

The Anatomy of the Joke  
**Due Session 21**

*A few words to contextualize this assignment (reflection on class discussion) ...*

The framework intended for this next assignment is a serious one and I want to be very careful and clear as to how we will talk about the *anatomy of the joke* in relation to the current topic in the course: “Women & Comedy.” It is very important that the class first understands how I am foreseeing the transition from our comparative readings with Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and James McBride’s *The Good Lord Bird*. I conveyed most of this argument in class today yet want to ensure that the trajectory is absolutely clear before you examine controversial YouTube videos and talk about how comedy follows the tragic.

In addition to examining how the figure of Quixote and Sancho are appropriated in both novels, to make more complex these new protagonists and foil characters, also of concern is how Huck and Henry transform into cross-dressing heroines and how *gender passing* or cross-dressing is utilized as a literary device. That is, we must contrast Twain and McBride, BUT ALSO, contrast McBride against writers of the historical mid-nineteenth century period from which this trope is more precisely derivative, in particular slave narratives and novels written by African Americans: William Wells Brown, William and Ellen Craft, Harriet Jacobs, and Hannah Bond (to name a handful). A central question: What does McBride intend or what has he accomplished, now that the real historical figure of the “tragic octoroon daughter” is in his contemporary hands? McBride has transformed this female figure in his novel, perhaps even disfigured her.

Suddenly, this tragic figure is *made* into a cross-dressing male slave: Henry as Henrietta is a light skinned slave girl who achieves passage across the dangerous “white” spaces of a racialized slave economy. With the word *made* I want to invoke the famous line by Frederick Douglass: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.” We might very well pair this line with McBride’s line as ventriloquized through Harriet Tubman, “A body can be whatever they want to be in this world. It ain’t no business of mine. Slavery done made a food out of a lot of folks.” Think of the body as transformative in all the contexts I am conjuring for you. However, here I am inclined to return to a most significant question: What is the *anatomy of the joke* that McBride is pursuing through this notion of being *made* and *remade*? Why present Henry as a slave girl in order for Henry to escape pre-Civil War turmoil, but at the same time, invent a female figure, Henrietta, who is exploited as the “tragic octoroon daughter” in this fictionalized novel about escaping slavery? I want us to examine the tragic reality of the invented Henrietta’s passing and passage. I want us to understand the real danger for this imagined figure, through which McBride’s crosses the many lines for the reader to delight in humor – crossing that of racial, gendered, and sexual lines.

For this class, this is how I want to enter a discussion of the slippage between comedy and tragedy – how we get to an understanding of the complex layers, how we then must question writerly intent, how we then return to the knowledge of a past, how we also complicate plot devices, but also – and perhaps most importantly – how we must examine the cruelty in the delivery of the joke on gender, that is, on the *female* body of the slave.

Finally, also of interest is what happens when one *turns the corner* and the joke is no longer funny, when we suddenly go from the aggregate to the individual, when we go from contemporary to the historical, when we go from comedy to empathy. My intention here is to examine McBride’s dismissal of rape in his exploitation of Henrietta, and to do so we now turn to perhaps one of the more difficult jokes of all: rape jokes, because McBride flirts with rape jokes throughout his novel and through a *female* heroine. There is also the suggestion of the rape of the male slave beneath the feminine garments, which one of you mentioned in class. This is why today’s mini-lecture is so important to first understand. It establishes a necessary context for this assignment on examining the *anatomy of the joke* and while these dangerous jokes might make us laugh, especially due to their careful construction, understanding how and why we are led to laugh is *key* to not just engaging the theoretical terms we are studying but remaining attentive to the potential of tragedy that remains embedded in humor.

*Details for close reading ...*

Rewatch the video clips below, though only until the minutes stated, please. Then, as you write your close reading, consider the perspectives provided by Henri Bergson on laughter, Sigmund Freud on comic process, and Walter Kerr on tragedy and comedy, as a lens through which to re-think the comic performances. You might want to select one video to closely examine and then treat the close reading as a dissection of the caustic social commentary. There is a science to humor – can you detect it?

Questions you might consider:

- What makes these jokes funny?
- Is it the rigidity?
- Element of surprise?
- Element of repetition?
- Breaking grammatical expressions by inventing a new expression?
- The intellectual work?
- The performer? Body language? Tone? Rhythm?
- Relationship between comedian and audience?

George Carlin on “About Rape” (December 26, 2008) - watch until 2:08  
<https://youtu.be/fwMukKqx-Os>

Sarah Silverman on “Rape Jokes” (July 6, 2012) - watch until 2:04  
<https://youtu.be/P5IoKVHNXmI>

David Cross on “Date Rape Tips” (September 17, 2010)  
<https://youtu.be/Sh4I1Yqq7EM?list=RDSH4I1Yqq7EM>

Ever Mainard on “Here’s Your Rape” (January 31, 2012) - watch until 3:35  
<https://youtu.be/29ArdxWYBGQ>

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