The Five Humors
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My favorite English teacher could draw humor out of the driest material. It wasn’t imposed either. He took Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, Addison’s essays, and many other literary wonders from the eighteenth century and made them hilarious, even at eight o’clock in the morning. The thing that amazed me most was that the first time I read these works on my own some of them seemed dead, but the second time, after his explanation, I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t seen the humor. The stories and poems and plays were suddenly filled with irony and allusions and hilarious moments.

I learned more from him than from any other teacher.

My least favorite English teacher also made people laugh. Some students found him to be wonderfully funny. Many others did not. He assigned journals over a six week period, to be written in every day. At the end of the six weeks I had a notebook full of jotted ideas, short story fragments, reactions to what we had read, and so on. Our teacher announced that we would be grading each other’s journals. Mine was passed to Joe, the class clown, who saw fit to quip at the end of it, “This writing isn’t fit to line the bottom of a birdcage.” Our teacher laughed at that. Funny stuff. It hurt me so much that the anger from it has driven my writing and teaching ever since.

So what makes the difference? Humor is one of the most powerful tools teachers (or writers) have at their disposal. It can build up students and classes and make them excited about literature and writing, or it can rip them apart. What sorts of humor are productive, and what sorts are counterproductive? What makes the difference?

There have been many attempts to categorize different types of humor. James W. Neuliep offers a comprehensive overview of these taxonomies. He describes approaches that separate types of humor (pun, joke, riddle, funny story, funny comment), a 1988 study by Downs that questioned whether humor in general was an effective teaching tool (it is, when relevant to the subject), and several other attempts at categorization. None of these, however, compared the effectiveness of different types of humor in the classroom. Perhaps the question is too complicated for a modern scientific study to properly answer.

Humor in the classroom owes something to the intuitive balancing and give-and-take of the medical practitioners of Shakespeare’s day. People at that time believed that some combination of “humours,” fluids in the body, dictated a person’s attitude, behavior, and even health. I believe that there are at least five basic directions or intents of humor whose ebb and flow dictate attitude, behavior, and even health for students and teacher.

Humor Drawn from Literature

Most successful writers use humor as a way to get their audience’s attention. Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, and Kurt Vonnegut are some of the more obvious ones, but sometimes we also find humor where
we do not expect it. Herman Melville's Ishmael in *Moby Dick* is a narrator given toward a wonderfully sarcastic voice. Finding that voice is often the key to letting students into his world. Reread the chapter called “The Sermon,” where the Nantucket preacher describes Jonah as some sort of spaghetti western bad guy, or “The Whale Line” in which, after several pages of detailed description, he explains that he would go into further detail, but that “might become tedious.” Gary Paulsen’s youthful narrator in *The Haymeadow* describes how a flash flood carries his wagon away and, although he manages to recover most of his canned food, the labels are all gone, so he never knows whether he’ll be eating stewed tomatoes, beef stew, plain beets, or who-knows-what for each meal. Or consider Zora Neale Hurston's retellings of African American porch stories like “How Man Got His Strength.” Even *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is certainly a serious book in content, features a climactic scene in which the main character, Scout, is walking home from the school play, scared, in the dark, wearing . . . a ham costume.

Sometimes a scene can be funny, even if it was not intended to be.

How do we find humorous material in authors we have never read before? One way is to ask mentors and fellow teachers, especially if you wonder if a certain passage is meant to be read funny or read straight. It also helps to picture the scenes clearly in your mind. The scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird* never struck me as particularly funny until, as I prepared to teach the novel one year, my wife and I read it aloud to each other as we drove from Chicago to Philadelphia and back. The scene with the ham costume almost caused us to run off the road with laughter.

Sometimes a scene can be funny, even if it was not intended to be. Our freshman literature book contains a passage from William Bradford’s “On Plymouth Plantation” that describes a sailor falling overboard and surviving by catching a rope and dragging behind the ship for some distance. One year a student compared that scene (with appropriate gestures and sounds) to learning to water ski—falling, but forgetting to let go of the rope. It helped the class picture the scene and see it as a humorous moment (though they recognized that, at the time, neither Bradford, the sailor, nor anyone else thought it funny).

Although it is easy to dismiss a classroom full of laughter as a bunch of slackers more interested in entertainment than learning, we need to remind ourselves again and again that we remember that which we laugh at.

**Humor at the Expense of Literature**

Humor drawn from a poem, essay, novel, short story, or play should not be confused with humor at the expense of a piece of literature. I once had a professor who disdainfully introduced Romeo and Juliet as “A tragedy that could have been averted if Verona had a decent postal system.” Although this comical reference to Friar Laurence’s difficulties in trying to alert Romeo to the hoax of Juliet’s death was probably meant first of all to be amusing, it had the effect of conveying to us his dislike for the play. That dislike was, I suspect, contagious for some.

If the teacher mocks the literature being studied, or the author who wrote it, that sends a powerful message to students. In a television world filled with mocking laughter, it tells students that the teacher doesn’t really believe there is any reason to take this stuff seriously. I once contemplated using a Saturday Night Live skit to introduce Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The skit featured Jon Lovitz as Stephen King. He was shown typing at a furious rate. The interviewer interrupted him to ask what book he was working on. Lovitz bent over the typewriter to read what he had just written in order to answer the question. The implication is that Stephen King churns out books at such an incredible rate, even he can’t keep track of them. I was going to show my students the clip, then explain that Mary Shelley put much more time and consideration into the meaning of her work. I abandoned the whole idea when, the next day, one of my students recommended one of King’s books to me. To build up Shelley at the expense of King would only serve to anger or discourage some of my students.

Humor at the expense of literature is counterproductive to what we as English teachers are trying to do. Literature is not above humor, but the humor should come out of the piece. To put humor
Humor That Puts Someone Down

At the beginning of class one of my students made a comment she thought would be funny, and I suppose it was. "Mr. B.-C., could I give you some advice?" (I now know that the proper response to this question is "No.") But I told her to go ahead. She pointed out to the class that my shirt still had bumps on the shoulders where I had hung it on a hanger and suggested that I might want to work on my fashion sense a bit. My impulse was to zing her back with a cutting comment of my own. I also thought of taking her out of class for disrespectful behavior, but I know what her defense would be: "You told me I could give you some advice."

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Perhaps you have had students use a similar tactic in class. They disparage someone’s writing or their enjoyment of an Annie Dillard essay, or they make fun of the dialect in Richard Wright’s Native Son. If the insulted person or the teacher takes offense, the insulter replies, “I was only kidding. Can’t you take a joke?”

Of course, it isn’t a joke. Not really. It is an insult. These sorts of things happen in the classroom as well (and perhaps in the teachers’ lounge, but that is another issue). Sometimes the students initiate them. Sometimes it is the teachers. Earlier this year I expressed my disappointment to a student who obviously had great dramatic talent but had chosen not to try out for any plays over her four years in high school. I knew the student fairly well and thought she would understand when I kidded that I would never forgive her for not trying out. I suppose I meant it as a kind of compliment. She was profoundly hurt by my offhand remark. Fortunately she talked to me about it. Funny stuff isn’t funny if it hurts your audience.

How do you judge whether a comment will be understood as funny by the person you direct it to? I don’t think we can count on being able to judge accurately all the time. Some classroom humor is planned, but most of it is spontaneous. That is some of the most effective motivating and teaching we do. Even so, sometimes it backfires.

We can take some steps to prevent those times when it backfires. But we can think about what we say, even after we’ve said it. When the drama student walked away from me after that conversation, she wasn’t laughing. She wasn’t even grinning. That should have been a sign. But even if she was laughing, if I had second thoughts about it later in the day, I should have checked back with her and clarified the comment. I also could have turned the joke back toward myself. Self-deprecating humor has a wonderful way of letting students lower their guards and talk about things with open minds. Maybe if I had told the drama student that I would never forgive myself for not finding a way to get her into a play, my comment would have had better results.

Humor that hurts the audience is counterproductive. If you allow your students or yourself to engage in it, it stifles creativity and class participation and creates an atmosphere of fear.

Humor That Builds Up, or Sometimes Even Shapes Identity

Humor can be used to build up student confidence and sometimes even help students forge a new, freer identity. Rick, for example, was the kind of class clown who made fun of his own stupidity. Although at times he had genuine flashes of insight, usually his stereotyped image of himself got in the way. During national poetry month I taught my students how to write haiku. Rick misunderstood the directions and thought that haiku needed to have end-rhyme. When he read his poem in class, there were a few snickers from the rest of the group. Before the snickering could develop into laughter at him, I suggested that Rick had developed a new haiku variant, the Rickian Haiku. The laughter came then, but it was subtly different, more congratulatory than insulting. A year later, Rick still plays the clown, but he writes poems often enough to give me some to look at every couple of weeks. Humor is a good way to turn a
showdown between teacher and students into a matter of confidence and success.

**Humor as a Classroom Management Tool**

John spent most of his high school life in wood tech or metal shop. English class was never, I am sure, the high point of his day. Toward the beginning of his senior year, though, John wrote a “how to” paper, describing how to make toast. He made this rather pedestrian topic more interesting by explaining how to make toast in accordance with the standards of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). John’s parody warned potential toast makers to first free their toasters of any foreign objects, like metal forks, tree limbs, and raccoons. The class’s positive response extended beyond the single day that John read. Furthermore, news traveled, and John had his piece published in the school literary magazine. The fact that it was funny gave it acceptance, even among those usually too cool to read the literary magazine.

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And this also illustrates my final point. Humor equals acceptance and at least nodding approval. When students laugh about something in a piece of literature, they are accepting it and approving it. This is a significant tool for the English teacher, and a worthwhile thing for students to understand.

During the final weeks of English IV, my class focuses on understanding the media. Last year’s class, when preparing their final projects, noticed that television laugh tracks encourage our approval of some things which, if we thought about them carefully, we might not approve of. They considered the television show *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*; for example, and noticed that much of the show’s humor consists of making fun of others. Even though the show usually ends with a moral, the students determined that the show did them a disservice by getting them to laugh at, and thus approve, humor at the expense of others.

It is this last notion that should make us think. If our society (including our students) views laughter as approval, then we need to recognize that we are vulnerable. The humor that might hurt one student or might mock a piece of literature may win us gales of laughter but may not be something we, as professionals, really wish to strive for.

Laughter is a powerful and remarkable tool. Approval through laughter can be used to gain acceptance for the student with the nasal voice or the shunned student with a birthmark on her face. Like my favorite and least favorite English teachers, we can use laughter as a conduit for students to find humor in the literature they read and the material they write, or we can use it to gain laughter for ourselves at the expense of others. How we wield that humor can transform students into readers who gobble up everything from Aristophanes to Judy Blume, or transform them into bitter nonreaders holding a grudge against the teacher who made them the butt of a mean joke.

**Works Cited**


