

Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *Wise Children*

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of comedy. It is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning by giving an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of comedy. There are some brief comments on how some aspects of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. Not all of the texts on the set texts list contain every element of the genre and that is reflected in this commentary. We hope that this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about *Wise Children* in more detail. It is important to note that *Wise Children* is an examination set text for AS students only, although it can be studied by A-level students for the non-exam assessment (NEA).

Overview

Wise Children is a post-modern novel which is constantly celebrating and questioning imagination, art and comedy. In doing so, it draws attention to its own artifice. Its narrator is the seventy five year old Dora, the more literary of two twins who come from a theatrical family. Dora is a self-conscious story teller and reminds readers intermittently that her memory is not as good as it once was and that she is uncertain of some of the details of which she writes. Her age is of course relevant to her unreliability but it is only one factor. Carter creates for her an extraordinary and bizarre life, a string of impossible relations with numerous sets of twins, a theatrical heritage and sequences of barely believable happenings. The story is told in a voice that is exuberant and bawdy, full of vitality. Dora celebrates life and exudes happiness. The novel contains so many aspects of the comedic genre that it would be hard to argue that any are absent. It is a novel about chances and hazards, the surnames of the principal families.

The world of *Wise Children* is crazy, full of stretched coincidences, sharp and often humorously indecent wit, and comes at us like an elaborate theatrical experience. In telling the story, Carter embraces a variety of genres: drama, poetry, autobiography, romance, family saga, the gothic and magical realism. Literary allusions abound.

Plots and sub-plots and the fluidity of time

Typical of the comedic genre, *Wise Children* has a complicated plot. The story in the narrative present is relatively straightforward. It spans one day and moves

from morning, when Dora and Nora receive an invitation to Sir Melchior Hazard 100th birthday party, to night when the chaotic party takes place. In between, there are the dramatic events of their god daughter Tiffany's misfortunes and her supposed suicide. There are several complications in the events of the evening, but they are not as complicated as the back story in the rest of the novel which spans one century. As Dora is recounting her life over the single day of the party, she reminisces over her past life (and the lives of her parents and grandparents) telling the seemingly in-exhaustive exploits of her family in a breathless way.

In the chaotic and busy story, time is never still. Neither is it easy to pin down. Time is forever going backwards and forwards. Art, of course, makes any kind of time travel possible. The grandfather clock which turns up, a legacy from the estate of their paternal grandmother Miss Euphemia Hazard, is an important symbol, often giving out the wrong hour, though not on Dora's and Nora's birthday. As it rightly strikes the hour of eight o'clock, Dora sees it as a presentiment, exclaiming: 'Something's up! Granddad in the hall got the right time, for once!'

Theatrical Context

The novel is structured with five chapters like five theatrical acts of a Shakespeare play. Significantly, all Shakespeare's comedies and romances are referenced or alluded to in the novel and those references help to inform its spirit. At the centre of *Wise Children* in 'Act 3' is the story of the two families' experiences in Hollywood where they star in a film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The bizarre events that occur in Shakespeare's comedy are matched or subverted by what happens in Hollywood to the twin daughters and twin fathers of Carter's story. However, in the novel as a whole, it is easier to see Shakespeare's later plays, specifically *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, as Carter's inspiration since *Wise Children* is as much about reconciliation and rebirth as anything else.

The novel embraces a plethora of forms from the visual arts and entertainment world: classical theatre, Hollywood cinema, television, vaudeville, pantomime and TV games shows. A central image is the paper moon, reminding readers (and the imagined watchers) of the illusion of art, theatre and make-believe lands. The novel is like a prolonged performance in which curtains are constantly rising and viewers are constantly watching.

Lampooning and/or celebrating old people?

So often in comedy (and tragedy) old men and women and their physical and mental frailties, are the butt of laughter. Primarily the old are laughed at by the young. But in this text, with time being ever fluid, it is not entirely clear who is old and who is young and who mocks whom. Dora and Nora at seventy five might be considered old, but they are twenty five years younger than their father and uncle who are still performing at the end of the novel. Dora tells the story

with all the energy of a young woman. While it is true that the novel invites us to laugh at the absurdities of Dora and Nora, at their states of dress and undress, and at Dora's sexual exploits with her one hundred year old uncle, Carter seems more keen to celebrate the 'old' ladies as a life force, not least of all when they are made the custodians of twin babies at the end of the novel suggesting they must and will carry on staying alive. Carter seems to be saying in *Wise Children* that her 'old people' offer a lesson that life must be lived in full to the very end and that age is just a number.

Sexual love and matters of the heart

Sexual love in the novel is not given serious treatment. Nora's first experience is with a pantomime goose and other sexual encounters take place in bushes, screen sets and back bedrooms. Dora is given her first sexual experience when Nora bequeaths her man to her sister on their seventeenth birthday. Dora describes the encounter in comic detail, claiming that it was romantic and wonderful. Dora is equally cavalier about descriptions of love making with Irish, Genghis Khan and Peregrine: it is all part of the fun of life. Carter includes the uncomfortable issue of incest in her novel (Dora's experiences - 'real' and imagined - with her uncle), but it is made comical by the narrator. This is not a novel which focuses on victims and the abused. In Carter's world, the key players are all winners.

Marriage, however, a key component of comedic texts is not a winner. Most of the characters choose not to marry and live lives free from the constraints of the marriage bond. Melchior marries three times and it could be said that his experiences are disruptive creating unhappiness for many.

Perhaps the greatest expression of love in the novel is between Dora and Nora. While other sets of twins are rivals and sometimes estranged, Dora and Nora stay together throughout their lives. As Dora says: 'To tell the truth, I love her best and always have'.

Disguise, intrigue and inversions, mistaken identity/doubles/twins/fathers and children

With so many twins and so much uncertainty about parentage, Carter makes good use of comedic intrigue and mistaken identities. Throughout most of the novel neither Dora nor the reader is entirely sure whether Melchior or Peregrine is the twins' father. While Grandma Chance tells them that Melchior is their biological father (and Dora and Nora seem to feel that he is), it is Perry who is the provider of money and some doubt remains until the end. In the case of Saskia and Imogen, they think their father is Melchior only to discover it is Peregrine. This is as much a surprise for Dora as for them. The novel's title is important in terms of the question of parenting. When Dora and Nora at seven first see the father who abandoned them, they develop a curiosity about him, a kind of 'crush'. Instinctively Dora has a daughterly reverence for Melchior; she is

the wise child (echoing Telemachus in *The Odyssey*) who knows its father. Out of the mouths of babes comes forth wisdom.

Duality and twinning are important aspects of comedy in other ways in the novel. Through using four pairs of adult twins (and three month old twins at the end), Carter sets up many paradoxes, mirror images and symmetries. Twins may stand in for each other, like the identical twins Dora and Nora, or they may be antagonists, and as different as 'chalk and cheese' like Melchior and Peregrine. But, however they are used, they all contribute to the carnivalesque mood of the novel. Characters who are not twins also play double roles – Nora's boyfriend who doubles as a waiter and beds Dora, Grandma Chance who is not a real grandmother but a landlady and perhaps the twins' mother, Lady Atalanta who once upon a time was stately and aristocratic and is now the dependent antique divorcee in reduced circumstances, known affectionately as 'Wheelchair'.

Carnival, celebrations and parties, seasons and customs

Carnival is traditionally the time before Lent when people can cut loose from restrictions. In some ways the whole of *Wise Children* is a carnival in that the world that is presented is a world turned upside down, where marriages do not happen, where old women have babies, where taboo subjects are talked about openly and where the English roses, Imogen and Saskia attempt murder. It is a world full of comic characters with glorious names: Gorgeous George, Genghis Khan, Daisy Duck, the many Hazards and Chances. In this world, social boundaries are broken, high and low art forms are merged, truth and untruth are inseparable and children are conceived legitimately and illegitimately.

Specific calendar festivities are also used to shape this novel, particularly birthdays. Melchior's party invitation comes in the first few pages and Dora and Nora attend the party in the final chapter. The date, when Melchior and Peregrine will be one hundred and Dora and Nora seventy five, is April 23rd, the same birth date as the presiding god of the novel, Shakespeare. It is also St George's Day. It is significant that the season is spring, a time of new beginnings and new growth. Birthday celebrations occur in all the other chapters too and on all occasions there is an overwhelming sense of joy- despite some chaos and disquiet. As a treat for Dora and Nora's seventh birthday, they are taken by Grandma Chance to see *Lady Be Good*, which becomes a Damascus experience for the girls as it is here they get stars in their eyes and decide they want to perform. It is also here that they catch a glimpse of their father and become intrigued by celebrity. Significantly on this birthday they also receive the gift of the toy theatre from Peregrine. At Saskia's and Imogen's twenty first birthday party, to which Dora and Nora are invited by Lady Atalanta, there is an explosion of anger when Melchior, the man Saskia and Imogen assume is their father, tells them that his gift for them is a new step mother. The scene descends into farce with pots broken, faces slapped, the caterpillars (given to them as a present by Peregrine) pulped and everyone miserable except Dora and Nora who go home to sing and dance.

Other calendar celebrations that are important in the novel's design are the joyful August bank holiday picnic with Perry when the girls are thirteen and the Lynde court Twelfth Night costume Ball. In this scene, the climax of chapter 2, Carter includes all kinds of comedic aspects: drunkenness, mistaken identities, role playing, outrageous fun and laughter, nonsensical dialogue and a fire which burns the house down. While the fire rages and Nora is lost, Dora has sex with her sister's boyfriend in the bushes, and Melchior, playing the role of tragic hero, extravagantly bewails the loss of his cardboard crown. But then out of the flames comes Peregrine, carrying Nora with the rescued crown upon his head. The stately home might burn but Carter creates a marvellous comic spectacle with a promise of more since the characters are all invited to Hollywood to film *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Illusion, theatricality, comedy drawing attention to its own artifice and game playing, magic

Perry embodies the spirit of carnival, theatre and illusion. He is magical, like Prospero, a conjurer who produces butterflies, scarlet macaws and babies from nowhere. He also does – or maybe doesn't do – back flips out of windows. He is restless, charismatic and romantic, both a father and a non-father and a bringer of fun, revelry, gifts and food. It is Perry who introduces Dora and Nora to dance; he is the lord of picnic and party. But he also connects with the dark edge of comedy as he is guilty of incest.

Perry is a key character and device that Carter creates to draw attention to the novel's artifice and to its genre of magical realism. But he is not the only device. Carter also includes allusions to writers and critics to remind us that the novel is a construction. The narrator Dora is herself a writer who tells her story like a stand-up comedian in a tone which is humorous, optimistic and mischievous. Dora has been educated by her literary boyfriend Irish and he himself writes stories, the Hollywood Elegies, in which Dora appears. So there are fictions within fictions.

The green world

It is possible to apply the green world theory to *Wise Children*. When Dora and Nora arrive in Hollywood they stay at the 'legendary Forest of Arden', the motel of the stars. Here the green world is transported into Hollywood (as it is in the film set of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and in the 'woods' anything and everything happens. Nora falls in love with Tony, Dora meets Irish but agrees to marry Genghis Khan to please her sister (though the disguised first wife of Genghis Khan stands in for her and gets her out of a fix), Melchior is smitten by Daisy and a holiday atmosphere prevails. However, whereas in Frye's theory the green world resolves problems, it could be argued that the chaotic Hollywood experience resolves nothing. In this post-modern text, the green world is altogether more complex.

Comic resolution: that which is lost is found

Wise Children ends with an explosion of energy and activity. Joie de vivre dominates. Carter suggests finally that all life is a performance, her novel a celebration of love and life. At the end of Chapter 5, Dora and Nora go to their father's party and are finally recognised and embraced as his children. As in *The Winter's Tale* the dead come back to life. Perry, believed dead after he disappears from Saskia's and Imogen's twenty first birthday party, returns now one hundred years old reconciling himself to his brother by giving him the cardboard crown once again. To everyone's amazement and joy he brings gifts: Tiffany, alive and well, and carrying Tristram's child and two babies fathered by Tristram's twin Gareth who are given to Dora and Nora to care for. Gifts indeed! As they go home Nora says to her sister: 'We're both of us mothers and both of us fathers...They'll be wise children all right'. So, interestingly it is not a triumphant traditional sexual union of husband and wife that ends this comedy, but two seventy five year old sisters who have in a sense displaced men in all but their sexual functions.