

The Wright Word – by Ray

Why Do Writers Have Bigger Balls Than Accountants?

Many poetic forms (Sonnet, Haiku, Tanka) rely on a “turn,” a point when the piece makes an abrupt “shift in direction” — usually a summary of, or contradiction to, what preceded it. This is a required part of the form, and its skillful execution is a measure of the writer’s ability.

Recently, I was discussing “Sonnets” with a fellow poet. I observed that my predilection was for “Elizabethan” Sonnets. The reason (beside the fact that they’re tad easier) is the “turn” occurs almost at the end of the poem. (In the “Italian” Sonnet — the other well-known form — the “turn” comes very near the middle.) So, surprisingly, the Sonnet shares a structure with a less-appreciated literary form, the Joke.

Well, it’s April, the “fool-ish” month. Let’s look at jokes.

Why is it that things which were so funny when they happened fall flat in the telling? We’ve all had the experience of recounting something riotous, only to be rewarded with blank stares. It’s embarrassing in social interactions. It’s catastrophic in writing. Why does it happen?

Most verbal humor (not all, most) is in the form of a joke. Some jokes work; some do not. Why?

The answer is in one well-known word: “timing.” “Timing” is closely related to “form” or “structure.” But what is “timing?”

The essayist, William Haslitt wrote, “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.”

A joke involves two different stories: the one the person thinks you’re telling, and the one you actually are. When the two finally clash, it’s funny. The comedy lies in the *contrast* between the two conflicting realities. It lasts as long as the audience

can conceptualize both of them simultaneously.

The trick is to (like “nitro” and “glycerin”) keep the ingredients separate until the last minute, and then slam them together, explosively.

A joke has a form. It consists of two parts: the “setup,” and the “punch-line.”

The setup establishes the “first story” — what the audience *thinks* the joke is about. The punch-line reveals the “second story” — joke’s actual point.

The setup establishes expectations. It provides a reasonable framework for humor. Notice, I said “reasonable.” A setup that stretches credibility — that reveals itself as artifice — simply won’t work. The setup must never show itself to be one. It must be accepted at face value.

The punch-line must be exactly that: a quick, sharp “jab” that changes the perception suddenly.

Imagine a house of cards. The setup erects the house. The punch-line is the card that, when removed, causes the house to fall. The “funniness” is proportional to the size of the crash — the height of the house, and the suddenness of the collapse. Nobody is interested in the fall of a one-story house of cards. And, certainly, no one will react with glee to its being arduously dismantled.

In life, we experience things very quickly. Events are comprehended as flashes — totalities.

In reading, the pace is slower — serialized. An event is dissected into its components, and presented sequentially. So successful comedy is stringent. The setup must present a vivid, real, reasonable picture — without losing the reader’s interest with too much detail. The punch-line must change the perception suddenly.

A successful raconteur develops a sense of when his audience will have grasped the setup, and a knack for “pulling the rug out.”

Oh yes.

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They sell more tickets. —