

## Aspects of comedy: Text overview – The Poetry Anthology (Comedy)

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This resource is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of comedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of comedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. It is hoped this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

### The Poetry Anthology (Comedy) – a series of snapshots of the genre

*The Poetry Anthology (Comedy)* has been put together to exemplify 'aspects' of the genre. There is no attempt to claim that each individual poem is itself an example of a complete 'comedy'. However, as a collection, this anthology provides students with a range of aspects which together will give an understanding of the wider genre. In teaching this text, schools and colleges must realise that all the poems need to be taught because together they offer a multidimensional vision of comedy. Students could be asked to write about one named poem, or refer to one or two others in their response, and must therefore study all poems. The question will target an 'aspect' and therefore, students will need to select wisely to ensure they are making the best use of the text. The key is to select relevant poems in terms of the question that is being asked. Schools and colleges might choose to study some of the poems as an introduction to Aspects of comedy and this could also be good preparation for the poetry requirement for the NEA, though schools and colleges are reminded that students cannot use any of the set poetry texts for the examined units in the NEA.

Comedy is a multifaceted and complex genre that is about so much more than simply creating humour. That is not to say that comic elements are not to be found in this anthology. Indeed, students will no doubt find much that is humorous in a number of the poems, but they will also need to see the importance of other comedic aspects, the expectations and subversions of ideas about: gender, romance, marriage, sex and bawdiness, human behaviour and human culture. Students will also see poets attacking human foibles and

weaknesses through satire and comic portraiture; they will see the clever display of conceits and intellectual arguing; the use of animals, insects and mythical creatures to mock human behaviour and human relationships; interesting comedic resolutions; and the joy writers show in the voices they choose, the organisation of their ideas and their use of language. The comedy in all of the poems has clear links with comedic drama and stand-up comedy, created largely through first person speakers.

### *The Flea* – John Donne

The title of this poem suggests that some fun is to be had here. In the poem, which is in fact a love poem, Donne uses the most unlikely of conceits – the human flea – to persuade his mistress to engage in premarital sex. The use of this insect as a vehicle in his argument to further sexual relations between a young male speaker and his mistress is comical in its absurdity, and even though human fleas were part of the fabric of normal 17th century life, and unlikely to provoke the squeamishness that modern western audiences might feel about them, Donne knew there was something audacious about focusing on a flea to celebrate love.

There is further comedy in the narrative of the poem which is intensely theatrical and packed with dramatic incident. The flea, a central character in the drama, has just bitten both the speaker and his lover and what follows is an amusing altercation over whether the pair will consummate their relationship. The speaker wants to, his lover apparently does not. The narrator who is a young intellectual, like Donne himself, cleverly uses the flea in the construction of his argument. In the opening stanza he exhorts his listener to “mark” the flea and learn from the lesson he will construct upon it. There is some mock sermonising here. Since the flea has sucked the blood of both of them, mingling their blood in its body, how can it be wrong if there is a sexual unification since blood and sex are really the same? The flea is surfeited (“pampered swells”) in the joy of sucking blood from each of them – enjoying “before it woo” and therefore the speaker argues, why can’t the lovers follow the flea’s example. In the second stanza there is a dramatic turn. The female, presumably unconvinced by the argument, or playfully pretending not to be, threatens to kill the flea. Here Donne foregrounds the battle between the sexes in the comic stand-off. He momentarily halts her murder of the flea by indulging in a more complex argument. Since the flea has sucked blood from both of them, it is now their marriage bed and therefore sacred. It would therefore be sacrilege to kill it. But then the female, more daring and provocative, squashes the flea, purpling her nail (seemingly a deliberate attempt to silence his argument too). This simply inspires him to argue more extravagantly. In a fiery yet friendly display of one-upmanship he quickly overturns his own argument. The death of the flea has not

dishonoured her, despite the loftiness of his former claim that it would be a sacrilege. Therefore, how would her sleeping with him be dishonorable either? *The Flea* ends with the possibility that the speaker, having won the argument will now find his lover compliant. In this vision of comedy, perhaps typical of 17th century poetry – or at least typical of Donne, it is the male who has power, shown in the flagrant exhibition of his wit.

### *A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General* (1722) – Jonathan Swift

The comedy of Swift's poem is different in that the target for the poet's satire is a male figure of public renown (General John Churchill, whom Swift considered a war profiteer). Though written nearly 300 years ago, the sentiments and astringent tone where authority is mocked could easily be found in the pages of a modern satirical magazine like *Private Eye*. In this poem, Swift employs Juvenalian satire, which is bitter and unforgiving, in his attack on the general. In attacking him, though, Swift is by extension actually satirising the political system of his time. Those in power, it seems, are those who are least suited to it. Swift exposes the honour and fame of the recently deceased General as a sham, opening in mock amazement that the general has died of natural causes and not like a glorious warrior. The general's talent, Swift suggests, is hollow. He has been raised to power by the "breath of kings" but he is just an empty vessel. Swift opposes the pervading system of elitism and preferment, the very opposite of a meritocracy.

Like *The Flea*, the poem is highly theatrical and colloquial. It starts in media res and seems to be part of a conversation in which the speaker addresses someone who has told him of the general's death. The narrative is formed of the speaker's reaction to the death in which there is a complete lack of reverence ("Well since he's gone, no matter how/The last loud trump must wake him now"). The comedy is dramatic and provocative. As the speaker delivers his diatribe, it seems the funeral comes into view, sparking even more vitriol. There is no mourning from widows and children, the speaker says: the general "made them weep before he dy'd". The final four lines parody the style of an epitaph and are punchy and daring: "Let pride be taught by this rebuke/How very mean a thing's a Duke/From all his ill-got honours flung/Turn'd to that dirt from whence he sprung".

### *Tam o'Shanter* – Robert Burns

This poem is full of all the ingredients of a modern farce, packed with comedic action. In the story Burns combines buffoonery, exaggeration, mock panic and fear, improbable situations and sexual innuendo. Typical of farce there is a

dramatic escape for the comic hero Tam and the humour is sharpened by the use of Scottish dialect.

The poem's comedy arises from the ways Burns represents the behaviour of the lower classes: the excessive humorous drinking of men on market days, their camaraderie and lusting after women in short skirts, their making bad decisions prompted by alcohol and their falling out with their sulky wives who gather their brows "like gathering storm". The story focuses on the sexual fantasies of ale drinking men and Tam's encounter with things supernatural. The narrator himself has a bawdy tone and aligns himself with the "drouthy neebors", and he mischievously delights in Tam's drunken adventures whilst apparently admonishing his behaviour and offering a comic moral. The narrator bewails the fact that Tam did not heed the advice of his wife Kate who prophesied that he would meet ill luck if he continued his drinking sprees. The chief element of comedy is created when Tam rides home after a drinking bout and experiences the supernatural at Alloway's Church. Here Tam, full of Dutch courage, feels he can out scorn the devil. When he sees witches and warlocks dancing, "auld Nick" playing bagpipes and grotesque images of murder, he is fascinated rather than appalled. The narrator at this point seems to particularly enjoy his own fantasy of re-creating the old hags as nubile young girls ("Now Tam...had thae been queans/A' plump and strapping in their teens/Their sarks, instead o' creeshie flannen/Been snaw-white seventeen hunder linnen!"); he says he would have given his trousers for "ae blink o'the bonie burdies!" The comedy is sharpened by the focus on the sexual desires of the drunken Tam who in his excitement sees the young witch Nannie in her short skirt and cries out "Weel done, Cutty-sark!" What follows is a farcical chase when Tam is pursued by the witches and only manages to escape because of the speed of his noble horse Meg who crosses a running stream, leaving behind the witches and, in the process, also her tail which they grab on to. In keeping with traditional comedy, there is a happy resolution and a neat reminder to all men who drink and think of girls in short skirts, that they should remember "Tam o' Shanter's mare".

### *Sunny Prestatyn* – Philip Larkin

This poem, like Swift's, is a satire, but Larkin's tone is darker. It could be considered black comedy given the controversial nature of its subject matter. On one level the poem is a comic satire on the world of advertising, a mockery of the life of a jolly publicity poster. Its comedy focuses on the graffitied defacements, many of which are pornographic, of an advertisement for Sunny Prestatyn. In the poem Larkin exposes the illusion of Prestatyn's being glamorous and Mediterranean. Despite the comedy, though, there is also the sense of loss. Wales is not the promised land of palms and sunshine, beautiful women and hotels. What the graffiti reveals is disenchantment, a reality that is

grim. After two weeks, the sexually alluring poster girl, laughing and kneeling on the sand, is unrecognisable, her face “snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed”.

This twentieth century poem shows that modern comedy is edgy, uncomfortable. It contains cruelty – the poster of this attractive woman has been “slapped up” by workmen – and there are also hints of rape in Larkin’s focus on the ravages of Titch Thomas’s penknife. Perhaps if it were not for the comic tone, this poem could be seen as tragic rather than comedic. But the grotesque image of the girl can be seen as humorous, (perhaps because of the colloquial language Larkin uses: the graffitist, he says, gives the woman “huge tits” and a “tuberous cock and balls”). However, such language can also be seen as offensive. Therein lies the edginess of the comedy. Significantly, Larkin himself said the poem was both funny and horrific.

### *Not my Best Side* – U.A. Fanthorpe

This poem is also cutting in its humour, but Fanthorpe is much less acerbic than Larkin. Whereas Larkin mocks the advertising world, Fanthorpe turns her satirical eye on the painting by Paolo Uccello of St George and the Dragon mocking the artist’s celebrated idiosyncratic style. In this respect she takes a risk in debunking high art. Like Larkin, though, Fanthorpe’s comedy works on a number of levels. She also comically deflates the legend of St George and in so doing mocks stereotypical ideas about gender. She does this by creating three different dramatic voices to foreground the comedy. The voices step out of the painting and speak directly to the audience.

The dragon is the first speaker and, it is through his voice that Fanthorpe ironically derides Uccello for his stylised geometric system of lines and cubes. The dragon wonders why the artist has only given him two feet and half critically, half sympathetically he refers to the “poor chap” who “had this obsession with triangles” and who has given him “bad publicity”. Fanthorpe creates comedy in the absurdity of the dragon’s explanation that Uccello didn’t give him the chance to “pose properly”.

She also uses the dragon to subvert the myth of England’s patron saint, established by medieval and Renaissance writers and printed in *The Golden Legend* by Caxton in 1483. In Fanthorpe’s ekphrastic story, St George is not the saint in a white tunic with a red cross, sitting astride his stallion and skewering the dragon as he rescues the beautiful maiden. Instead he is “ostentatiously beardless” and rides a horse “with a deformed neck”. The maiden is not the classical beauty but is so “unattractive” that she is “inedible”. The girl’s voice, like the dragon’s, is also used to mock the young knight, but in doing so she also draws attention to her own shortcomings in terms of legendary expectations. She complains that when “this boy” turned up, “wearing machinery” she didn’t

“much fancy him”; she thinks he might have blackheads or acne. Rather than feeling terror at the dragon, she finds him “nicely physical” with his “sexy tail”. St George himself is also mocked and damned through his own less than heroic utterances. He chastises the maiden whom he says can’t do better than him, given his qualifications and “custom-built” technology. Although the boy fulfils the role of rescuing the maiden, the story is continually undercut and at the end when he aggressively says that she is in his “way” the legend of dignified heroism is securely turned on its head.

A further layer of comedy in the poem is the ridiculing of gender types and twentieth century commercialism. Fanthorpe is satirical in her portrayal of the modern young man and his female counterpart who are cultural representatives of the mid-1970s. The ambitions of the young male with his high expectations and arrogant enthusiasm are ridiculed when he boasts of his power and qualifications (he has diplomas in Dragon Management and his horse is the latest model “with automatic transmission and built-in obsolescence”). There is also mockery of the insipid girl who cares only about herself, appearances and sex. The voice Fanthorpe creates for her is cliché ridden, designed to reveal the girl’s superficiality (“I mean, I quite/Took to the dragon. It’s nice to be/Liked, if you know what I mean”). There is also much that is comical about the modern spin Fanthorpe puts on the relationship between the sexes. She does not create the happy ending that is expected of the legend – or even of romantic comedy. Instead the girl and the boy satisfy their own self-interests, giving readers, perhaps, the final laugh.

### *My Rival’s House* – Liz Lochhead

In *My Rival’s House*, Lochhead uses a female voice to ridicule the often idealised relationship of mothers and sons. She takes as her subject a stock aspect of mainstream comedy – the mother-in-law – and gives it a slightly different twist. Mother-in-law jokes and stories have a long tradition in comedy, going back to Roman times. The jokes centre on the idea that there is something malignant and oppressive about mother-in-laws. Traditionally, the jokes are funny and delivered through male voices (like that of comedian Les Dawson) and they centre on the mothers of their wives. In this poem, Lochhead changes the angle. The mother-in-law here is the mother of her husband or partner. This mother-in-law is not so much over bearing, embattled and unattractive but furtive and seemingly well-meaning, making the speaker feel inadequate. Lochhead’s comedy is much more sombre and less obvious than that of Les Dawson; the speaker is low key rather than ebullient. The comedy is shaped by the voice of the speaker who we can imagine is polite and unassuming in her mother-in-law’s house but secretly feels hostility and resentment. Her sharp observations give the poem its comedic bite.

To compensate for her inadequacy, the speaker mocks the house (and, thus, the homeowner who lavishes the home with pride and polish); she sneers at the “silver sugar-tongs” and beautiful “parquet floor”. On the surface the mother-in-law’s middle class house seems welcoming and sophisticated (indicated by the list of household accoutrements) but the welcome is actually a façade, hiding deep seated feelings of envy and rivalry. “What squirms beneath her surface I can tell”, the narrator says; her rival will “fight foul for her survival”. The comedy is in the stand-off between the two women, the mother-in-law whose festering feelings and thoughts can only be imagined and the speaker who secretly harbours ill thoughts and bitter insults: “Lady of the house” “Queen bee”.

### *Mrs Sisyphus* (1999) – Carol Ann Duffy

In this poem, the chief comedic aspect is the relationship between a wife and her husband. Again this is a typical aspect of traditional romantic comedy, as seen, for example, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in the marriage of the Hardcastles in *She Stoops to Conquer* and in Austen’s portrayal of Mr and Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Here, Duffy uses the voice of the wife of Sisyphus to contemptuously comment on her husband’s obsession with work and to show the effect this has on their relationship. Duffy’s take on the Sisyphus story is modern, focusing on the wife rather than the victim who was sentenced by Zeus to push a rock up a hill for eternity. All expectations of a dutiful, caring wife are subverted by Duffy in her creation of a woman who simply thinks her husband is a “jerk” for pushing a stone the size of “a kirk” up a hill. Whereas the legendary story of Sisyphus and its mythical significance might excite pity in the reader, Duffy, through Mrs Sisyphus chooses to deflate what is tragic and monumental. In this respect she is not unlike Fanthorpe in her deflation of the St George myth. ‘Mrs Sisyphus’ does not focus on the horrors of man’s punishment of eternal work at the hands of punitive deities, or on the way that Sisyphus, in Marxist thinking, represents the proletariat oppressed by the bourgeoisie, or even of the tragic grandeur of a man who understands he has no hope of reprieve but is ennobled by the lucidity of his understanding. Fanthorpe’s story is a domestic drama of a wife’s non appreciation of her husband’s work ethic. The wife resents the effort he makes and is scornful of what she sees as his inability to understand the futility of what he is doing. While the neighbours are amused by what he does and while he thinks there is something dignified in giving “one hundred per cent and more” to labour, she is dismissive and thinks it is “a load of old bollocks”.

The comedy of the poem is heightened by the language choices that Duffy makes. The rhymes and half rhymes (“jerk”, “berk” “dirk” “squawk”) are deliberately colloquial, and all connect with the word “work” which is held off



until the last line of the poem to draw attention to the wife's disparagement of her husband and what she sees as his egocentricity.