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What Students Think is Funny: Gender and Class Issues in the Humor of Woody Allen, Grace Paley, Marietta Holley and James Thurber

Judith Beth Cohen

"Tell me what you laugh at and I will tell you who you are," says French writer Maurice Pagnol (Lewis 110).

To introduce students to the gender, culture and class dimensions of their reception of texts, I presented four short selections of literary humor. These forty two adult students, thirty women and twelve men, were beginning an intensive residency program to complete their bachelor's degrees at Lesley College in Cambridge, Mass. Ranging in age from their late twenties to late forties, many were human service workers, self-supporting divorced women and some were themselves recovering substance abusers. None were English or literature majors. Since I didn't want name recognition to influence their choices, I read the pieces aloud and gave them the examples without identifying the authors. The works represented contrasting narrative strategies, but all contained subject matter of high interest. Two were written by male authors and two were female. Students were asked to freewrite, noting places that struck them as funny, then rank the four in order of their preference and indicate the reason for their choices. I then revealed the identity and background of the writers. The exercise was intended as a teaching strategy and not as a research study. Their responses shed light on hidden gender and class dimensions of these texts, and pointed toward additional uses of humor in the curriculum. Though there isn't time to put you through the exercise, I'll try to capture the flavor of each excerpt I presented.

"Selections from *The Allen Notebooks*" by Woody Allen parodies both the literary trope of a writer's notebook and a confessional diary. Incongruous associations produce the humor: a man awakens to find that his pet parrot has been made Secretary of Agriculture, the writer tries committing suicide by wetting his nose and inserting it into a light socket. He broods on thoughts of death, wonders if there will be an afterlife, and if there is "will they be able to break a twenty (102)." By coupling unlike such unlike phenomena, Allen elicits surprise. As one student expressed it: "He leads me down one path and then takes a turn down another. "Should I marry W.?" writes the diarist, "not if she won't tell me the other letters in her name. (102)." Allen's narrator is concerned with failed love and family relationships. He meets his brother, whom he has not seen in fifteen years, at a funeral.

"...as usual, he produced a pig bladder from his pocket and began hitting me on the head with it (102)." The diarist wonders why this brighter, wittier, more cultured brother is still working at McDonalds, thus reducing his tormentor to a

nobody. Filial cruelty is likewise diminished by absurdity when he reports that his ridiculing father attended his first play, "A Cyst for Gus," in tails and a gas mask. Since his mother's terrible accident when she fell on some meat loaf and penetrated her spleen, the writer can no longer believe in God. Hope, he says was not "a thing with feathers" as the poet Emily Dickinson wrote, but his own nephew. He breaks off with W. who tells the writer his Critique of Metaphysical Reality reminds her of Airport (103).

In Grace Paley's short story "Wants," we also find an urban narrator, overwhelmed with life's complexities. This woman runs into her ex-husband on the steps of a New York library where she has gone to do her civic duty and pay a fine accumulated over eighteen years. They reminisce about the dissolution of their marriage, which he attributes "to the fact that you never invited the Bertrams for dinner (171)." When her mate of twenty-seven years, tells her "you'll always want nothing," she likens his narrow remark to "a plumber's snake...which "could work its way through the ear down the throat, halfway to my heart (172)."

Paley uses ironic humor to distance the narrator from the pain of the crumbled marriage. She sees her ex's limitations clearly but she's more compassionate than cruel. Though marriages fail, and wars go on, the Sycamore trees, planted before her kids were born, are in the prime of their lives. Perhaps she can't change the world, but she's not as passive as her ex suggests. Doesn't her decision to return those books prove that she can "take some appropriate action (173)." The humor in Paley's story comes not from wildly absurd images or slapstick effects but from a cumulative sense of the narrator's comic vision. Like Allen's persona, she's concerned with human weakness, but her humor derives, not from aggression delivered linguistically, but from a recognition of the absurdity of our social contracts, whether the rules pertain to marriage or library fines. Nonetheless, her emotional bonds to children, the library, and her beloved urban neighborhood remain strong in contrast to Allen's isolated loner, confiding in his diary.

Another character who finds social conventions laughable is Marietta Holley's late nineteenth century creation, Samantha, a hefty, upstate New York farm wife. Speaking in folksy rural vernacular, like the male crackerbarrel philosophers who preceded her, she attacks sexism and racism and rallies readers to defend women's suffrage. Holley published more than twenty books and was as widely read as her contemporary Mark Twain, but it took recent feminist scholars to rediscover her (Walker & Dresner 1988). In her preface to the 1873 volume, *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's*, Samantha decides "put her shoulder blades to the wheel and write a book on the great subject of "Wimmen's Rites." When she announces this to her husband Josiah, he reaches for the bottle. In despair over her project, he wakes in the middle of the night to proclaim that he won't pay

a cent of his money to hire anybody to read her book. Her silly neighbor Betsey Bobbet, desperate to please men, lectures Samantha that it is woman's greatest privilege and highest "speah" to soothe a man and be a poultice to the noble, manly breast. An angry Samantha sweating from her chores, is furious.

"Do I look like a poultice-- why don't they get men to soothe them--evenins they don't have anything else to do, they might jest as well be soothin' each other as to be a hangin' round the grocery store or settin' by the fire whittlin (Walker 103)."

The final selection, a fable by James Thurber called, "The Bear Who Let it Alone" tells of an alcoholic bear who

"would reel home at night, kick over the umbrella stand, knock down the bridge lamp, and ram his elbows through the windows (1955)." Determined to reform, he becomes a famous teetotaler and temperance lecturer who gets so agitated when he speaks of the awful effects of drink that he kicks over the umbrella stand, knocks down lamps and rams his elbows through the windows. Drunk or sober, the bear distresses his wife and frightens his children.

If you found the Woody Allen selection the funniest, then you agreed with twenty four of the forty two students who selected it as their first choice, though only one correctly identified it as Allen's work. Most reported that they chose Allen because of "the absurdity of the images." Ten students selected the Paley story as their first choice, eight of whom were women who identified with the divorced protagonist.

Grace Paley's narrator has much in common with Allen's diarist--she, too is overwhelmed by urban life, has relationship problems, and sees the absurdity of her situation but she's more deeply connected to people than is the Allen notebook writer. Rather than producing one-liners that explode in little bursts, most often at others' expense, Paley's narrative requires that you stay with it to get the whole effect. It doesn't deliver a laugh a minute, the way Allen does. What was striking about the eight female preferences for the Paley piece was not only their identification with her--in one student's words: "she represents the woman as survivor of divorce and I feel a bond with her," but her story elicited stories. Two women were prompted to write their own anecdotes about overdue library books. Paley's text is so much about intimacy that it invites a reciprocal bond from some readers, expressed in the form of a complementary narrative. Though Woody Allen explicitly wrote about struggles of faith, a man who selected Paley as his favorite cited the spiritual connection he saw in her text: "It relates to the cosmic joke and reminds me of the smiling Buddha. She shows a connection to the oneness in us all."

Despite the remoteness of the cultural situation and the rural dialect, six students selected the Holley piece as their favorite. One man wrote: "I felt her heart, like she was talking to me. She made a picture in my mind. I could see the expression on people's faces." A Cape Verdean woman who concluded from the dialect that the writer was black, said: "I

identified as a black woman. She's using humor to overcome dominance."

Only two students selected Thurber's cautionary tale, which seems more culturally removed, though it is more contemporary than Holley's writing. Like Samantha, women today still struggle to be more than unpaid domestics, but mocking abstinence is no longer funny, given recent changes in our consciousness about alcoholism as a disease. A therapist working with recovering substance abusers, himself a former addict wrote: "He sees the addictive layering in the human condition, but I miss the humor in this." A woman liked the piece because it reminded her of "being drunk and out of control."

These student responses suggest that their humor preferences are constructed by a shared culture and are more unified than their gender and class affiliations would seem to suggest. Though I had expected Paley and Holley to garner more first choices, Allen's neurotic persona and absurd juxtapositions appealed more to this predominantly white, female, working class

group. Traditional humor theories might appear to account for this preference. According to Incongruity Theories, we laugh when we are surprised, when our expectations are upset in an unthreatening way, as Allen does with his absurd juxtapositions. Disparagement Theory, which can be traced as far back as Plato and Aristotle, suggests that we use ridicule as a form of revenge and a way to make ourselves look better, as Allen's diarist does when he mocks his relatives. Freud's Release Theory argues that humor provides an outlet for repressed sexual or aggressive impulses--thus we can laugh with Allen, expel these dangerous feelings, and return to an equilibrium or status quo (Gagnier 135-6).

However, the work of feminist theorists has given us a new reading of women's humor that doesn't align neatly with any of the traditional approaches, which ultimately all view humor as a conservative force that allows us to "let off steam" so the social order can be maintained. Rather than supporting dominant cultural values, women's humor has the subversive intent of undercutting and destroying them. However, in order to get away with such a radical critique, much women's humor, like that of racial minorities and other oppressed groups is disguised. Feminist scholar Nancy Walker argues that writers like Marietta Holley create a "double text;" her Samantha character seems to endorse the stereotypes of the dominant culture, that women are gossipy domestics, so that her work appears unthreatening. However, lurking underneath this apparent simplicity is an indictment of the culture that assigns women such roles (Walker, 1988).

In addition to using concealment strategies, women tend to be storytellers rather than joke tellers; their humor is a sharing of experience rather than a demonstration of their own cleverness as we saw in the Paley selection (Walker 1988). A writer like Grace Paley combines the dual strategies of ironic distance, an ability to laugh at herself and her ex,

while she maintains her intimate connections, confirming what feminist theorists like Carol Gilligan and Mary Belenky have argued about the importance of relational thinking to women's ways of knowing (Gilligan 1982; Belenky et al 1986).

Then why did more of my women students favor the Woody Allen excerpt? I would argue that while Allen may seem to reflect the dominant culture's humor, he also subsumes the gendered aspects of women's connected humor. His persona-- the sickly, suicidal, under appreciated writer struggling with existential angst speaks to all who feel excluded or misunderstood. His degree of obsession with his father, mother, brother and nephew, and his questioning of his romantic choices might well appear in a woman's diary. Allen speaks to those who feel disempowered, whether by virtue of their gender, class or race. Grace Paley's humor, perhaps harder to see, is ultimately more subversive for she imagines a world where connection and compassion are more important than one-upsmanship and dominance. Though all of the examples I used contain an implied critique of the power structure, Allen's ability to mingle classic forms like slapstick and incongruous couplings with personal concerns make him reach across gender and class categories. This also helps explain the impact of his particular brand of humor on the mass media. Holley, whose gendered humor was as popular as Mark Twain's, may have been the Woody Allen of her day.

My purpose in using these literary selections was to grab students' attention, and stimulate their thinking about themselves as readers so that they could become more sophisticated about their reception of texts. However, the richness of their responses led me to consider other uses for humor in the curriculum. As powerful as it is for emotional and social expression, humor's untapped potential may lie in its cognitive underpinnings. Cognitive theorists study children's understanding of humor in order to assess their intellectual development (Lewis 73). For example, pre-school children consider figures of speech like: "You have a frog in your throat," to be hilarious because they picture the image literally. Psycholinguists like Ellen Winner study the ways in which children come to understand the nonliteral language involved in metaphor and irony (Winner 1988). Students who have difficulty perceiving the irony in these humorous selections may be struggling with developmental issues that affect their overall intellectual performance.

In a recent New Yorker piece by neurologist Oliver Sacks, an autistic adult explains her inability to process figurative language as evidence of brain abnormality. Since an ability to perceive incongruity is central to humor, noticing when students don't "get" it can tell us about their level of understanding and their possible cognitive deficits. We can also learn about their cultural expectations. Is breaking a twenty in the afterlife funny if your religious beliefs about heaven and hell make such jokes impossible? If your own culture is authority-based, is humor that openly and defiantly challenges authority comic or frightening? And if you don't know that Airport is a pulp novel or haven't heard of Emily Dickinson, would you find Allen funny? Student responses to humor can help us better

assess what they bring to their studies, letting us know when we are assuming too much about them.

Humor can contribute to the curriculum in a host of other ways as well. Here are a few I came across: Boston University history professor Joseph Boskin suggests that we can understand the spirit of a time and place by studying its humor. Each decade in American history has particular jokes that reflect the period's ideas including its stereotypes of race and gender. Understanding why jokes that poke fun at ethnic minorities or women are no longer acceptable can help students understand patterns of social change (Boskin 1979). Humor also offers a wonderful vehicle for exploring cultural diversity. Bringing jokes, stories and sayings from their own cultures to class can help students understand some of the subtle communication differences they may take for granted. Viewing ourselves through the eyes of an oppressed group can give us some distance on ourselves and help us to better understand other world views. Eugene Hynes's sociology students study the jokes Western Apaches make about Anglos, not to learn about Apaches as much as to see how the dominant group in this country has been seen by those without power (Hynes 1989). And because humor reduces tension and creates a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, students are likely to perform better. Steven Schacht and Brad Stewart present cartoons to reduce the anxiety levels students bring to a tough subject like statistics (1990). When it comes to test-taking, humor can also be a boon. Some teachers deliberately add a humorous item to an exam and encourage students to be funny in their answers.

Unfortunately, much of the research on classroom humor has focused on the teacher as entertainer rather than the use of humor to enhance curriculum content. A 1979 study by Bryant and others found that 48% of the humor used by college teachers was hostile or sexual (McGhee & Goldstein 1983). When Joan Gorham and Diane Christophel tried to draw some conclusions about differences in male and female teachers' use of classroom humor, they found that women who adopt the aggressive humor often associated with male comics were not favorably perceived by students (1990). Whether this is due to rigid expectations about proper behavior for women or a rejection of male modes isn't clear, but teachers should be sensitive to gender and power differentials when using humor. The same male teacher who would never tell a racial or ethnic joke might think that harmless teasing of female students is acceptable. A male professor I know swore that his joking was evenly balanced amongst the males and females in his classes. He was shocked when a group of female students confronted him for "sexually harassing" them. If the senators at the Thomas-Hill hearing "didn't get it", it's not surprising that a male teacher playfully commenting on female students' hairstyles or clothing wouldn't get it either.

Researchers Zillman and Bryant distinguish between confrontational and non-confrontational humor and warn that teachers must laugh with, not at their students

(1988). Some teachers use self-disparaging humor of the Woody Allen variety to remove the distance between themselves and their students. Though making yourself, the authority figure, the butt of the joke rather than poking fun at the less powerful can pull a group together, injecting humor into your classroom doesn't mean you must become a stand-up comic cracking one-liners. Rather, I'm interested in creating a community of laughter, which can break down gender, class and race barriers (Walker 114). Such humor can encourage bonding between student and teacher, student and student, and most important perhaps, between students and the subject matter being studied. Using humor in this manner requires that teachers be listeners more than performers, noting what humor or its lack tells them about their students. Connecting humor with learning can cast the teacher as a collaborator, searching with students for imaginative and sometimes subversive ways of reenvisioning what we teach and what they learn.

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