The Neuroscience of Poetry

Humor
wishes for sons

i wish them cramps.
i wish them a strange town
and the last tampon.
i wish them no 7-11.

i wish them one week early
and wearing a white skirt.
i wish them one week late.

later I wish them hot flashes
and clots like you
wouldn’t believe. let the
flashes come when they
meet someone special.
let the clots come
when they want to.

let them think they have accepted
arrogance in the universe,
then bring them to gynecologists
not unlike themselves.

Lucille Clifton
Sonnet

Well she tole me I had an aura. “What?” I said. “An aura,” she said. “I heered you,” I said. “but you ain’t signifying.” “What I mean, you got ths fuzzy light like, all around your head, same as Nell the epelectric when she’s nigh ready to have a fit, only you ain’t having no fit.” “Why, that’s a fact,” I said, “and I ain’t about to neither. I recon it’s more like that dead rotten stump by the edge of the swamp on misty nights long about cucumber-blossoming time when the foxfire’s flickering round.” “I be goddamn if that’s it,” she said “Why you ain’t but sixty-nine, you ain’t a-rotting yet. What I say is you got a goddamn naura.” “Ok,” I said. “Ok.”
The story of the book signing

The anniversary of the book signing

The Paradelle

The Paradelle is a modern poetic form invented by Billy Collins as a parody of the villanelle. Billy Collins claimed that the paradelle was a difficult, fixed form consisting of four six-line stanzas with a repetitive pattern invented in eleventh century France.

Even though the form was invented as a hoax, the Paradelle has taken on a life of its own.
What Makes Something Funny?

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog.
Few people are interested and the frog dies.
—E. B. White

Yeah. But since when did curiosity stop for that?

1. “The secret to humor is surprise”
   —Aristotle

But the surprise has to contain something pleasing
Something revealing, Something “True?”

Even though you know to expect the surprise, it’s still funny. So there is something more.
Element of surprise

Goes against what we thought would happen

2. Incongruity – Conventions undermined by absurd situations

(Kant, Schopenhauer, Henny Youngman)
It’s more complicated than that

3. Superiority Theory of Plato and Aristotle
   “we laugh at the misfortune of others”

4. Freud: Release Theory—gives people an opportunity to release
   Psychological tensions, overcome inhibitions and reveal fears
   and desires. (works for dirty jokes and puns)

The brain seems to need
both tension
and surprise
5. McGraw: Benign Violation Theory:

1. It violates the way we think the world should work
2. Does so without harm

“Appropriate Behavior” is violated

The violation has to seem “Okay”
and to have some truth to it.

The intention of the violation has to be “Playful”
In “Sex, Aggression, and Humour: Responses to Unicycling” (one of the greatest titles ever to come out of academe), a British researcher proposed that humor may be

6. a by-product of male hormonal aggression, a hypothesis inspired by the overwhelming percentage of men who mocked him while he was out riding his unicycle. (Women were much more supportive.)
7. My own belief is that humor reveals something about human behavior that we recognize as true or characteristic but lies hidden or unwelcome. The frankness of attack during the sudden reveal triggers laughter.

Why don’t poets do more of this?
Yet another theory... 

8. Humor is an evolutionary adaptation that has promoted human survival by rewarding our relatively feeble minds for distinguishing true from false, right from wrong, and harmless from dangerous over countless harrowing and deeply confusing centuries

—Hurley, et al

Really?

We don’t seem to be certain why things are funny!!

(I counted 17 theories and quit)

We may not understand Humor but it teaches us stuff...
Humor teaches

- Exposes us to truths we might otherwise overlook
- Makes learning fun where it would be terrorizing
  ie, in a biostatistics class. . . But it has to be
  relevant and not too excessive.
- Humor helps us remember stuff
- Piques interest in new ideas
- Reinforces or alters beliefs
- Contextual humor can help students ingrain information

- Makes learning fun
- The parable of the two Prisoners
- Poets tend to be a serious group.
  A little levity might be useful.
- Funny makes it more appealing
Robert Creeley

I know a man

As I sd to my friend, because I am always talking, --John, I sd, which was not his name, the darkness surrounds us, what can we do against it, or else, shall we & why not, buy a goddamn big car, drive, he sd, for christ’s sake, look out where yr going.
There once was a farmer from Leeds,  
Who swallowed a packet of seeds.  
It soon came to pass,  
He was covered with grass,  
But has all the tomatoes he needs.  

As for beauty I am not a star,  
There are others more handsome by far.  
But my face -- I don't mind it,  
For I am behind it,  
It's the people in front that I jar.
Ogden Nash made a virtue of writing what appears to be doggerel but is actually clever and entertaining despite its apparent technical faults.

—Wikipedia
Hey, Dad. Did you know that the golf ball goes farther if you speak to it in more than one language?

*What languages do you speak to it in?* Japanese and Spanish.

*Japanese, really? What do you say?*

Sayonara amigo ball.

Dad? What would you want regarding staying the same age? For me it’s 9 same size, same weight. . . only develop more skills. . . Actually, I wouldn’t want that.

*What then?*

One of those motorcycle things.

Dad, do we have any inferior human food?

A dream is basically an entertainment system.

You end up in a time continuum and you can know everything. You understand time and get out 25 years later.  

Really?

Yes and I am so good at physics.

Graffiti is just a language almost no one understands.
The term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as humors, control human health and emotion.

**Three levels of Humor**

1. There is a universal humor that can be understood by everybody, without regard to culture or formal education.

2. There is a humor that requires background, a set of norms that are particular to a certain society.

3. The third level of humor requires a high command of language and its stylistic devices. Its main channel of expression is irony. It is of two kinds, compassionate, directed to the heart, and intellectual, directed to the mind. It is an elitist form of humor.
“Rules” for Comedians

1. THE K RULE
It may sound strange, but it’s true: Words with the k sound (Cadillac, quintuplet, sex) are perceived as the funniest, and words with a hard g (guacamole, gargantuan, Yugo) create almost as many grins.

2. THE RULE OF THREE
Writing comedically usually requires establishing a pattern (with the setup) and then misdirecting the reader (with the punch line). One simple way of doing this is to pair two like ideas in a list and then add a third, incongruent, idea.

3. THE COMPARISON JOKE
Comparison jokes are simply metaphors chosen specifically for comedic effect. Robert Schimmel’s memoir

... this stupid hospital gown is riding up my ass. I try to pull it down and it snaps right back up like a window shade. I cross my legs and suddenly I’m Sharon Stone.
The Healing Power of Humor

in 1964, Norman Cousins, who had a stressful job as editor of a magazine, was given a few months to live. He had Ankylosing Spondylitis, a rare disease of the connective tissues. He was told by his doctor that he had a 1 in 500 chance of staying alive and was advised to “get his affairs in order.”

Cousins didn’t listen to his doctor. Instead, he took a sabbatical from his job and checked into a hotel, where he watched funny movies to the point where his stomach was hurting. About six months later, he went back to have a check-up and the doctors pronounced that he had been miraculously cured. Since then much research has shown that laughter actually strengthens the immune system and helps promote cure in many ways.
Laughing Improves Short Term Memory

20 minutes

1. Improved Short Term memory
2. Reduction in stress hormones

No Change

Dr. Lee Burk, Loma Linda University
Humor is Powerful
When I am with you, we stay up all night. When you’re not here, I can’t go to sleep. Praise God for these two insomnias! And the difference between them.
ALLIGHT SAVING TIME

Turn your clocks sideways to the hour where nobody can get a good clean shot at you

Kenneth Patchen
Imagine Seeing You Here

After all it's not everyday that the two nicest people in the big old lousy world get to live like this.
There is no hope left in the world.

But how drunk I am with life.
Grammar

Maxine, back from a weekend with her boyfriend, smiles like a big cat and says that she's a conjugated verb.

She's been doing the direct object with a second person pronoun named Phil, and when she walks into the room, everybody turns:

some kind of light is coming from her head.
Even the geraniums look curious, and the bees, if they were here, would buzz suspiciously around her hair, looking for the door in her corona.

We're all attracted to the perfume of fermenting joy,

we've all tried to start a fire, and one day maybe it will blaze up on its own.

In the meantime, she is the one today among us most able to bear the idea of her own beauty, and when we see it, what we do is natural: we take our burned hands out of our pockets, and clap.
What The Doctor Said

He said it doesn't look good
he said it looks bad in fact real bad
he said I counted thirty-two of them on one lung before
I quit counting them
I said I'm glad I wouldn't want to know
about any more being there than that
he said are you a religious man do you kneel down
in forest groves and let yourself ask for help
when you come to a waterfall
mist blowing against your face and arms
do you stop and ask for understanding at those moments
I said not yet but I intend to start today

Raymond Carver
he said I'm real sorry he said
I wish I had some other kind of news to give you
I said Amen and he said something else
I didn't catch and not knowing what else to do
and not wanting him to have to repeat it
and me to have to fully digest it
I just looked at him
for a minute and he looked back it was then
I jumped up and shook hands with this man who'd just given me
something no one else on earth had ever given me
I may have even thanked him habit being so strong
Some of the Things Humor Can Do for Poetry

1. Make the poem memorable

2. Invite us to agree with the poet’s point of view

3. Point out our flaws in a more acceptable manner

4. Lighten heavy messages, makes more palatable the hard news

5. Reflect human nature, match our behaviors, our psychology

6. Encourage affection for the characters and their actions

7. Moves us away from despair

And probably a lot more...
Let’s look at another Clifton poem:

to my last period

well girl, goodbye,
after thirty-eight years.
thirty-eight years and you
never arrived
splendid in your red dress
without trouble for me
somewhere, somehow.

now it is done,
and I feel just like
the grandmothers who,
after the hussy has gone,
sit holding her photograph
and sighing, wasn’t she beautiful? wasn’t she beautiful?

Lucille Clifton
Litany

—Billy Collins

You are the bread and the knife,
the crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker,
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.
And a quick look in the mirror will show that you are neither the boots in the corner nor the boat asleep in its boathouse.

It might interest you to know, speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world, that I am the sound of rain on the roof.

I also happen to be the shooting star, the evening paper blowing down an alley and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.

I am also the moon in the trees and the blind woman's tea cup. But don't worry, I'm not the bread and the knife. You are still the bread and the knife. You will always be the bread and the knife, not to mention the crystal goblet and--somehow--the wine.
3 Year-Old Boy Reciting the Billy Collins Poem

Litany

Samuel Chelpka