

## Existential Laughter in The Fiction of Marilyn Duckworth

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**Abstract.** The present paper traces the motif of laughter in the novels of Marilyn Duckworth, a prominent contemporary New Zealand writer, in terms of its existential import. The first part provides an overview of the most significant existentialist and existentially-tinged perspectives on laughter, while the second one employs some of them to bring to light the underlying meaning and function of the recurrent outbursts of laughter in Duckworth's fiction. It is demonstrated that they usually accompany the heroines in the moments of existential crises, generated by the experience of alienation and self-alienation, when their most cherished notions of external reality and themselves fall into disarray. As such, laughter becomes a harbinger of enhanced self-awareness and insight into the truth of existence. Most importantly, it also betrays anxiety arising at the prospect of unrestricted freedom and concomitant responsibility for shaping one's own life. Finally, it may serve also as a tool of interpersonal communication: either a weapon through which one may assert superiority over the other person or, quite the contrary, a facilitator of reciprocal recognition that binds people together.

Key words: laughter, existential, alienation, body, freedom

### 1. introduction

In common parlance and perception, laughter expresses primarily amusement, contentment or playfulness. In some cases, it conveys derision and ridicule. Rarely is it considered to be an appropriate response to matters of grave importance, let alone to communicate any profound meaning, as evidenced by the phrase 'no laughing matter.' Contrary to these most obvious associations, it may, however, carry existential import, unveiling the truth of the human condition. The present paper aims to demonstrate that this is the case by tracing the motif of laughter in the fiction of Marilyn Duckworth (b. 1935), a prominent New Zealand female writer. Throughout her career, Duckworth has portrayed the everyday life of women, focusing on their problems with constructing an authentic

self-identity in the face of social pressures and conflictual interpersonal relationships. The thematic texture of her works is permeated by distinct existential undertones, which the writer attributes not to conscious inspiration by the philosophy of existentialism, but rather to the influence of the existentialist zeitgeist of her times (Benson 2000, 207). She tends to place her heroines in “absurd, sometimes even paranoid, abnormal situations” (Sarti 1998, 23), where their taken-for-granted assumptions about external reality and their own existence fall into disarray. Quite surprisingly, it is usually in these moments of crisis that they erupt into laughter. The remainder of this paper attempts to bring to light the underlying meaning and function of their reaction. It is divided into two parts: the first one provides an overview of existentialist and existentially-tinged perspectives on laughter, while the other one employs some of them to analyse Duckworth’s novels.

## 2. Laughter and Existentialism

Although no existentialist philosopher formulated any systematic theory of laughter, Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup> and Jean-Paul Sartre offered some penetrating insights into its nature. In his *The Will to Power*, the former posits a link between the uniquely human ability to laugh and vulnerability to pain: “Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he *had* to invent laughter” (Nietzsche 1968, 74; emphasis in original). This dictum does not mean, however, that laughter is a mere palliative against anxiety. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, it stands as the emblem of an existential attitude, while self-laughter specifically is hailed by Zarathustra as a skill to be developed and cherished: “learn to laugh at [yourselves] as one must laugh!” (Nietzsche 2003, 226). According to Nietzsche, the power of laughter lies in its potential to overthrow the spirit of gravity: “Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come let us kill the spirit of gravity” (2003, 30). Whereas the latter obfuscates the human condition

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1 The status of Nietzsche as an existentialist philosopher has been disputed by some scholars (McBride 1997, xii), mainly due to his “denial of free will” (Michelman 245). Nevertheless, in consideration of his “critique of social conformity and conventional morality, his emphasis on individual creativity and ‘self-overcoming,’ and his suspicion of the objectivity and the project of rationalism” (Michelman 2010, 245), he is classified among the “big four” existentialists, together with Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre (Solomon 2005, ix), and included in anthologies and studies on existentialism, for instance William Barret’s classic *Irrational Man*. For the purposes of this paper, this line of interpretation is followed.

and entails paralysis in ready-made values, the former plays a revelatory function. Laughter exposes but also allows one to accept the hardship of existence. Katrin Froese contends that “Nietzsche’s laughter represents an affirmation that embraces all of existence, with its warts and blemishes and not just those aspects which we find palatable” (2017, 75).

With its emphasis on self-awareness and affirmation, Nietzsche’s vision contrasts with that presented by Sartre in *The Family Idiot*, his monumental study of Gustave Flaubert, in the context of an imaginary scene of the young writer contemplating his own reflection in the mirror. This act of self-examination is interpreted as the man’s attempt to “see himself from the outside” as “the object he is for everyone else” (Sartre 1987, 27), and the outburst of self-laughter that follows it as “withdrawing solidarity from one’s singularity insofar as singularity is perceived as a vestige of revolt against integration” (Sartre 1987, 30). Laughing at oneself, so Sartre asserts, is not only a means of surrendering one’s potentially subversive individuality. It doubles as a protection against the anticipated risks of being laughed at by others (Sartre 1987, 31). It may be noted that this position is akin to the superiority theory, which holds that laughter arises from a sense of being better than a person whose shortcomings have manifested themselves. In a similar vein, Sartre’s laughter castigates one’s failure to conform to the accepted norms of conduct. Those who laugh do so in order to preserve their own self-comfort: “a group threatened with danger withdraws solidarity from the man in whom the danger is incarnate” (Sartre 1987, 29).

The picture of laughter in existentialism should be complemented with the contribution of Samuel Beckett. His notion of mirthless laughter, described by the writer in *Watt* as “the laugh of laughs, the risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh, ... in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy” (Beckett 1959, 48), in a sense combines the characteristics of the Nietzschean and Sartrean concepts. While analysing Beckett’s works, Wolfgang Iser quotes the foregoing passage and indicates that mirthless laughter lays bare human misery and simultaneously alleviates it (1993, 173-174). He adds that “this laughter has no cathartic effect, but in its mirthlessness is still a response to the human condition, which is lit up by laughter ...” (Iser 1993, 174). It may thus appear paradoxical, performing, as it does, two contradictory functions: self-revelatory, just as Nietzsche’s, and “self-protective” (Simpson 2017, 12), just as Sartre’s. As succinctly summarised by Hannah Simpson, it constitutes a “method of both accepting and withstanding the human condition” (2017, 14).

The echoes of existentialism reverberate also in various non-existentialist expositions of the subject, notably the incongruity theory (Morreall 2013, 189), whereby laughter is engendered by discrepancy between human assumptions and reality:

We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns. (Morreall 1983, 15-16)

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant, considered to be an early proponent of the theory (Morreall 1983, 16), associates laughter with the sense of the absurd:

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.* (2007, 133; emphasis in original).

On this view, laughter may be deemed an anxiety-ridden response to reality that suddenly strikes one as unhomey. One laughs when existence reveals itself as suffused with contradictions and perplexities that surpass immediate and conventional understanding.

It may be thus claimed that, at the underlying level, laughter often accompanies the collapse of human illusions about full mastery over the external world and themselves. This sense of vulnerability is central also to the correlation between laughter and the body indicated by a number of scholars. Simon Critchley emphasises that, with the accompanying muscle contractions, laughter is essentially "a bodily phenomenon" (2004, 8). While laughing, one gains a heightened awareness of one's body, but simultaneously becomes alienated from it: "If we laugh with the body, then we often laugh at the body, the strange fact that we have a body" (Critchley 2004, 44). Similarly, in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson states that laughter typically arises when "our attention is diverted to the physical in a person when it is the moral that is in question" (2005, 57) and when "the image of *the body* [takes] precedence of *the soul*" (2005, 26; emphasis in original). Couching this in existentialist terms, it is triggered by the juxtaposition of human transcendence against the imma-

nence of the body. Involving a partial loss of self-control, it exposes the limitations of human agency.

Apart from highlighting the physical dimension of laughter, Bergson takes account also of other aspects relevant from the point of view of existentialism. He notes that “the laughable element ... consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being” (Bergson 2005, 5). According to the philosopher, laughter may be inspired by the sight of “a person [who] gives us the impression of being a thing” (Bergson 2005, 28; emphasis in original) and “anything rigid, ready-made, mechanical in gesture, attitude, and even facial expression” (Bergson 2005, 55). Michael Proudfoot and A.R. Lacey note that these observations are consonant with “Sartre’s view of bad faith” (2009, 32), whereby one “[behaves] as a mere thing” (2009, 32) with a pre-given essence, refusing to exercise one’s freedom in an active and creative manner. What laughter does, in turn, is to “re-adapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with” (Bergson 2005, 86). It unmasks bad faith, in which lies its potential to break the chains of self-deception.

To conclude the discussion, it is necessary to reference also the concept of grotesque laughter, which incorporates various elements of the approaches discussed previously. It certainly overlaps to a certain extent with the incongruity theory, being provoked by “juxtapositions, disjunctions, ambiguities, deformities, hybridities, exaggerations, caricatures or disorders” (Edwards and Graulund 2013, 94) – everything that is out of sync with well-known conventions and, as such, disturbs the human sense of harmony. Further, it is also closely associated with corporeality or, more specifically, a body that is deformed, incontinent and overgrown, raising doubts to its own humanity and inspiring repulsion. Its primary distinguishing mark is purposeful subversiveness. Grotesque laughter not only affirms but also celebrates incongruity as a means of undermining the established order. Closely linked with the rituals of carnival, it goes hand in hand with “the overthrow of authority, the dismissal of the sacred, the dissemination of counter discourses” (Edwards and Graulund 2013, 104).

### 3. Laughter in Marilyn Duckworth’s Fiction

Prior to analysing Duckworth’s fiction, it is worthwhile to devote a measure of attention to her memoir. Although laughter is mentioned only twice and very

briefly in *Camping on the Faultline* (2000), in both cases it is pregnant with existentialist meaning, resonating with the incongruity theory. In the first case, the writer recounts an episode from her childhood:

Walking home from the tram stop I passed a neighbour mowing his lawn. He looked so serious about it. All at once I was stricken by the sheer absurdity of life. I wanted to laugh. And then I knew this reaction was out place. Perhaps I wasn't normal. I wondered if I was going mad. I wound myself up and confessed this fear to Mother. She reassured me that many people found life absurd from time to time. (Duckworth 2000, 61)

Her urge to laugh at a seemingly inconsequential sight may be apparently attributed to the experience of defamiliarisation. The girl saw her neighbour and his commonplace activity in an entirely unexpected light. She noticed the discrepancy between the insignificance of lawn-mowing and the gravity accorded to it by the man, whose appearance literally bespoke the Sartrean spirit of seriousness – “a consciousness that ... takes itself and its world excessively seriously” (Rae 2011, 34). Interestingly, the incident itself may evoke associations with the famous restaurant scene in Sartre's *Nausea*, where Roquentin is watching customers utterly engrossed in their petty activities:

I glance around the room. What a comedy! All these people sitting there, looking serious, eating. No, they aren't eating: they are recuperating in order to successfully finish their tasks. Each one of them has his little personal difficulty which keeps him from noticing that he exists; ... And if I knew how to convince people I'd go and sit down next to that handsome white-haired gentleman and explain to him just what existence means. I burst out laughing at the thought of the face he would make. (1964, 111-112)

Duckworth's laughter debunked this spirit of seriousness, emphasising the ridiculousness of the man's pretensions to self-importance. Not least importantly, it also carried a note of rebelliousness, standing at odds with what was expected of her.

In the other case, a pretext for laughter was provided by a stroke of painful existential revelation experienced by Duckworth as a mature woman. The writer

confesses how she was coerced by her husband into pretending to be a self-fulfilled housewife and redefining her identity according to his expectations (Duckworth 2000, 167). Submissive as she was, she had an acute sense of disjunction between her inner self and the mask adopted to gain social approval: "They [her friends] think I can drive and they think I'm happy and go shopping for yellow stockings. I wanted to laugh because I was such a sham" (Duckworth 2000, 168). At that point, her laughter marked a glimpse of self-awareness. It exposed the authenticity into which the writer had fallen by allowing to have an identity imposed upon her instead of forging it on her own.

The correlation between laughter and a feeling of alienation or self-alienation drawn in *Camping on the Faultline* is foregrounded also in Duckworth's fiction, including *A Gap in the Spectrum* (1959). In her debut novel, the writer ventures beyond the limits of realism by imagining a dreamlike situation in which nineteen-year old Diana Clouston has been mysteriously catapulted into London, "without the faintest idea of where or what London is or how she got there" (Duckworth 1959, 208). The second chapter ends with the bewildered heroine, doubtful of her own sanity and incapable of conveying her strange condition to anyone, breaking into laughing and going to sleep: "With a brief, hysterical laugh, I turned over and drifted into dreams confused by the radio which continued to play on the chair beside me" (Duckworth 1959, 23). This outburst may be construed as the woman's pent-up response to the unsettling experience of being thrown into an utterly alien space without any reasonable explanation. Throughout the day, she has been roaming through London, a space of pure chaos that eludes any predictable rules: "Anything could happen, I thought, not for the first time. Anything, anything" (Duckworth 1959, 22). The pervading impression of absurdity is reinforced through the emphasis on the uncanny and grotesque in the portrayal of the city: "This world was full of horrible, meaningless things ... This was a world of extremes" (Duckworth 1959, 21-22). Equally grotesque are its inhabitants, including a bizarre news-seller, whose physical deformity elicits Diana's disgust and horror: "He had only one eye and his cheek was drawn up into an agonizing twist, leaving his mouth a lipless hole in his torn face" (Duckworth 1959, 21). What also attracts the heroine's attention is the conspicuous disproportion in the appearance of Londoners: "Some of them were exaggeratedly thin, some terribly fat. ... here and there an extreme stood out and these seemed to me sinister, even deformed" (Duckworth 1959, 22). Diana thus finds herself in a world turned upside-down, one that defies all well-established

patterns, thereby arousing “a sense of danger and insecurity” (Duckworth 1959, 21), which subdues the “spirit of adventure” (Duckworth 1959, 21) blooming in the face of the unknown.

The woman is haunted also by the sense self-estrangement as a result of a partial loss of memory. The feeling increases gradually throughout the chapter as she strives to reconstruct her own identity out of disparate bits and pieces of evidence, for the image of Diana Clouston that emerges from them does not correspond to her inner self: “The photos didn’t seem in character with myself at all” (Duckworth 1959, 13). Also, some old letters from her family and former sweethearts now do not present any emotional value (Duckworth 1959, 14). Consequently, the heroine becomes deprived of the elements that typically constitute the core of human identity: a sense of self-coherence and interpersonal connection. She faces the nothingness at the root of her existence, or, to use de Beauvoir’s phrase, the “lack of being ... which is precisely existence” (1948, 13): “Then a swift shame came over me. ... Could I be lacking in something?” (Duckworth 1959, 19). It may be asserted in Sartrean terms that the strange situation illuminates the fact that “... life has no meaning a priori. ... it is up to you to give it a meaning” (Sartre 1947, 58). Instead of acknowledging her own existential indefiniteness, Diana, however, desires to dispel the sense of inner vacuity at the cost of existential freedom. Rather than undertaking action through which she could define herself anew, she strives to re-assume her former self, which is, to a large extent, an amalgam of socially constructed patterns.

Her hysterical laughter thus appears to serve functions similar to those of Beckettian mirthless laughter. Its frantic quality signifies a loss of physical self-control, corresponding to the overall experience of reality slipping beyond her understanding and command. Seeing that neither anything in the external world nor any other people could assist her in the process of self-determination, the woman realises that the brunt of responsibility for giving her existence meaning lies entirely with herself. She resembles the adolescent invoked by de Beauvoir in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, whose gradual entry into adulthood from the insouciance of childhood elicits tremendous anxiety:

... it is not without great confusion that the adolescent finds himself cast into a world which is no longer ready-made, which has to be made; he is abandoned, unjustified, the prey of a freedom that is no longer chained by anything. (1948, 39)

At the same time, apart from bringing an existential insight, it also performs the role of a self-defence mechanism. Significantly, it is followed by the heroine's retreat from reality into the realm of dreams.

A collision with a world that offers no ready-made values forms the context of laughter also in *Rest for the Wicked* (1986). Fatigued by the daily drudgery of being a full-time housewife and mother to two children, thirty-eight-year-old Jane temporarily leaves her family to participate in an experimental project at the Sleep Research Centre. The decision, however, only magnifies her frustration, eliciting a sense of guilt. At one point, while the heroine is thinking with dread about her husband's wish to have her back at home, she catches a sight of her own face in a bathroom mirror and, stricken by its look, is suddenly gripped by a desire to go out:

She pulls at the door to get away. It won't open. She tugs harder on the chrome handle, beginning to sweat ... The door opens suddenly outward and she almost falls into the passageway. She shakes with hysterical laughter. (Duckworth 1986, 79)

The closed bathroom symbolises Jane's imprisonment in the social expectations imposed upon her as a woman, mother and wife. On the one hand, she experiences them as a limitation upon her subjectivity and autonomy, and desperately yearns for escape. On the other hand, these pre-given schemas enable her to avoid the burden of shaping her own life. Consequently, the moment of being thrown out of the closed space into freedom does give her any relief but rather a sense of anguish at the challenges that await her beyond the shelter of social roles. Just as Roquentin's nausea in *The Stranger* is a "physical expression" of his "dread of liberty" (Greene 1948, 54), so Jane's laughter betrays her anxiety of responsibility and choice. Similar to the subman described in de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she "is afraid of ... being in a state of danger before the future, in the midst of its possibilities. [She] is thereby led to take refuge in the ready-made values of the serious world" (1948, 44). Further, its hysterical tinge, just as in *A Gap in the Spectrum*, reveals a loss of self-control. Iser remarks that "we normally laugh when our emotive or cognitive faculties have been overtaxed by a situation they can no longer cope with. The disorientated body takes over the response from it" (1981, 221). This is the case with the female protagonist, who finds herself overwhelmed

by the conflicting feelings of desire for liberation from the straitjacket of social scripts and fear of unlimited freedom.

Laughter occasioned and accompanied by the experience of self-alienation surfaces as a motif also in *Matchbox House* (1987) and *Married Alive* (1985). The heroines of the two novels, similar to Flaubert in *The Family Idiot*, laugh while contemplating their own reflections in the mirror:

I must be mad, she thought, and laughed at herself in the sink mirror. (Duckworth 1987, 136)

She ... catches sight of herself in a plastic mirror. Her face looks stricken, bruised. It must be the night air on her skin. Feeling can't be so close to the surface. While she watches, a sneeze convulses the muscles of her face. The mirror rocks on its nails. She laughs, reaching out to steady her moving image. How little it takes to put things out of kilter. Even something as frivolous as a sneeze. (Duckworth 1985, 25)

It was mentioned earlier that, as emphasised in Sartre's account, the act involves a position of critical self-detachment: "Moreover, the unreality grows: the object seen is his image, it is not him; ...; and he himself is unrealised without knowing it a haughty observer of himself" (1987, 33). Indeed, each woman posits herself in the role of not only an active perceiving subject but also a passive object judged as if from an external perspective. Their laughter, however, appears far from "[saving] the spirit of seriousness" (Sartre 1987, 63). It rather implies withdrawal of self-compassion and exposes their shortcomings.

As for Jean in *Matchbox House*, the heroine's reaction should be analysed from the perspective of her descent into a world of daydreams away from the drab reality of being a mother to her baby son and a wife to an unfaithful husband. The woman begins to act in an erratic manner once she becomes a temporary caregiver for the three school-age children of her sick friend and develops an attraction to their father, Gerald. She is deluding herself that the man secretly reciprocates her feelings and intends to marry her when his wife dies. As the plot progresses, she starts to identify Gerald with his eldest son and, unable to act upon her desires towards the man, makes advances on the boy, simultaneously neglecting her duties towards the other children. The quoted outburst of laughter occurs,

however, at a rare moment of lucidity when the woman recognises the impropriety of her conduct. She notices that her fixation on the idea of replacing Gerald's wife makes her grotesque and somehow deformed, also in appearance:

This optimism in Jean was not new, but it was becoming more noticeable in her make up. Before long it would stand out as one of her prominent features – so exaggerated as to be slightly misshapen. She knew it was wrong to have misshapen features in one's characters, but how to prevent it? (Duckworth 1987, 136).

At this point, Jean is able to assess herself critically. Her laughter is reproachful and even self-disciplinary. It mocks her social maladaptation and berates the transgression of the accepted norms, serving as a warning call to amend her ways.

The passage from *Married Alive* comes from an early part in novel when the heroine is grappling with the feelings of anxiety and insecurity triggered by the epidemic of insanity that sweeps across New Zealand in the wake of flu vaccine contamination, demolishing comforting ideas about the world as a homely and safe space. The laughability of the situation appears to lie in the discord between the sense of gravity with which the woman is examining her face and the levity of her physiological reaction. With the sneeze, to use Bergson's phrase, "attention is suddenly recalled from the soul to the body" (2005, 25), and Francie's pretensions to self-importance are unexpectedly pitted against her facticity as a physical being. The faltering image in the mirror symbolises the fragility and changeability of her existence, which may be destabilised in a moment even by an entirely trivial factor. Francie's laughter, in turn, articulates her sense of vulnerability to forces beyond her control. It should be noted, however, that it lacks the hysterical quality underscored in all the previously analysed novels. Despite bringing the awareness of existential frailty, it appears to be rather affirmative.

A palpable experience of human facticity incites laughter also from the female protagonist of *Barbarous Tongue* (1963). While visiting her lover's sister, pregnant Frieda is assailed by a pang of acute pain:

Then I did a crazy thing. I giggled. I couldn't help it. 'Moaning and groaning,' I gasped. 'Here we are moaning and groaning,' I choked, 'and shivering and gasping and groaning.' I was so shaken with

mirth that when Barbara began to shake and so I thought she was joining me in the joke. (Duckworth 1963, 141)

In line with Nietzsche's concept, laughter becomes here literally intertwined with suffering and communicates Frieda's anxiety at the confrontation with her own animal physicality. It undoubtedly enables the woman to distance herself from pain, but also exposes her weakness and even ridiculousness in reliance on the body.

Apart from disclosing personal states, laughter has its place also in the portrayal of interpersonal relationships in Duckworth's fiction. In another scene in *Barbarous Tongue*, Frieda and her lover lie alongside each other after a sexual intercourse when the man suddenly starts to laugh:

I felt him laughing in his chest. Waves of laughter came out from him, rolling over my face in tobacco breath and that new breath in which I caught my own animal scent. I felt that if he didn't stop I would drown. (Duckworth 1963, 24).

The sea imagery throws into relief the violent and threatening character of John's laughter, emphasising the imbalance of power in their relationship, a prime concern of the entire novel, which depicts Frieda's journey out of submission to male authority into budding autonomy. It marks his indisputable position of ascendancy over Frieda and aims to objectify the woman, reminding her of her brute corporeality and instilling in her a sense of inferiority.

Whereas in *Barbarous Tongue* it manifests domination, striking a chord with the superiority theory, Duckworth offers also more positive instances of laughter that builds a sense of community between people. One of them can be found in *Married Alive*, when the heroine and her lover are driving back home soon after getting married:

They have driven some distance in silence and are almost at the spot where the tui died before Francie begins to laugh. Gently first, then wildly, with an edge of hysteria. Sidney pursues his lips and frowns concernedly. Then he begins to laugh too. Tears fill his eyes and blot the view ahead. The van veers drunkenly to the centre of the road and back again. He blinks and snorts. 'Well, anyway,

we're married,' he says at last. 'Don't forget.' How could I possibly forget?' (Duckworth 1985, 97)

It is necessary to indicate that the novel creates a vision of human relationships as a site of unremitting threat and conflict. In epidemic-stricken New Zealand, any bond with another person involves the risk of infection, insanity and possibly death, a situation that breeds mutual hostility and incites people to violence: "The injuries of love until now have remained decently internal. On the whole. Now they blossom on cheek and brow, in scars and bruises" (Duckworth 1985, 14). The echoes of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic are taken to extremes in the scene of the couple's wedding ceremony, which draws an explicit parallel between marriage and death, with a bizarre clerk grotesquely mistaking the words of the oath: "By the authority invested in me! – the old man declares belatedly – I pronounce you all – dust to dust" (Duckworth 1985, 97). As the dialogue between Francie and Sidney implies, their ride back home brings the realisation of their new condition. Each of them has to confront the threatening presence of the other, to which they are now condemned as husband and wife. While Francie's laughter initially appears malicious, its character changes once she is joined by Sidney. It evolves into a collective act, whereby the newly-weds reciprocally acknowledge their mutual existential condition: they are both mortal and exposed to the insurmountable hazards resulting from the encounter with a foreign consciousness.

In *Seeing Red* (1993), Vivienne and Isla become even more prominently united in their laughter. Throughout the novel, the relationship between the sisters is negatively influenced by their ties with other people. The latter has not come to terms with the death of her female lover, while the former is involved in a stormy affair with a man locked in an incestuous liaison with his own sister. Further, their bond is tainted by an undercurrent of rivalry going back to their adolescent competition for the affection of their father. This mutual tension is broken, if only for a moment, towards the end of the novel, when they unwillingly catch each other at their most vulnerable:

Vivienne pushes her way past Isla's bulk and heaves above a foaming lavatory bowl. Stick strings of bile snake from her nostrils and she towels them away viciously. In the mirror alongside her she catches sight of Isla, concerned witness, bug-eyed with tears.

Isla would like to be private about her tears. Vivienne would like to be private about her retching, but this time it isn't allowed. This time a smile crawls onto Isla's bloated face and an answering smile claws at Vivienne's top lip. Linked by messiness, like pedestrians caught in the same downpour, they have the sense to laugh at each other. (Duckworth 1993, 166)

Given to a fit of vomiting and crying, Vivienne and Isla find themselves in a situation where their bodies take over control, reminding the women of their facticity and the restrictions that it imposes upon them. The focus on the biological dimension of existence is especially prominent in the case of Vivienne, who, being pregnant, senses her physicality with particular force. The pregnant body itself is often associated with the grotesque (Russo 1995, 65), primarily due to the porous boundaries between self and other. Here, vomiting, described in quite graphic detail, makes it appear ungainly and incontinent. For Isla, in turn, crying signifies an exposure of weakness that she has been striving to hide under the guise of "a false strutting naked bravado" (Duckworth 1993, 120). Consequently, both sisters lose a part of their self-dignity: first by encountering themselves as mere objects at the whim of uncontrollable forces, and second by unwittingly revealing this vulnerability to the other one. Their laughter, in turn, expresses solidarity in mutual misery. In Beauvoirian terms, it opens space for reciprocal recognition<sup>2</sup> since each woman experiences her own existential ambiguity as "a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects" (de Beauvoir 1948, 7) and "an object for others" (de Beauvoir 1948, 7) by stepping into the role of both a laughing subject and an object laughed at. It is thus cathartic in the sense of allowing them, just as Nietzschean laughter, to affirm their existential condition and establish a bond, if only a fleeting one, based on the sense of community in suffering.

### 3. Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that laughter in Duckworth's fiction is heavily charged with existentialist overtones, usually accompanying the heroines in the moments of existential crisis. In most of the novels, it is triggered by the expe-

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2 Understood by de Beauvoir as "free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement" (2011, 159).

rience of alienation, when the world strikes the women as absurd, unhomely and hostile, or self-alienation. Shaken out of self-complacency, they laugh when their pretensions to power and self-control clash with their vulnerability and facticity as human beings. As such, laughter functions as a harbinger of enhanced self-awareness and insight into the truth of existence. Most importantly, just as nausea in Sartre's famous novel, laughter in Duckworth's fiction figures also as a physical expression of anxiety arising at the prospect of freedom and responsibility for shaping one's own life. Finally, apart from playing a revelatory role, it serves also as a tool of interpersonal communication: either a weapon through which one may assert superiority over the other person or, quite the contrary, a facilitator of reciprocal recognition that binds the characters together.

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