



Class Clowns: Prosody

The Relationship between Comedy and Poetry

For those of you who maintain that the art of comedy is at odds with literary integrity, let it be known that Shakespeare coined the first instance of the comedic, maternal insult. That's right ladies and gentlemen, the greatest writer in the English language, England's national poet, the Bard of Avon himself penned the first 'your mum' joke in Act IV, Scene II of Titus Andronicus:

Demetrius: "Villain, what hast thou done?"

Aaron: "That which thou canst not undo."

Chiron: "Thou hast undone our mother."

Aaron: "Villain, I have done thy mother."

Surprised? You shouldn't be. Comedy and literature have always acknowledged the same technical approaches and they will continue to do so. If we consider the Edinburgh Festival Fringe objectively, a nascent awareness of the literary potential of comedy becomes increasingly apparent.

The nature of comedy has historically been a source of contention within critical theory, however this is due to its treatment as a prosaic art; Comedy is inherently about timing, about rhythm and pace – it's organically prosodic and should be treated as such.

When questioned by The New York Times about his writing technique, stand-up Jerry Seinfeld offered an unmistakably prosodic response to his approach to tackling a joke, 'If it's too long, if it's just a split second too long, you will shave letters off words, you count syllables'. Topping the Forbes list as the highest paid comedian for the past three years, Jerry is at the top of his game, so his methodology is not something to be easily disregarded. If comedy is more than semantic content, if it is about the metre of language itself, then poetry is necessarily at the core of laughter.

Consequently, it's no surprise that the comedians who have utilized poetic construction within their acts during this year's Fringe have only grown in success; Nick Helm, Tim Key, Phil Jupitus and Bo Burnham (but to name a few) have all featured poetry in their comedy and all of the above have sold out shows to their names. The latter, Bo Burnham, began to highlight the comedic construction of poetry in his first Fringe appearance – three years ago – in which his show outlined the similarities between the cadence of Haiku and the punch



Class Clowns: Prosody

line of a joke; With the essence of Haiku being the juxtaposition of two images or ideas, the modern one-liner maintains this same definition with the punch line acting as the Haiku's kireji – the revelatory point which colours the manner in which the juxtaposed elements are related.

The comedy haiku and the traditional comedic 'one-liner' are similar in this respect; a concise assertion of linguistic displacement within a structure which is inherently poetic since it relies on a *structured* brevity in order to instigate a literary, as well as comedic catharsis. One of Britain's foremost progenitors of the modern one-liner, Jimmy Carr, asserts his own comic theory to a similar affect. When questioned in an interview on The Green Room with Paul Provenza, Carr argues that a joke is instrumentally something "which is out of place [. . .] something incongruous". He continues, "the ha-ha moment of a joke is very similar to the a-ha! moment of, 'Ah, I've got an idea!' realization'. Noticing something is different". When that difference is identifiable as prosody, the literary capacity of comedy knows no bounds.

Roses are grey,
violets are a different shade of grey,
let's go chase cars!



'A Dog's Poem' by Bo Burnham.



Class Clowns: Prosody

Power in Prosody

To the average person, poetry simply doesn't scream, 'fun'; but this simply isn't the case. Poetry is a veritable super-power; it grants anyone the ability to control the reader's every thought or mental action for as long as the text lasts. A perfect example of this can be found in the poem, *Magic* by Bo Burnham.

Hand out a copy of this poem to each member of the class. Ask them to read it in silence.

Magic

By Bo Burnham

Read this to yourself. Read it silently.

Don't move your lips. Don't make a sound.

Listen to yourself. Listen without hearing anything,

What a wonderfully weird thing, huh?

NOW MAKE THIS PART LOUD!

SCREAM IT IN YOUR MIND!

DROWN EVERYTHING OUT.

Now, hear a whisper. A tiny whisper.

Now, read this next line with your best crotchety-

old man voice:

"Hello there, sonny. Does your town have a post office?"

Awesome! Who was that? Whose voice was that?

It sure wasn't yours!

How do you do that?

How?!

Must be magic.



Class Clowns: Prosody

1. Reflection

- Once you have finished reading the poem, consider how and why you feel that this poem is effective?
- How do you feel about being influenced to change your own reading through someone else's writing?
- What techniques were used to achieve this?
- Do you like it?

2. Onomatopoeia

Although onomatopoeia was not a technique used in this particular poem, it is a way to evoke this kind of reaction in writing. Can you say or write 'CRASH' without hearing one? No, because that's the beauty of onomatopoeia; it is named by its effect.

- In a group of three or more, write down as many onomatopoeic words as you can in 5 minutes.
- Choose three words from your list.
- Write a short poem including the selected words.
- Exchange poems and read each other's aloud. It doesn't matter if the poems are silly or awful! We're not looking for the next William Wordsworth! We just want you to become comfortable reading written work to other people. Moreover, you will find that it is difficult to stop yourself emoting the different onomatopoeic words within the poems – almost as if they were designed to be performed!

3. The Haiku Exercise

The art of Haiku and the art of a comedy one-liner are surprisingly similar. The last activity was designed to familiarise you with 'performing' in front of peers while also exemplifying a useful literary device. Now that you have broken the ice where sharing your written work is concerned, we want to introduce an element more specific to comedy; THE PUNCHLINE.

- What makes you laugh? What kind of jokes do you like?
Hopefully there should be some kind of variety in your response. Whether it be different types of cartoon or comedian, there is usually one **universal** kind of joke that everyone typically shares in - the Christmas cracker joke! Cheap as it may be, everyone has heard them and everyone loves them (guilty pleasure or not!)
- Brainstorm generic Christmas cracker jokes with your group. Sharing jokes with friends comes naturally to all of us so see how many you can perform and write down in 10 minutes! Bonus points for those of you who can come up with your own!



Class Clowns: Prosody

- The Haiku is a short form of poetry hailing from Japan which traditionally takes the format of three lines broken into the pattern of five syllables followed by seven and concluded with a further five. A common example can be taken from the progenitor of the verse form, Basho Matsuo:

*An old silent pond...
A frog jumps into the pond,
Splash! Silence again.*

Note the use of onomatopoeia in this Haiku.

- There is a definitive component of Haiku called the *Kireji*. This element acts as juxtaposition between the opening line and the resolve.

The *Kireji* of Basho's example is the onomatopoeia; the 'Splash!' directly counters the silence of the pond in its initial introduction.

Much in the same way, the 'one-liner' or 'Christmas cracker' joke demonstrates the same effect -the closing statement directly links to the opening scene which is set while countering it or challenging its typical understanding. Take for instance the old classic, 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' . . . the punch-line of this joke (to get to the other side) is effective as it offers a logical resolve while challenging the initial frame of the question.

- Now that a link between the joke and the Haiku has been established, try to reframe the jokes that you previously came up with as Haikus.

You might want to begin by using the example of the aforementioned classic;

Initial Joke:

Why did the chicken cross the road?
To get to the other side.

Haiku version:

Why did the chicken
Decide he should cross the road?
To get across it

- Share your examples in the group.



Class Clowns: Prosody

This exercise is meant to help you understand that there are different ways of communicating the same information. Comedic writing is often a means of inverting the way in which a message is conveyed so it is useful to practice this technique in order consider different written and performed approaches to joke-telling.

There are many comedians who utilise poetry in their work –including the poet/comedian we opened with, Bo Burnham. Bo in High School when he decided to combine his love of English and Comedy, thereafter becoming an international success.

Hopefully this lesson should have inspired or encouraged some of you to continue writing their own material and will impel an active interest in the Class Clowns competition!