

***HUMOUR IN POETRY***

**By Padmaja Iyengar**

Let me first of all confess that I just don't qualify as a poet because I have absolutely no technical knowledge of poetry writing. From the serious business of banking where my mind was conditioned to a six-column thinking called Date, Particulars, Debit, Credit, Balance and F10 to authorise a transaction, and where we were experts in filling in the blanks in pre-structured forms or at best, were used to reading balance sheets that too we often misread and ended up giving loans that became bad - Nonperforming Assets (NPAs)! I was expected to look important and serious in the bank to command respect from my clients and colleagues, and impress my superiors. While in the bank, the only fun I had was in thinking of my customers as *Kashtamars*. So, help me God!

After three decades + of some very non-creative form fillings, and once my son started getting a regular salary, I quit banking and quite by some quirk I think, began writing what I believed were poems – funny ones at that!.No wonder, people thought them funny because my so called funny poems did not conform to any norms, forms, structure or rules! My evolution as a writer of poems involved besides frequent stumbles, a process of fumbling, bumbling, bungling and even sometimes mumbling to myself...I was never sure whether people were laughing at me or over my poems in enjoyment...!

The most wonderful thing about writing humorous poetry is that it is as enjoyable to write a witty poem as it is to read one!!! The best thing about it is that we can playfully mock, chide, tease, undermine and debunk the most important, the most popular, or the most sacred subjects – the politicians, the taxes, the celebrities, the family, and even death, and oh yes, love too! We can even mock or make fun of the daily news that appears in the papers. I've done that quite a bit. Earlier I used to pick up some news item that interested and amused me and would write a short piece. Here's a sampling – you all might have heard or read a few years back about the Shilpa Shetty-Richard Gere kiss-on-camera imbroglio and the moral

police making a hue and cry about it (as usual) and the relentless media hounding a sulking Shilpa. Here was my take on it then:

"So what if Gere kissed me  
In jest and style filmy?",  
Thus fumed the spunky Shilpa  
Refusing to say "mea culpa"  
At a press meet quite stormy!

In my bumbling, stumbling ways, I discovered that there is actually no defined genre in English Literature for humorous poetry. In fact, literary scholars have not really bothered to undertake a study of humorous poetry-writing as an art. They often club all funny poems into a vague category called Light Verse and view them as undeserving of any serious consideration or attention...

Some of the poets of the yore spiced up their poems with wit and humour and became famous for it. These include Edward Lear (the father of Limericks that were compiled in his Book of Nonsense), Ogden Nash, Arther Guiterman, Harry Graham and Dorothy Parker, to name a few. As this piece ambles along, I'll quote something from each of these poets and may be, some more too. These poets were known for their humorous poetic styles and the innovative devices they employed to convey the underlying wit in their poesy. Here are some really nice ones by Ogden Nash:

A fly and a flea in a flue  
Were imprisoned, so what could they do?  
Said the fly, "Let us flee!"  
"Let us fly!", said the flea  
So they flew through a flaw in the flue

--

A tutor who tooted the flute  
Tried to tutor two tooters to toot  
Said the two to the tutor,  
“Is it harder to toot, or  
To tutor two tooters to toot?”

All decidedly mind boggling but interesting and funny tongue twisters! And here’s another one, whose authorship continues to be debatable but most believe that this one too is another Ogden Nash special:

There was a young lady of Munich  
Whose appetite simply was unique.  
She contentedly cooed,  
“There’s nothing like food,”  
As she let out a tuck in her tunic.

If we know our intended audience, then we could tailor the language and references - “jokes” - according to their interests or fields they work for. Here’s one by Dr. A H Reginald Buller (A botanist himself) that would amuse someone interested in Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity:

There was a young lady named Bright  
Whose speed was faster than light.  
She started one day  
In a relative way,  
And returned on the previous night.

**So, what is humorous poetry really?**

Witty and humorous poems usually

- Tickle our funny bone
- Bring a smile to our face
- Have us laughing out loud
- Are natural and playful
- Most have some underlying wit and wisdom
- Generally, amuse us

Sadly, some consider writing humorous poetry as some kind of a terrible crime – something flippant and undeserving of any serious attention. But if you ask the film folks they'll tell you that comedy is serious business, as it is easier to churn out a tearjerker than a rib-tickler!

#### **What are the key elements of humorous poems?**

**RHYME:** Rhyme is an important tool for creating light verse. Almost all the humorous poems written in English have a pattern of end-rhymes. Rhyme delights the reader's senses and also makes the poem easier to understand.

**RHYTHM:** In comedy, timing is everything. The poetic element of rhythm is often used cleverly in witty verses. Writers can skilfully and purposefully use rhythm

- To propel the reader along in a fast gallop or
- To slow down the reader for a longer look, or
- To surprise the reader with something sudden and unexpected at the end of the ride.

Here's an example in a short poem called "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke:

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

Here's another example of good rhythm in a short poem called "Because I could not Stop for Death" by Emily Dickison:

Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me;  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.

**REFRAIN:** Another element used in humorous poetry is repetition and is called Refrain. A Refrain is

- A repeated line or
- A repeated part of a line that is used throughout a poem

Refrains can be used to repeat a silly phrase, or a funny name, to reinforce the light tone.

An example of this is in the poem "Macavity: The Mystery Cat" by T. S. Eliot, that includes two refrains that employ the cat's name throughout the poem:

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,  
He's broken every human law, he breaks the law of gravity.  
His powers of levitation would make a fakir stare,  
And when you reach the scene of crime – Macavity's not there!

**Refrain Forms:** Refrains can be used for puns or silly phrases as a part of the rhyme scheme. Two popular Refrain forms are the **Triolet** and the **Villanelle**.

**Triolet** is used in English poetry exclusively for humor and has eight lines. Here is an example of "Triolet" by G.K. Chesterton:

I wish I were a jelly fish

That cannot fall downstairs:  
Of all the things I wish to wish  
I wish I were a jelly fish  
That hasn't any cares,  
And doesn't even have to wish  
"I wish I were a jelly fish  
That cannot fall downstairs."

**Villanelle** is another refrain form. It is used for both serious poetry and light verses. It has stanzas of three lines (tercets). The most common form in English is the Passerat model, which has nineteen lines. Traditionally, all the lines have the same meter and length. A modern example of this form of witty poetry using the two refrains for humor is "Voice Mail Villanelle" by Dan Skwire:

We're grateful that you called today  
And sorry that we're occupied.  
We will be with you right away.

Press one if you would like to stay,  
Press two if you cannot decide.  
We're grateful that you called today.

Press three to end this brief delay,  
Press four if you believe we've lied.  
We will be with you right away.

Press five to hear some music play,  
Press six to speak with someone snide.  
We're grateful that you called today.

Press seven if your hair's turned gray,

Press eight if you've already died.  
We will be with you right away.

Press nine to hear recordings say  
That service is our greatest pride.  
We're grateful that you called today.  
We will be with you right away.

**Terse Verse:** Terse verse is a form poetry with just a few lines and rhymes to make a single point. The title of the poem may or may not be an important part of the humor. Types of terse verse include the Epigram and the Epitaph.

**Epigram:** An epigram imparts wisdom or a memorable message in a few words in an impactful manner. It can be serious or funny. Epigrams are carefully written. The title too may be a part of the joke. A famous humorous epigram is by Dorothy Parker titled "News Item" and it goes thus:

"News Item"

Men seldom make passes  
At girls who wear glasses.

This may not be that applicable in the 21st century when most women wear contact lens – yours truly excepted!

An Epitaph is a poem which could go on the tombstone of a dead person. Funny ones do rhyme, but the meter may not be exact. Some poets like to write their own funny epitaph before they die! John Gray's "My Own Epitaph" is an example:

Life is a jest, and all things show it;

I thought so once, but now I know it.

I too tried to write an epitaph for myself in a poem called “A Riff Raff’s Epitaph” that concludes thus:

Amidst a growth of unruly weed,  
My epitaph shall thus aptly read:  
“Here lies a silly, stupid riff-raff,  
Who doesn’t need an epitaph”

**Satire:** Satire is a serious art that’s funny and is often employed to ridicule something or someone. Satire and irony make people laugh. But they’re also serious, thought-provoking and multidimensional in a hard-hitting but humorous way.

I believe politics and politicians are easily and perhaps deservedly too, the butt of a lot of witty poems with satire. Here’s my own take on who else but NaMo and RaGa, who were so much in news those days with the 2014 elections not too far away: titled “”:

Toms & Jerrys

There is this confused Tom  
With a scheming super mom,  
Who’s willing to go to any length  
To give her Tom political strength  
And holds a powerful RaGa bomb.

And then there’s this Tom on the prowl,  
Who does not mew but lets out a growl.  
The rise of this NaMo from a nano  
Boasting of much political ammo,  
Has all his opponents crying foul...



As the wily Toms try their luck,  
The scared Jerrys run amuck.  
Not knowing which Tom to trust  
And which Tom's plans to bust,  
Jerrys now feel like a lame duck.

A very funny and delightful form of humour is self-effacing humour. In fact, there was one politician, the redoubtable Woodrow Wilson the 18th President of USA who self-effacingly said this often about himself, so much so that people also credited him of its authorship! I can't think of a better example of self-effacing humour than this one...

As a beauty, I'm not a great star  
There are others more handsome by far  
But my face, I don't mind it  
Because I am behind it -  
It's the people in the front that I jar!

Later it came to be known that this piece called "The Face" was written by a minor poet named Anthony Euwer who also wrote this one called "The Hands":

The hands, they are made to assist  
In supplying the features with grist,  
There are only a few-  
As a rule about two-  
And are hitched to the end of the wrist.

Euwer is also credited with writing this nice piece called "The Smile":

No matter how grouchy you are feeling,  
You'll find the smile more or less healing.

It grows in a wreath  
All around the front teeth –  
Thus preserving the face from congealing.

There is also a genre of poetry writing that is light hearted, naughty and leans slightly towards a mild shade of blue or raunchy. Here's are a few examples:

A bather whose clothing was strewed  
By winds that had left her quite nude  
Saw a young man come along...  
And unless we are wrong,  
You thought the next line would be lewd.

--

There was a young man from Bengal  
Who went to a fancy dress ball  
He went for fun  
Dressed as a bun  
And a dog ate him up in the hall.

--

There was a pert lass from Madras  
Who had a remarkable ass –  
Not rounded and pink  
As you probably think.  
It was gray, had long ears and ate grass.

Then, there is a style of humorous poetry that reflects black humour:

Here is one of my own called "The Nine Lives of a Cat":

A cat on despondency side,  
Decided to commit suicide.  
She went under the wheels  
Of eight automobiles.  
Under the ninth, she died.

And here's one by the irrepressible Edward Lear (1812-1888), the Father of Limericks:

A cute debutante from St. Paul  
Wore a newspaper dress to a ball.  
The dress caught fire  
And burnt her entire  
Front page, sporting section, and all!

One more:

There was a young fellow of Lyme  
Who lived with three wives at a time.  
When asked, "Why the third?"  
He said, "One is absurd,  
And bigamy, sir is a crime".

And here's another:

An amoeba named Sam and his brother  
Were having a drink with each other;  
In the midst of their quaffing  
They split their sides laughing  
And each of them is now a mother.

And in passing, the 19th Century humorist Gelett Burgess who added to the English Language words like “blurb” and “bromide” (meaning an unworn platitude”), wrote the famous “Purple Cow”:

I never saw a purple cow,  
I never hope to see one.  
But I can tell you anyhow,  
That I'd rather see than be one!

Burgess became somewhat exasperated with the success of this poem, of which he was constantly reminded. A few years later, he penned a riposte that became almost as well known as the original:

Ah, yes, I wrote the "Purple Cow" -  
I'm Sorry, now, I wrote it;  
But I can tell you Anyhow  
I'll Kill you if you Quote it!

Here's another from the same poet:

I'd rather have fingers than toes,  
I'd rather have ears than a nose;  
And as for my hair  
I'm glad it's still there.  
I'll be awfully sad when it goes.

William Cosmo Monkhouse, another 19th century poet wrote this classic one:

There was a young lady of Niger  
Who smiled and rode on a tiger.

They returned from the ride  
With the lady inside –  
And smile on the face of the tiger.

Here's another popular one:

There was an old man from Nantucket  
Who kept all his cash in a bucket  
His daughter named Nan  
Ran away with a man  
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

It is quite evident from the above quoted poems that limericks have contributed hugely to funny or humorous poetry.

In conclusion, I'd like to quote Alan Alexander Milne, the writer who popularized Teddy Bear, Winnie the Pooh and a whole lot of children's poetry and stories. And here's what he said of light verse:

“it is the supreme exhibition of somebody's definition of art, the concealment of art. In the result, it observes the most exact laws of rhythm and metre as if by a happy accident, and in a sort of nonchalant spirit of mockery at the real poets who do it on purpose.” The best writers of humorous poetry or the light verse are indeed masters of this poetic form.

Here's a must-read, cute and naughty poem by Joanne Bailey Baxter, Ohio :

**WHEN I'M AN OLD LADY**

When I'm an old lady, I'll live with each kid,  
and bring so much happiness, just as they did.  
I want to pay back all the joy they've provided.

Returning each deed! Oh, they'll be so excited!  
(When I'm an old lady and live with my kids)

I'll write on the wall with reds, whites and blues,  
and I'll bounce on the furniture wearing my shoes.  
I'll drink from the carton and then leave it out.  
I'll stuff all the toilets and oh, how they'll shout!  
(When I'm an old lady and live with my kids)

When they're on the phone and just out of reach,  
I'll get into things like sugar and bleach.  
Oh, they'll snap their fingers and then shake their head,  
and when that is done, I'll hide under the bed!  
(When I'm an old lady and live with my kids)

When they cook dinner and call me to eat,  
I'll not eat my green beans or salad or meat,  
I'll gag on my okra, spill milk on the table,  
And when they get angry. I'll run. if I'm able!  
(When I'm an old lady and live with my kids)

I'll sit close to the TV, through the channels I'll click,  
I'll cross both eyes just to see if they stick.  
I'll take off my socks and throw one away,  
and play in the mud till the end of the day!  
(When I'm an old lady and live with my kids)

And later in bed, I'll lay back and sigh,  
I'll thank God in prayer and then close my eyes.  
My kids will look down with a smile slowly creeping,  
and say with a groan, "She's so sweet when she's sleeping!"

**Bio**

Having explored the worlds of banking and urban governance in senior positions, Padmaja Iyengar – Paddy is currently the Hon. Lit. Advisor of The Cultural Centre of Vijayawada (CCV). She compiled for CCV the International Multilingual Poetry Anthology ‘Poetic Prism 2015’ that was reckoned as a Record and is currently busy compiling the second edition of the anthology ‘Poetic Prism 2016’.

She also manages an on-line literary networking forum and e-zine [www.ratelyliterature.com](http://www.ratelyliterature.com) that provides a free platform to writers to showcase their works.

Paddy’s maiden poetry collection ‘P-En-Chants’ has been reckoned as a ‘Unique International Record of Excellence’ by the Wonder Book of Records International and India Book of Records for Never-before-attempted Movie Reviews and Management Topics in Rhyming Poetry form.

Besides poetry, she also dabbles in articles, short stories, book reviews and movie reviews (in poetry form) that have appeared in leading Indian newspapers like The Hindu and Hans India and e-zines like Muse India, Boloji.com, DeadSnakes.Blogspot.com, etc. Her poems have also been published in several poetry anthologies.

Paddy regularly participates in discussions on civic and urban governance issues on the electronic media. She was a part of the Round Tables on Smart Cities organized at Hyderabad by the Deputy British High Commission and Foundation for Futuristic Cities.

Paddy writes for pleasure – finds humour in everything...P G Wodehouse being her all-time favourite and inspiration!