

INCLUDING LAUGHTER
The Use of Humor by Contemporary Women Poets

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Including Laughter: The Use of Humor by Contemporary Women Poets

I. Not To Be Taken Lightly

Margaret Atwood once said, “People think you can’t be a poet without being drunk. Women poets are expected to commit suicide. Someone once asked me *when*, not if, I would commit suicide” (qtd. in Petoskey *Absolute Write*). Instead, women poets have been using humor in their poems and living to tell about it. These women poets risk being offensive when they laugh at personal matters while exploring the nitty-gritty side of being a woman. They step over cultural and stereotypical boundaries by mixing humor with grim or taboo topics. Their work offers a new complexity by allowing humor to enter it.

Barbara Kruger, an artist and poet who uses language in her artwork says, “I think I developed language skills to deal with threat. It’s the girl thing to do—you know, instead of pulling out a gun” (Goodeve 96). Regina Barreca suggests in her introduction for *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor* that humor can be used as “a weapon against the absurdities of injustice” (2). Humor offers the poet an enlivening approach in responding to politics, culture, traditional roles, and values. It provides a woman poet the power to step out of the traditional dress that has been sewn for her.

While reading a variety of poems by women poets, I noticed that women are less obvious with their use of humor. Their poems tend not to contain a final punch line, but instead the humor is scattered throughout. Many times the humor is subtle, just enough to give the reader a break before diving into more intense territory. Linda Gregerson

criticizes the use of humor in one of Thomas Lux's poems, "What strikes me as problematic about these poems, however, is the extent to which they're content to be setups for their one best (and concluding) lines" (110). Yet in the majority of funny poems I read by women, rarely was humor present in the last line. These poems were not setups for jokes, but multilayered narrative and lyrical works; the humor was more likely to weave itself throughout the entire piece and infrequently concluded the poem. In their poems, humor is just as comfortable near the death of a favorite politician as it is in the accessories of a Barbie doll. The best humor builds itself on the particulars—not in acting out or setting up a joke—but in the belief that experience and intellect are funnier without props.

In Heather McHugh's poem "Mind," from *Hinge & Sign*, the humor does not jump out in a clown suit and spray the audience in the face with seltzer water. It is thoughtful and witty, "A man looks at his watch to see/if he's hungry. Yes. It's eight" (1-2). Later she continues, "At school/his days are numbered. He makes a felt/calendar" (13-15). McHugh plays with literal and figurative language; her humor is constructed from a word's many definitions and uses. She puts new energy into the cliché "his days are numbered" by associating it to an item mostly created *from* numbers: a calendar. Her poems are built on wordplay and paying careful attention to the details of language. She creates line breaks that reward the reader twice such as in the sentence, "A man looks at his watch to see." By putting a line break after the word "see," McHugh has caused the humor to work in two ways—not only is it funny that the man does not know he's hungry by his own physical urges and needs the aid of a clock, but the first line becomes a sort of

unexpected joke in language like a Wellerism or Tom Swifty in that the words “looks,” “watch” and “see” all have visual definitions.

Heather McHugh is not alone in the world of humor. With poets like Denise Duhamel, Nin Andrews, Lucille Clifton, and Dorothy Barresi, women poets can no longer fall into the stereotype of “suicidal poets” writing poetry for readers to slit their wrists to. There is a renaissance of smart and humorous women writing poetry that offers more complexity than melancholy, more wit than depression. Even when a poem dives into a painful topic, the humor allows both the reader and poet to have a multifaceted view. It can ease readers into difficult topics, though using humor in poetry isn’t as easy as it seems and comes with its own unique set of risks.

II. What Women Risk

In *They Used To Call Me Snow White. . .But I Drifted*, Regina Barreca believes, “All humor involves taking a risk, and as we all know from other lessons, without risk there is no possibility for improvement or success. Especially when initiated by a woman, humor *is* risky” (19). Humor collides with the good manners girls are taught to follow from childhood. Julie Kane suggests:

For a woman to be funny at all is to exhibit traits that her society considers ‘unfeminine.’ Cross-culturally, according to Barreca, there exists a very strong link between the sexually knowledgeable or promiscuous woman and the woman who is allowed to crack jokes. The ‘Bad Girl,’ as Barreca calls her, inhabits the margins of polite society, and thus is allowed to bend its rules. (1)

By using humor in their work, women poets work against the deeper psychology of our culture. If one recalls her own school days and who the class clown was at school, most likely this label was given to a male student. In class, girl students tend to be more well-behaved and a little less comical, but as any woman who has ever gone to a slumber party, a bachelorette party, or even just out for coffee with her girlfriends knows, women are just as witty, comical, and entertaining as men; they can mix good manners with raunchiness, and do. Women keep many sides to themselves: “Like the myth that women have no sense of humor, the idea that we can’t be sweet and wicked at the same time, just isn’t true. Good girls can and do laugh with their mouths open” (Barreca, *Snow White* 8). Yet while there have been many women writers throughout history who have used humor in their work, women are still underrepresented in this category.

III. Smiling In The Dark

Today, poets use humor to explore issues that are not considered funny or are even considered taboo in polite company. Dorothy Barresi is a poet who uses humor to move into darker issues that people may not want to read about. She invites the reader into a comfortable chair and opens a bottle of red wine to loosen her up before explaining that the world is on fire. Herbert Gardner says, “once you get people laughing, they’re listening, and you can tell them almost anything” (Robertson 137). Humor can be the glass of wine poured before the story of the shooting can be told. Humor acknowledges that hope exists as we discuss what matters deeply to us because if we can laugh at our demons, our fears, and our pains, they cannot so easily destroy us.

However, humor should not be mistaken for a lack of seriousness in writing as some of the most serious writing is intentionally humorous. Sherman Alexie emphasizes, “The most effective joke is something that’s funny about something that’s *not* funny, something that’s deadly serious” (Kachuba 45). Humor opens the door to subjects that may be too painful to read or write about out. By being able to find humor in the worst situations, humans are able to survive and move forward. In poetry, this may allow the poet to tackle subjects she finds too difficult to explore, while it allows the reader ways to approach topics that are painful, frightening, and/or upsetting.

Dorothy Barresi is a poet pouring the wine at the dinner party for the darker poem. In “Expect Mercy, Crave Relief” from *Rouge Pulp*, Barresi writes stanza after stanza chock-full with images of tragic events and creates the sense that life is built from bad news and chance. But it’s Barresi’s surprising delivery and engaging voice that allows us to digest the assassination of Bobby Kennedy where “chance was all over him,/not like death’s sticky pearls/to unquote Sylvia Plath” (6-7). Even while we’re in the middle of the bloody image she’s created, she’s moving us away with her wordplay and into her literary world by “unquoting” Sylvia Plath. This serves as a reminder to us that she is in control; though she doesn’t control the chaos in the world or the tragedies in history such as the shooting at Kent State and the Argentinean tour bus crashing down an overpass, by using the humor Barresi controls how she responds to it.

Barresi considers the woman in the famous photo after the Kent State shooting:

So she raises one arm
in wretched supplication,
though the white kerchief tied around her neck
looks—it seems wrong to say it—
jaunty. (30-34)

Barresi lets herself off the hook by writing “it seems wrong to say it,” but without that line, the timing would be off and we wouldn’t know what to make of the comment of the scarf being called “jaunty.” When tragedy happens, we know deep inside that we are not supposed to be thinking about someone’s fashion choice, but here Barresi does that. By writing “it seems wrong to say it,” Barresi acknowledges the darker part in each of us that has these trivial thoughts in serious moments. She has the courage to say what many of us won’t say, to be person smiling at the funeral because she’s noticed the widow’s skirt is tucked in her nylons. Our best selves would immediately want to help the widow, but our darker sides may laugh nervously on the inside. Barresi understands the strange humor of death by knowing that we will all be part of its joke one day and she is not afraid to confront it. In the anthology *How To Write Funny*, Esther M. Friesner states:

...humor gains depths when it’s about something more than just making the reader laugh. Food for thought—serious thought—goes down a lot more readily if it’s coated with a little laughter. Humor observes, analyzes and comments on the human condition, which can sometimes be a pretty scary thing to face head-on. Humor helps us cope with some of life’s harsher realities through laughter.

(83)

Barresi’s work deals with “life’s harsher realities” and it’s her humor that allows for the exploration of these tragic events.

Barresi’s humor moves into deeper fears and a very female world when she explores her own grimness:

I believe in bones.
I believe in Black Talon bullets, subways, the nine o’clock news
with details at eleven. The nagging qualm. The footfall’s
lingering grace.

You think I'm morbid. I am morbid,
 though also the loving mother of a son
 who bartered his cell-life way
 into this world unbidden. I was using birth control, for god's sake. (35-42)

By beginning the stanza with "I believe in bones," the speaker tells us how much she thinks about death; she's preoccupied with the hazards and accidents around us. By repeating the word *morbid* and using that word to describe herself, she tells us that she accepts her full personality; she is both the good girl ("loving mother") and the bad girl ("I am morbid") thinking the thoughts that women aren't expected to have. The humor comes from the unpredictability of this stanza. She begins by stating she believes in bones and ends with the unplanned conception of a child. We smile with her at how unpredictable the world is. Her voice at the end of the stanza is lighter and as if she's talking directly to us as a friend she adds, "for god's sake." The speaker shows us that chance can and does happen and she has connected us into the "joke" life has played on her.

Barresi's humor is not consistent throughout her poem, which is why it works. If we were handed the wittiest lines one after another, they would be lost. Her writing works because Barresi's humor incorporates breathing room. She may push us under again and again with the violence and tragedy in the world, but she allows us to surface and take a deep and satisfying breath. As she concludes the poem, we don't feel manipulated:

Imagine. The funniest, cleverest,
 most beautiful person ever
 Three years old today!)
 arrived like a common gate crasher.

Repeat after me:

What I called randomness

was really just reach.

What I thought was chance was change. (43-50)

We can laugh at the description of the son's conception because the event is not described as a miracle, but that her son "arrived like a common gate crasher." By the close of the poem, we feel as if we've come full circle from the beginning image of death to the ending image of a new life; she provides hope, humor, and insight. Barreca offers:

Women use comedy to narrate their experience and so diffuse the pain. How many times have you woken up your best friend by telephoning in the middle of the night to relate the most horrible story about being abandoned at the party, about being set up on the world's worst blind date, about being fired...Our disappointments can be transformed through our ability to tell the story to someone else. (*Snow White* 22)

Barresi's poem becomes the late night phone call and we are the friend on the other end of the line. While Barresi's poems are not laugh-until-your-socks-fall-off humor, they are satisfying and complex as they offer humor that twists its way through other emotions including pain and sadness. Barresi's humor allows us to explore darker issues with her, just as humor can allow us to explore other subjects such as ones that are considered taboo or off-limits.

IV. Name Your Taboo

Comedic writing is serious business. It's hard enough to tell a joke without adding line and stanza breaks, and perhaps this is why the prose poems lends itself nicely to humorous poems. This is the form used by Nin Andrews in *The Book of Orgasms*. Two ways to create humor in poems are through exaggeration and repetition. Andrews uses what Robin Hemley calls "three of the comic writer's invaluable tools," which are "exaggeration, repetition, and snowballing" (Kachuba 12).

If you say a word a hundred times, its meaning dissolves as the word becomes a sequence of sounds losing the definition it once had. This is the case with the word *orgasm* in Andrews' book. By page three, the word *orgasm* has been used so often (in the first poem, the word is used twenty-three times) it's no longer a word neglected in polite company, but something so comfortable, we try it on like a warm sweater: *orgasm*. Similar to Marvin Bell's dead man poems, which create an entrance for the poet to explore anything and everything, Andrews uses humor to work within a form, in this case the prose poem with the subject matter of the orgasm.

She allows the orgasm to stand for many things: freedom, identity, happiness. In her poems, orgasms become living things—one is even interviewed later in the collection—that create love and tension, desire and fear. In "The Anti-Orgasm," which at first seems to be about the fear of our own sexuality, "After all, we don't want to be caught with our orgasms" (2), Andrews' writing becomes multi-layered. She writes, "Better to hide and keep quiet. It's very/dangerous...The whole nation is/turning to stone" (3-6). Here the poem demonstrates that by not expressing our true feelings or desires, we've become a cold country; we've learned what not to say and when not to say it. Andrews escorts us into this political climate in a subtle way. She shows us an

America made of fear, “It’s important to be afraid in the land of the anti-orgasm” (1) and while we’re guffawing over the use of the word *orgasm* and its images, she has taken us to a more crucial subject—the view of an oppressive country where many are afraid to speak out and many of these people are women.

Andrews’ humor allows for examination of serious subjects. Had she written bluntly about what she suggests—that we are a nation afraid to speak out and we are out of touch with our own feelings—it would have been a highly different poem where the reader could easily say, “I think differently” and turn the page. But because the poem’s significance is its undercurrent and she keeps the focus on the humor and absurdity, we can receive the deeper meaning.

Like other women poets who use humor, Andrews’ humor comes in bits and pieces. In “The Ultimate Orgasm,” she writes, “For years, I have been growing orgasms in a Petri dish” (1). Imagine if science could do such a thing! And Andrews’ does imagine this. She continues exploring this surreal world where “orgasms come in many/styles” (9-10). Andrews brings us into an outlandish world because she entertains with her embellishments. She exaggerates then she pulls back. She returns us to the “real world” by suggesting that growing orgasms is:

a costly and
difficult task and would be impossible without the expert help
of renowned scholars whose lives have been devoted to the develop-
ment of the orgasm. (1-4)

Here, even in this imaginary science lab, there are still the concerns and constraints that face real scientists. The voice in the poem becomes serious and scientific; happiness comes second to money and science, even in her imagination. But

it's Andrews' ability to control the content that makes her writing successful; she juxtaposes silliness with reality, playfulness with seriousness, and disbelief with intellect.

Andrews' humor and repetition create familiarity with an infrequent subject in poetry. The orgasm becomes something that returns page after page, with each poem having a new outlook or undertaking. Once a word reserved for Dr. Ruth and cable TV shows, *orgasm* steps onto a new stage in Andrews' book. Here on the stage of the poem, *orgasm* becomes something we can laugh at, both in its own self-importance and the surprise of it. We have entered this taboo subject privately from the side door and once inside Andrews can have her way with us. She writes in "The Ultimate Orgasm," "we cannot contain our joy. We break open /the champagne and cheer wildly" (17-18) and throughout Andrews' poems, we do.

V. It's a Girl Thing

Many times I've tried to explain something I thought was funny to my husband only to have him miss the joke. Usually I just smile at his puzzlement and say a phrase I picked up in college, "Don't worry, it's a girl thing." Frequently I can relate the same story that was misunderstood by my husband to a girlfriend and find her smiling and nodding in agreement. While researching studies done by Carol Michell, a folklore researcher, Barreca discovered this:

There are some solid data to back up the theory that men and women laugh at different matters, at different times, and even that they laugh at different elements in one joke. . . . Mitchell came up with some fascinating conclusions, among them

the observation that women's humor centers on the female experience. (*Snow White* 63)

Lucille Clifton is a poet who celebrates a women's unique experience in the world and does so with humor. In "wishes for sons," Clifton writes about menstruation and situations men will never have to face. She begins, "i wish them cramps/i wish them a strange town /and the last tampon./i wish them no 7-11." Here Clifton dives into a situation that males will never have to endure (except through the complaints of their wife or girlfriend). It is an incident that most women can relate to. For women, reading these lines allow us to laugh at our experiences while returning us to the anxiety the situation created—not being able to find a place to purchase tampons during a period.

Clifton continues, "i wish them one week early/and wearing a white skirt./i wish them one week late." For the female reader, immediately we can appreciate what is being said here. Despite the naturalness and normalness of periods, they can be both an inconvenience (starting your period while wearing white) as well as a concern (if they arrive late there's the possibility of pregnancy). The cleverness of Clifton's lines is that unless a period comes on the day it is supposed to—a treat that rarely happens without birth control pills, even for a woman with the most regular schedule—this is something that women constantly keep in the back of their minds; the start or stop of the menstrual cycle can change a women's life in profound ways.

Ever since we started our periods as girls, we have been aware that unless we're pregnant, breastfeeding, or have been through menopause, we are somewhere in our menstrual cycle. This connection with other women is something women share, as well as the ordeals that sometimes accompany these traits of being a woman. Barreca

believes, “Where men hear something funny and want to ‘top it’ with one of their own stories, women hear a funny story and think, ‘Oh thank God, that happened to you, too! It means I’m not crazy!’ Women are more concerned with integrating a story into their own lives than to campaign to see whether they can come up with a better one” (Barreca, *Snow White* 118).

Clifton writes to the female experience. Still, by writing about such subjects, Clifton risks alienating male readers who do not have this experience. For some, reading about menstruation may be uncomfortable, but Clifton’s use of humor makes it entertaining. The reader is allowed to laugh at something that makes them feel uneasy and it becomes less of a threat. By using humor in her work, she invites all readers to participate in the experience. We can all laugh at the feeling of being in an awkward situation and the humanness of our own lives. She shows us the quirks of being a woman and shares some of the difficulties we may encounter.

What’s interesting is that Clifton isn’t willing just to conclude at menstruation, she moves forward into the life of a woman and into menopause. Clifton graphically states the details of this event women don’t usually bring up to men, “later i wish them hot flashes/and clots like you/wouldn’t believe” (8-10). Having recently seen the musical “Menopause,” I noticed that the easiest way to get a laugh in a theatre of women over forty was to mention hot flashes; women realize the humor of a body with its own climate zone. But Clifton doesn’t attempt the easy laugh because this poem is a wish “for sons.” The speaker wants the males in her life to better understand the sensations and conditions they are not accustomed to or perhaps, not even aware of. She wants them to see a different perspective and to find compassion. She concludes with:

let them think they have accepted
arrogance in the universe,
then bring them to gynecologists
not unlike themselves. (15-18)

As the ending alludes to the familiar joke about the insensitivity of a male gynecologist, the poem expresses the pressures and indignities women experience in their lives. The poem always carries the underlying hope that perhaps these sons, these boys, these young men will gain a greater compassion or empathy for women by having a better understanding of the female experience. Yet Clifton's poem is just as much for women, mothers, and the mothers of boys who "will see that the comedy in her daily life is part of a long-standing tradition and that she is in excellent company" (Barreca, *Snow White* 37).

Clifton not only uses humor to explore the female experience, but to celebrate a body that is built differently from the size zero world of American fashion. In "Homage to My Hips" from *Good Woman*, Clifton begins:

these hips are big hips.
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back. (1-7)

Clifton's lines are full of music and power. Her hips take on a life of their own, "they don't like to be held back" (7). She allows her hips to represent her spirit and power.

"When you can speak of something, laugh at something, you show control over it" (Barreca, *Snow White* 169), Clifton takes back control over society's idea that smaller sized hips are better. Barreca writes:

As Lisa Merrill, a professor of speech and communication arts at Hofstra University, has argued, 'A feminist comic sensibility would be one in which the

details of women's lives were presented in such a manner as to allow the female audience to mock our traditional roles. (*Snow White* 118)

There is a connection that takes place in this poem, an acknowledgment from the speaker that she doesn't fit in and she doesn't care. "Those who laugh at the joke feel part of club" (Barreca, *Snow White* 85); the reader can nod in agreement with Clifton as she relates to a common experience she's had. As women we know about the issues with weight and body acceptance, Clifton's poem with its gentle humor shows a not-so-perfect body as a perfect body. It praises what a body can do. It's both accepting and strong—the humor creates compassion and new strength. Women can feel good about themselves no matter their size.

But again, Clifton's humor and craft must be strong enough to for all readers, not just female. I doubt a male has looked in the mirror and thought, "Does my butt look big in these pants?" But for women, the experience moves across class and race lines. Clifton redefines beauty as power and her humor transforms it; although she does not write, "As a woman I have been made to feel inferior about my large hips and I don't think that is right," her humor allows that message to come across. Nancy A. Walker writes in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, "Instead of bowing to circumstances, the feminist humorist assumes that the circumstances are wrong and refuses to be bound by them" (143). Clifton continues exploring the power her hips have:

these hips have never been enslaved,
 they go where they want to go
 they do what they want to do.
 these hips are mighty hips.
 these hips are magic hips.
 i have known them

to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top. (8-15)

Here Clifton continues to base her humor on the shared experience with women, but by adding the word, “enslaved” to describe her hips, she also reminds us of the history of the African-American woman and how far she has come. She uses repetition to reinforce her control; by amplifying what her hips, she adds surprise to the poem, yet she never exaggerates so much that she risks losing the reader. Ultimately by the end, she not only has control of her hips, but a man on whom she’s “put a spell,” spinning him like a top (17). Clifton uses humor to put a spin on beauty, confidence, and self-acceptance. No longer does the speaker need male validation, instead she shows the power her hips have and the wit throughout this poem allows us to admire that.

IV. The Politics of Barbie

While Clifton’s poems show the acceptance of self via humor and take on society’s biases, poet Denise Duhamel does a similar thing in her work through use of the Barbie doll. Leave it to Barbie to tell it straight, “There’s nothing wrong with me!/There’s something wrong with society!”(1-2) or so writes Denise Duhamel in “Barbie’s Final Trip to Therapy.” In her book *Kinky*, Denise Duhamel uses the Barbie doll to show the superficiality in American culture as well as how our society can obsess on artificial physical beauty instead of deeper values in life. Her work incorporates humor to show us our cracked-mirror world where our ideals and actions are misaligned. The strength in Duhamel’s writing is her ability to highlight American culture with its flaws and insecurities through these dolls. These poems are over-the-top and successful because her humor arrives through the surprising world of the Barbie doll.

In *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Nancy A.

Walker writes:

. . .the distinctive characteristics of women's humor are derived from the disparity between the 'official' conduct of women's lives and their 'unofficial' response to that conduct. Implicit in this humor is protest of a very specific sort, whether presented as direct satire or masked in irony; through apparent self-mockery and confrontation of the 'other,' women's humor seeks to correct a cultural imbalance. . . . An essential purpose of humor is to call the norm into question. (70-71)

To build this satiric humor, Duhamel risks offending people by creating Barbies that Americans may not be too comfortable with. She creates "Holocaust Barbie," the Barbie who in the end we're not sure "was the Nazi or the Jew" (12) and "Buddhist Barbie," who even through enlightenment remains shallow: "Barbie agrees, but wonders how a man/with such a belly could pose,/smiling, and without a shirt" (6-8). There's also the one-line poem of "Native American Barbie," because "There's only one of her left" (1), reflecting the European genocide of native cultures and people as well as colonization of North America. And yet because Barbie is always the center of attention, we can laugh at the absurdity while reflecting on the cultural "truths" delivered in the poems. We can imagine Mattel creating this line of Bizarro-world Barbies and sadly, we have to question if they might if there were a market for them.

Denise Duhamel lets Barbie direct us through this land where dolls are leading lives that make us question our own realities. These satiric poems allow us to reflect on society's absurdities such as the desire to look the same through plastic surgery as if

there's only one way to be beautiful. In "Sensational Barbie," Duhamel risks shocking the reader: "When the surgeons sliced off her nipples/to put in the silicone implants . . ." (6-7).

The poem continues:

Barbie couldn't
possibly give birth. After all
the expense her family went to,
she wouldn't insult her new body
with stretch marks. There were other women
shorter and darker, who could carry Barbie's eggs. (21-26)

Duhamel makes breast implants less alluring by bluntly showing what the surgery entails. Later we see the irrationality in this upper class world where a woman would hire a surrogate mother to give birth for her so not to inflict stretch marks on her perfect body. The description of the woman who would carry the child is the exact opposite of tall white blonde and reflects the stereotypical image of hired help like the Mexican housekeeper or the Filipino nanny. Her humor appears in both the extreme and the understatement throughout the poem.

Ironically, Barbie with her tiny-nose, big-bosoms, and unachievable "perfect" body is one of the first images white American girls have of beauty. In "Black Barbie History," Duhamel writes:

Today, the same plastic surgery
used on Black Barbie can smooth those ethnic features
in all of us. We can all look the same, as we jump
into a vat of anesthesia and knives. So let's
bring our check books, our intolerable foibles, our fat selves.
There'll be no more competition when we emerge, identical
and redone, only dulled sisterhood and numbed love. (20)

By ending the line on “So, let’s,” she wryly suggests that we might even surrender to this cosmetic-surgery world by implying it’s easier to go along with the crowd. Again Duhamel makes a larger statement about the obsession with beauty and the belief that there is one perfect look. She jokes that when Mattel does create a Barbie with darker skin to represent other races, it still has the European facial features of the Caucasian Barbie: “Black Barbies look exactly like White Barbies./Identical molds . . .” (1-2).

When I asked Duhamel in an email interview if she’s aware that she’s being funny when she’s writing a poem and if she intentionally uses humor in her work, she responded:

Sometimes I am writing about a subject that seems particularly difficult to write about or I’m angry and I feel a kind of bitter shrill coming through the work. If I can detect this, I usually ask myself: How can I turn this around? Where is the absurdity in this? Absurdity is comedy’s friend, so yes, I sometimes intentionally try to use humor. Other times my own melodrama makes me laugh at myself when I read things over. Though I may have not written a piece with the thought of it being comical, I revise it to heighten the humor. For me, humor is a way to catch the reader—as I sometimes catch myself—unaware. Humor opens a poem and invites people in, even people who may not exactly agree with you. It’s a way to avoid being didactic in political poetry.

Duhamel’s poems focus on women’s issues that are an “assertive and insightful alert to the absurdities that affect not only their lives but the values of American culture in a larger sense” (Walker 183). Duhamel creates Barbies that represent an exaggeration of what we don’t like about society and ourselves. We laugh at the poems because they

give us the sense of superiority to this superficial doll that tries to be everyone, but keeps returning to her own shallowness and unaware ways.

In “Planning the Fantasy Wedding,” Barbie has to handle all the details: “Should the pew bows go on every other row?/Will they be too gaudy if there are too many?/Will Barbie and Ken look cheap if they skip?” (21-23). We can laugh at the trivialness of these questions, but any couple planning a lavish wedding has had to think about these things. Women may see themselves in this poem or in “The Limited Edition Platinum Barbie” where Barbie wears a Bob Mackie gown and we can see how easily we can fall prey to a commercial-driven world that reminds women of “who they’ll never be,/ of what they’ll never have” (33-34). Duhamel’s poems are entertaining, yet they allow for reflection on our own society. We can laugh through her words even while we acknowledge the harmful elements of a society so centered on physical attraction and a life of perfection. Just as women use “self-deprecation in a complex way: to appear to adopt the stereotype, yet to challenge it and the cultural assumptions that underlie it at the same time” (Walker 124), Duhamel uses Barbie to represent these stereotypes so we can confront them.

Her use of humor allows the door to these conversations to be opened. Yet the concern is that she could over exaggerate and we may no longer hold our disbelief. With an entire book about Barbie, she risks writing the same poem again and again. However, Duhamel successfully maintains her edge throughout the book and continually surprises us with refreshing humor.

V. The Seriousness of Using Humor

Today's women poets use humor to confront serious subjects and to connect with the reader, yet each poet presents her humor with a distinct style and voice. Just as we each have our favorite jokes and our own way of telling them, there is no one way to write a funny poem nor is there one particular topic we should be writing about. Many times in poetry, women use humor to talk about darker issues or to confront a taboo subject. Other times, it is used to explore a completely female experience such as menstruation or motherhood. Humor can be a political response to contemporary American culture. Each poet creates her own path to use humor and each voice is distinct from the other.

Yet in a literary world where writers want to be taken seriously, there may be a concern that if poets write humorous poems they may *not* be taken seriously. Sometimes it seems we live in a poetry world where the best seats in the bar are reserved for the poets with their significant scotch or full mugs of Guinness; most do not want to be labeled a "light" poet. As Ronald Wallace writes about Emily Dickinson in *God Be The Clown: Humor in American Poetry*:

These critics, and others who would assure her a place in the highest ranks of American literature, prefer the dark Dickinson to the lighter one, reserving their highest praise for her tragic sense, for her poems of anguish, pain, despair, grief, agony, and death. A comic is, it seems by definition a minor poet, while a tragic poet aspires at least, to being a major poet. (78)

Most women have worn an array of hats in their lives—mother, wife, employee, homemaker/domestic goddess, friend, sister, financial advisor—there is a strong history of multi-tasking here and, with humor, we watch women doing another task well. A

successful poet is able to be humorous in one poem and serious in another, and a truly successful poet can be both serious and humorous in the *same* poem. Just as one would speak differently to a class of first graders than to the audience at a museum fundraiser, the voice in a poem can address different situations. As poets use humor to explore new territory in their work, they are using humor with faith as “it means trusting that someone will share in your laughter” (Barreca, *Snow White* 37). Poets can use humor to make a connection with their reader. In a recent article about poet Kay Ryan, a journalist Elizabeth Lund suggested:

To this day, she feels the need to make people laugh, whether she's in the grocery store or reading in front of a standing-room-only crowd. “I need to make them laugh to know they're there,” she says. Then, on a more serious note, she adds, “I need [humor] to connect with people.”

Poets who use humor offer a refreshing way to connect with the reader and to create a common bond: laughter. Yet they risk not making this connection with each attempt of humor they use. When used well, they are able to reveal the strangeness in our lives and together we can laugh at the world around us; we'd offered one more way to appreciate the poem. Thoughtful and well-crafted humor is an invitation to join in. As Dinty Moore writes, “The manner of presentation—the way a truth is packaged—is often all that differentiates what makes us wince from what makes us chortle. Every successful comic and humorist knows that the line between an uncomfortable truth and a good belly laugh is remarkably thin” (Kachuba 120).

Barreca contends, “A great deal around us is funny, and we've always laughed about it when we've been with other women. What makes us laugh is worth talking

about. Our humor is worth sharing openly, with enthusiasm and confidence, with a generosity that will make our laughter easy to join” (121). But as it says in the introduction of *Redressing the Balance: American Women’s Literary Humor From Colonial Times to the 1980’s*: “Students of American literature and even those who study American humor have been largely unaware of the rich tradition of the women’s humor that has flourished ever since women began writing and publishing in the New World in the seventeenth century” (xv).

As readers of poetry, we must be persistent in our search for women poets who use humor. We may guess why women’s contributions to humor are not noted, but “despite disagreements about causes, however, the uncontested result is that women writers have been consistently underrepresented in or excluded from anthologies of humor and also underrated or relegated to the footnotes in scholarly studies of American humor” (xv-xvi). Women’s humor opens the door to new conversations and, particularly, the female experience. While it connects poems to readers, it also is a way to take control over the biases, preconceptions, and stereotypes concerning women. As we have seen, “women’s humor many be undervalued, but it is priceless” (Barreca 202).

As women continue to use humor it shows “both strength and vulnerability—you are willing to make the first move, but you are trusting the response of the listener” (Barreca 201). Humor allows poets to explore what’s on their minds even when it moves into uncomfortable territory. We are able to laugh at what scares us, be it death or birth, our bodies or sex. Humor finds the common bond in our differences and similarities. With each use of humor, these poets allow the world to see a greater dimension in each of us. If we only write seriously without the use of humor in our work then we limit our

writing and ourselves. We become Flat Stanleys touring the world, paper-thin versions of the full writers we are in our everyday lives. As readers or writers, we want to experience the full emotional spectrum—including laughter.

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