

Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse, and Officer Pupp

Varieties of Humor

Professor Lavender
AMS 243
Fall 2009

How to be Funny

- According to Rowan Atkinson, a person may be funny in one of three ways:

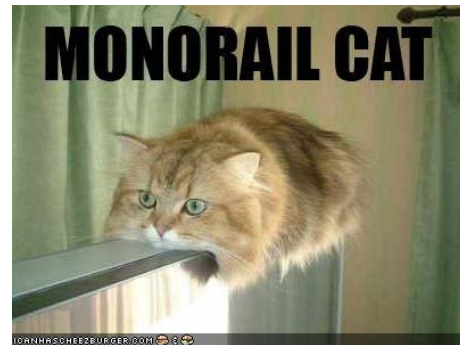


(Note: LOLcats will stand in for persons in these examples)

1) By behaving in an unusual way



2) By being in an unusual place



3) By being the wrong size



And I will add a fourth one:
4) by being a LOLcat

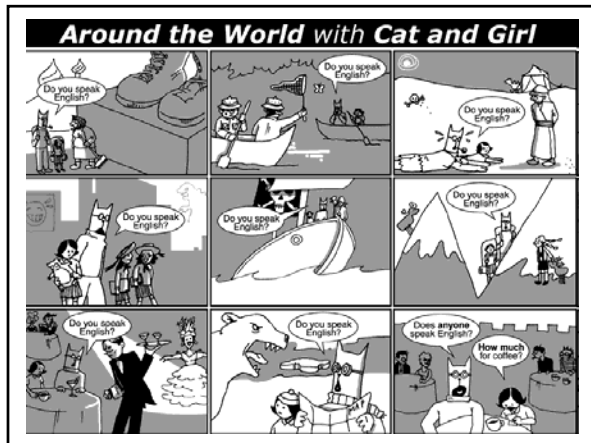


Bwahaha

- While the simplicity of this model is attractive...
- There actually is scholarship about the varieties of humor we must consider – (the “cake recipes”)
- Ernest Penney Earnest (I’m not making this up) identifies 13 kinds in his *Foreword to Literature* (1945)
- We will look at 10.

1) Boorish Humor

- Laughing at anything unfamiliar or exotic
- “The Ugly American” stereotype of a tourist abroad
 - Laughing “at the manners and dress of other nations, at the social usage of other groups and at the religion or beliefs of anyone who differs with him” (201)
- Penney calls this the lowest form of humor
 - “Some writers have even had the bad taste to laugh at college students.” (202!)



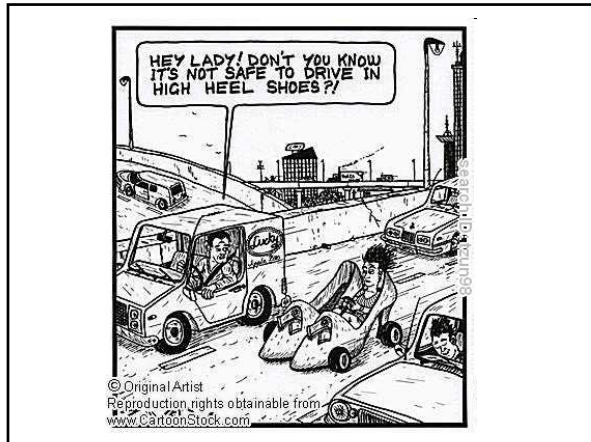
2) The wise-crack

- Use of a catch-phrase, often without meaning
 - Penney gives examples like “applesauce!” or “so what?” and *double entendres*
- Also “the snappy comeback”
 - Whistler and Wilde:
 - Wilde: “I wish I had said that.”
 - Whistler: “Don’t worry, Oscar, you will.”

3) The pun (and other wordplay)

- Playing with language to create a supposedly humorous effect... but “Puns aren’t very punny” (W. Bell, 2009)



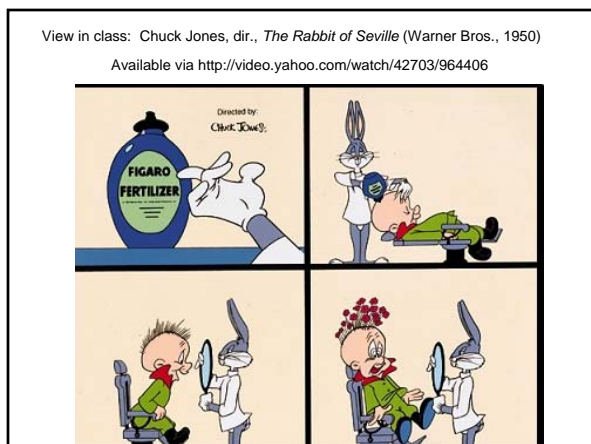


9.1) Riddles as Wordplay

- Riddles often rely on plays of language:
- Q. A girl is locked in a room that is empty except for a piano, a wooden table, a saw, and a baseball bat. The door is locked and there are no windows, no keys, and no other openings. How does she get out?
 - A. She broke out with the chicken pox.
 - A. She used the saw to cut the table in half. Since two halves make a whole, she crawled out through the hole.
 - A. She played the piano until she found the right key. Then she unlocked the door and let herself out.
 - A. She ran around the room until she wore herself out.
 - A. She swung the baseball bat three times. It was three strikes, and she was out.

4) The Mock Heroic

- Making something small seem gigantic – like Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” about the grandiose outcomes of a young man stealing a lock of a girl’s hair.

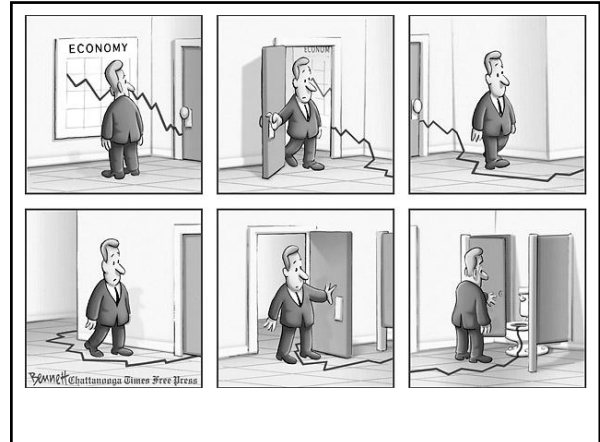


5) Satire

- humorous literary works, artistic pieces, performances, or informal speech in which such human frailties as greed, self-indulgence, stupidity, and various kinds of abuses are held up to ridicule and contempt for the purpose of inspiring reform.
 - Ex: The Daily Show

5) Satire, cont.

- Perhaps most famous political satire: Jonathan Swift, in 1729's "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick."
 - suggested that at the age of one year, poor Irish children should be sold as food to be eaten by landlords and other members of the upper class.
 - Irish mothers should be encouraged to let their children
 - "suck plentifully in the last Month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table. A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Pepper and Salt, will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter."



5.1) Gallows Humor

- a type of humor that arises from stressful, traumatic, or life-threatening situations; often in circumstances such that death is perceived as impending and unavoidable. It is similar to black comedy but differs in that it is made by the person affected.
 - Ex: From William Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene 1:
 - Mercutio is stabbed in a swordfight by Tybalt, Juliet's cousin:
 - Romeo: "Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much."
 - Mercutio: "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man."



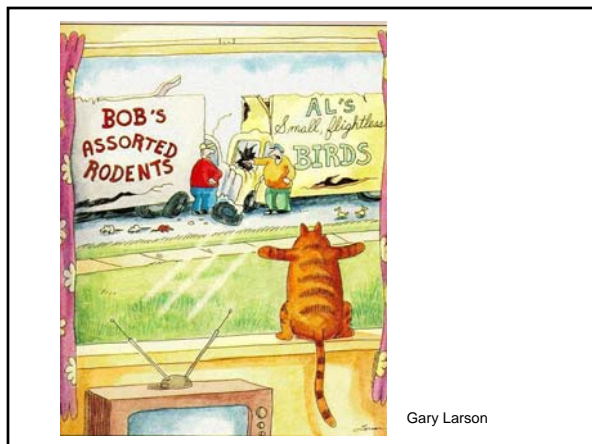


6) Irony

- Irony is an implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant.
- "...the surface meaning and the underlying meaning of what is said are not the same."
– Henry Watson Fowler, *The King's English*

6) Irony, cont.

- Irony is a form of "lying" that gives itself away through elements of playfulness.
- And the outcome is a "twist" on what might be expected:
 - Ex: Two friends, one a Catholic and one a Protestant, try to convert each other. They present such convincing arguments that the Protestant becomes a Catholic and the Catholic becomes a Protestant.



6.1) Linguistic or Verbal Irony

- when an author says one thing and means something else.
 - Ex: "as pleasant and relaxed as a coiled rattlesnake" (Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*)

6.2) Situational Irony

- a discrepancy between the expected result and actual results.
 - Ex: Lily Tomlin on buying a waste basket:
The clerk puts it into a paper sack so she can take it home, and the first thing Tomlin does when she gets home is to put the paper sack into the waste basket.
 - Ex: General John Sedgwick at the Battle of Spotsylvania: "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist..."



No Smoking Sign, Baker Street Tube Station, London

6.3) Dramatic Irony

- when an audience perceives something that a character in the literature does not know.
 - Ex: *The Wizard of Oz*
 - Ex: In Shaw's *Major Barbara*: Unterschaf asks Bilton, the foreman, if anything is wrong, and Bilton responds that a "gentleman walked into the shed and lit a cigarette, sir; that's all." The stage directions are that Bilton is to say this "with ironic calm." The irony is obvious only when the audience learns that the shed is filled with high explosives.

7) Kindly humor

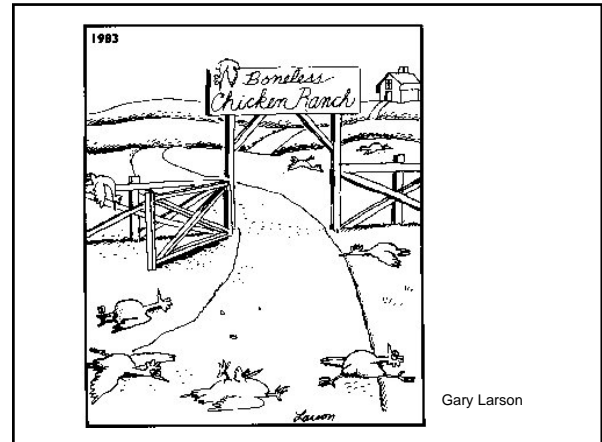
- Penney: "Satire touched with pity"
- Most of Twain, and Will Rogers
 - Even the "evil" are only misunderstood or traumatized persons

8) Laughing at Oneself

- Will Rogers and Woody Allen

9) The Absurd/Surreal

- Humor derived from surprising juxtapositions or nonsensical connections



Newport City Police officer Jennifer Harlow says in an affidavit that she went to the Rendezvous Bar on January 21 to investigate a report of women fighting. One of the women, officer Harlow said, had called the other a "crack whore." The woman denied the insult saying she was a "heroin whore."

10) The Non-Sequitur

- The humor of Robert Benchley

In an article on How Authors Create, in which the writing methods of various masters of English prose like Conrad, Shaw, and Barrie are explained (with photographs of them in knickerbockers plugging dogs and pushing against sun-dials), I discover that I have been doing the whole thing wrong all these years. The interviewer in this case hasn't got around to asking me yet—doubtless because I have been up in my room with the door shut and not answering the bell—but I am going to take a chance anyway and tell him how I do my creative work and just how much comes from inspiration and how much from hashish and other perfumes. I may even loosen up and tell him what my favorite hot weather dishes are.

Or Ring Lardner, more succinctly

- Ring Lardner's novel *The Young Immigrants* (1920):

Are you lost daddy I asked tenderly.

Shut up he explained.