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Carnivalesque Parody of Academia through Jewish Self-Mockery in *Howard Jacobson's Coming from Behind*

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Abstract

Sefton Goldberg is an English lecturer who works at Wrottesley Polytechnic in the Midlands. As a Jew, he feels disconnected in his personal and professional life. His peers seem to flourish in their pursuits, which makes him mock the institution where he works. He gives the impression that his students are unworthy of his lectures and remarks on how the Polytechnic ties up with the local football team for relevance and reputation. This paper applies Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to expose the hypocrisy of the institution as perceived through the eyes of a Jewish protagonist. His sense of outsiderhood leads him to use satire as a means of mocking both himself and the world that has reduced him to feeling like a lesser achiever.

Keywords: academia, incompetence, disconnection, professionalism

Introduction

Howard Jacobson is a twentieth-century British Jewish writer who received many awards, including the Man Booker Prize for his novel The Finkler Question. His writing represents the contemporary Jewish community, who have inherited a traumatic past and a disconnected present. He masks the sufferings and complexities of Jews comically, and his characters employ humour as a means of self-expression, critiquing cultural hypocrisies and negotiating fragmented identities.

MikhailBakhtin first introduced the term 'carnival' in his work Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, later elaborating it in Rabelais and His World. According to Bakhtin, carnival is a space where serious matters can be mocked. Hierarchical roles are reversed, dominant powers take a back seat, and laughter offers solace to individuals and the collective. In such moments, time itself is liberated, paving the way for freedom from ordinary structures.

Howard Jacobson's Coming from Behind, published in 1983, was his debut novel and is often classified as a campus novel. Its protagonist, Sefton

Goldberg, embodies the experiences of a Jewish lecturer who ridicules reputation-seeking institutions, internal politics, and the quality of teachers and students in academia. He addresses Jewish identity through the lens of the carnivalesque, parodying a society that privileges high achievers while looking down on those whose heritage leaves them no space either to flourish or to accept themselves.

PetrAnténe, in his article 'Justly Forgotten or Unjustly Overlooked? Reconsidering Howard Jacobson's Coming from Behind' (American & British Studies Annual, 2019), examines humour and satire in Jacobson's work. This paper builds on that discussion, exploring Jacobson's use of mockery to reveal the realities of Jewish life and his skill in transforming struggle into satire.

Jacobson critiques educational institutions and their members for hypocrisy, reflecting his own experience teaching at Wolverhampton Polytechnic. Like Sefton, he felt he deserved a university post but was instead confined to a polytechnic. His frustrations are expressed through ridicule, aligning with a well-known trait of Jewish humour that mocks both the system and the self, revealing how Jews are perceived by those who look down upon them.

Bakhtin observes, "In such a system the king is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over… Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused; it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king's uncrowning" (Rabelais and His World 10). Similarly, Jacobson uses satire to mock society, institutions, and social hierarchies that marginalize the Jewish community. Through humour, he subverts reality, exposing the absurdity of prejudice and the struggles faced by Jews, encouraging readers to empathize with their experiences and reconsider entrenched attitudes.

At the beginning of the novel, Sefton feels trapped in the polytechnic, surrounded by triviality. He appears confident and ready to leave once he secures a university job. Although he once had a physical encounter with a married former student, he conceals his sexual inadequacy by projecting promiscuity. Jacobson normalizes Sefton's life, portraying it as that of a non-Jew, full of passion and potential. "And because he was Jewish and short and knew all the answers they loved him in return" (Jacobson 9).

The carnivalesque emerges as the Jewish protagonist mocks his academic peers, reversing hierarchy. For a moment, Jacobson presents a world where the marginalized take centre stage while the competent appear foolish. In one scene, Sefton's parking dispute exemplifies this reversal: "Is it here at last," he wonders, "the bliss of persecution?" (Jacobson 65). Mockery becomes both his means of normalcy and affirmation of identity. The non-Jewish normalization of rejection transforms suffering into belonging.

Self-mockery and carnivalesque parody recur throughout the novel. Sefton's rivalry with Peter Potter, who constantly taunts his failures, reflects how Jewish striving is met with derision. Jacobson satirizes the faculty members—Arthur Twinbarrow's financial strain, Charles Wenlock's failed morality, Dr. Sidewinder's monotony, and Ray Grassby's indifference—to ridicule the absurdity of academic institutions.

Cora Peck stands in contrast to Sefton. While he aspires to literary recognition, Cora already enjoys it. She represents modernity and progress, while Sefton clings to tradition. Her success mocks his stagnation, embodying a carnivalesque inversion where competence undermines male academic ego. The contrast symbolizes how the world evolves while the marginalized cling to inherited restraints.

The parody of academia intensifies when the polytechnic partners with a football team for prestige rather than focusing on education. Jacobson exposes institutional hypocrisy: classes held on the football field symbolize the triumph of spectacle over scholarship. The carnivalesque chaos here mocks the very idea of intellectual hierarchy.

Sefton's decline culminates in his failed eulogy for footballer Trevor Bullivant. When the audience jeers and throws objects, the professor becomes the clown. The reversal of roles—lecturer derided, athlete glorified—epitomizes Bakhtin's theory. The scene dismantles the illusion of academic dignity, leaving Sefton stripped of both pride and purpose.

Realizing his inadequacy, Sefton watches his colleagues thrive: Wenlock's affair, Cora's celebration, and his own unacknowledged letter from the university. Having forgotten the embellished claims of his application, he fears exposure. His editors

remain silent. His life, once full of aspiration, becomes an extended parody of failure.

Ray Grassby assumes Sefton's constant humour is cultural: "He didn't know why Sefton joked as often as he did but supposed it had something to do with his being Jewish… He smiled to show he hadn't missed the joke" (Jacobson 136). Jacobson's ending denies redemption—Jews, seemingly invited to succeed, are ultimately ridiculed. Society rewards ambition with rejection, leaving Sefton emblematic of a community perpetually on the margins.

Through Sefton's decline, Jacobson transforms Jewish self-mockery into tragic laughter. The carnivalesque parody of academia becomes a reflection of broader social exclusion, revealing how cultural and institutional hierarchies invert dignity into derision.

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