

## Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *Small Island*

---

What follows 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 that this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

*Small Island* is a historical novel, giving a snapshot of life in Britain after the Second World War. Given that some of the novel's content (particularly the racism and violence) is disturbing, it might be considered an odd choice for inclusion on an Aspects of comedy paper. Unlike classical dramatic comedies, this text also contains death (Arthur Bligh is an innocent casualty in a horrible racial incident). However, the story never becomes bitter or maudlin, largely because of the voices of the characters who recount the events, and Levy writes her story with warmth and humour. She uses four narrators who are all able to amuse in the ways they tell their stories, the ways they reflect on happenings and their unconscious irony. The humour is sharpened by the ways the same stories are told by different speakers, who offer different perspectives on the same events. The novel is also full of comedic incident and, like dramatic comedy, the novel ends cheerfully, with journeys towards self-knowledge (for Hortense and Queenie), some happiness in love and the birth of a child.

### Love interest

The comedic aspect of romantic love is used by Levy to structure the story, and it is certainly true that the course of true love does not run smooth. There are two main pairs of lovers: the English pair, Queenie and Bernard, and the Jamaicans, Hortense and Gilbert. As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, their love is complicated by separation and by love not being reciprocated. There is an additional complication in that both are part of love triangles and those love triangles intersect forming a third love triangle. Hortense and Queenie both love Michael Joseph (who has some qualities of a comic villain) though both are ignorant of the other's knowledge of and love for Michael. Hortense's love for Michael is formed in the time before her marriage to Gilbert, and Queenie's while Bernard is away at war. For much of the novel Hortense holds on to her dream

about Michael and her marriage to Gilbert is just a convenience, but by the end she learns to love her husband. The love of Hortense and Gilbert is cemented by their agreeing to take Queenie's (and, unbeknown to her, Michael's) baby and raise it as their own. The birth of the child and Gilbert and Hortense's decision to nurture it, give the novel an upbeat resolution. Queenie and Bernard's marriage has an uneasy conclusion, but an understanding between them emerges and there is compromise. In the world of this novel, that is no small thing.

## Marriage

Whereas in traditional dramatic comedies, and in romantic novels like *Emma*, there is a celebratory marriage at the end of the text, *Small Island* works in reverse. The marriages occur at the beginning of the novel as unromantic contracts, and then during the narrative there is a growth towards love (for Hortense and Gilbert), and the development of an honest understanding (for Queenie and Bernard). Hortense marries Gilbert so that she can move to England to better herself. Gilbert is happy to comply because Hortense can provide him with money needed for the passage, "I will lend you the money, we will be married and you can send for me to come to England when you have a place for me to live." Their relationship from the start is comical: born of deception on Hortense's part (she insinuates her way into taking the place of Celia) and seen as a light hearted joke by Gilbert. It is fraught with squabbling and misunderstanding, not unlike that of Katherina and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Hortense's account of their wedding night is delightfully comic. Sexual contact is not what she has signed up for. When Gilbert stands naked before her, in full expectation, Hortense screams "Do not come near me with that thing". Hortense's description of the moment is high comedy: "The fleshy sacks that dangled down between his legs, like rotting ackees, wobbled. If a body in its beauty is the work of God, then this hideous predicament between his legs was without doubt the work of the devil". Although there is no corresponding romantic love scene at the end of the novel, to show how the relationship has changed, there is affection and a growing respect. This is best shown when Hortense, who is no longer arrogant, and who is impressed by Gilbert's passionate speech to Bernard, bows to his wish to protect the child. They are also at ease with each other, delighting in wit and repartee, and share simple affection.

Queenie has a less happy ending. Her marriage is far from the dream she had anticipated as a child, when she believed she had "the whole world" at her feet. Before the war, she naively begins a relationship with the dull and mechanical Bernard because her aunt encourages it and, even though she soon begins "to hate the back of his neck", she marries him for security. Like Hortense, she derives no pleasure from intimacy but, rather than being despairing, Queenie describes the encounters comically, as befits the comedy genre where sex is a key comedic aspect: "A held breath that turned him pink, then a grunt that slathered spittle all down my neck, and it was all over." Not surprisingly, Queenie is somewhat relieved when Bernard joins the RAF and is called up. Their

separation enables her to have a brief love affair with Michael, where for the first time she experiences tenderness and joy and it is by Michael that she becomes pregnant. When Bernard returns in 1948, seemingly from the dead, Queenie is shocked rather than joyful. The chaotic scenes after his return could almost make the ending tragic. Certainly, Queenie's belief that she has to give up her "darling little baby" strikes a sad note. However she derives some comfort from giving the baby a chance of a happy life with Hortense and Gilbert, and Bernard seems to develop some humility and understanding, perhaps softened by the presence of the baby and by his wife's strength of feeling.

## The comic voices of the narrators and the follies and nonsenses of human behaviour

However uncomfortable some of the subject matter is, the four narrators speak with voices that help to secure the novel's status as one of comedic intent. All speak with an honesty that reveals both their personal foibles and the short comings of the societies of which they are products. The voices are undercut with irony – Queenie speaks in a white working class vernacular; Hortense is Jamaican but an educated snob; Gilbert speaks in West Indian dialect with a simple humorous charm, and Bernard takes himself so seriously that he invites laughter.

Levy uses all four narrators to laugh at human behaviour, at human ignorance and at the wider communities that are represented in the novel. When Queenie retrospectively records her childhood trip to the British Empire Exhibition, she shows the inherent racism in the British public when Graham says of an African woman: "She can't understand what I'm saying," ... "They're not civilised. They only understand drums." In Gilbert's account of the visit to the cinema, while inviting laughter at his own idiosyncrasies and turn of phrase, Levy also mocks women and their fascination with movie stars: "How Clark Gable make every woman swoon so? Gone With the Wind. Queenie was so thrilled she jump in joy... Forgetting all sense she squealed delirious at the thought of being in the dark with this puffup American star." Hortense is used, by Levy, to laugh at male sexuality, though Hortense's pride and superiority are also ridiculed when she asks Gilbert to turn off the light before he undresses: "Any man of breeding would have realised that that was why a woman such as I might require the light to be off. I did not wish him to stand before me in his nakedness as puffed as a peacock". Bernard's racial ignorance and Malvolio-like foolishness are well exposed in his farcical description of the scene when Queenie goes into labour (without his knowing that she is in labour): "She was panting, tongue fleshy as steak. Darkie woman tried lowering her to a chair. .. Blackie puts out his hand to steady her. 'Oh, no, you don't,' I told him."

## Resolution

Human folly certainly abounds in *Small Island* and Levy creates some brilliant scenes to show human beings at their most ridiculous. Examples are Hortense's

arrival in England and her not being understood by the English, despite her top of the class English pronunciation; Gilbert's account of losing his money in attempting to keep bees; the game of cards that Michael has with Arthur Bligh; and the chaotic scene when Bernard comes home from war and finds Gilbert and Hortense in his house. But perhaps what marks this novel out most as an example of comedic writing is its resolution. Although Gilbert may have displayed some of the behaviour of the stereotypical clown for much of the novel (Hortense calls him a buffoon), at the end he rises in dignity. Not only does he agree to take Queenie's child, "I can't just walk away. Leave that little coloured baby alone in this country, full of people like Mr Bligh...What sort of life would that little man have?", but there is something noble in his speech to Bernard when he explains why his attitude is so wrong: "You know what your trouble is, man?' he said. 'Your white skin....You think it give you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? ...It make you white. That is all, man. White.'" There is also a fantastic moment of comic deflation when Bernard seems to begin to apologise but then doesn't, "I'm sorry... I just can't understand a single word that you're saying." However the import of the speech is not lost on Hortense who realises that her husband is "a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend." and the two have the promise of a happy ending together.

Acknowledgement of copyright-holders and publishers

*Small Island* by Andrea Levy, first published 2004 by Headline Publishing