Bruce Goebel

What’s So Funny about Social Justice?

Some years back, after my class had just finished Richard Wright’s Black Boy, a student said to me, “The only appropriate response to all the readings you’ve given us is suicide.” While I knew he was joking, I was still taken aback. We had read wonderful, powerful books—Beloved, Fools Crow, The Kite Runner—and it saddened me that ultimately, these books might simply leave students depressed rather than moved. In his introduction to Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor, poet and novelist Paul Beatty relates a similar experience he had as a student:

For a black child like myself who was impoverished every other week while waiting for mother’s bimonthly paydays, giving me a copy of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings was the educational equivalent of giving the prairie Indians blankets laced with smallpox or putting saltpeter in a sailor’s soup. I already knew why the caged bird sings, but after three pages of that book I now know why they put a mirror in the parakeet’s cage, so he can wallow in his own misery. After this traumatic experience I retreated to my room to self-medicate with Clavell, Irving Wambaugh, the Green Lantern, Archie and Jughead; it would be ten years before I would touch another book written by an African American. (7)

So, what if the literacy and social justice work we are trying to do via literature is being foiled by its often tragic seriousness? What if the emotion work students are being asked to do when engaging with such literature is debilitating for some of them? One might argue that many students’ reluctance to read and their lack of success at reading may often be rooted in the bleak literary landscapes we ask them to visit.

One possible response to this problem is a turn toward humor. According to Claudia Corbett, student interest in particular reading material accounts “for 30 times the variance in reading success,” and while tragic literature may be off-putting, “humor provokes interest” (16). Which isn’t to say we stop teaching more somber literature, but perhaps we might change things up with a little social justice humor and provide some comic relief along the way.

Whether we are looking at classical Greek satire, Jonathan Swift, or the more contemporary works of authors from Mark Twain to Langston Hughes, humorous texts do serious work. If our goals include helping students recognize, respond to, and redress even subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity, as Paul Gorski and Katy Swalwell suggest (37), social justice humor is an extremely useful tool, since such humor doesn’t merely engage in feel-good multiculturalism but rather explicitly identifies and challenges bias and corresponding inequities. Humor has always been at the forefront of progressive change, and is uniquely suited to influence its audience. As Ojibway stand-up comedian Don Kelly notes, “Humour is a fantastic communication device. If you yell at people, or browbeat them into submission, they’ll tune out and walk away. But if you can keep them laughing, they’ll keep listening. People who would
never walk into a lecture on Native history will walk into a comedy club” (59). For an example of this choice in the classroom, I might—on the one hand—say to my students, “Today we’re going to look at how Western charities use oral and visual rhetoric that intentionally stereotype the people of Africa as always impoverished and always in need of Western help.” A few of my students may show some interest. Most will likely yawn at the prospect of yet another one of their teacher’s PC journeys. But, instead, I start with the spoof music video “Af-
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What's So Funny about Social Justice?

with some of the primary humor strategies that authors use—our third challenge. Perhaps more so than any other mode of writing, humor is formulaic. Authors use the same strategies repeatedly, even within the same text, and readers never seem to tire of them. It would be helpful in any critical exploration of humor if students were familiar with at least the sample of terms included in the sidebar.

Sample Unit

Short pieces of social justice humor can be used as one-off breaks in between more somber texts to lighten the emotional burden on students, they can be paired with tragic texts, and they can be shaped into a short unit that works collectively toward a progressive goal. For example, a broad learning target for a short humor unit might be to help students understand the problem in the United States of bias toward and stereotyping of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent. It might be useful here to introduce to students the notion of “deficit theory,” the ways in which unequal treatment of a group is justified by stereotypical portrayals of supposed intellectual or ethical deficiencies (Gorski 518). As students explore the various humor pieces, they can watch for the ways in which the authors reject these deficit theories and both implicitly and explicitly argue for more equitable treatment.

Typically, it’s best to start with the most transparent texts, those that are least susceptible to misreading, and then work toward more ambiguous and complicated pieces of humor, with the idea that the earlier pieces will aid students in a more competent reading of the later ones. So, we’ll start with the short chapter “With a Little Help from My Friends” from Firoozeh Dumas’s delightful, funny memoir Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America. This piece focuses on her childhood experiences with neighbors and elementary school classmates repeatedly making false assumptions about Iranians. For example, one boy keeps asking whether she owned a camel back in Iran. Since he refuses to take no for an answer or accept that they had a Chevy, she tells him “yes, we had camels, a one-hump and a two-hump. The one-hump belonged to my parents and the two-hump was our family station wagon” (33–34). Dumas alternates throughout the piece between explaining certain aspects of Iranian culture and using humor to defuse misconceptions. Ultimately the piece is a celebration of kindness and an expression of sadness that politics has altered Americans’ ability to see Iranian immigrants for who they are. Students might consider such questions as: What misconceptions do the Americans depicted in the story have about Iranians? What might be the origins of these misconceptions? How does Dumas use dramatic irony and other humor strategies to address these misconceptions? How might the effect of some of those strategies differ from when she used them as a child and when she uses them as an author of this piece? What does she want her readers to understand about her family and Muslim immigrants?

From there we move on to Maz Jobrani’s TED talk, “Did You Hear the One about the Iranian-American?” As you might know, the TED Talks come with downloadable scripts, so this can be both a viewing and reading activity. In this eight-minute stand-up comedy routine, Jobrani humorously explores the problematic nature of being an American of Iranian descent: “it causes a lot of inner conflict, you know, like part of me likes me, part of me hates me. Part of me thinks I should have a nuclear program, the other part thinks I can’t be trusted with one.” He offers a number of illustrations about how
not all Middle Easterners are the same, for example, how he as an Iranian American is treated differently in Kuwait than he is in Dubai. And he illustrates the bias that he faces as an actor:

But a lot of times in Hollywood, when casting directors find out you’re of Middle Eastern descent, they go, “Oh, you’re Iranian. Great. Can you say ‘I will kill you in the name of Allah?’” “I could say that, but what if I were to say, ‘Hello. I’m your doctor?’” They go, “Great. And then you hijack the hospital.” Like I think you’re missing the point here.

Overall, this routine reaffirms much the same argument as the Dumas piece, but using a decidedly different set of humor strategies (including the stand-up technique of stating a premise and then acting out a scene—“they go”—that illustrates that premise). Students can examine each segment of the routine and identify Jobrani’s implied argument: What stereotype or misunderstanding is he trying to address? How does he try to complicate and expand notions of identity? What kinds of humor strategies does he use to do this? How effective do you think those strategies are?

We can further broaden the way in which students are thinking about Muslim Americans by including Masoon Zayid’s TED Talk, “I Got 99 Problems and Palsy Is Just One.” Zayid is a Palestinian American female stand-up comedian who has cerebral palsy. Her humorous, self-deprecating talk explores both her ethnicity and her disability in a way that forces viewers to acknowledge the complexity of identity and the absurdities of bias, such as when she was turned down for a part as a character with CP because the director didn’t think she could “do the stunts,” to which she responded, “Excuse me, if I can’t do the stunts, neither can the character.” There’s an opportunity here to talk with students about how, for some people, certain limited aspects of their identities are all anyone else sees when, in fact, everyone is comprised of a complex intersection of identity markers—with gender, religion, ethnicity, and disability all being in play in this video clip. How does Zayid construct her identity through this routine; in other words, what different aspects of her identity does she address? Which aspects seem most important to her? She knows that most people are uncomfortable with disabilities; how does she use self-deprecating humor to get them to accept her as more fully human? How does this piece complicate our understanding of Americans of Middle Eastern descent?

The next two sets of humorous texts address a couple of specific “complaints” about Muslims: that they are inherently angry people and that they don’t denounce terrorism. The first requires a bit of set-up. On the cover of its September 17, 2012, magazine, Newsweek intentionally chose a provocative and prejudiced image that perpetuated the idea that all Muslims are characterized by anger. The magazine invited the usual vitriolic social media comments by asking for comments with the hashtag #MuslimRage. What they received in response from many in the Muslim community was humor, not anger. To introduce the controversy, show students the article “Newsweek’s ‘Muslim Rage’ Cover Draws Angry Protest” from Huffington Post (Mirkinson). This article offers a
straightforward critique of *Newsweek*'s choice to run this cover and the ethical consequences surrounding that choice. Follow that up with NPR’s “'Muslim Rage' Explodes on Twitter, But in a Really Funny Way (Yes, Really)” (Chappell). This piece includes some of the humorous responses to #MuslimRage, including the following:

- I’m having such a good hair day. No one even knows. #MuslimRage—Hend (retweeted 2,900 times)
- Lost your kid Jihad at the airport. Can’t yell for him. #MuslimRage—Leila (retweeted 1,000 times)
- When you realize that if you have a 5 o’clock shadow it can be deemed a security threat. #MuslimRage—Taufiq Rahim

Students can consider first the rhetorical choice that these responders made. How are the authors of these tweets reframing the argument? Where are they using ironic humor or reversals? What do they want us to understand about certain aspects of life as a Muslim? We could extend this with a look at “13 Powerful Images of Muslim Rage” (Read), which offers an ironic series of images of people in love, playing with their children, and building a snowman.

The second complaint, that Muslims don’t denounce terrorism sufficiently, might also need a little contextualizing. In fact, most Muslims, including the vast majority of Imams in the United States, denounce terrorism—but such denunciations seldom make the news since news organizations know that ratings are driven by violence and anger, not reason and logic. This complaint about the lack of denunciation, in and of itself, is an interesting rhetorical strategy meant to discredit if not dehumanize, and we can see it playing out in the way in which Black Lives Matter spokespeople are continually asked by conservative media why they don’t denounce Black on Black violence—as though Black communities weren’t working against such violence all the time. In response to this kind of complaint, Negin Farsad, a stand-up comedian and filmmaker (*The Muslims Are Coming*), created the website *The Daily Denouncer: Your Average Muslim Denouncing Terrorism Five Days a Week and Taking Weekends Off*, which features single-panel comics that work in a similar vein as the #MuslimRage responses. For example, characters in the panel say such things as the following:

- I denounce terrorism! Now can we talk about the culinary merits of Panda Express?
- I denounce terrorism! I also denounce people who never fill the paper tray.

Students might consider: What is the implied argument in these comics; what exactly does Farsad want readers to understand? Is her approach effective? How might such a response be applied to other contexts?

The final humor piece for students to examine is *The Qu’osby Show*, a parody of *The Cosby Show* created by Aasif Mandvi, best known as a correspondent on *The Daily Show*. This fake sitcom offers an exaggerated, ironic take on what Muslims would have to do to be at least partially accepted in America. It simultaneously reveals and critiques the assimilationist pressures that certain Americans feel. As with any ironic text, it would be best to clue students to the fact that Mandvi isn’t representing American Muslims as they are, but rather is creating a caricature based on the fear that anti-Muslim prejudice in American culture perpetuates. Students might consider: What aspects of Muslim culture (stereotypical or otherwise) does the video address? How are these perceived by mainstream culture? How are exaggerations and reversals used in the parents’ response to each of these? There are a couple of opportunities for extension here. First, students might consider Uzma Kolsy’s claim that “in its effort to address years of misunderstanding, the [Qu’osby] show risks further cementing the very stereotypes it’s ostensibly trying to deconstruct.” This returns us to the double-edged sword of humor’s polysemy and provides a chance for students to debate the progressive usefulness of humor that is inherently unstable in its effect. In addition, this fake sit-com is also a parody of the way in which *The Cosby Show* largely erased many cultural notions of Blackness as opposed to the way the more recent sit-com, *Black-ish*, addresses these cultural differences head on. A comparison of a *Cosby Show* episode and a *Black-ish* episode alongside the *Qu’osby Show* parody would allow students to explore the broader pressures to erase difference in the United States.
Conclusion

Given that our anthologies seldom include humorous literature, and the whole-class collections of books available to us rarely do either, except that hilarious Lord of the Flies, if humor is going to find a place in the classroom, individual teachers will need to seek out funny texts that are still doing important work. Whether in the form of novels and memoirs, such as Dumas’s Funny in Farsi and Paul Beatty’s brilliant, if too linguistically authentic, satirical coming-of-age novel, The White Boy Shuffle, or short stories such as Langston Hughes’s “Who’s Passing for Who” and Pat Griffith’s “Diamonds, Dykes, and Double Plays,” or poems such as Gary Soto’s “Mexicans Begin Jogging” and Denice Frohman’s “Dear Straight People,” or even selected episodes from Black-ish or The Simpsons, there is a wealth of good humor pieces that can motivate students as critical readers, listeners, and viewers who recognize and respond to inequity when they see it. Social justice can be a laughing matter.

Note

1. See the Rusty Radiator website for comparative examples of biased advertisements and parodic responses. Web search “White Savior Barbie” for a related spoof and “White Savior Industrial Complex” for information about why the approach of many Western charities toward Africa is problematic.

Works Cited


Bruce Goebel, a former secondary English teacher, now teaches in the Department of English at Western Washington University, where he offers courses on humor, American literature, young adult literature, and English teaching methods; he can be reached at Bruce.Goebel@wwu.edu. He has been an NCTE member since 1991 and is the author of two NCTE books: Humor Writing: Activities for the English Classroom and Reading Native American Literature: A Teacher’s Guide.

READWRITE THINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “Literary Parodies: Exploring a Writer’s Style through Imitation” students analyze the features of a poet’s work and then create poems based on the original model. Students analyze sample poems and their parodies, focusing on the language and style of the original writer. They then write their own parody of the poem. http://bit.ly/2cyglru