

## Richard Pryor: Melancholy and the Religion of Tragicomedy

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**Abstract** Drawing on Donald Capps' discussion in *Men and Their Religion* (2000) on the development of the melancholy self in early childhood and the emergence of three religious impulses as a consequence of its development (the religions of honor, hope, and humor), this article focuses on the early childhood experience of Richard Pryor and the role that the religion of humor plays in helping him cope with these experiences. Particular attention is given to his grandmother's paradoxical role in his life and his identification of her as his spiritual mother.

**Keywords** Sigmund Freud · Grief · Melancholy · Lost object · Donald Capps · Emotional separation · Maternal loss · Religion of honor · Religion of hope · Religion of humor · African-American humor · Grandmother as spiritual mother · Racism · Father of personal prehistory · Mother of personal prehistory

*The bare railway-line of their story tells of a passion honest enough to entitle it to be related.... They are real creatures, exquisitely fantastical, strangely exposed to the world by a lurid catastrophe, who teach us that fiction, if it can imagine events and persons more agreeable to the taste it has educated, can read us no such furrowing lesson in life* (Meredith 1892, pp. 2–3)

### Introduction

When considering mental illness and its role in the modern-day church, there is often a swept-under-the-rug mentality with regard to the issue of melancholy. Much of this denial of melancholy is no doubt associated with the failure to comprehend what it is. The word is not commonly used in daily conversation, nor is it represented among the more widely known mental illnesses: depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety. In the *Diagnostic and*

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*Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association 2000), melancholia appears only as a “melancholic features specifier” for a mood disorder (p. 419). Nonetheless, the overlooking of melancholy is quite possibly detrimental to what may be considered a healthily normal and necessary part of life. And perhaps the same could be said of humor.

Humor as a means of coping may perhaps be equally as common to the human condition as melancholy, especially through its incorporation in other artistic forms. It is plausible that through this medium, the artistic process, as well as the product of the process, helps to shape some form of rehabilitation for the afflicted. For example, this quotation from Anton Chekhov’s play *The Cherry Orchard* precedes the poem “Having it Out with Melancholy” by Jane Kenyon (1996): “If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure” (p. 189).<sup>1</sup> With this quotation, Kenyon signals that the prescription medications listed by name in the poem (Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin, Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Zanax, Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil and Zolof) are not effective cures for her own melancholy, that, indeed, they are not as equitable a panacea for her as poetry is. Though the tone of her poem is itself melancholic, one must acknowledge that she seemingly musters up enough courage to still find hope. In the fifth movement of the poem, entitled “Once There Was Light”, Kenyon writes, “Like a crow who smells hot blood/you came flying to pull me out/of the glowing stream./I’ll hold you up. I never let my dear/ones drown.’ After that, I wept for days”. Here, Kenyon channels her melancholy by tapping into what appears to be her religion; her invocation of this seemingly instinctual being that is far yet near to her could quite easily be read as a God figure. This becomes more apparent when in the third movement—“Suggestion from a Friend”—one finds the admonition, “You wouldn’t be so depressed/if you really believed in God”. The God who this friend concludes Kenyon does not believe in is the same God who believes in Kenyon enough to rescue her from the melancholic valley in which she finds herself. It is this same religious escapism and salvation that may also provide residence for the humorous and more specifically, the comedian.

Laughter, and the ability to make others laugh, becomes the nexus for working through the tragic, the melancholic, of life. And just as Kenyon employs poetry as a medium for her lament, Richard Pryor taps into his lament through his comedy. Regarded as one of the best comedians of the late twentieth century, and often referred to as the greatest comedian to ever live, the melancholy of Richard Pryor’s sordid past propels him (in some inevitable ways which will be alluded to later) toward a comedic life marred by the tragic. Much of this sordid past stems from his parentage, his rearing and events in his childhood to early adolescence. In turn, it would appear that Pryor’s life is shrouded in melancholy. To make this case, and to show how Pryor’s humor serves as a panacea for his melancholy, I will first present a brief historical discussion of melancholy, then present some ideas on melancholy from *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* by Donald Capps (2002) and then focus on Richard Pryor’s life and career. I will show how Richard Pryor is the tragicomic product of his melancholy self.

<sup>1</sup> Marie Rose Napierkowski (1998) points out that although “Chekhov intended the play to be a comedy, when it was first produced by the Moscow Art Theater on January 17, 1904, producer Konstantin Stanislavsky insisted it should be played as a tragedy. Chekhov fought against this portrayal, but to this day, most productions emphasize the tragic elements of the piece.... The action is quiet in this tragicomedy. Chekhov’s family had lost its home in repossession in 1876, and this may have been an inspiration for the story”.

### What is Melancholy? What Does it Mean to be Melancholy?

Dating as far back as the fourteenth century and with an etymology that borrows from Middle English, Anglo-French, Late Latin and Greek, the word *melancholy* is typically defined as “a depression of spirits, dejection; a pensive mood” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2010). Furthermore, being *melancholy* would denote “causing or tending to cause sadness or depression of mind or spirit, dismal” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2010).

Given these definitions, one could quite reasonably understand why most people mistake melancholy for depression. After all, the very word *depression* is invoked in the defining of melancholy. This assumption that melancholy is simply another word for depression is also evident in the aforementioned Jane Kenyon poem in which Kenyon’s friend “diagnoses” her melancholy as depression. The fact that Kenyon has been on various antidepressants reinforces this assumption. Nevertheless, in the field of psychology, Philip W. Jackson refers to melancholy as “[reflective of] matters at the very heart of being human: feeling down or blue or unhappy, being dispirited, discouraged, disappointed, dejected, despondent, melancholy, sad, depressed, or despairing—states that surely touch something in the experience of just about everyone” (cited in Capps 2002, p. 3). Jackson’s understanding of melancholy, which is based on the range of emotions invoked, encompasses much of the human condition, and its very encompassing nature distinguishes itself from the more specific state of depression, especially depression viewed as a clinical problem. With this broader, more inclusive understanding of melancholy, one can begin to dissect the affect of melancholy in the formative years of children, specifically those of young boys.

### Mothers and Men: Mechanisms Toward Masculinity in Response to Melancholy

In *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* (2002), Donald Capps addresses the issue of melancholy in men. He begins with Sigmund Freud’s claim in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” that melancholia is similar to, but also different from, the experience of grief; the similarity is due to the fact that in both instances there is the loss of someone whom one loves (which Freud calls “the lost object”). Thus, he suggests that “a comparison with the normal emotion of grief, and its expression in mourning throw some light on the nature of melancholia” (cited in Capps 2002, p. 6). Freud defines melancholia by presuming that it may be signified by “a profoundly painful dejection, diminished interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of one’s self-regarding feelings to such a degree that one engages in self-reproach and self-revilement, often culminating in a delusional expectation of punishment” (cited in Capps 2002, pp. 6–7). This is a kind of grief disassociated from death but still impactful to those who remain alive. Freud furthers the similitude of melancholy and grief by claiming:

like the griever, the melancholic has experienced the painful loss of a loved object [and] the melancholic experiences [this] loss with considerable ambivalence, as he feels that the loss he is now having to endure is the object’s own fault, that the object has abandoned him.... The major difference in the two experiences of loss, however, is that in melancholia the lost object is still “in the neighborhood” (Capps, pp. 7, 9).

Following his invocation of Freud's perspective on melancholy and grief, Capps posits two different stories of melancholy from William James: his recollection of a melancholic patient in a French asylum and that of another "Frenchman" who, it is well known, is James himself (p. 11). In both cases, the men reference the role their mothers play in the formative aspects of their lives, and each of their recollections is reminiscent of either the irreligious or the religious turn of melancholy, respectively (p. 11). As Capps suggests:

The patient in the French asylum experiences himself as having been abandoned, left to face his misery alone. To him, God might as well be the devil. The Scripture verses to which James clings, however, give assurance that God has not abandoned him, that God is his refuge, that Jesus invites him to come unto him and place his cares upon him, that through Jesus there is resurrection and life (p. 13).

Capps then makes his own turn by asserting that the lost object is the same person both men reference in their personal accounts: their mothers. He states:

The fear of abandonment expressed in these accounts is rooted in an experience of actual or perceived abandonment by their mothers when they were little boys. The susceptibility to melancholia in their twenties is related to some earlier experience or experiences of actual or perceived abandonment in early childhood, and they recapitulate the trauma experienced—but not worked through—in their early years... as a result of the boy's emotional separation from his mother around the age of three or four (p. 14).

Because a child literally cannot survive without his mother, i.e., pregnancy, breastfeeding, continued nurturing and care, the moment at which the child is forcibly separated from his emotional constant, his mother, melancholy is inevitable. This melancholy may also stem from an unawareness of why the separation is occurring.

The separation is essentially the effect of the cultural expectation that the child will identify and bond with his father or with the man who represents the paternal, though it is also due to the fact that his muscular development enables him to act independently of his mother. The first effect is one that he does not understand at all, and the second is one that he only dimly understands. But because this is the time when conscience also begins to develop, he is likely to believe that he has done something to warrant the loss of his mother and that if he makes certain reparations and promises he might win her back. Likewise, if the mother is the original "lost object, all subsequent experiences of loss for reasons other than death (where grieving is possible) will be reminiscent of his mother and will evoke similar feelings of shame and rage, guilt and remorse. These subsequent losses may be other people (e.g., women with whom he falls in love) or desires that are symbolically linked to his mother (e.g., the desire to pursue a career in art, music, or caregiving)" (p. 17).

It would appear that this object loss has an effect on many of the aspects of a boy's/man's life. It renders him vulnerable to self-doubt, guilt, shame and distrust because of the seminal loss which occurs at some time around the age of three or four. Similarly, because this separation is unforeseen, a level of blame also resides within the boy/man. Capps believes that "he is more likely to hold himself to blame or find other plausible reasons for his mother's behavior, and any anger that he feels toward her for mistreating or abusing him is likely to be repressed" (p. 32). He further states, "In this way, men gain an extremely important secondary benefit from blaming themselves for the original emotional separation from their mothers and from their tendency, even as adults, to see their mothers in highly idealized ways" (p. 34). This secondary benefit is that they may continue to

believe that their mothers love them unconditionally, and this sense of being the object of their mother's unconditional love enables them to maintain a strong sense of their own self-worth ("If she loves me so much there must be a reason for the fact that she does"). Through the utility of these emotions, men are able to displace whatever anger they hold for their mothers onto themselves later in life. While still holding their mothers to a standard which is internally confusing for them, men excuse their mothers' enforced separation and in turn lift her up as a kind of prototypical, ideal figure. It is at this fulcrum where a boy's formation pivots toward honor, hope and humor.

Capps poses three different vehicles, or religious impulses, by which boys begin to counteract the emotional trauma, characterized by melancholy, they feel due to separation from their mothers: the religious impulse based on being a "good boy" as a means to win his mother back, which leads to a religion of moral rectitude (a religion of honor); a religious impulse based on a compensatory quest for other persons, objects or ideals that might take his mother's place, which leads to a religion of searching and questing (a religion of hope); and the religious impulse that stands over against the "good boy" religious impulse by challenging its sense of ultimate seriousness, leading to a religion based on the relaxation of the superego (a religion of humor or light irony) (pp. 100–101).

The religion of honor lifts up the idea that the boy's efforts to be "good" are likely "to confirm the mother's belief that the emotional separation is having its desired effect" because "he is able to be good on his own initiative" (p. 44). By being "good," the boy not only proves to his mother (and himself) that the emotional separation has healthy ramifications, but also that he has always been capable of being "good." However, the very fact that he is able to be "good" could just as well cast doubt on the very need for the emotional separation, especially if the boy misunderstands its purpose and rationale. In effect, the religion of honor is based on a misunderstanding of his mother's reasons for effecting this separation, and a boy may carry this misunderstanding into his relationships, as an adult, with other women.

If the religion of honor helps to explain why men are more likely than women to view religion in moral terms, the religion of hope reflects the fact that "they are also much more likely to consider religion as a personal quest," as one of seeking in religion a substitute or compensation for the "lost object," their mother (p. 45). This quest for an ideal figure may take the form of searching for a woman who is worthy of his worship, thus an essentially secular religion of hope. On the other hand, as in the case of the patient in the French asylum, some men may respond to melancholy in irreligious terms, and thus nullify the quest for a religious substitute or compensation. If they do seek the ideal figure in a recognizable religion, however, religions that worship female deities may be problematic for some men, especially if the deities are threatening, as in the case of the Hindu mother-goddess Kali (pp. 49–51) and in certain apparitions of the Virgin Mary (Carroll 1992).

In light of these problems with the religions of honor and hope, it is perhaps inevitable that a third religion would develop: the religion of humor. The religion of humor or light irony becomes an especially useful resource for coping with the melancholy brought about by early childhood separation from one's mother. Capps writes that humor is the counteractive force of two dynamics: (1) the internalization of the mother, and the transformation of her into an object of fear and distrust; and (2) the redirection of one's cruel and deadly hatred, previously aimed at overpowering adults, against oneself (p. 53). He notes that the psychoanalytic argument that humor is liberating "suggests that humor may itself be a form of religiousness, that it may even be a more 'advanced' form of male religiousness than those of honor and hope" (p. 53).

Humor is a universally emotive condition which is prejudiced on neither religion nor morality. Therefore, it would appear to be an all-encompassing response by men to the

melancholic self. And it is with this understanding, and the incorporation of I Corinthians 13:13, that at the end of his book Capps states, “I suggest that the religion of the melancholy self—whose religion cannot but be a rather unconventional, idiosyncratic one—is comprised of honor, hope and humor, and perhaps the greatest of these is humor” (p. 190).

Now that the groundwork has been laid—a more encompassing definition of *melancholy* and of what it means to be *melancholy*, and the use of Capps’ *Men and Their Religion* in order to better grasp the role that mothers play in their sons’ development of the melancholy self that they carry with them into adulthood—I now want to focus on the life and work of Richard Pryor, and show how he is the tragicomic product of his melancholy self. The use of the word “religion” to characterize Pryor’s work is supported by the fact that, as John and Dennis Williams (1991) report, he once said, “I can’t help feeling that my life is a cosmic joke” (p. 1).

To introduce Richard Pryor, it will be useful for us to consider his location within the phenomenon of African-American humor reaching back to the slavery era. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence W. Levine (1977) dedicates a whole chapter to African-American humor, entitled “Black Laughter.” He suggests that in order to fully grasp African-American humor, one must grapple with the role of the trickster, which was intrinsic to the institution of slavery as performed by these newly naturalized citizens. Often referred to as a kind of conjurer, the trickster (or the mentality of such) occupied a central role in the life of slaves. Usually finding its allusions in narratives of the animal and human variety, the trickster was characterized by his or her adroitness in outsmarting a dominant force in a given context. Levine writes, “Although slaves were forced by their situation to create their own practical set of values and norms of behavior, these did not necessarily replace those of their heritage, their religion, and of the outside society but rather were used to ‘neutralize’ them” (Levine, p. 123).<sup>2</sup> In effect, black life during slavery was such that in order to survive, amorality occurred through the medium of trickery. The qualities innate to black culture were seemingly protean, allowing for the “neutralization” of core sociopolitical and religious tenets in response to the suspension of those of white slaveholders. An example would be slaves stealing food from their masters in order to feed their families. To be sure, for Christian slaves who took the Bible and, more specifically, the eighth of the Ten Commandments seriously, the act of stealing itself was wrong.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Levine explains his use of “neutralize” by citing the work of Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957). He writes, “In their work on the ‘techniques of neutralization’ Sykes and Matza have demonstrated that deviation from certain norms may occur not because they are rejected but because a given situation may accord precedence to other norms.” As Matza (1964) points out, “Norms may be violated without surrendering allegiance to them. The directives to action implicit in norms may be avoided intermittently rather than frontally assaulted. They may be evaded rather than radically rejected.... Most if not all norms in society are conditional. Rarely, if ever, are they categorically imperative.” Levine concludes that “it was possible for slaves to rationalize their need to lie, cheat, and steal without holding these actions up as models to be followed in all instances, without creating, that is, a counter-morality.” Furthermore, “the evidence indicates that the slaves’ strong convictions regarding the injustice they suffered at the hands of whites, who themselves were guilty of hypocrisy and gross immorality, were sufficient to allow them to relax or neutralize their normal standards and mores in certain situations” (pp. 123–124).

<sup>3</sup> For example, William Saunders Crowdy (1847–1908), a former slave and a cook on the Santa Fe Railroad, claimed that God had chosen him to lead African-Americans back to their historic religion and identity. He formed the Church of Gods and Saints of Christ in Lawrence, Kansas, on November 5, 1896. Under his leadership, the Church of Gods and Saints grew into a highly syncretic African-American Judaic-Christian sect with branches in several American cities and overseas. He argued that blacks are descendants of the ten tribes of Israel, whereas Caucasian Jews resulted from miscegenation with whites. His seven “keys” also emphasized repentance of sin, baptism by immersion, commemoration of the Last Supper, foot washing, observance of the Ten Commandments, the holy kiss, and prayer (Glazier 2001, p. 97).

However, given the need to survive in a system that withheld food from people based on their perceived fledgling humanity, stealing was an act of “neutralization”. Levine writes:

They placed the same emphasis upon the tactics of trickery and indirection, took the same delight in seeing the weak outwit and humiliate the strong, manifested the same lack of idealization, and served the same dual function which included the expression of repressed feelings and the inculcation of the tactics of survival (p. 131).<sup>4</sup>

This process of neutralizing intrinsic norms could be viewed as a doubly saving act in that it was not only a subversive instance of attempting to live above the fray of slavery, but also the *modus operandi* to maintain the authenticity of an African/black cultural Zeitgeist which was irrevocably severed through the transatlantic slave trade. It would then seem plausible that this neutralization as a cultural practice could be transformative, even—or especially—in a cultural milieu like African-American comedy and humor.

In *Black Theology and Black Power* James Cone (1997) notes that when the black man “first awakens to his place in America and feels sharply, the absolute contradiction between *what is* and *what ought to be* or recognizes the inconsistency between his view of himself as a man and America’s description of him as a thing, his immediate reaction is a feeling of absurdity” (pp. 8–9). As a proverbial theater of the absurd, slavery seeks to “thingify” black people.<sup>5</sup> The absurdity inherent in that “thingification” is magnified by the fact that those who subjugated their fellow human beings as less than human not only miscomprehended what a human was, but they also misconstrued Christianity, especially in light of God’s initial creative act.

This same kind of absurdity occurs in African-American humor, but it is more ontologically and ethically grounded. As Levine points out, the jokes the tricksters told stripped their adversaries bare without prior warning, “revealing the ludicrousness of the white man’s puffery and the black man’s situation” (p. 310). It was on “this plane of absurdity that much of Afro-American humor took place,” and the “humor of absurdity worked through a straight-faced assumption of the rationality of the system and the belief structure upon which it rested” (p. 310). Levine continues, further suggesting that although “It is obvious that black humor as a whole did not tend to reaffirm the outside world’s opinion of blacks”, on the contrary, “no other mechanism in Afro-American expressive culture was more effective than humor in exposing the absurdity of the American racial system and in releasing pent-up black aggression toward it” (p. 335).

Essentially, the black existence and experience in the American continental context is quintessentially tragicomic. As black Americans hold in delicate tension their espousal of an intrinsic value of self while being extrinsically defined as less than human, they proverbially resort to laughter to keep from crying. As Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1982) points out, when tragedy threatens to engulf us, comedy may be “the only thing that can still reach us.” To be sure, some would conclude that comedy

is the expression of despair, but this conclusion is not inevitable. Of course, whoever perceives the senselessness, the hopelessness of this world might well despair, but this despair is not a result of this world, but rather an answer given by an individual

<sup>4</sup> A genre of black humor that illustrates Levine’s concept of the neutralization process are jokes in which black defendants respond with shrewd and clever answers to white judges’ questionings relating to the charge of chicken stealing (Lupton 1938, pp. 298, 403–404, 435–436).

<sup>5</sup> In his speech, *Where Do We Go from Here*, [Martin Luther] King states, “A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will ‘thingify’ them—make them things. Therefore they will exploit them and poor people generally, economically” (Washington 1986, p. 251).

to this world. Another answer would be not to despair; it might be an individual's decision to endure this world in which we frequently live like Gulliver among the giants. He also achieves distance, he also steps back a pace or two who takes measure of his opponent, who prepares to fight his opponent or to escape him. It is still possible to portray man as a courageous being (cited in Sander 1982, pp. 255).

I want to suggest that Richard Pryor is such a man.

### **Richard Pryor's Early Childhood/Adolescence: Peoria, Prostitution and Punishment**

Richard Franklin Lennox Thomas Pryor III was born on December 1, 1940 in Peoria, Illinois. On this same day, the local newspaper, *The Peoria Journal Transcript* ran two interesting features. One was the chronicle of the latest developments in an already 14-month old issue—the war in Europe: German submarines were torpedoing ships in the Canadian-American convoys at a fearful rate and France and England were under heavy attack. The second was from a regular columnist, Myrtle Meyer Eldred, whose column, “Your Baby and Mine”, was subtitled, “Parents Can Help a Child Develop a Likable Personality.” Dennis A. and John A. Williams suggest that Pryor's parents likely did not read that column the day their son Richard was born (p. 18). Here, one sees that before Pryor is even able to fully understand what it means to be melancholic himself, he is born into a world that not only fully understands it, but also propagates and embraces it. In addition, Peoria, Illinois proves an interesting motherland for the birth of Richard Pryor. His parents, Gertrude Thomas, a bookkeeper, and Leroy Pryor, Jr., also known as Buck Carter, met in Peoria. Also, his *paternal* grandparents, Marie Carter Pryor Bryant and Thomas Bryant, met in Peoria in 1929. She relocated to Peoria from Decatur, Georgia where she and Leroy Pryor, Sr. had four children: Richard, John, Maxine and Leroy Jr. (Williams and Williams 1991, pp. 16–17).

Noteworthy statistics regarding 1940s Peoria compiled by The Civil Liberties Committee, a subcommittee of the Peoria Advisory Committee of the State Commission in Illinois, include 40% of the black population was unemployed; 90% of the people questioned believed they had been denied work because they were black; only two restaurants in the downtown area served black people; and black people were denied entrance to two downtown theaters, not permitted into residential theaters, and restricted to the rear sections of another (Williams and Williams 1991, p. 19). Furthermore, there were 102,000 whites and less than 3,000 black people living in Peoria (p. 18). Between 1943 and 1944, Pryor's family moved to North Washington Street in Peoria. This street was “noted for its string of whorehouses” (p. 21). It was here that Richard Pryor grew up.

In his biographical essay on Richard Pryor titled “A Pryor Love,” Hilton Als (2000) provides an excerpt from Pryor's 1979 interview with Barbara Walters. Als suggests that the exchange reveals how Pryor's early life was “a sad house of cards” that he “glued together with wit.” Here is what he had to say about his childhood (p. 389):

Pryor: It was hell, because I had nobody to talk to. I was a child, right, and I grew up seeing my mother... and my aunties going into rooms with men, you understand....

Walters: Your grandmother ran a house of prostitution or a whorehouse.

Pryor: Three houses. Three.

Walters: Three houses of prostitution. She was the chief madam.

Pryor: There were no others.

Walters: O. K.... Who believed in you? Who cared about you?

Pryor: Richard Franklin Lennox Thomas Pryor the Third.

With this family enterprise, the situation that Richard experienced was even more problematic due to familial religious practices and discipline. According to John and Dennis Williams, his grandmother, the person “who exerted the greatest influence on his young life, was a member of two fundamentalist churches.” One was Morning Star Baptist Church, the largest black church in Peoria. The other was Church of the Living God in Decatur, Illinois, where she was buried. She was also a member of the United Neighborhood Corporation and of the Improved Benevolent Order of Elks (Williams and Williams 1991, p. 22). They go on to note: “Even if true that his family was engaged in prostitution,..., there was that necessary separation of those instances from those periods of worship and communal relaxation—a not unusual accommodation found among all people everywhere” (p. 22).

In like manner, Pryor also witnessed strict discipline while growing up in Peoria. As John and Dennis Williams point out:

Discipline was strict. Pryor’s skit of his grandmother whipping him with a switch is but one example. Such discipline also served to remind youngsters that the white world outside the door, if crossed, might claim more than the youngsters were willing to pay. To obey, to not get in trouble, to be able to tolerate various aspects of everyday life was the central message in the harsh disciplining (p. 22).

Taking all of this into account, Pryor says of his grandmother in his 1995 memoir *Pryor Convictions*: “She reminded me of a large sunflower—big, strong, bright, appealing... She was also a mean, tough, controlling bitch” (quoted in Als 2000, p. 389) And yet, with all that he was exposed to at the hands of his grandmother, he still referred to her as “Mamma”.

### **A Reading of Pryor’s Life in light of Capps’ *Men and Their Religion***

With this rather brief synopsis of Richard Pryor’s early life in Peoria, the reasonable question to ask is: what does this all mean? Well, in light of Capps’ argument, which asserts that the melancholy self can be attributed to the boy’s loss of an object, namely his mother, around the age of three or four, one can begin to formulate some root causes of Pryor’s turn to the religion of humor.

The above account of Pryor’s upbringing would certainly suggest that there was a level of abandonment by his mother. In fact, the abandonment may well have occurred before Pryor was three or four, for by that time, he was able to comprehend the surroundings in which he lived, a brothel, and watched his mother, and, for that matter, his aunts as well, go into rooms with men to perform sexual acts. In fact, when Richard’s father met Gertrude, she was already involved in Peoria’s nefarious underworld, and she soon began working in Marie’s whorehouse (Als 2000, p. 389). At the same time, the age of three is also important for Pryor because, as he shared in his interview with Barbara Walters, his parents did not get married until he was about 3 years old (Williams and Williams 1991, p. 23).

Thus, we can see how he was primarily raised by his mother, and presumably also his grandmother, both of whom were involved in behaviors that would preclude them from

giving the necessary energy to caring for a child his age. Moreover, his father was apparently absent. Therefore, the depravity he witnesses in his mother, as he observes her engaging in sexual relations with men who are not his father, renders him alone—alone to such an extent that he begins to believe, at a very early age, that the only person who believes in him and cares about him is himself (cf. the Barbara Walters interview excerpt). Furthermore, his father's presence is both nonexistent and lingering. In another part of Pryor's interview with Walters, he reveals that his father was having sex with the woman whom he believed to be the mother of his firstborn daughter Renee (Williams and Williams 1991, p. 35). He later learned, however, that Renee was not his child. Nonetheless, even if his mother wanted to emotionally separate from him so that a relationship with his father could develop, the relationship with his father appears to have been marred from the very onset.

In short, one must acknowledge the disjointed nature of Pryor's early life. Similar to Williams James' personal account of his mother as a paradox in her "unconsciousness of danger" (see Capps 2002, p. 13), Pryor's characterization of his grandmother seems paradoxical in much the same way: like James' mother, she is a religious woman, yet she raises her grandson in a brothel, exposing him to the naked underbelly, literal and figurative, of adulthood when he is a young and highly vulnerable child. Furthermore, it is this unconsciousness of danger which may have left him vulnerable to rape by a teenage boy at 6 years old. As he states in *Pryor Convictions* (1995): "I cried and shook and tried to make sense of what happened.... I carried that secret around for most of my life. I told no one. Ever" (p. 29). Years later, that same perpetrator brought his own son to the set of *Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life is Calling* to ask Pryor for an autograph (p. 31). It is the sordidness of his life which appears to support Capps' argument that Pryor's melancholy self is directly related to abandonment by his mother. And yet, this is merely the surface of Pryor's melancholy.

With regard to his father, mother and grandmother, it seems that Pryor blames himself for the ways in which his family treats him. John and Dennis Williams retell two different stories regarding Pryor's view of his parents. In his comments about his father during the Barbara Walters interview, Pryor noted that his father had a child (Richard) but didn't need a child. So "It was hard for him" to be "placed in that position," a position in which there was "no planned parenthood" (p. 23). Likewise, they describe the scene in which Pryor stands beside his mother's hospital bed as she nears her death:

Pryor stares slightly downward. There is a blankness on his face that does not quite conceal a suggestion of primness; also present is a hint of sadness or resignation or pity. Much later he would say, "My mother went through a lot of hell behind me, because people would tell her, 'You don't take care of that boy.' She wasn't the strongest person in the world.... At least she didn't flush me down the toilet like some do" (p. 18).

In both of these cases, it is as if Pryor blames himself for his very own existence. He seems to view himself as an unnecessary appendage and he absolves his parents of any responsibility for what he had to endure as a child. His only satisfaction, it would seem, was that he could thereby claim to have been, as it were, his own man, indebted to neither parent for how he turned out. On the other hand, as alluded to by Capps, he believes that he has done something to warrant the loss of his mother, and his father for that matter, and that if he makes certain reparations and promises he might win her back. According to John Hazel, Pryor never got over the division he saw in his mother: the way she could separate her emotional self from her battered body and yet was emotionally damaged anyway.

Furthermore, in his memoir, he is quoted as saying that the only person scarier than God was his mother (cited in Als 2000, p. 389). And it is perhaps at that place of limbo that he is able to construe his comedic religion.

However, his reaction to his grandmother, and specifically her passing, is even more revelatory. According to Pryor's official website (Pryor 2010), his mother deserted him when he was 10 years old, leaving his primary rearing to his grandmother. He makes reference to her sternness and sweetness, even creating a skit about her discipline in his comedic routine. However, when she dies, his reaction speaks volumes about the kind of melancholy he may experience as a result of abandonment by his birth mother. Audrey Thomas McCluskey (2008) describes the scene:

Pryor was overwhelmed with grief at the passing of the one person who could still exercise some modicum of control over the so-called unpredictable Pryor.... He spent his time near her and was with her when she died at 6:30 in the morning in Methodist Medical Center in Peoria.... "He just stood there shaking like a rag doll. He was just crying and talking, 'Mamma! Mamma! Mamma!' He had a grip on her hand and they couldn't pry him loose without a struggle. They couldn't get him out of that room and when they did, he broke and come right back in there... I tried to console him and he cried: 'Everything I've had and everything I've got is gone. My mamma's gone. I just loved her. I loved her. I loved her. Mamma, I did everything I could for you. Everything! I prayed, and I prayed. Mamma, I prayed so hard. I didn't even know I could pray'" (p. 153).

The emotional vulnerability inherent in this excerpt shows the complexity of melancholy in Pryor's life. Pryor juxtaposes melancholy, on any number of levels, with that of religion in a rather interesting manner. Of course he is saddened over the death of his grandmother yet he also attempts to almost circumvent the notion of her death by becoming childlike. The metaphor of him looking like a rag doll suggests the sheer incapacitation he feels at the loss of a woman who has quite possibly troubled his notions of God, women, motherhood and safety. This is even more ironic when considering the interview with Barbara Walters where he suggested that the only person who cared about or believed in him was himself. It appears that inasmuch as his grandmother propelled him to adulthood at a very early age, it was in her dying that perhaps the child that Pryor should or could have been emerges: innocent, blameless, looking for nurturing from an elder figure.

Similarly, it is interesting how religion is incorporated into all of this because it is through his experience of melancholy that Pryor finds a religion: comedy (or, the religion of humor). Yet, would Pryor characterize his comedic self as he does his spiritual self? That is, would he say the same thing about his comedy routine that he says about prayer? Here is where Capps' argument becomes relevant: because Pryor's hope has been twisted (through abandonment, abuse) and his honor withered (through blame, self-effacement), humor is the only religious undertaking left for Pryor to tap into such that he can be all that he wishes to be (superego), while shielding all that he may be afraid to expose (ego). Furthermore, his assertion that in his grandmother's dying, he does not have anything else may perhaps speak of further abandonment. Although his accounts of having been raised in a whorehouse may have been, in part, an attempt to appear more reactionary and rebellious to the greater society than he really was, there is no doubt whatever that he "loved and respected his grandmother, and but for her, the Pryor story might well have taken a quite different course" (McCluskey 2008, p. 153). Pryor loves

his grandmother because, in her own singular way, she may have been the only person who loved him back.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Although Pryor's melancholic self is no doubt a product of his relationship at an early age with his mother, his grandmother, and, for that matter, his father, is it possible that other factors also played a role in his melancholy? Although the psychosocial ramifications of the black existence in America are not thoroughly explored in this paper, my earlier discussion of absurdity vis-à-vis the African-American cultural milieu of comedy offers a glimpse into the social and political dynamics that yield black humor: in this case, Pryor's brand of humor specifically, as seen by the demographic nature of Peoria at his birth and its liminal spaces, i.e., the "string of warehouses" (Williams and Williams 1991, p. 21) occupied by black people during his rearing. Further research may suggest that the racial climate during Pryor's upbringing, as well as abuse, factors significantly in catalyzing his melancholy such that his comedy is as much a criticism of America as an entity as it is of its predilection to create opportunities for maintaining levels of absurdity for certain kinds of people. Furthermore, I would argue that in his case, it is not the father of personal prehistory he seeks (Capps 2002, pp. 78–107), but rather the mother of personal prehistory. This mother may, in fact, be a response by people of color to abandonment that stands in tandem with, or even in contrast to, the dominant culture's search for the father of personal prehistory.

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<sup>6</sup> Capps (2002) discusses the role that Freud and his associates ascribed to grandparental figures in the development of the small child (pp. 89–96). They especially emphasized the role of the grandfather, and noted how the grandfather, due to the fact that that he is much older than the father and not ordinarily in daily contact with the boy (but visits from time to time), may be a model for the boy's image of God. In his article, on "the reversal of generations" phenomenon Capps (2006) notes that the grandmother may be the primary spiritual force in a boy's early development, and cites the case of John Henry Newman, who, as an adult, made an association between his grandmother's spiritual influence and his attraction to the Church of Rome. He cites Erik H. Erikson's (1958) observation that "father religions have mother churches" (p. 263).

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