In this issue of Classroom Notes Plus, you’ll find a series of steps for studying parody, an in-depth look at a tool for cultivating active readers, and a lesson on analyzing short videos that could be used as a stand-alone or in conjunction with a literature or media studies unit.

Though their focus varies, all three lessons carry a common emphasis on examining and responding to texts—actively, thoughtfully, and critically. Whether students are examining literary texts, as in the first two lessons, or visual texts, as in the third, the outlined strategies will aid them in developing and deepening habits of close analysis, active response, and meaningful interpretation.

Download the handout for this issue from the April 2010 Classroom Notes Plus web page at http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp.

Parody: An Introduction through Poetry
by Bruce Goebel

We live in an age of parody. From Saturday Night Live impersonations of political figures to The Simpsons remakes of The Odyssey and Hamlet, from Weird Al’s comic songs to parodies made through sampling and mashing, we are surrounded by the repeating, remixing, and making fun of other texts.

Ours is a time that thrives on the ironic humor that comes from such juxtaposition of disparate texts. These are guilty pleasures, especially in the classroom, because we are a little suspect of texts that violate the requirement of “originality” and because they often make fun of texts we love. But parody has much to offer in terms of the skills we associate with English language arts instruction. It requires careful attention to form, language, and style and insists that the readers and writers of parody recognize the constructed nature of all literary and visual texts.

Definition

Parody is a term about which there is much disagreement among critics and theorists. Etymologically, the idea emerged from the Greek parodia, which can be broken down into para, meaning beside or parallel to, and oide, meaning song. In this sense, parody is a text that parallels or imitates another. The most common use of the term parody, as it generally applies to literature (and film) is that of a work that imitates one or more earlier texts for comic effect, usually at the expense of the earlier text(s).

But any attempt to define parody in more specific terms becomes quite complicated as it struggles to encompass a number of variables. For example, a parody may be a response to one specific text, a whole genre or subgenre, or a particular author or person’s style. While parody always relies in part upon repetition of some aspect of an original text(s), this repetition varies in three fundamental ways:

A parody may imitate the form, style, and/or the content.
A parody may be a short quotation, a condensation, or full adaptation of the original.
A parody may either ridicule or revitalize the form, style, and/or content of the original.

Interpreting Intertextuality: Analyzing Video Messages
by Luke Rodesiler

Students interpret and analyze short video clips through structured discussion and writing, developing critical interpretation strategies they can use in the future.

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In addition, there are a variety of humor strategies that are typical of parody:

- **Incongruity**—juxtaposing two things (texts, characters, objects, language styles) that don’t belong together, resulting in surprise
- **Reversal**—inverting one or more aspects of the original text, making a good character evil, a serious topic trivial, a female character male
- **Misdirection**—setting up reader expectations for one text or type of text and then undercutting those expectations
- **Puns and Wordplay**—using puns and other types of word play to alter the meaning of the original
- **Exaggeration**—distorting one or more aspects of form, style, or content
- **Non Sequitur**—including characters, objects, and ideas that are unrelated to the original text
- **Gross-Out and Slapstick**—using description of disgusting images or embarrassing actions

Combine all of this and we have enough permutations to make any inclusive definition nearly impossible.

**Goals**

Regardless of problems in definition, in order for students to become adept readers and writers of parody, they will need to be able to

- Recognize a text/author/genre’s distinctive form and style.
- Summarize a text and identify important and/or repeating ideas, images, and symbols.
- Recognize and apply incongruity, reversal, misdirection, punning and word play, exaggeration, non sequitur, and gross-out and slapstick as sources of humor.
- Analyze the parodic intentions of the second author.
- Imitate in writing the form, style, or content of a text, genre, or author.

Notice that many of these encompass core reading and writing skills that English teachers generally hope to pass on to their students. While the humor strategies are, perhaps, the least central, they offer a rare opportunity for the kinds of divergent, creative thinking for which we praise most professional writers. Taken as a whole, there is nothing easy or inappropriate or frivolous about these skills, and a teacher interested in making parody a subject of study shouldn’t feel guilty or hesitant about such a project.

**Step 1: Definitions and Terms**

The very complexity of the definition can serve as a center for teaching about parody, as we allow students to explore a variety of texts to expand their understanding of parody as a literary form and provide opportunities for creative writing. Students might begin with the following questions:

- What is parody?
- What differences do you see between various parodies?
- Brainstorm a list of parodies with which you are familiar. What seems to be the purpose of these parodies? What makes them funny?

When students have a tentative definition, provide them with the list of typical humor strategies: incongruity, reversal, misdirection, puns and word play, exaggeration, non sequitur, and gross-out and slapstick. Have them think back to the parodies they brainstormed earlier and ask them the following:

- What are some of the funniest parts of the parody?
- Do those funny moments apply any of the humor strategies on the list?
- If so, which ones?
- Lastly, have them consider these questions:
  - Are there such things as unintentional parodies?
  - Under what circumstances do you see such unintended parodies emerge?
Step 2: Testing a Definition

Let’s begin a study of parody by putting some aspects of our definitions to the test. We’ll start with a simple definition: a parody is a literary work that imitates another for comic effect at the expense of the first author, and explore a quick example that might fit. Let’s begin with the popular William Carlos Williams poem “This Is Just to Say,” found online on the American Academy of Poets web site at http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15535

After the students have read the poem a couple of times, ask them to respond to the following:

Describe the form, style and language of the poem.

Observant students might point out:

how closely the language of the poem matches the way a person might speak.

how simple the words are—26 out of 33 words are one syllable, and all the words are common.

how the poem is divided into three stanzas.

how the title and first two stanzas form one sentence, while the final stanza forms a second sentence.

In terms of content, students might observe:

how closely this poem resembles a note someone might leave for someone else (which W.C.W. claims it was).

how it begins with a description of something the persona did wrong.

how it ends with a request for forgiveness and an excuse for the behavior.

By our simple definition, then, students should expect a parody of this poem to do some combination of the following: imitate the form, style, and/or the content, and ridicule the original (and, by extension, the poet). Ask students to look at a parody of “This Is Just to Say” that was included in a Guy Noir episode on Prairie Home Companion featuring former poet laureate, Billy Collins (yes, poet laureates write parodies too). It’s available online at http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/20021130/noir.shtml

To find the poem parody quickly in the transcript, count down to the 7th time Billy Collins speaks.)

The students’ first task is to answer the simple question, “What repeats and what is different?”

In this case, repetitions might include the title, the phrases “Which you” and “Forgive Me,” the simple diction, and the content movement from behavior to apology to excuse.

There are only two essential differences:

The second text only has two stanzas.

The second text focuses on different content.

With this in mind, students should consider the following questions. (My italic notes after the questions suggest potential responses or thoughts that can be shared with students in discussion or after they’ve had a chance to speculate on their own.)

At what point does this second text become a parody? (After the title? The first line? The last line?)

Since the title is a word-for-word repetition, there is no parodic effect yet, no difference against which to measure the two texts. With the first line, however, a parodic effect is generated.

Does it matter that the second text only has two stanzas? Does that diminish the effect of the parody? How much repetition is necessary to create the desired effect?

The altering of the form from three stanzas to two does not seem to have much influence on the parodic effect. While some repetition is crucial, parodies frequently condense or shorten the form and/or the content.

What would happen to the parody if we replaced the title with “I Regret to Inform You”? In this case, the title seems crucial to the parody. Replacing it with the more formal title strips much of the humor from the parody.

What is the source of humor in the parody?

As the previous question about the title suggests, the humor of this piece relies on the incongruity between the casual tone and content of the original poem and the more serious nature of the content of the parody. There is nothing trivial about informing someone that a pet has died.

What are the parodic intentions of the second author(s) and how does the parody change the way we look at the original?

One can certainly see an element of ridicule in the parody, a critique that asks us to recognize the lack of seriousness and depth in the original. On the other hand, one might see the parody as merely a playful reworking just for fun.

What humor strategies are applied in this parody?

The first strategy is that of misdirection. The parody’s use of the original title sets up our expectations, if not for a rereading of the original, then of something similarly light in topic and tone. The parody immediately undercut this expectation by stating bluntly, “I have buried your cat.” The second strategy is that of the gross-out with the use of “stiff” and “smell funky.”

At this point, students are asked to return to the original definition: a literary work that imitates another for comic effect at the expense of the first author. Pose this question:

In what ways might even this fairly straightforward parody force a revision of that definition?

If nothing else, the verb “imitates” probably needs some qualification to something like “at least partially imitates.” Students might also argue that a parody does not really need to critique the original, but just use it as a springboard toward humor.

Of course students should be given their own shot at this poem, with the following assignment:

Create a parody of “This Is Just to Say.” Be ready to explain the strategies you used and why you think it qualifies as parody.
Step 3: Parodic Allusions

From here, a teacher could provide a series of parodies of poetry that further complicate our definition. Since our recognition of parody requires a knowledge of the original text, let’s use one of Hamlet’s soliloquies as our original and explore a number of parodic responses to it.

To be, or not to be—that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles . . .

The simplest kind of parody of this soliloquy would be a short quote. So proceed by asking students to imagine a story in which one character is arguing the benefits of a vegan lifestyle, to which another character says, “To beef, or not to beef—that is the question.” Ask the students:

In what way does this statement function like a parody?
Anyone unfamiliar with Hamlet can only take this statement at face value, a mildly witty acknowledgement of a dilemma. On the other hand, anyone familiar with Hamlet will recognize this as a parodic quotation, a bit of word play that indicates a flippancy about this nutritional/moral choice through imitation of Hamlet’s indecisiveness.

What aspects or elements of parody does this statement employ?
This parody relies almost entirely on style—the repetition of the same syntactical pattern of one line. Its only content concern is that of a general indecisiveness. In terms of humor strategies, it utilizes a simple sound-alike pun. And, when considering the question of attitude—ridicule or appreciation—in the parody’s tone toward the original, we might err on the side of appreciation, a playful use of the original for a new purpose.

Such an example suggests extreme brevity is not a barrier to parody, and that any definition would need to acknowledge such an allusion or quotation as being at one end of a continuum. At this point, students can be asked to:

- Brainstorm any parody examples they have already heard regarding this “to be or not to be” phrase.
- Create a few similar parodic quotations of “to be or not to be” and contexts in which they might be funny.

Step 4: Condensed Parody

Moving along that quotation-condensation-adaptation continuum, we might look at slightly compressed version of the soliloquy.

Green Eggs and Hamlet
I ask to be or not to be.
That is the question I ask of me.
This sullied life, it makes me shudder.
My uncle’s boffing dear sweet mother . . .

[Complete text at http://www.netfunny.com/rhf/jokes/97/May/geandh.html]

After a couple of readings the students should ponder the following:

How does “Green Eggs and Hamlet” work as a parody?
What strategies does it employ?
In this instance, “Green Eggs and Hamlet” directly ridicules Hamlet’s content. In fact, while the first line grounds the poem within the context of the soliloquy, the rest of the poem condenses thematic aspects of the entire play. While the parody repeats key phrases and some issues raised in the play, it differs significantly in most other ways. First, one of the easiest ways to disrupt content in a parodic manner is to translate the text into an incongruous form and style. The title immediately announces this mismatch (with no misdirection), and we quickly see what happens to the soliloquy when done in the sing-song rhythm of Dr. Seuss. The playfulness of the rhyme, the repetition, and rhythm work against the seriousness of the question of suicide, a parody that exaggerates lists of ways Hamlet might kill himself. As a result, we are asked to reconsider Hamlet in the original, to perceive him, through ridicule, as a rather goofy, creatively morbid, and lazy adolescent boy. And, as we consider our extended definition of parody, “Green Eggs and Hamlet” suggests that room needs to be made for the ways authors condense original material.

If the students have a good ear for meter, or if you want to digress a bit and explain the concepts of trochaic and iambic pentameter that Seuss uses in Green Eggs and Ham, you can give them the following extra challenge:

- Summarize another play, novel, or movie using this Dr. Seuss style and form.

Step 5: Parody Adaptation

As we move down the continuum from simple quote to a full adaptation, “Hamlet’s Cat’s Soliloquy,” by Henry Beard (available widely on the Internet), will serve as a good example:

To go outside, and there perchance to stay
Or to remain within: that is the question:
Whether ’tis better for a cat to suffer
The slings and arrows of inclement weather . . .

Here, too, after a couple of readings, and with the original soliloquy at hand for easy comparison, students should explore:

How does “Hamlet’s Cat’s Soliloquy” work as a parody?
What strategies does it employ?
If the students have a good ear for meter, or if you want to digress a bit and explain the concepts of trochaic and iambic pentameter that Seuss uses in Green Eggs and Ham, you can give them the following extra challenge:

- Summarize another play, novel, or movie using this Dr. Seuss style and form.

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- Summarize another play, novel, or movie using this Dr. Seuss style and form.
Let’s return at this point to our definition and ask students: In what ways does “Hamlet’s Cat’s Soliloquy” suggest a revision or expansion of our definition of parody?

This parody does not really ask us to reconsider the meaning of the original, but rather to appreciate the creative reapplication of its form and style. As a result, our definition now must incorporate a careful and complete adaptation with a reverent attitude toward the original.

Here, too, if your students are up to the challenge of iambic pentameter (with a bit of variation), have them:

Brainstorm daily dilemmas—to pack a lunch or buy at school, to study or go to a movie, to wear that dress or the grungy jeans—and choose one that seems to offer the most examples to explore.

Make a list of key words and phrases that might be repeated in the parody for effect.

Write a full adaptation of Hamlet’s soliloquy using that dilemma.

**Step 6: The Complexity of Parody**

One last example will serve to illustrate the variety of uses to which parody is put and some of the permutations it might take in poetry.

In Chapter 21 of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain includes a parody of the soliloquy as written by the King and Duke, a couple of con artists taking advantage of rural Midwesterners in the 1830’s:

To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
But that the fear of something after death . . .

(http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/twa2Huc.html)

Upon one or two readings, students are likely to be confused by this parody. Either before or right after their first reading, they should be cautioned that it doesn’t really make sense. With that in mind, they can then respond one more time to a discussion or writing prompt:

How does this work as a parody? What strategies does it employ?

Only partially attentive to form, style, and content, this poem offers language and rhythms that sound Shakespearean, yet are nothing but a nonsense compilation of bits of Hamlet and of MacBeth, strewn together in such a way as to fool the uneducated. In this sense, the humor of the piece relies on incongruity and non sequitur to surprise us. Given its context within the novel, the intentions of the parody are open to a variety of interpretations. It illustrates first the King and Duke’s limited knowledge of Shakespeare. They are able to recall bits of the original, but clearly never understood it given the incomprehensible mishmash they create.

We might also read this as a measure of the King and Duke’s low opinion of the general population who they believe will be fooled by this recreation. Or is that Twain’s low opinion of middle-class America? Is there a bit of ridicule, too, of Shakespeare himself, who, unlike Twain, did not write in the vernacular of the people and thus distanced himself from them? Or does Twain paradoxically intend the Duke and King to represent learned Americans, teachers and professors, who foolishly attempt to bring Shakespeare to a hopelessly ignorant public? Or all of the above?

This complexity of meanings suggests just how powerful and effective parody can be in the hands of a gifted writer.

Given this example, how might our definition of parody now evolve?

That parody can be quite complex in intention and can ridicule or critique something or someone largely unrelated to the original text.

**Conclusion**

As you can see by now, the possibilities and permutations of parody exceed our ability to easily define it.

For our purposes, just recognizing the various approaches that authors take toward this peculiar art will need to suffice. If you are interested in exploring the writing of poetic parodies with your students, there is certainly no end to the examples. Just do a web search for your favorite famous poem along with the term parody and you’re likely to get a few hits. Or check out a few of the books listed below.

**Suggested Titles for Further Teacher Exploration of Poetry Parody**


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**April Is National Poetry Month!**

As part of your celebration of poetry, enjoy these features from the Academy of American Poets web site:

- A Poem a Day: www.poets.org/poemADay.php
- Poem on the Range: www.poets.org/ontherange
- Notebooks: www.poets.org/notebooks
- National Poetry Month (main page): www.poets.org/npm

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