

THE AGE-OLD TROUBLE: AN ANALYSIS OF AGE AND HUMOR IN BEVERLY DONOFRIO'S NOVEL *RIDING IN CARS WITH BOYS*

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Abstract

Riding in Cars with Boys is an autobiographical novel about Beverly, a teenage Italian American girl who is pregnant in high-school. The article focuses on Beverly's development towards maturity and the obstacles she has to overcome in order to turn out right at the end. Donofrio's novel is a good example of contemporary female wit which has not been sufficiently explored by scholars. What is more, this work is part of the female Italian American literature which questions patriarchal standards of this immigrant community. With her disruptive attitude Beverly challenges the traditional family schemas by using irreverent expressions, especially those related to sex, which are considered taboo in her circle. Hence, she is what we can call a "bad girl" as opposed to her mother, a sexist example of "good girl". Donofrio's use of humor is a means to challenge society and women's role in society, especially in the Italian American community.

Resumen

Riding in Cars with Boys es una novela autobiográfica sobre Beverly, una joven italoamericana que se queda embarazada en el instituto. El artículo se centra en explicar el desarrollo de Beverly hacia la madurez y los obstáculos que tiene que sortear para que las cosas le salgan bien al final. La novela de Donofrio es un buen ejemplo de humor contemporáneo femenino, un campo que no ha sido suficientemente analizado por los investigadores. Así mismo, esta obra forma parte de la literatura italoamericana escrita por mujeres que cuestiona los estándares patriarcales de esta minoría. Con su actitud disruptiva Beverly choca con la idea tradicional de la familia ya que utiliza expresiones irreverentes, especialmente aquellas relacionadas con el sexo, puesto que son consideradas tabú en su comunidad. Es por ello que podemos etiquetarla como una "chica mala" en contraposición a su madre, un ejemplo sexista de la "chica buena". Donofrio utiliza el humor como un medio para desafiar a la sociedad en su conjunto y el papel que desempeña en ella la mujer, especialmente en la comunidad italoamericana.

Keywords: Women authors, Italian-American fiction, wit and humor in literature, Beverly Donofrio.

Palabras clave: Escritoras, narrativa italoamericana, humor en literatura, Beverly Donofrio.

Beverly Donofrio is the author of five novels, three of them semi-autobiographical: *Riding in Cars with Boys: Confessions of a Bad Girl Who Makes Good*, *Looking for Mary: Or, the Blessed Mother and Me*, and *Astonished*. In Donofrio's memoirs tears and joys are usually intermingled in such a way that she has herself stated: "Again and again, pain and disappointment launched me in a different direction, opened doors, seasoned me" (2013). The secret of her success is her authenticity, a reason why her humor is so spontaneous and straight to the point. Likewise, coming from an Italian American family, her origins mark her stories, which explain "what it means to be alive and why people... think and feel and act the way we do" (Donofrio: 2013). According to Michael Carosone, Italian American literature is usually characterized by three major topics: survival, identity quest and ethnic discomfort (2007: 12). *Riding in Cars with Boys* is a clear example of this type of literature given that her heroine struggles throughout the novel to survive and at the same time, she questions the stereotypes in the Italian American sub-culture to show her disagreement with conventions. As Edvige Giunta suggests, Italian American women dare to write "of one's own life. It might mean asserting the right to break the silence imposed from the inside... and from the outside" (2002:12). That is why Donofrio's novel is a good example of how humor is used as an act of defiance to the standards.

Although *Riding in Cars with Boys* was written in 1990 and was made into a movie in 2001, Donofrio's novel has not deserved any mention in modern critical books related to female humor. In spite of her reduced number of works, Donofrio's style is a significant exponent of female wit. According to Nancy Walker in her notorious book about women's humor called *A Very Serious Thing*, women's humorous writing functions "more as a means of communication than as a means of self-presentation, a sharing of experience rather than a demonstration of cleverness" (1988: xii). In line with this interpretation of female wit, Donofrio explains in an interview for Della Donna "webzine" (2007) how humor has helped her to write about the sad and painful experiences in life:

I don't know that humor got me through the dark times, but I do know it gave me a less painful and even enjoyable way to think about those dark times. You can laugh or you can cry. Or you can do both. When I'm truly alive, I do both, and the best is when my writing produces both laughter and tears in the reader. People have a much greater tolerance for hearing about your pain if it is couched in or tempered by humor.

Donofrio's words follow Barbara Levy's statement about wit, which seems "to offer a false control, a sort of last-ditch effort to salvage *something* from a situation slipping beyond one's grasp. When all else fails, make a joke" (1997: 1). Since humor plays a major role in the novel, this essay is going to analyse the relationship between age and humor, given that age influences the way in which humor is used in the novel. Furthermore, taking into account that female "humor is at odds with the conventional definition of ideal womanhood" (Walker 1988:12), I will explore how Donofrio is challenging the patriarchal standards of the Italian American society by means of comedy. Thus, the aim of this article is to shed some light on Donofrio's work, given that up to date there are few critical materials about her novels, which have been very successful among the readers but have not had a high repercussion in the scholarly community.¹

Riding in Cars with Boys tells the story of a girl, Beverly, who "gets in trouble" when she is still in high school. She herself explains the kind of trouble that she is in on the first page of the novel: "The trouble I'm talking about was my first real trouble, the age-old trouble. The getting in trouble as in 'Is she in Trouble?' trouble. As in pregnant. As in the girl who got pregnant in high school" (1992: 13). In these few lines she talks about "the age-old trouble". In fact, age plays a major role in the novel, since she is too young and immature when she gets pregnant.

Donofrio starts her story with the word "trouble," which is associated with "the age-old trouble". With this remark she makes a reflection on her younger years, when she was at high school and did not think of the consequences of her actions. Now that she writes her memoirs she is able to acknowledge that she was driven by the consequences of the age, but as she states, she "had no way of knowing it" (1992: 13). The story narrated by Donofrio is the story of an immature teenager from an Italian-American family that gets pregnant, something that makes her enter the adult world without being prepared. But as she gets older she will understand the meaning of motherhood and sacrifice. As a result, the subtitle of the book is *Confessions of a Bad Girl Who Makes Good*.

In a way, *Riding in Cars with Boys* reminds us of other best-selling novels like *Kinflicks* by Lisa Alther. Although Donofrio's work is autobiographical, her character in the novel (Bev) shares some features with Alther's Ginny. The two characters are young and narrate the problems of their age, namely, their impossibility to get along with their families, their never-ending fight with the established conventions, their failures in love, and their ability to create a joke in any situation. In addition, both of them are not what Regina Barreca – an Italian-American scholar – would call a "Good Girl" and a "Snow White", but they rather fit in the "Bad Girl" stereotype. Donofrio

¹ Although the film has been reviewed by numerous critics such as Jessica Wolf or Bruce Kluger (maybe because superstar Drew Barrymore plays the role of Beverly), her novel has received fewer reviews, being the most notorious the one written by Rosellen Brewer.

explains her understanding of “good” and “bad” in her interview for Della Donna. It is a quote by Shakespeare that she also uses in *Riding in Cars with Boys*: “Nothing is either good nor bad, but thinking makes it so” (2007). This sentence clearly shows that both “good” and “bad” are stereotypes created by society. What is more, this society has been ruled and built by men, which is the reason why the “good girl” has been accepted by society and the “bad girl” has been rejected and condemned by it.

Before analyzing the humorous features in the novel, it is worth considering why the main character, Beverly, is considered to be a prototype of a bad girl. The same as Ginny Babcock, Beverly breaks the standards in society: She is pregnant in high school and she has to marry, she takes drugs, and she lives on the edge. In fact, she once wonders why her parents decided “to name their first daughter Beverly Ann Donofrio and forever brand [her] with the initials B.A.D.?” (1992: 124). Thus, she thinks that she has been labeled as a bad girl from childhood and it is her destiny to be bad. On top of that, Beverly represents the “bad girl” within an Italian American family. These families are usually highly religious and traditional, since the woman is the nurturer and caregiver whereas the man is the worker outside of the house. As Regina Barreca mentions, the “Bad Girl has only recently been granted permission to be the heroine” (1991: 44). Thus, in this sense the novel also uses a new concept of heroine, given that Bev represents what young girls are told not to be. By showing such a heroine, Donofrio highlights and makes fun of female’s badness by challenging the moral standards of society, especially her Italian American circle.

In addition to using the stereotype of the bad girl, Donofrio’s story is full of scenes that belong to the slapstick comedy. Furthermore, her memoir is part of what Nancy Walker calls the “domestic saga” (1991:52). According to her, this type of writing has got the following elements that are fulfilled by Donofrio’s story: a female first-person narrator that recount, with some degree of self-deprecation, her chaotic attempts to achieve a level of ideality as a homemaker that is dictated by the culture in the form of older women... Such sagas presuppose that the reader will identify with the central character’s struggles” (1991: 52). As we will see later on, Bev’s mother is the older female figure who tells her how to act according to the Italian traditional standards that Bev tries to break by all means.

Bev’s youth problems are more often than not related to boys (she herself states that she is “boy crazy” (1992: 15), hence the inclusion of “boys” in the title of the book. In a way she is fighting against conventions. Boys can chase after girls but girls are said to ruin their reputation if they do the same. That is why Beverly also fits in Barreca’s “bad girl” stereotype. Nevertheless, like any girl of her age, Beverly has dreams and imagines that everything will happen like in tales or movies. But at the end, everything turns out different and all her goals in life end up when she gets pregnant and she has to marry. However, she still has dreams about her new life, which she idealizes somehow influenced by Hollywood movies and the pop culture of the 1960s. This sense of “fictional life” is what makes Bev so vulnerable and

childish but, on the other hand, it also makes her story more humorous and irreverent. For example, when she first meets Raymond (her son's father) she imagines that it "would be like *On the Waterfront*. He'd be Marlon Brando and I'd be Eva Marie Saint. I'd tutor Raymond for his high school equivalency; he'd listen to me recite Shakespearean soliloquys in my cellar" (1992: 29). But she soon realizes that she is going to have "a hood for a boyfriend" (1992: 29). The use of the word "hood" (a slang word for "hoodlum") contains numerous negative connotations to describe Raymond: a criminal, a liar, and a drug addict. Unlike Beverly, Raymond is not able to mature as he gets older due to his addiction to drugs.

But why does Beverly love Raymond if she knows that he is a "hood"? It is precisely that immaturity what makes her feel love, when maybe she is only feeling pity for him. At the beginning of their relationship more than once she mentions expressions like "poor Raymond" but as she realizes that he is not going to be the man she had expected, she begins to feel anger. These contradictory feelings even take place on the same day of their wedding:

I felt the way I did whenever I saw a midget or dwarf or a hunchbacked person – like I wanted to take them home and adopt them or something. So I covered his shaking hand with my hand, looked him in his eyes, and said, "I love you," even though a minute ago, at the top of the aisle, I wished he'd die before I turned thirty-five. The kid would be eighteen then, a legal adult, and I could start another life while I was still reasonably attractive. (1992: 41)

These thoughts reveal that she is not facing reality, given that she daydreams that her two problems (Raymond and Jason) will disappear in the near future so that she can still enjoy her youth. Thus, she does not take into account that the course of time will make her mature and change her preferences. The fact that Bev is so immature may have to do with the traditional family she lives in. Since her parents are of Italian origin, she is thought to act according to the Catholic faith and be a good daughter. But her attitude towards boys is a way to rebel against those traditional conventions. In addition, her family has never mentioned anything related to sexual matters and that is why it is so hard for her to tell her parents that she is pregnant at the beginning. Beverly uses humoristic exaggeration to highlight the behaviour of her family, especially her father: "How could I mention the word sex to him when I couldn't stay in the same room through a Playtex living bra commercial?" (1992: 32). With this sentence Donofrio employs humor by mentioning a taboo topic in an Italian American family: sex. Being such a traditional community, Italians are usually very religious and sex is considered a sin. Thus, with this example, she is denouncing the fact that something so dull like a commercial announcing a daily female piece of clothing is transformed into an unpleasant weapon related to sex.

With the pregnancy, she is about to enter the adult world while being still a child. As the story develops, the reader realizes that Beverly does not want to be like her mother, who usually follows the patriarchal model of woman in the Italian-

American community. She is usually at home cooking, cleaning and tending her family. Thus, Beverly does not understand why her mother is always defending her father's decisions. She even labels her mother as "[her] father's servant" (1992: 26). Although she has to take care of her own family with Raymond and the child, she does not want to be a conventional housewife that makes the food, washes the clothes or tends the children. The same as every other girl of her age, she wants to enjoy with her friends and go to university. On the contrary, her mother tries to teach Beverly how to become a good mother and a good housewife:

"When'd you do the wash last?"

The last time I did the wash was when she'd done it. "I don't know," I said.

[...]

"It's not like you don't have plenty to do – you just don't do it. When did you mop the floor last?"

"I don't want to talk about housework."

"I'm just telling you for your own good. You get into a routine, then it's easy."

"Ma!" I yelled. "I don't want to talk about housework, okay?" (1992: 48)

This scene happens when Beverly is still a teenager, but the relationship with her mother is an example of how the feminist movement presented motherhood and mothering. According to Paulina Palmer, the figure of the mother has been sharply criticized in feminist novels because it is seen "as the tool of patriarchy, she was attacked for the part she played in socializing children into traditional gender roles, thus perpetuating the positions of male dominance and female subordination" (1989: 96). Donofrio uses, then, a tense relationship between mother and daughter in order to challenge patriarchal standards in the Italian American community. As Beverly points out: "It's the old debate. Good mother, bad mother. Is it worse to have an overprotective one who tries to keep you a kid forever or one who verges on neglecting you and therefore makes you responsible for yourself?" (1992: 183). For this reason, Bev's mother represents the concept of "Good Girl" that Barreca describes:

Control is the quality most explicitly associated with Good Girls... Decorum and poise, the ability to be both demure and self-possessed, these are the trademarks of the Good Girl. She is mature but never precocious. She is affable and easy to please. Immune to temptation... Good Girls don't swear, sweat, succumb, or satirize... Bad Girls don't necessarily swear, sweat, succumb, or satirize but they can be counted on to make a little trouble. (1991: 46-47)

The different perspectives clash due to Beverly's rejection of conventions. She is a "Bad Girl" because she has premarital sex, she is not religious and makes jokes that threaten the authority of their parents. In addition to the confrontation with her mother, Beverly questions her father's authority from the very beginning since he represents the patriarchy of the Italian immigrant community. Hence, Beverly is among those women that "look at those in power, or at those institutions we were

taught to revere, and laugh” (Barreca 1991: 14). If the relationship with her mother is more a reaction against the conventional status of the Italian-American woman than a feeling of anger, her behaviour towards her father and her brother is more related to the anger that she feels for the authority that the male represents in her Italian American family:

I was never the type of little girl who hated boys. Never. Well, except for my brother. I was just the oldest of three girls, while he was the Oldest, plus the only boy in an Italian family, and you know what that means: golden penis. My father sat at one end of the table and my brother sat at the other, while my mother sat on the sidelines with us girls. You could say I resented him a little. (1992:15)

What is more, her father's authority is highlighted by his being a cop, which allows him to have an additional power (the one representing society) over her daughter. What Beverly's father represents is what she challenges, in other words, she does not defies her father just because he plays the role of a father but because he plays the role of a male with an authority in society and in the family. In this context, humorous situations arise due to Beverly's immaturity and incapacity to face her acts. For instance, when her father is questioning her about a car accident that she has with some friends, he assumes that she has been drinking, which in fact she was. Thus, instead of assuming her fault, she pretends that she is not lying as a way to question her father's authority and the way he controls her. This is what she called the “Stanislavsky method of lying”:

I put on my best injured look and pretended to be choking back tears [...].
“They're setting up the lie detector in the other room [...] Will you swear on the lie detector that you're telling the truth?”
A bead of sweat dripped down my armpit. “Good. And bring in Ronald Kovacs and make him take it, too. Then you'll see who's a liar.”
Turns out there was no lie detector; it was a bluff and I'd won the gamble. (1992: 24)

As time passes, Beverly learns additional strategies to get on his father's nerves. Coming from an Italian family, her father is very conservative and Catholic, consequently, for him everything related to sexuality is taboo. Bev's humor is so sharp when her father is around as a way of taking revenge against those in power and, at the same time, mocking their patriarchal beliefs. Most of the times Beverly plays the bad girl role as a way of getting a feeling of victory over her father, as in the following scene:

“You ever been to a porn shop, Ma?” I said.
“No,” she said, glancing nervously at my father, who was pretending not to listen as he watched the Giants game on TV.
“They have this doll. You blow it up human size. It's got a hole...”
My father left the room... This was the first time in memory my father had ever abandoned a Giants game. I considered it a victory.

“Good,” I said to my mother. “Want to watch the Bette Davis movie on channel five?”

“Shame on you,” she said. (1992: 167)

She begins the conversation knowing that her father will be listening and as a way to disturb him. Here she exaggerates her role as bad girl, which makes her father abandon the room as a sign of dislike. The humorous part comes when the reader discovers that she is only pretending to play a role considered taboo in the family in order to watch a movie on TV. However, her mother does not laugh at the situation, she reproaches her attitude instead. In this scene, Bev is fully aware of the topic that she is dealing with and, in a way, she is testing her father. But her father, who represents the male-in-power, fails to analyze the situation and is intimidated by the use of certain words. A man like him is used to react against the force of bad actions and behaviours but he is unable to treat words, although words themselves have even more power than actions. That is why he loses the battle, because he is not able to cope with words and his only way of showing disagreement and rejection is leaving the room. For this reason, Bev represents again the concept of the Bad Girl, as she says what she wants to say in order to challenge authority: “Bad Girls say what they think. This is particularly important because what the Bad Girl says out loud is usually the same thing that everybody else is thinking but is too ashamed to admit” (Barreca 1991:49).

When the moment of giving birth comes, Beverly uses humor in order to “diffuse the pain” (Barreca 1991: 22). That is why those pages are among the most memorable of the book. For instance, when she is taken to the hospital she starts talking to a woman named Louise, who is in labor too. When Louise mentions that she is majoring in anthropology, Bev does not really understand the meaning of the word “but [she]’d rather die than ask her” (1992: 66). Then, when Bev is starting to push she “kept thinking how even Jacqueline Kennedy must’ve held her ankles in the air and grunted like she was taking a shit” (1992: 67). Donofrio uses a cultural icon of the period in order to challenge important people and, at the same time, associate it with “low” humor. It also challenges the ideal of motherhood of the time when labor was disguised. The use of a respected lady like Jacqueline Kennedy as a way to portray the equal suffering of all women in labor is one humorous remark that serves to make the reader laugh even though the main character is suffering a huge pain. One of the times that the nurses bring the baby to her, Bev tries to memorize how they have pinned the diaper so that she “could duplicate it” (1992: 69). Although she is a teenage mother with no idea of how to take care of a baby, she has the resources to learn how to do the basic things. Beverly would like to have a girl so that she can have a friend to talk to, without realizing what childbearing is:

I began making plans. My daughter would look just like me... She was going to be my best friend and there’d be nothing in the world we wouldn’t talk about. I’d tell her every last detail about my life up to her birth and after. She’d definitely go to

college, and I'd call her Nicole, after a schizophrenic on my favourite soap opera. (1992: 63)

These thoughts show how Beverly is projecting her wishes of a mother-daughter relationship that she has not had with her own mother. That is why she is so frustrated when she discovers that instead of a girl she has had a boy:

What would I do with him? I didn't even like boys anymore. He'd have army men and squirt guns and baseball cards and a *penis*. What would we talk about? (1992: 68)

Except for her father, her brother and her husband, Beverly has only had girlfriends and sisters. The male figure in her life has always been associated either with power (her father and elder brother) or with sex. Thus, she feels that she will not feel confident with having a male child.

At the eyes of society Beverly was already a bad girl just because she got pregnant in high school. To make things worse, after having the child she started to take drugs with her husband. But the problems in the couple soon arise as a consequence of drugs. One night she was alone waiting for Ray to come because "[she] was bored to death and had such a craving for a Dairy Queen ice cream cone [she] thought [she]'d go out of [her] mind" (1992: 83). The fact that she is thinking of an ice cream is what makes the situation a humorous one. However, the ice cream symbolizes Bev's freedom. She is tied to a marriage that she knows that is not going to work and, on top of that, her husband lies to her. That is why when Ray comes back she says to him ironically: "Let me guess. You ran over a dog and had to bring it to a vet" (1992: 84). After one of their arguments, Bev leaves the house and considers the idea of killing herself. But for the first time she has a feeling of responsibility and considers what would happen if she broke the car or, even worse, what would happen to her son if she died: "And what about Jason? Do I want him to be raised by Raymond? To use double negatives when he speaks? (1992: 86)

This reflection marks the beginning of her maturity. It is the beginning of her feeling of motherhood, absent so far in the narrative. Her responsibility as a mother starts with her divorce from Ray. However, once she is free, her mother reminds her what being a divorced woman in that period of time means for men:

"Men see a divorced woman and they're out for one thing," she said.
"For Christ's sake, Ma. I'm going to the movies with Beatrice."
"They figure once a woman's had it," she kept going.
"Had what?" I wanted her to come out and say it.
"You know what I'm talking about." (1992: 95)

Although she is still a girl, her experience has made her a more mature woman. Now that she is a divorced woman, she even questions marriage: "The only thing I thought about marriage after that was, Never in a million years, not for a billion dollars, and never again if it kills me" (102). This sentence results quite ironic if the

reader remembers that before marrying Raymond she stated that she was not going to get married because she did not want to be like her mother:

"It's not up to the wife to tell the husband what to do," my mother said.

"He tells you what to do all the time."

"The man wears the pants in the family."

"I'm never getting married."

"You'll change your tune."

"And end up like you? Never in a million years."

"You better not let your father catch you talking to me like that." (1992: 25)

Beverly criticizes her mother for being a traditional housewife and a mother but when she marries Raymond and gives birth to Jason, she becomes something that she despised before. The contrast between Beverly and her mother illustrates the opposition between the "Good Girl" and the "Bad Girl" explained by Barreca. Apart from criticizing her mother, Beverly also confronts her whenever she intends to be a mother to Jason, for instance when he asks Beverly to have a GI Joe toy:

"Leave the kid alone," my mother said. "I don't know why he can't have a GI Joe."

"Because toys like that encourage violence," I said.

"It's just a doll," she said, not listening.

"It's just drugs. It's just sex," I said into the table.

"What?" she said.

My sisters giggled.

"Ma!" Jase said, and slapped my hand. (1992: 122-123)

The mother-daughter conflict arises because Beverly's mother sees the toy as any other "doll" whereas Beverly considers that that kind of toys are violent for her child. But the underlying problem is that the daughter is deconstructing her mother's discourse by bringing drugs and sex to the forefront. This reply provokes the surprise on her mother and the giggles on her sisters. Both reactions are understandable because Beverly's answer does not fit with the behaviour of a "Good Girl", who is not supposed to mention the taboo words and even less to accept to be part of it. Nevertheless, as Donofrio recognizes after publishing the novel, she really loved her family: "Leaving my family would be like experiencing a death [...]" (1992: 30).

Beverly's divorce also means that she is sexually free. As a "Bad Girl" she enjoys her youth and her living alone with a friend. Sometimes the concept of "Bad Girl" has been associated with that of feminism. Although being a feminist may imply being a "Bad Girl" it may not function the other way around. For instance, as it has been pointed out, Beverly is a "Bad Girl" but she is not a feminist most of the time, i.e. she does not act according to the feminist ideals but according to her likes and dislikes. Nevertheless, sometimes she feels part of the feminist movement because she does not feel attached to any man: "I'd read Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Simone de Beauvoir, and I was ready, I was willing, I was chomping at the bit to personally fight for the rights of all women" (109). Yet, what Beverly does is

not to fight for the rights of women but to sleep with any man as a way to enjoy, not as a way to defend the situation of women in the 1970s. In fact, Beverly herself realizes that, although she lives without a man by her side, “[a]ll we ever do is talk about guys, think about guys, and go to the club to look for guys... [h]ow can we call ourselves liberated?” (1992: 113). This open question starts a debate about her attitude. Although she feels liberated, she still wants to be in the company of men. Finally, her friend Fay recognizes that she gets along better with men than with women because women are still living in the traditional and domestic sphere that they want to escape: talking about their babies, their husbands or shopping at stupid stores (1992: 114).

Both Bev and Fay are criticizing the way the “Good Girls” behave. Nevertheless, the liberation of women (“women’s lib shit”) is not what they are searching, but rather the possibility of living their own lives without having to depend on a man.

When Bev finally decides to start working, she first tries to earn money being a writer. She wrote a story and applied for the Famous Writer School. At first she thought that her story was good and had started to dream about the possibility of being a famous writer. Interestingly enough, Beverly writes an ironic story about a girl that has hiccups. The theme and the plot reminds us of other Southern writers who used humor as a way to depict uncommon episodes such as Flannery O’Connor or Catherine Ann Porter. Typically, women writers of the South use their anecdotes in a funny way in order to add an important detail to the story. Hence, these little anecdotes are what really build the whole story. Donofrio’s novel is also based on a series of anecdotes which mark her life such as the women she met when she was giving birth, her relationship with her baby or the way she started college.

After her initial disappointment when the school suggested that she needed extra training, she started to look for a job. But, once more, she clashes against society and its standards. This time it is due to the fact that she does not usually wear a bra, hence, her employment counsellor asks her to wear it on the basis that “it makes a better impression” (129). Consequently, Beverly decides that she would rather stay jobless than change her attitude “if that’s the way jobs were... I’d rather stay poor, unemployed, and true to my principles, thank you” (1992: 129). On the other hand, this example illustrates how she does not want to adjust to society’s values, which seem to affect women only. On the other hand, her willingness to keep her own values is clear evidence that she is critical with the established conventions, even though she does not get any benefit from this confrontation.

The same as Lisa Alther in *Kinflicks*, Donofrio uses dark humor to narrate Bev’s attempt of suicide. It is a dramatic moment, since Bev has just discovered that she may not be able to find a good job after all and, as a result, she may end up like her mother, something that she has always despised. After checking with a hospital about

the effects of aspirins, she decides to eat one hundred of them in order to die. She starts to eat the aspirins two by two and starts to imagine how she will be found by her son. Apart from that, she also considers how problematic her life is with her pregnancy at seventeen, her divorce at nineteen, her arrest at twenty-one and her death at twenty-three, “there was a beautiful symmetry” (1992: 136). Furthermore, she remembers her first suicide attempt, which was due to a joke that a boy that she liked had played on her. At first she thought that it was the worst thing that happened to her but, as she herself remembers, “one day, it seemed funny” (1992: 137). Consequently, Beverly wonders if what now she considers a drama she will later see it as a funny thing that once happened to her. These thoughts make her reconsider her suicide attempt.

This passage is an inflection point in Beverly’s life. Dramatic as it may be, her reasons for committing suicide are strong but she decides to laugh at drama. This is what the whole book is about. Although her life is not easy and she has to face her early motherhood all her life, by writing the book she learns to struggle tension with humor. In addition, the suicide attempt and her final decision show that Beverly is maturing. That is why her suicide is not the end but the beginning of a new and more positive period in her life. When she is offered the opportunity to attend college she takes it because she realizes that she is smart enough to go to college and change her life.

Nevertheless, Beverly’s account of the tests that she has to pass in order to get accepted in the college still illustrates her underlying immaturity. For instance, when she is about to start the tests she mentions that her “strategy was to answer the questions like a crazy person so [she]’d be considered disabled and a candidate for college or training” (1992: 140). However, she realizes that the tests that she has to pass are too abstract to know what the right answer is and that is why she says, “I couldn’t distinguish between crazy and sane, which made me think I really was a nut” (1992: 140).

With the information collected by these tests, the psychiatrists conclude that she is “having a difficult time adjusting to adult life” (1992: 141), which scientifically demonstrates that society also considers her too immature to be an adult with a kid and about to enter college. However, society will give her another opportunity and will allow her to attend college in order to show that she is able to act as an adult. Beverly’s reaction to this proposal is that of relief mixed with anger:

Let the problem be anything but the car and the kid. If I had a car and a baby-sitter to begin with, I wouldn’t be sitting in this old coot’s office listening to how I’m an emotional and social basket case. (1992: 143)

But despite adversity, Beverly always finds a solution. The last chapter of the book is a description of the family years later, when Jason is about to go to college.

Despite the tensions in the family, Beverly's parents behave as always, worrying about their daughter and grandson:

My mother will ask a million questions about the journey, as though we'd come halfway across the world through continents deluged by monsoons when all we did was drive two and a half hours north on the interstate from Manhattan in the rain. (1992: 179)

With these words Beverly still laughs at her mother's concerns without realizing that now that her son will leave her, she will do the same with him. Beverly's relationship with her son also develops in the course of the novel. But when both get older and move to New York, Beverly starts to consider him as a friend, somebody to rely on. However, Jason starts to take the role of a father and starts to ask her where she goes and worries about how much money she spends: "He told me he was planning on becoming a millionaire and then he'd give me an allowance, but no more than a thousand dollars a month, because I'd just squander it" (1992: 187). When Jason is a teenager he is also concerned with sexual issues. He is no longer a kid who asks questions about it but he can now judge on his own and even criticize her mother, who starts to think twice about her acts. For example, once Jason asks her, "Don't you think it's disgusting to leave that thing out, in the kitchen?" (1992: 187). He uses the term "thing" to refer to Beverly's diaphragm. However, Beverly sees it as a normal thing to do taking into account the possibilities of their house: "The tub was in the kitchen, as well as our one and only sink, so where else to put a diaphragm to dry after washing but on the shelf above the sink?" (1992: 187). In her rhetorical question at the end of the sentence lies the humorous part of the scene, since the answer is not so obvious and maybe her son is right.

Despite her disruptive attitude, Bev finally turns out right, since she is able to cope with the moral standards without forgetting her own self. The reason why she ends up being a more responsible person is related to age. When she was pregnant, she was still an immature teenager that acted without thinking of the consequences. But as the novel develops, she gets older and she discovers that she is not on her own but she has a child to take care of. She is no longer a teenager but a young mother. Therefore, this novel can be considered a "Bildungsroman" given that it shows Beverly's moral, psychological, and intellectual development from her adolescence to her maturity as the events happen gradually. Despite her childish attitude at the beginning of the story, at the end of the book Bev is able to cope with the difficult situations that she faces and finally become a modern Good Girl.

All the aforementioned examples from the novel illustrate how Donofrio uses humor to challenge the social roles of women. According to Alice Sheppard, there are five types of humor that challenge the social roles of women. First, role-consistent humor, which is used when women use "stereotyped roles of women" (Sheppard 1991: 44) in order to narrate a comic situation. In the book, this type of humor is present in the form of Bev's mother and how she behaves towards her daughter. Role-

reversal humor, on the other hand, makes use of a swift in roles and the women do traditionally men things whereas men are the ones in charge of doing female things. Bev is always trying to reverse roles, especially when she experiences the sexual freedom that only males enjoy. When Bev is wondering about her role as a mother, however, it is an example of role-dilemma humor, which “is centered in the contemporary roles and the challenges of feminine identity in a transitional society” (Sheppard 1991: 45). She tries to compare herself with her mother but she is not able to have the same attitude towards motherhood because she does not want to sacrifice her own life in favor of her son. Nevertheless, she also thinks that motherhood does not allow for a complete freedom because there is someone to take care of.

But when she is told to wear a bra by the social worker she definitely uses role-transgressive humor, which “is based on violations of conventional boundaries of social propriety” (Sheppard 1991: 46). By declining to wear a bra she is also vindicating her right to wear what she wants, not what society has established for her to wear.

Finally, role-transformative humor “is the humor that most obviously and directly seeks to attack gender roles” (Sheppard 1991: 47). In this sense, Bev’s rejection to the conventional role of women is part of her arguments with her mother. Her reaffirmation in having her own life apart from family is a clear attack to the traditional gender roles established by the traditional Italian American society. Although she refuses to be called a feminist, Bev revolts against a patriarchal society exemplified by her Italian American family.

Donofrio defies the standards in society using comedy because, as Sheppard states, the “most critical dimension of women’s humor becomes the manner in which women’s social roles are portrayed and/or challenged in women’s humor” (1991: 44). *Riding in Cars with Boys* is a good example of how a woman tries to challenge conventions by following her instincts, although maybe she is not always successful in the methods that she employs and the reader might not agree with her unsettling behavior. It is also an example of how a teenage-mother is able to succeed in life in spite of defying the standards in family and society. With her novel, Donofrio goes against what women must say, do, and wear. These issues are part of gender models, and she challenges them.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning the importance of Donofrio’s work within the scope of the humorous American literature written by women. Her use of irony, sarcasm and punch lines is so, that it comes as a surprise that her work has not been sufficiently explored in modern anthologies or scholarly works about Italian American writers. Hopefully, this article would not be the last one dealing with an author who has shown an enduring commitment with contemporary female literature and ethnicity.

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