LUCKY JIM Essay, Research Paper

Tribulation and Comedy in Lucky Jim

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Tribulation and Comedy in Lucky Jim

Despite misfortunes, comedy possesses the ability to elevate one’s mood in distressing or unhappy times. The sweet flavour comedy adds to life makes many situations much more palatable. In Kingsley Amis’ Lucky Jim, the Jim Dixon character is cast into unfavourable relations with other characters who make his existence quite trying. Jim’s involvement with Margaret is marked by his desire to see it end. His association with Professor Welch incessantly lands him in a disagreeable position. Moreover, Jim does nothing to amend this, and the reader becomes frustrated with Jim’s inaction, and his ready acceptance to let things carry on as they are. However, Jim’s extraordinary comic sense continually lightens the severity of his predicament and makes living with his problems much easier.

Jim Dixon’s relationship with Margaret is the source of considerable anxiety and distress; yet, he dodges the need to remedy this. Jim sees Margaret as a girl possessing “minimal prettiness” (Amis, 1953, p. 105), a person who is unenjoyable to spend time with, and whom he knows is manipulative. At the same time, he feels compelled to continue seeing her. Although it is not clear, his behaviour seems to be partly derived from a tragic sense that beautiful girls are not for him. As well, it seems to come from an unprecedented, yet noble sense of duty combined with pity; and a belief that he hasn’t “got the guts to leave her” (Amis, 1953, 201). Essentially, Jim lacks confidence. In noting Margaret’s deceit, one observes from the inception of their friendship, that Margaret is manoeuvring Jim into something he is not aware he is being involved: “It had seemed only natural for a female lecturer to ask a junior…male colleague up to her place for coffee, and no more civil to accept. Then suddenly he’d become the man who was `going around’ with Margaret, and somehow competing with this Catchpole” (Amis, 1953, p. 10). Margaret’s imposition of this title on Jim without his taking part, demonstrates her crafty nature. In addition, Margaret’s incorporation of another man into the pageantry, who is supposedly in pursuit of Jim’s title, is unquestionable evidence of Margaret’s manipulation of Jim. Then, at the Summer Ball, Carol Goldsmith affirms this opinion: “Throw her [Margaret] a life belt and she’ll pull you under” (Amis, 1953, p.121). Simply, Carol is saying that when Jim is “civil to accept” Margaret’s invitations, he is setting himself up to be used, which is exactly what she will do,

she [Margaret] feigns sexual avidity to entice, then denounce Jim…she shows no sympathy when he is in trouble with the Welches and uses her knowledge of his plight to coerce him…and she exploits him by manipulating him into paying for everything when they go out, even though he cannot afford it and she can” (Salwak, 1992, 27).

Furthermore, it is extremely frustrating in that Dixon makes no attempt at freeing himself from this laborious relationship, which he recognizes as antagonistic, “Dixon fought hard to drive away the opinion that, both as actress and script writer, she [Margaret] was doing rather well” (Amis, 1953, 76). Jim notes with precision that Margaret’s behaviour is theatrical, and, is not natural, but planned ahead of time to secure a certain response; however, he chooses to ignore this. To make matters even worse for Jim, the time he spends with Margaret is always drab and displeasing, and as a result, he dreads encounters with her. For example, he is often “averting his attention from the thought that Margaret would be there” (Amis, 1953, p.204). Despite his apprehensions about meeting with Margaret, Dixon again makes no effort to relieve himself of her acquaintance, “in a variety of tones, [Jim] recognizes, but fails to act on, a discrepancy between what he ought to do or wants to do and what he in fact does” (McDermott, 1989, p.63). As a recurring theme throughout the book, Jim’s failure to take action against Margaret is very disconcerting and leaves the reader feeling pity for him.

Much like Jim’s involvement with Margaret, his association with Professor Welch is very discouraging. Ironically, Jim does not want to teach for Welch, yet, he is incessantly trying to prove to him he is fit for the position by performing tedious duties. Much like the Margaret scenario, Jim’s motive for this behaviour is indiscernible. However, his conduct may quite conceivably come from a belief that by becoming an academic, he can secure the respect of others, and thus, raise his self-confidence. There is also a detectable hint of self-deprecation stemming from Jim’s not putting an end to the source of his frustrations. Moreover, he hates Welch for his dull company and arduous requests. Dixon feels, for example, that by remaining “present and conscious while Welch talked about concerts” (Amis, 1953, p. 8) he can secure his teaching-post. Unfortunately, these stories are miserably drab and are extremely uninteresting: “Dixon is bored not only by Welch’s account but by the concert itself. He has not of course the nerve to say so, and suppresses his rage” (McDermott, 1989, p. 55). Elaborating on Dixon’s disapproval of having to flatter Welch, McDermott also points out that Jim does nothing to free himself of this burden because of a lack of self-confidence. Similarly, in order to gain favourable standing with Welch, Jim writes an essay which he tries to have published. In recalling the papers title for Welch, Dixon reveals a strong dislike for the work his position requires: “It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article’s niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw on non-problems” (Amis, 1953, p. 14). Herein lies the core of his predicament; Jim subjects himself to Welch so that he may attain a job he doesn’t even enjoy doing. At other times, the Professor, employs cunning evasiveness (a chief aspect of his personality) in order to avoid letting Jim know whether or not he will in fact be able to land the teaching job he is pursuing. Jim’s uncertainty about his career coupled with the means by which he must guarantee it and his very dislike for the work, leave him in a precarious psychological balance. That is to say, Jim no longer wants to feel that the crap he puts up with from Welch may possibly be in vain. Thus, Dixon goes to Welch seeking stability in knowing whether, following his probationary vocation, he will be employed by the college or not. In a frustrating display, the Professor elusively denies Jim the satisfaction: “All the time he’d thought he was bringing the matter of his probation to a head he’d merely been a winkle on the pin of Welch’s evasion technique” (Amis, 1953, p. 86). Here, the “infuriatingly vague and evasive” (Gardner, 1981, p. 27) Welch succeeds in eluding Jim, thus causing Jim’s uncertainty to continue. Dixon then reveals a slight helplessness in reaching a conclusion and discloses Welch’s role in making his life difficult. Welch is also an antagonistic force in that he gives Jim menial tasks to perform, which chip away at his dignity. Not being “able to spend any time pottering about looking things up in the library himself” (Amis, 1953, p.173), the Professor pompously assumes Jim does. He then begins listing several subjects which Dixon is expected to research for a lecture Welch is to give. Much to his own annoyance, Jim does as is requested of him, though “not without some loss of time and integrity” (Amis, p. 173). Setbacks like this and other Welch aggravations are exceedingly frustrating and discouraging for poor Jim. These setbacks cause Jim feelings of ineffectuality, while they strip him of some dignity.

Not withstanding that Jim’s association with Welch and Margaret is frustrating and hindering, Dixon’s wit and inclination toward the absurd competently counter the depressing effect of his Margaret-Welch dilemma. In one instance, Jim is attending an extremely boring “arty get-together” (Amis, p.23) at Welch’s home. Following the excessive drinking of the evening, Jim smokes a cigarette and coaxes himself to sleep on one of Mrs. Welch’s guest beds. Upon awakening the following morning, his head throbbing, Dixon discovers that his cigarette has burned several gaping holes in the sheet, branded black an oriental rug, and charred the surface of a night table. Desperately not wanting to confess what he has done, Jim plots to conceal the incident. To begin with, he makes the bed with the burns reversed so they are hidden at the end. Then, he stuffs the burnt portion of the rug under a heavy chair on the other side of the room. For the finale, he scoops the table up in his arms, dashes fanatically down the hall, stops at, and darts through an apparently unused door, into a small room where he hides the table amongst an array of cluttered junk. In contrast to the dreary get-together, this outrageous incident lightens up the mood, taking the bite out of Jim’s precarious situation: “Jim’s taste for the absurd is perfectly accommodated by the polite restraints of his social environment….his comic energy propel[s] us through a social world which without his presence would be mundane” (Bradford, 1989, p. 33). At another moment, Jim exhibits further ridiculous behaviour in celebrating the completion of a laborious task that Welch had assigned to him:

With a long jabbering belch, Dixon got up from the chair where he’d been writing…and did his ape imitation all round the room. With one arm bent at the elbow so that the fingers brushed the armpit, the other crooked in the air so that the inside of the forearm lay across the top of his head, he wove with bent knees and hunched, rocking shoulders across to the bed, upon which he jumped up and down a few times, gibbering to himself (Amis, p. 205).

Initially, the reader is just relieved that Jim has finished his assignment, yet with the addition of this slap-stick monologue, the moment becomes a delightful departure from the annoyances of Jim’s world. He also vents irritation through off-handed, comical thoughts he has while in the company of Welch and Margaret. For example, as Jim is watching Welch talk about a concert, his mind drifting between several unrelated thoughts and the notion that he despises Welch’s company, it occurs to him that he should take action:

He pretended to himself that he’d pick up his professor round the waist, squeeze the furry grey-blue waistcoat against him to expel the breath, run heavily with him up the steps, along the corridor to the Staff Cloak-room, and plunge the too-small feet in their capless shoes into a lavatory basin, pulling the plug once, twice and again, stuffing the mouth with toilet paper (Amis, 1953, pp. 9-10).

Although the idea is never realized, this hysterical digression allows Jim to endure Welch with a certain degree of composure: “In order to maintain self-respect…[Jim] resorts to a comic fantasy world in which he can express rage or loathing towards…Welch (Salwak, 1992, p. 65). Likewise, in spending time with Margaret, Dixon illustrates the therapeutic nature of his humorous fantastical attacks. In a scene where Margaret is attempting to manipulate Jim, one perceives that in his hilarious mental outbursts, there is a calming effect:

“`Do you hate me, James?’ she said.

Dixon wanted to run at her and tip her backwards in the chair, to make a deafening rude noise in her face, to push a bead up her nose.

`How do you mean?’ he asked” (Amis, 1953, 156).

One notices the sharp contrast between the farcical animosity of Dixon’s thoughts and his smooth verbal response immediately. This is Jim collecting himself by means of releasing mounting hostility, while keeping it all contained in his head. Jim’s humour allows him a feeling of exultation, which is very calming.

In Lucky Jim, Jim Dixon is a man who is exposed to people who are forever tormenting him with various assaults ranging from manipulation to outrageous demands to outright dullness. Moreover, for unclear reason’s, Jim does not feel he can alter this situation, allowing them to continue as they are. Understandably, this is very dispiriting. Nevertheless, Dixon possesses a saving grace, his sense of humour. Compensating for Jim’s dissatisfying relationships, his jokes, and the ludicrous things he gets into, give Jim a way in which he can deal with the problems in his life. In fact, the comedy makes even the most disturbing moments amusing. This attribute allows Jim to live more contentedly in spite of numerous set backs. Comparably, this holds true for any person. What better way to cope with adversity than a strong sense of humour.

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