

## Dichotomies In Boy Genius

Steve Lee

English Linguistics and Language Technology/College of English/ Hankuk University of Foreign Studies,  
Republic of Korea

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### Abstract:

Emergent American literature of the late twentieth century was often concerned with the observation of change ; the changes in how people viewed themselves, and others, through the often opaque lenses of ethnicity, race, and gender. In his novel, *Boy Genius*, Korean-American author, Yongsoo Park approaches these changes in a unique yet eye-opening way; he uses qualities of absurdity, sarcasm, irony, and hypocrisy; all qualities that are amply found in his protagonist character, our Boy Genius. Through his absurdly Quixotic psychology and behavior, *Boy Genius* is Park's way of making a statement of these new changes he sees in the world around him. Through the farcical nature of *Boy Genius*' thoughts and ideas, we as readers, can come to know, analyze, and perhaps even, to appreciate how these same changes are actually taking place.

**Key Words:** psychology and literature, the absurd, Korean-American, race studies, satire

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### I. Introduction

There is, on the part of Yongsoo Park, a deliberate and effective use of dichotomies and absurdities to strengthen and illustrate a fundamental claim he is making in *Boy Genius*: that the reader can better grasp the seriousness of issues such as race, racism, marginalization, culture, and identity if he is presented positions from either extreme. As with many of Camus's works, though the narrative is filled with the absurd, it is through these absurdities that the reader may realize the seriousness of the issues presented. *Boy Genius* is not merely a character in a fictional novel; he should be understood as a hybridized amalgamation of these oppositional forces. Despite the often-times preposterous nature of *Boy Genius*' thoughts and actions, ideological and practical, the thrust of the narrative relies on an implicit understanding, on the part of the reader, that issues of racism, identity, and prejudice are complex and involve a much deeper introspective into their causes.

In his study titled, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*, John Foley examines how Camus viewed the nature of what can called "the absurd." Foley is interested in the relation Camus views on the absurd had to with the existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre. Foley quotes Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the attempt to conceptualize this concept of the absurd. "At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within his longing for happiness and for reason, The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Foley, 2008, p. 5). The absurdity of the viewpoints of our protagonist, *Boy Genius*, is a direct and predictable response to the external absurdities he sees in his immediate environment. For further clarification on the theme of absurdity Foley quotes Hazel Barne's translation of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* in a more in-depth manner. "...the Sartrean absurd is defined as 'That which is meaningless. Thus, man's existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification'" (Foley, 2008, p.6).

From a psychoanalytical perspective, a brief yet meaningful introduction can be included here to add to our ongoing discussion. Ernest Wolf, in his paper on subject matter, *Psychology of the Self and Literature*, defines the term "selfobjet" in terms first brought to bear by Heinz Kohut. "Selfobjets are those aspects of the environment that at the same time as part of the self" (Wolf, 1980, p. 43). This goes to explain at least some of our main character's outwardly bigoted responses- he is in fact, self-incriminating himself when critiquing the outside world. In an obvious and profoundly articulate symbiosis of ideas culminating here, the Lacanian model of the "mirror stage" is at our disposal for a more clarified and justified exploration of *Boy Genius*' possible motivations. Jane Gallop's exposé on Lacan's main work in eye-opening: "The mirror stage is a turning point. After it the subject's relation to himself is always mediated through a totalizing image which has come from outside" (Gallop 1983, p. 120).

Looking for meaning in a fundamentally meaningless world and faced with the absurdities of his environs, *Boy Genius* begins his indoctrination into intolerant ideology and propaganda as he first meets with "His Excellency the Most Honorable President Park." This is a direct response to what he feels he has no personal control over. The President's title itself is absurd and plays with the notion of interpellation; how naming someone

can create an identity for that person. President's Park's honorific title, as well as his extremely anti-communist and nationalistic stance, conjures up Kim, Jong-il's "Dear" or "Beloved Leader" titles. Irony is used often in the novel. Be it communist or democrat, both sides are shown to be mere propaganda-mills, intolerant to any viewpoint other than their own.

Boy Genius's early life is shaped by this intolerance and throughout rest of the story he is himself a racist, an elitist snob though he is often the victim of racism. In other words, Boy Genius' actions are paradoxical and his views are often hypocritical. As he is abruptly cut off from President Park, he and his family are forced into a life of poverty. Boy Genius' prejudices come to the surface soon after his 'fall.' His new neighbors are "...feeble-minded former peasants" (Park, 2002, p.59). As he befriends some of the kids in his new neighborhood, he considers himself "...just another street urchin, indistinguishable from the soot-covered monsters who swarmed the city..." (Park, 2002, p.60). Throughout the novel, Boy Genius continues making derogatory remarks to people he sees as being below him. He also resorts to the kind of stereotyping, prejudging, and bigotry that is more often associated with Caucasians in America, not new immigrant boys from Korea. At first, Boy Genius' observations are directed toward those that he considers inferior intellectually. He equates intellectual and educational inferiority a clear-cut indicator of the differences between himself (a genius), and the uneducated peasant class. He describes Cheju Island as having "ignorant fisherman whose children all had below-average I.Q.s" (Park, 2002, p.63). In an interesting side note, when Boy Genius has finally learned that the president has truly cast him off, he cries out, "Your Excellency, Your Excellency, why have You forsaken me?" (Park, 2002, p.64) This echoes Jesus' words as he stands dying on the cross and finding God silent to his calls.

As he begins his life in America, Boy Genius' true dichotomy or irony comes from the fact that he spouts hatred not only on the dominant white culture, his racism extends towards other minorities as well. For ethnic minorities he is an equal-opportunity-racist and for whites, a dangerous historical revisionist.

In 1492, Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue, because he was a tool of the European colonialist regime that led the way from the rape of the New World and the genocide of the indigenous people...The British East India Company, on which your textbooks heap endless praise, grew opium in India and pimped it on the Chinese. They were drug dealers of the worst kind...(Park, 2002, p.89)

His revisionism is interesting because though it adds a new twist on U.S.-centered history, it is not completely without merit nor inaccurate. Genius' history is seen not from the dominant culture, but rather, it is seen from the perspective of the dominated. It should also be noted that Yongsoo Park chooses to portray white colonialism in terms of sexual violence and the sex trade, "rape" and "pimped." Things become quite disconcerting when, especially after seeing how anti-dominant-culture, anti-white Boy Genius is in the previous block quote, he describes other people of color. Tanh "...had been born in the jungles of an insignificant Third World country..." His community of Bogota is composed of "...hairy Sicilians, angry blacks, and dirty Puerto Ricans" (Park, 2002, p.105). As he is tortured and forced to sign the "Bogota Accords" Boy Genius says that the people of Bogota had heard of the news but then he describes these people as "...mostly dirty ethnics with greasy hair and heavy accents" (Park, 2002, p.108). By having a Korean-born immigrant living in New York expressing such obvious racism, towards all groups, could Yongsoo Park be using the irony of the situation to clarify his point that racism and intolerance are inextricably linked with the human condition in terms of how we exist and function in a society historically based upon human divisions? If Yongsoo Park is looking to reconcile racial hatred, he has apparently identified a cause.

People are slaughtering one another and trying to turn the weak into slaves...And what for? For nickels and potatoes...We're the only life form on the planet that kills and tortures because we don't like the way someone looks. That's why my ancestors were slaves and your country was split up between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. (Park, 2002, p.99)

After a long search, Choco Joe finally finds Boy Genius and offers a profound commentary on what he sees as the core of the human problem. For Choco Joe, "For nickels and potatoes" indicates money and food. People kill and enslave each other for money and for food. Choco Joe seems to have latched onto the central problem in this novel. It goes beyond racism. It goes further to find the roots of racism, human nature and its insistence on killing each other. Yongsoo Park offers more commentary on human nature through Choco Joe: "Revenge only begets more violence, Boy Genius. It's what the experts call the circle of violence" (Park, 2002, p.114).

Yongsoo Park seems to comment on the issues of racism, hatred, and human suffering by giving us a different type of protagonist, Boy Genius. Even with and perhaps due to, his ironies, intolerance, snobbery, and with his racism, Boy Genius, because he is the minority, provides greater credibility when he speaks of racism. Perhaps Boy Genius' true genius lies in the fact that he is so vulnerable, so young, and so wise for his years. His genius is visible in that the character of Boy Genius, when observed against the backdrop of contemporary culture, further implicates that culture in its wrongs.

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