

Bloom's
**LITERARY
THEMES**

DARK HUMOR

Edited and with an introduction by HAROLD BLOOM / Volume Editor: BLAKE HOBBY



Bloom's Literary Themes

DARK HUMOR

Edited and with an introduction by

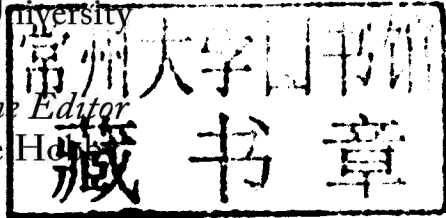
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Bloom's Literary Themes: Dark Humor

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 **Series Introduction by Harold Bloom:** 
Themes and Metaphors

1. TOPOS AND TROPE

What we now call a theme or topic or subject initially was named a *topos*, ancient Greek for “place.” Literary *topoi* are commonplaces, but also arguments or assertions. A *topos* can be regarded as literal when opposed to a trope or turning which is figurative and which can be a metaphor or some related departure from the literal: ironies, synecdoches (part for whole), metonymies (representations by contiguity) or hyperboles (overstatements). Themes and metaphors engender one another in all significant literary compositions.

As a theoretician of the relation between the matter and the rhetoric of high literature, I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge. We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things, as Oscar Wilde phrased it. Literary *topoi* can be regarded as places where we store information, in order to amplify the themes that interest us.

This series of volumes, *Bloom’s Literary Themes*, offers students and general readers helpful essays on such perpetually crucial topics as the Hero’s Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. Some of the topics would have seemed odd at another time, another land: the American Dream, Enslavement and Emancipation, Civil Disobedience.

I suspect though that our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names. Tropes change across the centuries: the irony of one age is rarely the irony of

another. But the themes of great literature, though immensely varied, undergo transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts. The power of imaginative literature relies upon three constants: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. These are not bound by societal constraints or resentments, and ultimately are universals, and so not culture-bound. Shakespeare, except for the world's scriptures, is the one universal author, whether he is read and played in Bulgaria or Indonesia or wherever. His supremacy at creating human beings breaks through even the barrier of language and puts everyone on his stage. This means that the matter of his work has migrated everywhere, reinforcing the common places we all inhabit in his themes.

2. CONTEST AS BOTH THEME AND TROPE

Great writing or the Sublime rarely emanates directly from themes since all authors are mediated by forerunners and by contemporary rivals. Nietzsche enhanced our awareness of the agonistic foundations of ancient Greek literature and culture, from Hesiod's contest with Homer on to the Hellenistic critic Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Even Shakespeare had to begin by overcoming Christopher Marlowe, only a few months his senior. William Faulkner stemmed from the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad and our best living author of prose fiction, Philip Roth, is inconceivable without his descent from the major Jewish literary phenomenon of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka of Prague, who wrote the most lucid German since Goethe.

The contest with past achievement is the hidden theme of all major canonical literature in Western tradition. Literary influence is both an overwhelming metaphor for literature itself, and a common topic for all criticism, whether or not the critic knows her immersion in the incessant flood.

Every theme in this series touches upon a contest with anteriority, whether with the presence of death, the hero's quest, the overcoming of taboos, or all of the other concerns, volume by volume. From Monteverdi through Bach to Stravinsky, or from the Italian Renaissance through the agon of Matisse and Picasso, the history of all the arts demonstrates the same patterns as literature's thematic struggle with itself. Our country's great original art, jazz, is illuminated by what

the great creators called “cutting contests,” from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on to the emergence of Charlie Parker’s Bop or revisionist jazz.

A literary theme, however authentic, would come to nothing without rhetorical eloquence or mastery of metaphor. But to experience the study of the common places of invention is an apt training in the apprehension of aesthetic value in poetry and in prose.

 **Volume Introduction by Harold Bloom** 

Defining dark humor is virtually impossible because its manifestation in great literature necessarily involves irony, the trope in which you say one thing and mean another, sometimes the opposite of what is said. The great specialist in literary irony was the Anglo-Irish clergyman Jonathan Swift, who digresses endlessly into acidic ironies in *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*. G. K. Chesterton liked to assert that sometimes Chaucer's ironies are too large to be seen. That is even truer of Shakespeare, the master of dark humor as he is of every other literary mode.

Shakespeare's geniuses of dark humor include Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, and the Fool in *King Lear*, though they abound elsewhere in virtually all the plays. Since Falstaff is the grandest comic creation in all of literature, his variety of dark humor proves very much his own. His mode of wit has no precursors, while Hamlet owes something to Montaigne. Iago is again a true Original, in dark humor as in ontological malice, while Lear's Fool has a touch in him of Biblical irony, of Ecclesiastes and of the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha.

The most loyal of Falstaffians, I will devote myself to him here, though he is boundless and my compass must be brief. Falstaff's central target is power, and he is audacious enough to satirize King Henry IV as well as Hal and Hotspur. So subtle is the Socrates of Eastcheap, Falstaff, that he ironizes even Hal's murderous ambivalence which primarily is directed against the fat knight himself.

Falstaff will die the poignant death of the rejected teacher, and Shakespeare astonishingly transmutes even that into dark humor. I brood much on that transformation and come to the insight that Falstaff, more even than Hamlet let alone Hal/Henry V, represents the charismatic in Shakespeare. Charisma emanates neither from

society nor history: it emanates out from a major personality who manifestly bears the blessing of more life:

Embowelled? If thou embowl me today, I'll give you leave to powder me and eat me too tomorrow. 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot termgant Scot had paid me, scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit: to die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man, who hath not the life of a man: but to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed.

That is Falstaff's transmemberment of dark humor into his own ecstasy of sheer being. Call it the Sublime of dark humor and go on from there.

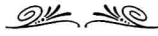
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THE PLAYS OF ARISTOPHANES



“Aristophanes’ Comic Apocalypse”

by Louise Cowan,
in *The Terrain of Comedy* (1984)

INTRODUCTION

Louise Cowan argues that one ethical question drives the work of Aristophanes: “The question of how a person can achieve blessedness in the midst of war, avarice, contention, and falsehood.” For Cowan, Aristophanes employs dark humor as an apocalyptic writer with “double vision.” This duality, according to Cowan, “allows the writer to be possessed by a spirit of nonsense, absurdity, and contradiction, so that he may undertake his supremely difficult task of raising earthly existence to a new plane of being.” Aristophanes, dreaming of a better world, exposes Athens’s moral decline while saving with his plays “a permanent part of the *mundus imaginalis* available to all citizens everywhere through the comic imagination—an image of that one city we keep dreaming of building.”



Cowan, Louise. “Aristophanes’ Comic Apocalypse.” *The Terrain of Comedy*. Ed. Louise Cowan. Dallas, Texas: Dallas Institute of Humanities, 1984, 61–88.

Ordinarily overlooked as one of the paradigms of comedy in its full scope is the canon of Aristophanes, whose plays are considered by common consent brilliant though limited examples of satire and farce—uninhibited but conservative, naughty but nice. Taken in its entirety, however, Aristophanic comedy is much more comprehensive than this initial judgment would indicate, much more pregnant with things to come. It is, in fact, religious drama, in the same sense that medieval drama is religious. Both Old Attic Comedy and the liturgical comedy of the Middle Ages were essentially popular theatrical productions dramatizing a divine story, with such certainty of its sacrality that they could submit its holiest mysteries to burlesque.

Drama, as Muriel Bradbrook suggests, is “the cooperative, creation of author, actors, and audience.”¹ At its highest realization it exists in a kind of communion among these three, “an intercourse from which it issues and on which it depends.” The Greek and medieval English theaters were such cooperative creations, “Acts of Faith,” she would have it, “directed to a God who might be both subject and audience of the play.”

For the Greeks, the god who is “both subject and audience of the play” was, of course, Dionysus, the divinity of wine and harvest, whose presence is marked by pain and ecstasy and who testifies to both incarnation and transcendence. Walter Otto’s extensive study reveals him to be “the god who comes,” and emphasizes his distinction from the Olympians.² The Greeks knew the sudden appearance of a god, according to Carl Kerényi, not only as *epiphaneia* but also as *epidemia*, a “divine ‘epidemic’—whose kinship with ‘visitation by a disease’ is undeniable at least insofar as it was always the incursion of something overpowering. . . .”³ As the god who comes, the epiphanic and epidemic god, Dionysus is experienced not as a governing and sustaining deity, timeless, beyond change, but as one who in time suffers, reveals, destroys, and fulfills. “The evidence is clear,” Kerényi maintains, “that the core of the Dionysian religion, the essence that endured for thousands of years and formed the very basis of its existence” was the coming of the god, his “cruel death,” and, as “indestructible *zoe*,” his resurrection.⁴

In his humanity as the son of a mortal mother, Dionysus traces throughout his earthly career the course of human life and hence provides for drama its subliminal subject. In his divinity, as the offspring of Zeus, he is the hidden but all-seeing audience of a theater

in which a people come to self-knowledge. But it is not simply that Dionysus expresses a duality inherent in existence. More importantly, he brings about a new order. As Otto comments, “he symbolizes an entire world whose spirit reappears in ever new forms and unites in an eternal unity the sublime with the simple, the human with the animal, the vegetative and the elemental.”⁵ He is the “archetypal image of indestructible life,” according to Kerenyi,⁶ opening for man what James Hillman calls “a new psychic geography.”⁷

Athenian tragedy and comedy both grew out of ceremonies dedicated to Dionysus, and in both genres, as subject and audience, he has the effect of being “the god who comes.” In tragedy he appears to the proud and self-righteous ruler and to the rigidly structured city, manifesting himself to rend and destroy. Whenever men set themselves up as gods, Dionysus comes—bringing ecstasy and terror, vision and death. In comedy, by contrast, his purpose is to bring life back to a degraded and disintegrating city. In this undertaking he works by uniting a community of people in a collective exuberance, sweeping aside the barriers that divide human beings from animals, from gods, from themselves. Intoxication and festivity give rise to inspiration and fantasy, driving out the darkness of oppression, pain, and death. Dionysus comes, bringing revelry and joy, resurrection and life.

What is traditionally called “Old Comedy” is thought to have had its origin in phallic ceremonies at the festival of Dionysus, in the carnival revelry in his honor (the *komos*, or processional). Although it flourished in Athens for several centuries as popular entertainment as well as religious and mythic liturgy, comedy was not officially recognized as part of the two Athenian Dionysian celebrations until the early fifth century B.C. The names of nearly 200 authors of Greek comedy have survived, dating from the sixth century B.C. to the second century A.D. But the work of only one of them has been preserved, copied, and annotated by the Byzantine scholars, admired by the Church Fathers, his texts brought into Italy after the Fall of Constantinople and rendered into Latin long before the translation of the great tragedians. It is Aristophanes of whom I speak, of course, the comic genius who has shocked the Western world ever since his translation but who is universally regarded, in Moses Hadas’s words, as “the most brilliant and artistic and thoughtful wit our world has known.”⁸

Nothing remains of Old Comedy except Aristophanes’ extant eleven plays (out of some forty-odd he is known to have written).

Hence, when we speak firsthand of this entire mode of comic drama, we address ourselves to one author whose work was considered significant enough to be kept alive, translated, and constantly read. For all practical purposes Aristophanes stands alone, with his “terrible graces” (*phoberai charites*).⁹ And yet to make this admission is not necessarily to hold, with the general opinion, his utter separation from tradition. A recent director of Aristophanic comedy, Alexis Solomos, is an extreme spokesman for this position. He maintains that Old Comedy (by which he means Aristophanic comedy) had no ancestors and no progeny—that, in fact, the Western comic tradition stems solely from Greek middle and new comedy, the style and form of which were adopted by the Roman and European playwrights in an unbroken tradition of “comedy of manners”:

The Old Attic Comedy, on the contrary, does not belong to that millennial tradition; it stands apart; its style cannot be adjusted to the normal orbit of theatre history; it is a mythological monster without parents and without seed; it resembles the satyrs and the Centaurs, the Sphinx and the Gorgons, in being half human and half supernatural.¹⁰

Solomos’s basic insight is of course true: the comedies of Aristophanes have something fantastic, weird, and supernatural about them. Still, it seems unjustified to set them aside from the major comic tradition and to consider them a kind of monstrous, even if magnificent, eruption.

What Mikhail Bakhtin has to say about medieval carnival¹¹ provides some understanding of the kind of “tradition” within which Aristophanes worked and which continued on after his time, even surviving the defeat of Greece. Old Comedy was shaped, as we have said, by festivals celebrating the rites of Dionysus, a pattern of communal imagination much like, and no doubt one might even say a forerunner of, the kind that gave rise to the wild and festive carnivals of the Middle Ages. Like carnival, the Greek rituals emphasized food, drink, sexuality, and an overturning of official order while at the same time celebrating and deepening an awareness of cultic mysteries. According to Bakhtin, we find in Aristophanes a veritable “heroics of the comic.” All the things and events of ordinary life are transformed in his plays to become “cultic acts reinterpreted on the literary plane”:

... they lose their private-everyday character, they become significant in human terms in all their comic aspect, their dimensions are fantastically exaggerated; we get a peculiar heroics of the comic, or, more precisely, a *comic myth*. . . . In Aristophanes we can still see the cultic foundation of the comic image, and we can see how everyday nuances have been layered over it, still sufficiently transparent for the foundation to shine through them and transfigure them.¹²

Bakhtin's is an illuminating comment; there can be no doubt that it is something like a comic myth that Aristophanes presents or that much of the strength of his comedy derives from its being a poetic reenactment of a cultic image or, as Bradbrook has said in a more general context, an act of faith. Both of these comments imply the action of *memoria*, as indeed in part drama must be said to be. In Aristophanic comedy, a deeply pious and conservative strain goes back to ancient fertility rites and the cultivation of the earth. But what seems fully as distinctive in these plays is the reach of their aspiration toward futurity, the projection of their spiritual and phenomenal being away from the earth into poetic space. For, unlike Homer and the author of Genesis, Aristophanes does not reveal the world and history to be comic in themselves; they are only implicitly so until seen in the light of the Dionysian imagination, which in touching and altering things, brings them to a new creation.

C. G. Jung has described what he calls "primordial experiences" that are to be found in the work of some writers, experiences that characterize a "visionary mode" of artistic creation:

The expression that furnishes the material for artistic expression is no longer familiar. It is a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind—that suggests the abyss of time separating us from pre-human ages. . . . It arises from timeless depths; it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque. . . . the primordial experiences rend from top to bottom the curtain upon which is painted the picture of an ordered world. . . .¹³

Jung has here described the literature that in effect tears apart the veil of the cosmos, as opposed to that which, as he says earlier

in the same passage, deals with the foreground of life. His emphasis is on a primordial experience which arises, as he says, “from timeless depths. There is another kind of visionary literature, however, which emerges from somewhere other than the abyss; it finds its material in transcendence—in the circles of light surrounding the heavenly city. It too is grotesque and strange, though fantastic and bizarre rather than monstrous, and its evocation is more of rapture and terror than of dread and horror. This is the apocalyptic, which erupts into human consciousness from above rather than below, from the future rather than the past. An apocalypse, in its root sense, is an uncovering, a disclosure, a revelation of final things, not so much at the end of time as outside time.¹⁴ The images that rise from that realm bespeak spiritual realities through grotesque patterns loosely associated with the vivid sense experiences that arise from ecstasy and terror. Northrop Frye contrasts apocalyptic with demonic, one a desirable world, the other undesirable: “The apocalyptic world,” he writes, “the heaven of religion, presents, in the first place, the categories of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilization.”¹⁵ His comment is apt, though for my purposes it needs some slight amendment. For, one must object, apocalyptic seems to speak less of the “heaven of religion” than to provide strange and marvelous images of the threshold surrounding that realm. It is in the nature of apocalyptic poetic revelation for fantasy to seize upon an intuition of something incomprehensible and to shape its patterns into allegory, out of which emerges the sweet dream of peace, a vision of the new city *coming to be* where tears are wiped away and lions and lambs lie down together.

Both archetype and apocalypse manifest themselves through images; both are collective and not private. It is as though the first emerges out of the primordial past and testifies to those aspects of the soul which were imprinted with the *imago dei*, though marred and distorted by a warp of darkness. The second appears as if refracted into the present from an unseen future and thus carries the force of revelation. Its images are of the never-experienced and hence imperfectly comprehended fields of light, a realm which when its face is turned toward time can appear as an avenging angel of destruction and judgment, but which in itself is the still point, the kingdom of peace.

The Aristophanic vision, without doubt, is apocalyptic.¹⁶ It is concerned with images and signs of what Rudolf Otto, speaking of