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Humorous sublimation of a dying Cuban writer in Reinaldo Arenas' *The Color of Summer*

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Abstract: How does a human being deal with suffering? How can we emotionally cope with the vicissitudes of life, especially in times where they suddenly multiply themselves? In this study, we present an innovative interdisciplinary study on the use of coping mechanisms by career writers dealing with difficult life events. We focus in particular on the use of humor and sublimation, two creative mental mechanisms that contribute to the lowering of anxiety while at the same time dealing constructively with the external stressors. Never before have these mechanisms been studied in a complementary way in the context of a literary study. This paper offers an in-depth analysis of Reinaldo Arenas' *The Color of Summer*. In this novel, this Cuban author introduces an autobiographical perspective of the Cuban sixties and seventies, intending to present a facet of history that would never appear in Cuban history books. The combination of both coping mechanisms, which we call humorous sublimation, offers a novel that not only helped the author cope with his tormented life, but also allowed the reader to gain an understanding of a dark period of Cuban history by means of a very funny and surreal reading.

Keywords: humor, sublimation, coping, defense mechanisms, Cuban literature, Reinaldo Arenas

*Christophe Panichelli and Stéphanie Panichelli-Batalla contributed equally to this work.

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1 Introduction

In addition to belonging to the eight most effective coping mechanisms, humor and sublimation also have in common the characteristic of using creativity to deal with the vicissitudes of everyday life. Humor generates amusing perspectives about painful situations (Farrelly and Lynch 1987; Hollander 2012); sublimation turns lead into gold by producing works of art that are valuable to others (Adams 2006; Metzger 2014). These creative mental mechanisms allow to lower anxiety while at the same time continuing to deal with reality with an “optimal adaptation in the handling of stressors” (DSM-IV 1994: 752). Nevertheless, they have never been studied as complementary mechanisms.

Artistic production as a psychological defense mechanism has only been mentioned in scientific literature previously in the context of chronic physical illness, considering for example famous painters suffering from rheumatoid arthritis (Zeidler 2012). Indeed, a Pubmed search with the keywords “artistic sublimation” finds only fifteen results.¹ Furthermore, the case of career writers in this context has not been addressed up to now, despite the fact that several studies showed that they are more likely to suffer from mental illness and die younger (in Kaufman and Sexton 2006). In this paper, we offer an original interdisciplinary perspective crossing psychology and literary studies, focusing in particular on humor as a meaningful creative tool that colors the writing experience.

We chose to analyze the case of Reinaldo Arenas, a Cuban author exiled in the United States in 1980, who died in 1990 being terminally ill with AIDS.² The use of humor in Cuban literary culture to deal with the harsh social and economic situations is a common strategy (Guanche Pérez 1996; Cooper 2006; Hidalgo 2012). Arenas offers us an intriguing case study with his novel *The Color of Summer* (2001b). This carnivalesque story is closely related to Arenas’ personal life: although clearly framed as a fictional work, the novel reveals to be a metaphor of Arenas’ dilemmas and life events. The author even uses his real name for the main character, a process known as “autofiction” (Panichelli-Batalla 2015). The result is an astonishing transformation of difficult life experiences of exile and suffering in an incredibly creative work of art. The systematic use of humor while unfolding this autobiographically-based story is combined with the simultaneous sublimation of painful personal experiences, thereby revealing a form of fusion between these two mature coping mechanisms.

1 PubMed Search on 9 February 2017.

2 For ‘Acquired ImmunoDeficiency Syndrome,’ the final stage of the illness transmitted by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

2 Context

Reinaldo Arenas (1943–1990) is a Cuban homosexual author who spent most of his life writing literary and non-literary works in order to inform others about the situation of the Cuban people on the island under the government of Fidel Castro. He had a particular interest in denouncing the situation of the intellectuals and homosexuals in a country where there was no freedom of speech and where homosexuality was persecuted by the revolutionary regime. Indeed, while Cuba has recently undergone a radical change with Mariela Castro, Raul Castro's daughter, leading the "sexual revolution," in the sixties and seventies a systematic persecution of the homosexual community was taking place on the island. To illustrate, one can refer to the UMAPs (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción [Military Units to Aid Production]), these so-called rehabilitation camps for homosexuals and anti-social citizens, opened between 1965 and 1968. Their purpose was to 'reeducate' these men into 'real men,' equivalent to Che Guevara's 'hombre nuevo' [new man] concept of the 'real' revolutionary man (Negrón Muntaner 2008). At the entrance of the camps, a sign indicated: "Work will turn you into men," reminding in some way the sign that could be found at the Nazi concentration camps, which stated: "Work will make you free."

Arenas has written novels, theatre plays, poetry and essays, but above all he is known for his *pentagon*, a collection of five autobiographic novels that recounts the tragic story of its characters in Cuba. Arenas was himself a persecuted homosexual writer as his writing did not correspond to the expectations that the new government had set for the revolutionary intellectuals. In 1980, tired of suffering the repercussions of his marginalized existence on the island, Arenas decides to leave Cuba. A few years after settling in the United States, he is diagnosed with AIDS and his priority becomes the writing of his autobiography, as well as of the last unfinished novel of his *pentagon*, *The Color of Summer*.

3 Coping mechanisms

How do we cope emotionally with the vicissitudes of life, especially in times where they suddenly multiply themselves? This is one of the core topics of psychology since the early works of Freud (2014), who introduced the concept of defense mechanisms. Since then, it has gained a vast recognition among psychotherapists (Ionescu et al. 2008; Perry 2014). It addresses the way in which

people psychologically and physically react to adverse life events. Those reactions highlight their own psychological functioning in their (dis-)ability to regulate one's emotional conflicts. Some defenses demonstrate a high potential to restrain negative emotions while remaining aware of the difficult aspects of reality. They limit excessive reactions and future relational problems. Other defenses only succeed in lowering anxiety by avoiding the consciousness of unpleasant or unacceptable sides of the situation. Their individual and interpersonal cost is far more deleterious to the psychological well-being.

The DSM-IV (1994) defines ego mechanisms of defense as “automatic psychological processes that protect the individual against anxiety and from the awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors” (751). It differentiates thirty-one mechanisms from each other, regrouped in seven defense levels. For example, the highest adaptive level includes eight defenses: anticipation, affiliation, altruism, humor, self-assertion, self-observation, sublimation and suppression. These mechanisms “result in optimal adaptation in the handling of stressors” for they “usually maximize gratification and allow the conscious awareness of feelings, ideas, and their consequences” (DSM-IV 1994: 752). On the other hand, defenses at the lowest adaptive level are “characteristic by failure of defensive regulation to contain the individual's reaction to stressors, leading to a pronounced break with objective reality” (DSM-IV 1994: 753). Each individual uses a combination of those thirty-one different defense mechanisms, which constitutes his/her own *coping style*. Some of these defenses are located at the same adaptive level. Others are not.

Reinaldo Arenas' *Color of Summer* conveys numerous examples of coping by two specific defenses: sublimation and humor, which are defined as follows. Sublimation corresponds to dealing “with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by channeling potentially maladaptive feelings or impulses into socially acceptable behavior” (DSM-IV 1994: 757). It goes far beyond minimizing stress: “it also leads to the creation of a product [a work of art, for example a novel] in the real world, one that can have value to others” (Metzger 2014: 479). Humor is a way of handling emotional suffering “by emphasizing the amusing or ironic aspects of the conflict or stressor” (DSM-IV 1994: 755). It is associated with perspective taking and with not taking oneself too seriously (Panichelli 2013; Kuiper et al. 1995) as well as with personal resiliency (Kuiper 2012).

Among several associations of different defenses that have been described by anecdotal evidence, humor has been shown to relate with a particularly high number of other mechanisms such as displacement (Vaillant 1992), affiliation, devaluation (Metzger 2014), and denial (Martin et al. 2003). Panichelli (2007) adds that if humor can be considered a specific defense mechanism, it can also give access to at least five other defenses (affiliation, reaction formation,

undoing, devaluation, and acting out). We believe that this unique potential is due to the link between humor and creativity, which is pointed out by numerous authors (e.g. Cade 1982; Kuiper et al. 1995). It is therefore somewhat surprising that an association of humor and sublimation, another defense obviously related with creativity (Metzger 2014), has not been analyzed further up to now.

4 Analysis

The Color of Summer recounts the story of an island and its inhabitants in 1999. The island's dictator, Fifo, decides to celebrate the revolution's anniversary with a grand carnival. In the meantime, the inhabitants initiate a strong opposition against the dictator. As escaping the island is not possible, they express their criticism with an excessive sexual fury, and they decide to gnaw the island from underneath in order to free it from its platform and find at last freedom. Although at the end of the carnival the island comes loose, the inhabitants cannot seem to agree on its new destination/destiny, and it ends up sinking into the sea taking with it the whole population.

4.1 Arenas' most humorous novel

This novel is undoubtedly Arenas' masterpiece when talking about the use of humor in his literature. From the very start, the author not only sets the humorous tone of the story, but he also provides the reader with a consistent humorous frame that he includes as a condition to understand the novel. He introduces for example the novel with a sarcastic "Note to the judge," emphasizing that this story is a fiction that takes place in the future. For these reasons, no legal repercussions should follow:

Whoa, girl, just hold it right there. Before you start going through these pages looking for things to have me thrown in jail for, I want you to try to remember that you're reading a work of fiction here, so the characters in it are made up-they're concoctions, denizens of the world of imagination (literary figures, parodies, metaphors-you know), not real-life people. And another thing, my dear, while we're at it-I wrote this novel in 1990 and set it in 1999. I mean think about it-how fair would it be to haul me into court for a bunch of fictitious stuff that when it was written down hadn't even happened yet. (Arenas, R., *The Color of Summer*: n.p.)

As the author himself explains in a letter to his friends Margarita and Jorge Camacho: "It is important that people understand that they are reading a novel

and not a history book, that this is an ironic and sarcastic novel, with a black sense of humor.” (Reinaldo Arenas Papers, Box 23, Folder 4). Moreover, there are in the novel numerous comments, anecdotes, and jokes, which will make the reader laugh. All the characters are inspired from real life personalities of the Cuban or Latin American political and cultural world, who, despite their funny nicknames, are easily recognizable. To give only a few examples, one could mention “Fifo” for Fidel Castro, “Miguel Barniz” for Miguel Barnet, or “La Marquesa de Macondo” for Gabriel García Márquez. The novel also offers a collection of funny tong twisters spread throughout the book, using the common humor device of alliteration (Triezenberg 2004). In most of these, Arenas mocks members of the Cuban intellectual world, often referring to their cowardice or their hypocrisy towards the regime. This is how he explains it:

To get even, I wrote a few tong twisters making fun of him; this was another of the weapons I used against those who had harmed me. In 1977 those tongue twisters became famous throughout Havana; in them I ridiculed over thirty well-known people in the city’s theatre and literary worlds. (*Before night falls*: 239).

This reminds us of Henri Bergson’s definition of laughter: “Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it.” (Bergson 2002: 47). This book represents a great example of political humor, which relates directly to Bergson’s definition but more specifically within a political context. As Pi-Sunyer explains (1977: 187), political humor ridicules by “wrecking the apparent logic of the system under attack.” It can be directed against a person, such as a politician or a socio-political system as a whole. As many studies have shown, Cuban society shows a great sense of humor (Mañach 2018; Hidalgo 2012; Samuell 2013). It has even developed its very own type of humor, to which they refer to as *choteo*. There have been many attempts to define the Cuban *choteo*, and Jorge Mañach’s essay “Indagación sobre el choteo” is without any doubt a key reference in this context. *Choteo* refers to a certain type of mockery used in Cuba, which demonstrates an ability to make fun of everything and not take anything seriously. In addition, it also allows in some cases the empowerment of the person using it against a deficient form of authority: “as soon as an authority appears weak, indirect, or defenseless, *choteo* arises as an affirmation of the self” (Mañach 2018: 23). Moreover, it offers an escape route to Cuban people to bear with the challenging socio-economic situations they live in (Hidalgo 2012: 35). In the case of Arenas’ novel, one can say that it is a great example of *choteo* within Cuban literature written in exile. This sarcastic parody doesn’t spare anyone. Cuban

revolutionary leaders as well as the entire socio-political system implemented by the revolution since 1959 are ridiculed through a pervasive use of aggressive humor.

As a victim of the persecution against homosexuals in Cuba, Arenas also offers many humorous anecdotes and stories related to the sexual frenzy of the characters, whoever they are. Just to give one example, one could refer to the chapter entitled “Buses or turtles?” (92–99), in which, while watching the main character, Funk in a Skunk, have a homosexual encounter with a policeman, not only do the travelers on the bus end up eroticized, but the bus itself as well. This leads to the bus looking rigorously to find another bus to have sex with, which then ends up in an orgasmic explosion in which most of the passengers die. This explosion is wrongly thought to be the signal that indicates the start of Fifo’s carnival. This absurdist and provocative humor reflects the eroticized society of the book, where the supreme pleasure is the “Crucifuckingfixion,” which implies dying “being impaled on thousands of enormous glistening, hard, erect phal-luses, all at once” (218) (Figure 1).

Throughout the novel, Fidel Castro is the person who gets the strongest criticism. Arenas presents him, as well as other revolutionary heroes, such as Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara, as homosexuals (64). By doing so, Arenas ridicules the oppression imposed by the revolutionary regime against the homosexuals in the sixties and seventies. Turning the whole Cuban society upside down was, in his eyes, an amusing way to take revenge of the humiliation he suffered on the island. His criticism against the regime is also noticeable in the irony of the chapter “The Seven Wonders of Cuban Socialism” (237–238), one of them being the *officialist* newspaper *Granma*. In this case, Arenas mocks the censorship imposed by the regime, and the indoctrination carried out by the revolutionary press:

It’s the only newspaper in the world in which the events that the newspaper reports on have nothing whatsoever to do with reality. It is the most optimistic newspaper in the world (...). It’s also the newspaper with the largest potato and sugar harvests in all the world, although we ourselves never see those products anywhere. It has no obituaries, and when somebody is shot by the firing squad the newspaper says that the person died in a state of grace, proclaiming the virtues of the newspaper editor who had the person shot. (237)

One of Arenas’ ways of mocking the Cuban regime and its political members was by exaggerating every aspect of its authoritarian features. This takes us back to the introductory sarcastic “Note to the judge.” The overt critical content of the novel makes it obvious from the very beginning that no Cuban publisher would ever be allowed to print this book. Therefore, this introductory note is simultaneously completely incongruous, rendering it highly comical, and also a

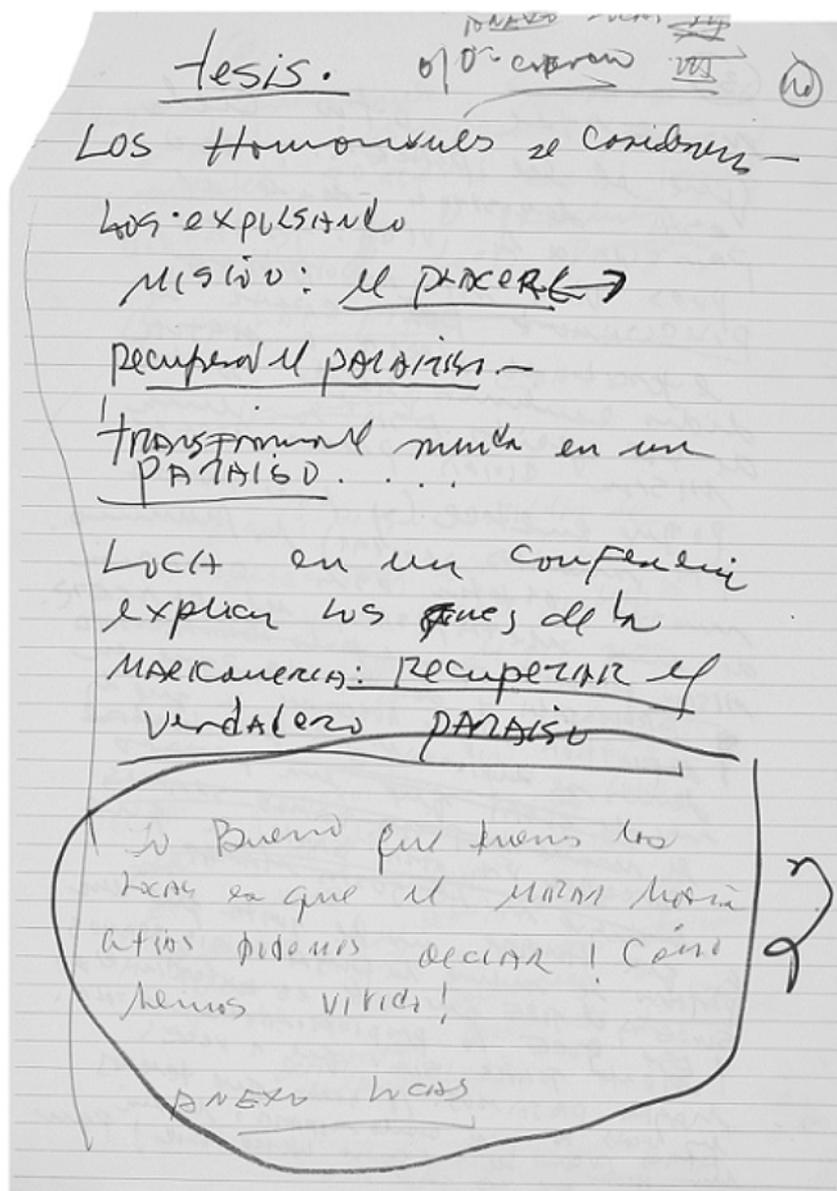


Figure 1: This note accompanies the manuscripts of Arenas' *The Color of Summer* (Princeton University Library). He explains the thesis of his novel, which states that the rejected homosexuals' mission it to recover paradise through pleasure. At the bottom he adds: "a great thing about us, homosexuals, is that when looking backwards into our past, we can say that we have lived."

profound criticism of the lack of freedom of speech within the revolutionary society. However, as Arenas mentions on several occasions in his personal correspondence (Reinaldo Arenas Papers, Box 23, Folder 24), it is also a way to calm down possible publishers who would not dare to publish such a sarcastic novel, which is, despite its fictional argument, so close to reality. In his preface, Arenas explains that by writing this novel, he is offering an aspect of history that otherwise would disappear, as it would never appear in official Cuban history books. This counter-narrative not only describes the homosexual world of the Cuban sixties and seventies, but also denounces the persecution suffered by homosexuals and intellectuals in Cuba in those years. In his correspondence, Arenas expresses on several occasions (Reinaldo Arenas Papers, Boxes 23–26) the importance of publishing this novel. Inside this creative process, Arenas argues that “humor has a fundamental role because it is the only way to tell a reality that is so pathetic that in some way it loses its effectiveness when being told” (Arenas 2000–2001: 61). Humor played a key role in his life philosophy too. As he said: “I believe that reality, in general, is always so excessive and cruel that if we were to lose laughter, we would lose it all.” (Arenas 2000–2001: 60)

At the same time, can the writing of *The Color of Summer* be considered psychological sublimation? The DSM-IV definition of this adaptive defense underscores the necessity of specific elements: (1) an “*emotional conflict or internal/external stressors,*” (2) “*potentially maladaptive feelings or impulses,*” and finally (3) the act of transforming these “*into socially acceptable behavior*” (757). Each of these three elements is clearly represented in this particular novel.

4.2 Emotional conflicts and stressors

The *emotional conflict* is well depicted at many places of the text, particularly in the four letters that the author writes to himself, and that are included inside the story. Arenas describes the internal stressors, such as the fact that he is dying from AIDS. He also refers to external stressors resulting in the impossibility to bear the life in Cuba because of its political regime, and at the same time the impossibility to find happiness away from his homeland. As a consequence, the author is trapped into the double-bind of two irreconcilable injunctions that contradict themselves: 1. Do not go into exile, for it is impossible to be happy away from your homeland, and 2. Do not stay in Cuba, for it is impossible to be happy on the island. The first injunction is stated in the first letter: “Don’t come (...) to experience (...) calamities that are foreign to you but that you’ll have to bow to” (86). This stems from the suffering of exile, clearly described in the third

letter: “I have never felt such a cosmic, suffocating, and implacable loneliness as I’ve been feeling on these beaches in Miami. Everything is so dehumanized, so alien, so plastic, so monumental, so soulless” (294).

The second order is expressed in the fourth letter, written to Reinaldo in exile, condensing these contradictory feelings:

I assure you that I can imagine how much you’ve all suffered – and will go on suffering – and how lonely you must be up there, far from this country that is and always will be ours, no matter where we live. But get real. Nothing that you suffer can compare with the horror of life down here. Up there, even if all you get is kicks in the ass, at least you can yell about it – here, we have to applaud when we get kicked, and applaud enthusiastically. How can the three of you have the nerve to tell me I should stay here? Have you forgotten so soon that living under a tyranny is not just a shame and a curse, but an abject act that fills us with self-disgust because if we want to live, we have to play the game by the tyrant’s rules, whether we want to or not? (351)

This situation of ‘double-bind’ is considered as a major emotional conflict since the works of Bateson (1985: 201). In our case, where the two injunctions are ordered by Arenas upon himself, the situation corresponds to an “auto-double-bind,” which has been described as a personal conflict, where creativity and humor can solve the paradox (Panichelli 2013).

This impossible choice faced by the author is the consequence of *external stressors* that Reinaldo Arenas endured in Cuba as a persecuted homosexual and intellectual. But the double-bind also influences him in a more personal level, unfolding additional *internal stressors*. In Cuba, Arenas could not live accordingly to his beliefs. He was compelled to hide permanently, and to take on an identity that wasn’t his, as he writes about his character: “And all of this he performed while feigning (and suffering) a double, a triple, life (...) The price he had to pay in order to be himself was so high that the best thing might be to give up on being himself once and for all and offer himself to those other people the way they wanted him” (112–113).

However, he cannot conceal his true identity forever. This idea is developed in a chapter entitled *A Prayer*, where Arenas gives clues about the choice of the title of his novel: “And here again is the color of summer, with its repetitive, terrible hues... (...) Outside this summer, what do we have? (...) Because it is not possible to escape the color of summer. Because that color, that sadness, that petrified flight, that sparkling, gleaming, glaring tragedy – that knowledge – is us.” (407–408). As a natural consequence of this process, Arenas’ and his main character’s vital necessity of truth and authenticity is achieved through the writing of his novel: “To touch those pages was to touch an authenticity, a rightness, that the world denied him” (112).

4.3 Sexual fury and death thoughts

The definition of sublimation also necessitates the presence of *potentially maladaptive feelings or impulses*. These are represented by two major themes in the novel: first, the use of sexual acting-out as a way of escaping his condition, and second, thoughts about death and suicide.

Sexual acting-out is indeed one of the main topics of the novel: the reader is confronted with an enormous amount of anecdotes, stories, and descriptions of sexual encounters. However, this overwhelming presence of sexuality is never combined by any preoccupation for protecting oneself, or the multiple sexual partners, from the transmission of sexually transmitted illnesses like HIV. The author, while openly and restlessly describing this permanent sexual fury, never seizes the opportunity to convey a message of prevention to the reader. Does this mean that Arenas avoided protection and consciously took the risk of contaminating other sexual partners in real life? Arenas' close friends, who confirmed his authentic preoccupation for not contaminating sexual partners, refuted this.³ In 1990, prevention through the use of condoms was promoted in several countries, and the United States was no exception. Consequently, avoiding his possible impact as an author on limiting the dissemination of HIV through prevention or information can be considered as maladaptive. In fact, the practice of a hypertrophied sexuality is even glorified as “sex as an immediate means of escape” (255), and as “an act almost of rebellion, certainly of freedom and *fun*” (329). The author finally delivers his ultimate philosophy about it in the following excerpt:

Yet there is no heaven, my friends, but the heaven of pleasure. That has been clear since the beginning of life. We have before us, then, a sacred task: To create the army of pleasure, or, better said, to continue to be soldiers in that army, its eternal reinforcements. It is a divine mission because it exalts (and for a moment makes us forget), the human. (...) Over against all the horrors of the world, and even within them, we set the only thing we possess-our enslaved bodies-as the sources, found, and vessel of grace. (401–402)

The second topic representing maladaptive thoughts is the theme of death and suicide, which are central pathological symptoms of depression (Hamilton 1967; DSM-IV 1994). Although the place given to this theme in the novel is far less important than the place of sexuality, it is introduced in the very first pages by a warning just under the title of the novel: “The author of this work is solely responsible, *both in life and in death*, for the ideas and opinions contained

³ Email exchange with Miguel Correa on 29 October 2016.

herein” (n.p., our emphasis). For Arenas, the urge to finish the last novel of his *pentagony* is powerful enough to make him postpone his project of suicide, highlighting the importance of literary creativity in his own mental equilibrium. The place of writing in his life is confirmed in the letter that Arenas wrote to justify his suicide, and that has been added at the end of the novel in some editions: “Dear Friends: Due to my delicate state of health and to the terrible emotional depression it causes me *not to be able to continue writing* and struggling for the freedom of Cuba, I am ending my life.” (*Before night falls*: 317, our emphasis). Arenas wrote the novel making sure the reader would be confronted with his thoughts of death from the very first page of the novel, as a black cloud hanging in the sky and darkening the color of his last summer.

4.4 Turning lead into gold

Finally, the definition of sublimation implies the act of *channeling* the potentially maladaptive feelings or impulses *into socially acceptable behavior*. This can be achieved through the practice of sports, but also through artistic production. As such, it corresponds to the original meaning of the word, used in the context of alchemy and which describes the mythical process of *transforming lead into gold* (Adams 2006). It constitutes the core of the definition, as the subject actively transforms his subjective painful experience into something that is valuable to others (Metzger 2014). The physical and mental health benefits of writing about an emotional topic – also known as the ‘writing cure’ – have been widely studied (e.g. Pennebaker 1997; Pennebaker and Seagal 1999; King 2001). In the case of career writers, Kaufman and Sexton argue that narrative writing can be used as self-therapy, developing a “meaning-making process, shifting perspectives over time” (2006: 274). Arenas himself actually confessed that literary creation was in his case a coping mechanism. As he states in “Humor e irreverencia”: “If we were at peace and reconciled with the world, we wouldn’t create anything” (Arenas 2000–2001: 59). He also alludes to the writing as a search of meaning and explains: “I believe that when a person writes, s/he is full of contradictions, continuous questions, ideas that s/he often can’t express, because if one did not have these questions, one wouldn’t write anything.” (62).

In this particular novel, Arenas makes use of the skillful maneuver of splitting himself into three characters that represent three facets of his personality. This act of creating three distinct identities out of himself, as a literary response to his emotional conflict, is the essence of sublimation represented in *The Color of Summer*. This unique literary process allows him to express various contradictory feelings separately and with great virtuosity. Describing the

emotions of the three characters transforms the emotional conflict into a complex written story, showing with great detail all the facets of his personal experience and illustrating Vaillant's quote (2000: 94): "sublimation does more than make affect acceptable; it also makes ideas exciting." Even if contradictory, all these feelings are true at the same time, and all three identities authentically represent himself, as he explains in an excerpt where he addresses his mother:

And above all – listen, listen – I have not betrayed myself. I'm not a person, I'm two or three people at the same time. For you, I'm still Gabriel, for those who read what I write but can hardly ever publish, I'm Reinaldo, for the rest of my friends, with whom I escape from time to time in order to be totally myself, I'm Skunk in a Funk. (103)

Indeed, Gabriel is the author's middle name⁴ (Panichelli-Batalla 2015) and 'Skunk in a Funk' is the nickname Arenas received in the homosexual community because of his tragic facial expression. Throughout the novel, different parts of the story are told from the point of view of one of the three identities. This process culminates in the four letters the author writes to himself. In the three first letters, Arenas is writing to Reinaldo but signs alternatively by one of the three pseudonyms. The fourth letter is addressed to all three identities, and signed 'Skunk in a Funk,' which is the name Arenas used for his 'true self,' as cited above.

As such, this literary maneuver is the metaphor of his emotional conflict, as it successfully describes the complexity and impossibility to reconcile – in reality – the feelings and hopes of three parts of himself: "I will never be able to join myself to myself again. I will never again be myself, or you – which is the same thing" (296). However, inside the novel, and only through the use of sublimation, the author succeeds to put all the pieces of the puzzle together, and finally finds a way to avoid betraying any part of himself, reconciling all these contradictory feelings by putting them together in an extraordinary story where they coexist forever as a whole, as he predicts: "If I've hung on this long (I'm sure you know I have AIDS) it's in the distant hope that someday, somehow, we may be able to meet again and be just one person, the way we used to be. That may happen only after death; I don't know" (296). This 'distant hope' is metaphorically achieved in the fourth letter, where the author states: "we are all, still, part of a single scattered person" (353).

In sum, the process of sublimation allows Arenas to find a meaning to his suffering and to his whole life, since it gives a chance to his cry to be heard by someone:

⁴ Personal communications with Dolores Koch and René Cifuentes (March 2004).

But through it all, I never forgot that if my life was to have meaning – because my life is lived more than anywhere else in the sphere of literature – I had to write this novel, *The Color of Summer*, (...). In this country, as in every country that I have ever visited or lived in, I have known humiliation, poverty, and hypocrisy, but here I have also had the privilege to cry out. Perhaps that cry will not meet oblivion. (252–253)

4.5 Humorous sublimation

Reinaldo Arenas obviously chose to tell the story of *The Color of Summer* in a humorous way, emphasizing the amusing and ironic aspects of his situation. In addition, this particular novel is also his last cry of creativity before dying, sublimating the various stressors of his tormented life. Here, Arenas operates a fusion between these two mature coping mechanisms, as he *simultaneously* uses humor and sublimation to cope with his sufferings. At a global level, the whole novel is told in a carnivalesque way, playing with the frame of the narration, but also continuously using a playful tone, comical exaggerations, funny nicknames, and word-play throughout the story, which makes the reading a rather unique experience. And this very special way of writing is used to tell an easily recognizable autobiographic story where the author sublimates a lot of personal painful experiences.

There are numerous specific excerpts where this fusion of humor and sublimation can be observed. As mentioned earlier, the twenty-seven tong twisters are also used to ridicule people Arenas held responsible for his situation. But the most interesting examples of fusion between humor and sublimation arise when Arenas plays with his three identities. In an excerpt where he visits his mother, all three characters representing him alternatively answer her questions in what becomes a burlesque and nearly absurd dialogue:

“I suppose the baby’s already crawling?”
 “Uh-huh. He’s even walking a little bit,” lied Gabriel.
 “I suppose your wife’s gone back to work now?”
 “Uh-huh. Months ago,” lied Reinaldo.
 “Tell me the truth – are you two happy, do you get along?”
 “Yes! Oh, yes!” enthusiastically lied Skunk in a Funk. “I’m very happy.”
 “And what about her?” the mother asked, now beginning to sweep the hall.
 “She’s very happy too. Why shouldn’t she be?” asked Gabriel.
 “I don’t know,” said the mother. “The last time I saw her there seemed to be something in her... something she didn’t want to tell me. Something very sad.”
 “I told you she’s as happy as I am,” Reinaldo assured her. (102)

Here, Arenas metaphorically describes his personal suffering of being forced to lie permanently about his situation, for he was never allowed to be totally

himself in front of others. The three identities are used to illustrate how he must oscillate permanently between different essential facets of himself. And the production of a fictional, but autobiographically based story (sublimation) is delivered in a playful way (humor), forcing the reader to smile at the absurdity of the situation.

Another excerpt uses the same process, making fun about the tragedy of having to rewrite his novel continuously, in a moment where the three characters are soon to be eaten by a shark: “And then the animal, its fearsome eyes looking deep into Gabriel’s, dived and headed for Reinaldo, its terrifying teeth glooming. As the shark devoured her, Skunk in a Funk realized that she was losing her life, but before she did so, she was determined to start her novel again” (454). The whole process highlights the essential fact that whereas his three identities in the novel – and his own in the real world – are doomed to endure all their sufferings, they also possess the power to modify their perception of reality by writing stories, and by making fun of it (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Humor and sublimation: a way of coping with a forthcoming death.

5 Discussion

When Reinaldo Arenas became aware of his forthcoming death due to the illness of AIDS, he felt the urge to finalize his last unfinished novel: *The Color of Summer*. In a letter to his friends Jorge and Margarita Camacho, he explains what finishing this novel would mean for him: “I work desperately in my fight against death, but treating her as a friend. If I finish *The Color of Summer*, I will be able to retire from this world with a great laughter” (Reinaldo Arenas Papers, Box 23, Folder 4). In order to present this story inspired by his own agonies, the author decides to make fun of everyone and everything. In the preface of the book, he describes it in the following way: “Then comes *The Color of Summer*, a grotesque and satirical (and therefore realistic) portrait of an aging tyranny (...), the attitude of not taking anything seriously in order to go on surviving” (255).

Having lived several years in the United States, the idea of the American dream had already started to fade. The growing nostalgia towards his home country, as well as the devastating news of his illness and forthcoming death led him to use humor as a survival mechanism, allowing him to continue living with his past, his nostalgia, and to bear the sufferings caused by exile and AIDS, at least until his literary work was finalized. In his autobiography, he explains how important humor is as a coping mechanism, and how Castro’s regime has banned it over the years:

One of the most nefarious characteristics of tyrannies is that they take everything too seriously and destroy all sense of humor. Historically, Cubans have found escape from reality through satire and mockery, but with the coming of Fidel Castro the sense of humor gradually disappeared until it became illegal. With it the Cuban people lost one of their means of survival; by taking away their laughter, the Revolution took away from them their deepest sense of the nature of things. Yes, dictatorships are prudish, pompous, and utterly dreary. (Arenas 2001a: 239)

Writing *The Color of Summer* corresponds to the classical search for meaning for a career writer (Kaufman and Sexton 2006). As the author himself states: “Writing this pentagon, which I’m still not sure I’ll ever finish, has, I confess, taken me many years, but it has also given a fundamental meaning to my life that is now coming to a close” (256). But it goes far beyond that. It is an act of sublimation of Arenas’ emotional conflict, multiple stressors, and maladaptive feelings, into a work of art of rare complexity and virtuosity. The purpose of lowering the anxiety of exile and physical illness is clearly described by the author in many places. This reminds the research findings by Corruble et al. (2004: 286) who showed that depression intensity was negatively correlated with

the use of sublimation and humor in a sample of 156 depressive inpatients. In the case of this novel, the author uses the splitting of his own identity in three characters, all three truly representing different facets of his personality. This allows him to solve his emotional conflict by expressing all of his sometimes contradictory feelings in the same story and with the same voice. In this way, he is finally allowed to be totally true to himself in front of the world, even if only in the eyes of the reader. The use of sublimation of personal sufferings inside a work of fiction allows him to escape the double-bind described above. Inside this novel, Arenas can literally achieve the classical consequence of being caught in a double-bind: “the person thereby defined is this kind of person only if he is not, and is not if he is” (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 212). At the same time, he is true and false, real *and* fictional.

Inside this process of sublimation, the place of humor adds a particular color to the novel by its overwhelming presence, like an invincible stream that turns the whole story in a gigantic farce. The function of humor in this context can be analyzed at two levels. At an individual level, looking at his personal situation with a humorous perspective is part of the different coping mechanisms used by the author to deal with reality. Indeed, humor implies “multiple simultaneous levels of meaning and impact” (Schnarch 1990: 77), and produces “the unique effect of forcing upon the humor participants an internal redefinition of reality” (Fry 1963: 153), which leads to *experience* the situation differently (Panichelli 2013). This process can be compared to what is called a *reframing* (Panichelli 2006), which is a central therapeutic tool in many different forms of psychotherapy (Fourie 2010), and is used to help patients towards a constructive change. At a more global level, in his autobiography, Reinaldo Arenas described the role of humor for the Cuban people themselves as a survival mechanism. Therefore, this novel can also be seen as a testimony that the Cuban people never lost their sense of humor, their *choteo*, and indeed survived despite the harshness of the regime. In addition, it forces the reader to understand Cuba’s tragic situation, integrating a lot of realistic information, although in a humorous way that makes the reading not only bearable, but also a particularly facetious experience. Consequently, the reader is brought to modify his knowledge and perception of the Cuban society without having the feeling of reading a history book, by going through the multiple funny anecdotes that surround the miserable condition of the characters, like lightning colored Christmas balls would divert the attention from the dead Christmas tree underneath, but nevertheless rendering it present and more attractive.

This unique combination of sublimation and humor in a work of art has never been described before. In *The Color of Summer*, the two coping

mechanisms are not only associated, but used simultaneously, a mechanism which we call ‘humorous sublimation.’ Sublimation allows humor to channel all these funny perspectives and separate anecdotes into a coherent work of art that will survive after the author’s death, and also after the disappearance of Cuba’s very specific sixties’ and seventies’ society. Humor, in turn, colors sublimation with some particular characteristics: a tone of playing with ideas in a funny way, highlighting the absurdity of the repression of the revolutionary regime, and therefore allowing a new interpretation of the events to emerge (Ritchie 2006). Moreover, the “Note to the judge” sets the humorous frame from the very first page of the novel and transmits a particular autoreferential message to the reader, which means: ‘What you read is not about reality, it is a joke.’ The fact that the note itself is written in a humorous tone confirms its autoreferential nature. This induces a paradox of the Epimenides type (Bateson 1985; Panichelli 2013), for if the note is true, it is a joke itself, but if it is a joke, then it is true again. This paradoxical frame implies a permanent doubt about the information that is given to the reader, reinforced by the autofictional character of the novel (Panichelli-Batalla 2016): is it real or invented? Autobiographic or fiction? This very particular ingredient was necessary for Arenas to unfold the complex sublimation he had in mind, and specifically the splitting of his identity into three characters. It forces the reader to consider the whole novel at the metaphorical level, and to be aware that even if contradictory, all of the elements that compose the story can be true at the same time. As an implicit consequence, the counterpart implies that all the official information received about Cuba has to be put in question, a message Arenas also felt essential to transmit (Ulla & Villaverde 1986).

Here lies perhaps a possible explanation for the surprising absence of prevention messages about ways of protecting oneself against HIV and AIDS. Once this humorous frame is set, the author himself is bound to tell the story as an enormous joke, where the elements of reality can only be decoded through the metaphor. He cannot escape the humorous perspective he has imposed to the reader and to himself. Therefore, putting a note about HIV prevention, even if only a few sentences, turns out to be impossible, as this is a subject about which the author could not laugh, for he was finishing his novel with infusion needles in his hands, looking at his forthcoming death of AIDS. Hence, the only option left for Arenas was to omit it.

On 7 December 1990, critically ill, Reinaldo Arenas committed suicide. The humorous sublimation he used in the last unfinished novel of his *pentagon* helped him cope with his internal and external stressors until his literary project was finalized and he was ready to leave this world.

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