

THE COMIC SENSE IN THE SHORT STORIES OF TONI CADE BAMBARA

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Lucille Clifton has said of Bambara's short stories, "I laughed until I cried, then laughed again."¹ Indeed, Bambara's warm, witty, and varied sense of humor prevades her stories, sometimes evoking from the reader an amused smile, sometimes a hearty laugh. In creating this wonderfully effective comic sense, Bambara makes skillful use of all four elements of comedy—comedy of action, situation, character, and words—as the following analysis will show.

Comedy of action is perhaps best exemplified in the story entitled "The Hammer Man" in the narrator's amusing description of the street fights of two older ladies. The young black girl who serves as the narrator and main character has had an altercation with an older, mentally disturbed boy named Manny, and in order to indicate how this altercation has spread to family and friends, involving finally almost the entire urban neighborhood, she tells of the fights between Manny's mother and Miss Rose, the narrator's godmother. These fights take place in the streets, providing entertainment for all the neighbors, who eagerly look on:

[Manny's] mother chased Miss Rose out into the street and they commenced to get with it, snatching bottles out of the garbage cans and breaking them on the johnny pumps and stuff like that... I never figured the garbage can for an arsenal, but Miss Rose came up with stricks and table legs and things, and Manny's mother had her share of scissor blades and bicycle chains. They got to rolling in the streets and all you could see was pink drawers and fat legs.²

The humor here springs from the incongruity of two old ladies literally slugging it out in the streets of New York City, and the narrator's multitude of concrete details creates for the reader a clear visual image of the fray, even down to their pink underwear, or drawers, as she puts it.

Comedy of situation appears in "My Man Bovanne," in which an elderly woman picks up an elderly blind man at a neighborhood party despite the disapproval of her three grown children. The humor again proceeds from an older woman doing something generally not expected or acceptable, as she breaks the rules by asking the blind man to dance, rather than waiting to be asked. Then she dances with him very closely: "And I press up close to dance with Bovanne who blind and I'm hummin and he hummin, chest to chest like talkin. Not jammin my breasts into the man. Wasn't bout tits. Was bout vibrations. And he dug it..." (p. 4). Shocked and embarrassed not only by her manner of dancing but also by her choice of partners, her children immediately haul her into the kitchen and berate her for her behavior (or misbehavior):

"Look here Mama... You were makin a spectacle of yourself out there dancing like that."

"Dancing like what?"...

"Like a bitch in heat," says Elo.

"Well uhh, I was goin to say like one of them sex-starved ladies gettin on in years and not too discriminating. Know what I mean?" (p. 5).

They are also upset because of her appearance: "... You going to be standing there with your boobs out and that wig on your head and that hem up to your ass. And people'll say, "Ain't that the horny bitch that was grindin with the blind dude?" (pp. 6-7) As they continue to upbraid her about various other shrotcomings, she tries to fend them off with language ("You know what you all can kiss," p. 7), but that too fails and she finally leaves the party, defying her children by taking My Man Bovanne home with her.

While comedy of action and of situation are staples in Bambara's comic repertoire, it is in comedy of character and comedy of words that she particularly excels. Bambara's various narrators, often young black girls, are absolutely delightful and wonderfully humorous. Sylvia is the narrator and main character in what is perhaps Bambara's finest story "The Lesson," in which the youngster is forced to learn an unpleasant and disillusioning lesson about the economic inequality of American life when an older black woman named Miss Moore takes a group of black children from their New York slum environment to the plush F.A.O. Schwartz toy store on Fifth Avenue. Although the story itself as well as Sylvia's experience is essentially gravely serious, a great deal of humor is evoked by her blunt language and her uncompromising view of things. Her speech is frequently and casually studded with words such as "goddamn," "shit," "bitch," and "ass," one of her favorite expressions being the addition of "ass" to a preceding adjective; for example, in describing Miss Moore, she says, "... she was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do..." (p. 87). On returning from the visit to the toy store, Sylvia affects a casual and even bored attitude to disguise her disillusionment, using her special language for emphasis: "And

we lean all over each other so we can hold up under the draggy-ass lecture she always finishes us off with at the end before we thank her for borin us to tears" (p. 95). Not one for decorum, diplomacy, or phoniness, she tells of "making farts with our sweaty armpits" (p. 89), describes her gullible Aunt Gretchen who is an easy touch and a pushover as "the main gofer in the family. You got some ole dumb shit foolishness you want somebody to go for, you send for Aunt Gretchen" (p. 88), and labels Miss Moore as a nosy busybody who "know damm well what out homes look like cause she nosys around in them every chance she gets" (p. 91).

Kit, the exuberant and endearing fifteen-year-old in "Sweet Town," evokes humor through her romantic and excessive nature and her witty use of words as she describes her first experience with love. After describing the ecstasy of being in love, she reveals that B.J. abruptly departed, leaving her desolate and disillusioned. Yet, even in the midst of the pain and shock of the abandonment, her incurably romantic nature briefly takes over as she imagines herself, in an amusing and curious combination of Hollywood Westerns, popular love ballads, and romance novels, on a long, arduous quest somewhere out West in search of B.J. and his friend Eddie:

And in every town I'll ask for them as the hotel keeper feeds the dusty, weary traveler that I'll be. "Have you seen two guys, one great, the other acned? If you see 'em, tell 'em Kit's looking for them." And I'd bandage up my cactus-torn feet and sling the knapsack into place and be off. And in the next town, having endured dust storms, tornadoes, earthquakes, and coyotes, I'll stop at the saloon and inquire. "Yeh, they travel together," I'd say in a voice somewhere between W.C. Fields and Gladys Cooper... And legends'll pop up about me and my quest. Great long twelve-bar blues ballads with eighty-nine stanzas. And a strolling minstrel will happen into the feedstore where B.J.'ll be and hear and shove the farmer's daughter off his lap and mount up to find me. (p. 125)

The humor emanates from hyperbole (she endures terrific forms of natural disasters as well as wild animals, and ballads with eighty-nine stanzas are written about her), her juxtaposition of incongruous words ("Have you seen two guys, one *great*, the other *acned*?"), her stereotyped vision of the West (saloon, coyotes, feedstore), and her casting herself as a Hollywood star with a voice "somewhere between W.C. Fields and Gladys Cooper."

Peaches, the very young narrator of "Maggie of the Green Bottles," is a humorous character because of her innocence and naiveté. In describing the very special relationship between herself and her great-grandmother, the child-narrator is an innocent eye, not fully comprehending the meanings of many things she tells about. While to the other characters and to the reader, Maggie is a crazy old woman, a freeloading relative, and an alcoholic, to Peaches she is a kind of fairy godmother with special qualities. For example, the fierce verbal battles between Maggie and

Peaches' father neither appall nor frighten the little girl, but rather fill her with admiration for Maggie's courage in standing up to him:

And then it was name-calling time. And again I must genuflect and kiss her ring, because my father was no slouch when it came to names. He could malign your mother and work your father's lineage over in one short breath, describing in absolute detail all the incredible alliances made between your ancestors and all sorts of weird creatures. But Maggie had him beat there too... (p. 155)

The excessive quality of Peaches' admiration adds to the comic effect created by the situation and the diction. Peaches has an innocent, and thus to the reader a somewhat humorous, view not only of Maggie but also of herself, as in the following description which she gives with absolute and unquestioning sincerity, believing it because Maggie has endowed her with the feeling that she is a very extraordinary person:

There's me [in the photograph]... looking almost like a normal, mortal, everyday-type baby... Except that it must be clearly understood straightaway that I sprang into the world full wise and invulnerable and gorgeous like a goddess... I was destined for greatness. Maggie assured me. (pp. 152-3)

A final example of a comic touch springing from Peaches' naiveté occurs after Maggie's death from alcoholism when Peaches is asked which of Maggie's possessions she would like as a keepsake. Not realizing that the green bottles contained alcohol but rather believing that they were magical and enchanted, she innocently requests them to the horror and astonishment of the uncomprehending adults:

"Well, Peaches," my father said. "You were her special, what you want?"

"I'll take the bottles," I said.

"Let us pray," said the Reverend. (p. 159)

Bambara is also extremely skillful at evoking comedy through language, using numerous devices such as puns, put-downs, nicknames, parody, verbal abuse, reversals of expected meanings, vulgarities, and unusual words, comparisons, and definitions. An excellent example of a play on words used for comic effect is found in "The Hammer Man" where the narrator recounts her father's pun on the word "deviant": "I looked into [my folder]... and saw that I was from a deviant family in a deviant neighborhood. I showed my mother the word in the dictionary,... and it was my favorite word after that. I ran it in the ground till one day my father got the strap just to show how deviant he could get. So I gave up trying to improve my vocabulary" (pp. 38-9). The put-down is done to comic perfection by Hazel

Elizabeth Deborah Parker, the narrator of "Raymond's Run" whose responsibility it is to take care of her older retarded brother and to protect him for children who make fun of him. In describing one of these thoughtless children, she says that the girl "has a big mouth where Raymond is concerned and is too stupid to know that there is not a big deal of difference between herself and Raymond..." (p. 26). The nicknames of some of Bambara's characters are often amusing names like Dirty Red and Big Butt— but my own favorite is the nickname given to a large and formidable matron at a movie theatre whose job is to control rambunctious kids —thunderbuns.

Bambara also proves to be a master of parody, achieving, for example, wonderful humor in the following passage describing the minister's comments after the death of":

Then Reverend Elson turned to say that no matter how crazy she'd been, no matter how hateful she'd acted toward the church in general and him in particular, no matter how spiteful she'd behaved towards her neighbors and even her blood kin, and even though everyone was better off without her, seeing how she died as proof of her heathen character, and right there in the front yard too, with a bottle under her skirts, ... despite all that, the Reverend Elson continued, God rest her soul, if He saw fit, that is. (p. 159).

The long, seemingly endless sentence, the hammering repetition, the religious terminology, and the double reversal of meaning at the end combine with the satire of the clergyman's essentially unChristian attitude to create the humor here. The same story also provides an illustration of the device of verbal abuse as the narrator recounts occasions on which her father and Maggie traded insults:

It began with the cooking usually, especially the pots of things Maggie concocted. Witchcraft, he called it. Home cooking, she'd counter. Then he'd come over to the stove, lift a lid with an incredible face, and comment about cesspools and fertilizers. But she'd remind him of his favorite dish, chitlins... He'd turn up the radio and make some remark about good church music and her crazy voodoo records. Then she'd [say]... that some men, who put magic down with nothing to replace it and nothing much to recommend them in the first place but their magic wand, lived a runabout life, practicing black magic on other men's wives. Then he'd say something about freeloading relatives... Depending on how large an audience they drew, this could go on for hours... (pp. 153-4)

One of Bambara's most effective and most frequently used techniques is reversals of expected or implied meanings. In "Mississippi Ham Rider," a story in which Inez, a black career woman, and Neil, her white male colleague, visit a poor and run-down Southern town in order to convince an old blues singer to do some recordings in New York, Inez explains that the old man will "be dammed if he's going North. Says he was badly mistreated up there. Froze his behind off one winter

in Chicago. And in New York, the Negro artists had to use a drafty freight elevator to get to the recording studio." Neil replies with obvious irony, "Not like the swell conditions here" (p. 50). Later, Inez describes the restaurant where they are to meet the blues singer as "a storefront thing [with] fried chicken legs and bar-b-que'd ribs... painted on the window panes... In the doorway were three large jugs with soapy brown something or other in them, rag wicks stuffed into the necks and hanging over the sides to the floor. But you could see that the place was clean, sort of" (p. 52). The unexpected last two words create a comic effect by immediately casting into doubt the speaker's assertion in the main part of the sentence.

Vulgurities too provide humor, not so much in and of themselves but because one typically does not expect them from those who use them in Bambara's stories, usually old women or very young girls. For example, in "The Johnson Girls," when the college-aged narrator asks Great Ma Drew to put up the ironing board for her, the old woman tartly responds, "Kiss my ass" (p. 166). Sylvia, the young narrator in "The Lesson," also uses strong language that often has a comic effect as does the tough young heroine of "The Hammer Man," who describes policemen in no uncertain terms: "...none of my teachers, from kindergarten right on up, none of them knew what they were talking about. I'll be damned if I ever knew one of them rosy-cheeked cops that smiled and helped you get to school without neither you or your little raggedy dog getting hit by a truck... Not that I ever believed it. I knew Dick and Jane was full of crap from the get-go, especially them cops" (p. 42).

Finally, Bambara uses words, comparisons, and especially definitions in unusual and thus humorous ways. The first can be seen in "My Man Bovanne" when one of Miss Hazel's disapproving children criticizes her close dancing ("You been *tattooed* on the man for four records straight," p. 7), while marvellous examples of the second and third appear closely linked in "The Johnson Girls". The story concerns how Inez should respond to her lover's suddenly having left her and revolves thematically around the nature of male-female relationships as Inez's friends discuss what course she should take. The major metaphor, complex and ingenious, describes these relationships in terms of menus in a restaurant. Typically, because no one man can satisfy all of a woman's needs and desires, she must have several different types of men —or, metaphorically, she must eat à la carte, although, as Sugar says, "à la carte is a bitch" (p. 169). She then goes on to give hilarious, but perhaps soberingly accurate, definitions of the various types of men:

"First, you gotta have you a fuckin man, a cat that can get down between the sheets without a whole lotta bullshit about 'This is a spiritual union' or 'Women are always rippin off my body'... Course, he usually look like hell and got on no I.Q. atall... So you gots to have you a go-around man, a dude that can put in a good appearance so you won't be shame to take him round your friends, case he insist on opening his big mouth... Course the go-round man ain't about you, he about his rap and his wardrobe and his imported deodorant stick... Which means you gots to have a gofor... Like when you

crazy with pain and totally messed around and won't nobody on earth go for your shit and totally messed around and won't nobody on earth go for your shit, you send for the gofor cause he go for it whatever it is... You gots to have your money man, that goes without saying. And more importantly, you got to have you a tender man." (p. 168)

Ideally, however, what Sugar and most women desire is one man with all these qualities: "... one day I'm gonna have it all and right on the same plate..., so I don't have to clutter up the whole damn table with a teensy bowl of this and a plate of extra that and a side order of what the hell" (pp. 169, 167). This rare type of man, exemplified by Inez's departed lover Roy, is called "the blue-plate special": "that particular man of yours, Nez, is somethin special. I mean the two of you kept my faith in the blue-plate special" (p. 171).

Two other wonderfully humorous definitions, by chance again concerning food, are found in "Mississippi Ham Rider." When the narrator and her colleague Neil, a white male from the North, enter the restaurant for their meeting with the blues singer, she tells us, "a whiff of chitlins damn near knocked me over. A greasy smell from the kitchen had jammed up my breathing before I even got into the place. 'Somebody's dying,' whispered Neil. 'Soul food,' I gasped, eyes watering" (p. 52). And when they sit down to eat, the blues singer says, "Bet you ain't ate like this in a long time... Most people don't know how to cook nohow, specially you Northerners.' 'Jesus Christ,' said Neil, leaning over to look into the bowls on the far side of the table. 'What's that that smells?' 'That's the South, boy..." (p. 55).

Bambara's comic sense, then, is clearly a dominant element in her short stories. Yet, as Clifton's statement perceptively suggests ("I laughed until I cried, then laughed again"), her comedy has a serious, and sometimes a sombre, point about human nature, human relationships, or the world in which we live. For all the hilarity in the Johnson girls' discussion, it is clear that male-female relationships are by and large unsatisfactory and unfulfilling, and, while the situation in "My Man Bovanne" is comic on the surface, beneath it runs a poignant commentary on the loneliness and uselessness one feels in old age and on the sometimes unbreachable rift between parents and children. "The Lesson," despite its sharp humor, is a blunt criticism of the economic inequality of American life, and "Sweet Town" traces the universal human experience of the disillusionment of young love. Yet not all the serious points are sombre and negative ones; indeed, some are quite positive. Beneath the humor in a number of stories lies a celebration of humanity and particularly of human solidarity: a young person's unselfish love for a sibling in "Raymond's Run," a great-grandmother's special gift to her great-granddaughter in "Maggie of the Green Bottles," and a young girl's defense of a former enemy in "The Hammer Man."

Thus on a number of levels Bambara proves herself a masterful practitioner of the art of comedy, employing all the comic elements and devices to evoke laughter

and using that humor not only to entertain her readers magnificently but also to make serious comments on the human experience.

Notes

1. Lucille Clifton, as quoted on the book cover of Toni Cade Bambara, *Gorila, My Love* (New York: Vintage, 1981).
2. Bambara, *Gorila, My Love*, p. 36. All subsequent references to the short stories will be to this edition.