing against each other. The description of the situation is given in a quite funny way. The bottles are not ordinary ones but beer bottles on top of this the starter's noise resembles the ringing of a cracked door-bell:

"A minute later Dixon was sitting listening to a sound like the ringing of a cracked door-bell as Welch pulled at the starter. This died away into a treble humming that seemed to involve every component of the car. Welch tried again; this time the effect was of beer-bottles jerkily belaboured."⁴

Dixon's both academic career and private life prove to be great suffering. Dixon finds himself entangled with Catchpole's ex-girl-friend, Margaret. He never finds her attractive enough to strike up an intimate relationship, but ironically he is

2-Kingsly Amis, *Lucky Jim* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1984), pp.232-233.

3-Ibid., p.8.

4-Ibid., p.13.

pushed into a close relationship that he never dreamed of before. Out of humanistic motives, he tries to help her regain her lost self-confidence, but all of sudden he realizes that this hysterical girl is tied up with him resolutely. He cannot shake off her easily because the academic's naivety does not allow him to grasp the true personality of Margaret and there is also another hindrance which seems to be more irritatingly significant-Mr. and Mrs. Welches are acting as Margaret's protégés. This particular situation illustrates the ambivalent characteristic features possessed by Dixon. He seems rather immature in arranging his relations with the members of the opposite sex and feels weak to speak his true mind and emotions so this creates a pathetic situation which leads to funny events especially at the advent of Christine. Dixon naturally draws a comparison between Margaret's and Christine's physical appearances as it reads in the following lines:

"The huge class that contained Margaret was destined to provide his own womenfolk." ⁵

"It was a pity she wasn't a bit better-looking"⁶

"Every thing about her looked severe and yet she didn't mind burnt sheets and charred table-tops, and Margaret did. The girl hadn't minded fried eggs eaten with fingers, either."⁷

The ambivalent humorous situations are generally related to Dixon's limited capacity to find a way to cope with his inner conflicts. The solutions he figures out are either unworkable or inadequate. When he spends the week-end at the Welches, due to his drunkenness, he burns the sheets, blanket and the top of the table with a lighted cigarette. By cutting off the burnt areas of the bed-clothes with a razor blade, and removing the charred table from the guest bed-room up to the attic, he causes the reader to burst into laughter because the reader does not expect a grown-up academic to act like a child to cover up his faults:

"A large, irregular area of the turned-back part of the sheet was missing, a smaller but still considerable area of the turned-back part of the blanket was missing; an area about the size of the palm of his hand in the

5-Ibid., p.39.

6-Ibid., p.37.

7-Ibid., p.79.

main part of the top blanket was missing

..... He started carefully cutting round the edges of the burnt areas of the bedclothes with the blade. He didn't know why he did this, but the operation did seem to improve the look of things: the cause of the disaster wasn't so immediately apparent....."⁸

On many occasions, the people who assume to own some superiority to the others can inevitably give rise to humorous events or situations. Professor Welch's son Bernard knows for certain the fact that poor Dixon's future basically depends on his father. Therefore, Bernard feels free to threaten and scold Dixon whenever he suspects the closer intimacy between Christine and Dixon.

"I'm having Christine because it's my right. Do you understand that? If I'm after something, I don't care what I do to make sure that I get it. That's the only law I abide by; It's the only way to get things in this world. The trouble with you, Dixon, is that you're simply not up to my weight. If you want a fight, pick someone your own size, then you might stand a chance....."

Dixon moved a pace nearer. 'You think that just because you're tall and can put paint on canvas you're a sort of demigod. It wouldn't be so bad if you really were. But you're not: you're a twister and a snob and a bully and a fool'."⁹

The reader easily notices the dishonest motives of the painter, Bernard for having Christine as his girl friend. Christine has got an uncle called Gore Urquhart who holds a very important social status as an art critic in London. Through Christine, Bernard wishes to seize a secretarial job in Gore's company. Meanwhile Bernard is courting with Carol Goldsmith without letting Christine know about his hypocrisy. In the end of the novel, ironically enough, Bernard faces such a defeat that he has never expected to. He loses the chance of getting the job, and his fiancée, Christine turns to Dixon who he humiliates and scolds on every possible occasion. The situation described above is quite ambivalent and ironic. Bernard's final defeat by Dixon who has never attempted to overpower him strikes highly ironical. Bernard's fall is great because he himself claims to be socially great and artistically unequalled.

8-Ibid., pp.62-63.

9-Ibid., p.212.

Christine explains to Dixon why she decided to dissolve her relationship with Bernard:

"'What's happened? That you wanted to tell me.' He tried to force his spirits down, to expect nothing but unexpected and very nasty nastiness.

She looked at him, and he again noticed that the whites of her eyes were a very light blue. 'I've finished with Bernard.' She spoke as if of a household detergent that had proved unsatisfactory.

.....She hated him for taking her for granted. I didn't mind what he'd done before he started going about with me, but it was wrong of him to try to keep us both on a string, Carol and me."¹⁰

In the relations of Dixon and Mrs. Welch, the social friction between them can easily be noticed throughout the novel. Especially, the atmosphere gets more and more tense after Dixon's burning her bedclothes during an ordinary case of drunkenness. Mrs. Welch seems to be hunting for a chance to take revenge on Dixon, but several funny incidents come in between, and Mrs. Welch's sense of vengeance appears to die away gradually. This particular two adults' exaggerated chase reminds the reader of a game played by a cat and a mouse. Dixon sweats when he is asked by Margaret why he tries to keep secret what he did:

".....'The whole thing just strikes me as rather silly and childish, that's all.' He said effortfully: 'Now look, Margaret: I can quite see why it looked like that to you. But don't you see? the whole point is that naturally I didn't mean to burn that bloody sheet and so on. Once I'd done it, though, I'd obviously got to do something about it, hadn't I?'

'You couldn't have gone to Mrs. Welch and explained, of course.'

'No, "of course" is right, I couldn't have. I'd have been out of my job in five minutes.' "¹¹

The party is drawing to an end and people start to say good-bye to each other meanwhile Dixon is out hunting for a taxi and lays hold of the one called by the

10-Ibid., pp.253-254.

11-Ibid., p.75.

Barclays. He tells the driver to back off toward the side road and wait for him there. Seeing the front lights of the taxi, the Barclays rush out of the house but to their great astonishment, the taxi mysteriously disappears the moment they see it. What Dixon does is completely against the codes of the proper behavior. That's to say, a deviation from the generally accepted standards of propriety leads commonly to an amusing situation as follows:

" 'What's going on?' Christine asked with undisguised curiosity.

'What's all this about?'

'We've pinched their taxi, that's one of the things that's going on. It parked just round this corner.' ¹²

Dixon's great thirst for taking revenge on Bernard grows more and more insatiable day by day. He arranges a telephone conversation telling Bernard that one of London journals, Evening Post, is going to allot a full-page for familiarizing the public with the features of his paintings. Hearing this great news pleases Bernard immensely. Dixon plays this particular practical joke to punish the snobbish Bernard. In the course of this particular event, Dixon is violating the established moral codes and making Bernard the victim of his ridicule. The apparent incongruity lies in the fact that the adult Dixon is supposed to act according to the generally observed codes of society. The simulated conversation on the phone runs below:

"'Evening Post here', he managed to quaver through his snout.'

'And what can I do for you, sir?'

Dixon recovered slightly. 'Er... we'd like to do a little paragraph about you for our Saturday page', he said, beginning to plan. 'That's if you've no objection'.

'Objection? Objection? What objection could a humble painter have to a little harmless publicity?' ¹³

Dixon receives an urgent message from Catherine about her leaving for London earlier than it was planned. Dixon catches a bus that will take him to a

12-Ibid., p.135.

13-Ibid., p.100.

distant station but the bus driver seems to have no intention of getting to the station at the right time. The descriptive terms specially picked by the author makes the scene vivid and humorous. Especially the sudden appearance of two women in black and subsequently the emergence of another woman with a strange peaked hat add vivacity to belated Dixon's imaginative power:

"The foreshortened bulks of two old women dressed in black waited until the bus was quenched of all motion before clutching each other and edging with sidelong caution out of Dixon's view towards the platform. In a moment he heard their voices crying unintelligibly to the conductor, then activity seemed to cease. At least five seconds passed; Dixon stirred elaborately at his post, then twisted himself about looking for anything that might have had a share in causing this ceasura in his journey. He could detect nothing of this kind. Was the driver slumped in his seat, the victim of syncope, or had he suddenly got an idea for a poem? For a moment longer the pose prolonged itself; then the picture of sleepy rustic calm was modified by the fairly sudden emergence from a cottage some yards beyond of a third woman in a lilac costume. She looked keenly towards the bus and identified it without any obvious difficulty, then approached with a kind of bowed shuffle that suggested the movements of a service-man towards the nay-table. This image was considerably reinforced by her hat which resembled a Guardsman's peaked cap that had been strenuously run over and dyed cerise."¹⁴

The slow moving heavy traffic infuriates Dixon and he starts guessing what misfortune might happen next. This free flow of imagination reminds Dixon of the most incredible possibilities. In this particular example, it is observed how the accumulation of the incongruous elements naturally leads to laughter as it reads below:

"Dixon thought he really would have to run downstairs and knife the drivers of both vehicles; what next? what next? What actually would be next: a masked hold-up, a smash, floods, a burst tyre, an electric storm with falling trees and meteorites, a diversion, a low-level attack by Communist aircraft, sheep, the driver stung by a hornet?"¹⁵

14-Ibid., pp.248-249.

15-Ibid., p.250.

The following set of events are good examples to clarify how an absent-minded professor intrudes upon the time of his research-assistant selfishly. He asks Dixon to go to the city library because the required material is not available here, and he has to present his speech tomorrow evening. Professor Welch totally disregards whether Dixon himself has got to do something urgently or not. When the professor complains about having tiny time left to get ready for his speech, he never takes into consideration the fact that Dixon also has to prepare his own talk about "Merry England". In this example, the theory of superiority emerges and the readers find it hard to suppress laughter on occasions especially once a boss asks even for something irrational, he should be provided with what he requests in an instant.

"No, of course they won't have the information here, Dixon. I can't imagine any one thinking they would. That's why I'm asking you to go down to the library for it, I know for a fact they've got ninety percent of the stuff I want, I'd go myself, but as I took the trouble to explain, I'm tied up here. And I must have the information by to-night, because I'm giving the talk tomorrow evening after Professor Furtescue gets..... goes..... goes back. Now do you see?' Dixon did: Welch had all the time been talking about the public library in the city, and, since this was clear to him, naturally hadn't thought of the confusion he might cause by talking about 'the library' within five feet of totally different building known in the area as 'the library'."16

As it is exemplified in this particular section above, Kingsley Amis makes fun of either with sticking out springs of Mr Welch's car seats or with a scholar who gains promotion and a raise in salary by having Dixon's article published as if it was the fruit of his own study.

Kingsley Amis carefully tries to touch on social connections and their undeniably significant impact on individuals lives and their career opportunities. Actually, he writes about highly universal issues that can inevitably be heard of or witnessed in our daily lives. He never tends to leave out the ordinary happenings for the sake of laying emphases on the serious occurrences.

16-Ibid., pp.177-178.

As it is widely conceived that life is an incredible combination of both vitally significant and less crucial components, Kingsley Amis has a strong preference for presenting his readers with both absurd and serious aspects of real life side by side to make his material sound more authentic.

Conclusion

Kingsley Amis tries to transmit a great deal of useful information about campus life and the fiery spirit of competition among the members of academic circles. Apparently, he assumes this particular light and mild tone of expressing facts as a more reliable and impressive way rather than resorting to a crude and direct mode of narration.

Kingsley Amis does not only illustrate the bright facet of events but he also elaborates on the arena of relentless rivalry in the secret worlds of scholars. Intentionally he draws an anti-hero, Dixon, to enable the manipulative individuals to achieve their objectives. In real life, such innocent and naive characters cannot possibly evade the tricks of cunning ones, but finally **Lucky Jim** as the title indirectly suggests most fortunately escapes the various sorts of traps with the help of the humanbeings who have developed more sound perspectives acquired through humanitarian values.

Works Consulted

- Amis, Kingsley. **Lucky Jim**. Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk: St Edmundsbury Press. 1984.
- Ludovici, Anthony. **The Secret of Laughter**. London: Constable and Co., 1932.
- Monro, D.H. **Argument of Humour**. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 1951.
- Powell, Chris and George E.C.Paton. (eds.) **Humour in Society Resistance and Control**. Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988.