



A New Head and a New Heart: Laughter in Life and Literature

In the film *Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes is hurt that his best friend Dr. Watson is moving out to get married. When he meets Watson's fiancée, Mary, he deliberately insults her. Perhaps as he'd hoped, Mary immediately walks out. Unfortunately, so does Watson. The next day, during a sullen carriage ride, Watson demands that Holmes return the waistcoat he once gave him. It looks for a moment as though the bridges are burned—until Watson tosses the waistcoat out the window and, with a faint smirk, catches Holmes's eye. His repaying Holmes with a joke tells us that their friendship is still intact.

Laughter is a strong tie to bind friends together. It is also a cord of many strands with many different roles. We sometimes distinguish between laughing “with” people and laughing “at” them. Friendship is usually associated with the first. In C. S. Lewis's dystopian novel *That Hideous Strength*, Mark feels the first stirrings of resistance to the despotic new regime when he sees, as the despots don't, the goodness of men gathering in an ordinary English pub: “The whole scene was reminding him of drinks and talks long ago—of laughter and arguments in undergraduate days. Somehow one had made friends more easily then.” Laughing with someone is an easy way to make a new friend. But an old friend knows that sometimes the greatest act of friendship is laughing at you. Sometimes what a friend needs most is a new view of things—a new head—and laughter can help provide it.

A New Head: Laughing At

In *Paradiso*, Dante the narrator is lifted up through the planetary spheres above the

earth as Beatrice and other saints reveal to him the nature of God's workings. From the highest planet, Saturn, Dante looks down to see how far he's come:

With my eyes I returned through
every one
of the seven spheres below, and
saw this globe of ours
to be such that I smiled, so mean did
it appear.
That opinion which judges it as least
I now approve as best . . .
The little patch of earth that makes
us here so fierce.

Surprising as it might seem, heaven for Dante works a little like the punchline of a joke. A joke begins by structuring our perception of things in a certain way. The punchline makes us realize that our initial interpretation was mistaken. When our misperceptions are corrected by new insight, we laugh. Dante smiles because he now sees the gap between what he thought the world meant and what it actually means. From his new perspective in the heavens, he can laugh at humankind and its undue attachment to the little earth. Of course, he's also laughing at himself—at the attachment that makes us fierce. Lacking a heavenly ascent, the next best way of changing our perspective can be laughter.

In college, my professors urged me to apply for a certain prestigious scholarship. They were enthusiastic about my chances. Ultimately, I was not even selected for an interview. Deeply hurt, I turned to one friend for support, and she was so sympathetic, so sorrowful, that she made me tear

up worse than before. Another friend had a different response. “So you didn't get an interview. Hm. I guess you must be pretty stupid. I mean, they interview, what, a whole twenty people in the country? I guess you must be *really* stupid if you didn't even get an interview.” I stopped crying and started laughing. I said, “You're funny.” He said, “You're stupid.”

My friend got me to laugh at my situation by changing my perspective on it. When my first friend offered sympathy, she reinforced my sense of bereavement—which came ultimately from my sense of my own self-importance. My other friend helped me see how misguided my sense of self actually was. That was an act of friendship, because much of our unhappiness and many of our mistakes come from a false understanding of ourselves.

In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Emma seeks to arrange a marriage for her friend Harriet. After inducing Harriet to love a man who scorns her, Emma learns that Harriet has now fallen in love with Mr. Knightley—the man whom, Emma only realizes at that moment, she herself loves. She feels bewildered and humiliated: “How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself . . . The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!” The first step towards a new head, she realizes, is to “thoroughly understand her own heart.”

Understanding oneself is a foundational precept in a long humanist ethical tradition. To live a good life, you must cultivate your virtues and uproot your vices—which means you must know what these are. And so moral philosophers like Cicero enjoin their readers, *nosce teipsum*, know thyself.

The difficulty, of course, is that it's hard to see your own face. You need a mirror. For Cicero, one mirror is friendship: "When a man thinks of a true friend, he is looking at himself in the mirror." Befriending a good person and listening to his or her judgment is a way to see your own shortcomings and overcome them.

Another mirror is comedy. Cicero was said to have defined comedy as "an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, and an image of the truth." Comedy, by making us laugh at the faults of others, also reflects back at us those same follies in ourselves. In his poem "To a Louse", Robert Burns teasingly describes the proud, well-dressed woman sitting in front of him at church who, unknowingly, hosts a plump grey louse in her elegant bonnet. He concludes, "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us! / It wad frae monie a blunder free us." In fact, we have such a gift. We enjoy it when people who, as close to us as Burns is to the bonnet, can see our faults and help us see them too—through laughter.

In *Lord Edgware Dies*, detective Hercule Poirot takes in his friend Captain Hastings, after Hastings loses his home and savings through bad investments. At the episode's end, Hastings comes into a large sum of money. His friends Poirot, Inspector Japp, and Miss Lemon congratulate him and tell him about an "interesting investment opportunity" they saw advertised: a new railway line from Liverpool to Carlisle. "Oh, yes?" says Hastings, ears pricking. "Of course they will have to construct a bridge over six miles of water," says Poirot. "And then they've got to get across the Cumbrian Mountains," adds Japp. "The Scafell Pike's only three thousand feet high," reassures Miss Lemon. When they turn brightly back to Hastings, he smiles appreciatively and says, "You know, I think I'll put this in the bank." What makes their lesson so effective? Just as jokes are less funny, lessons are less memorable if someone else explains the whole thing. We learn best when our teachers let us draw the conclusion for ourselves. His friends set up their lesson as a joke, and so Hastings *himself* supplies the punchline.

You can, of course, examine yourself in stern solitude rather than through sociable laughter. But this approach has its dangers. Scrupulous self-examination can help you see your flaws—but you might start to see only those flaws. Sir Gawain, in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight*, falls into this trap. Gawain, a knight of the Round Table, promises to accept a series of blows from the mysterious Green Knight. But when Gawain goes to encounter the Knight, he violates his promise by secretly wearing a magical green girdle to protect himself from physical harm. The Green Knight nicks Gawain's neck with his axe as a "just desert" for compromising his courage and honesty. Gawain confesses his fault with bitter self-reproach. The Knight laughs, declares Gawain purified by his confession, and gives him the girdle as a gift. Gawain declares, however, that he will wear it as a "token of untruth in which I was taken . . . all the while I may live."

Gawain's adventure lets him see his faults. But now those faults are all he can see. Although the Knight told him that he was "polished by that penance, and purified as clean / As if thou had never sinned", he still dons the girdle "in sign of my sin", declaring, "sin can not be hidden, / For where it once is attached depart will it never." Gawain refuses to believe that anything can wash away sin. He wears the girdle as a sign of its continual stain. To the poem's Christian readers, Gawain would seem dangerously close to despair. It is at just such moments that we need our friends.

In *Emma*, one of Emma's greatest blunders is the wrong kind of "laughing at". At a party, she makes a cruel joke at the expense of her impoverished neighbor Miss Bates. Mr. Knightley chastises Emma sternly. This pains him, but he insists on "proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now." Mr. Knightley does not simply reprimand Emma's faults. He expresses his firm hope that she can overcome them. Indeed, without that hope, there would be

no reason for the reprimand. A real friend helps us see our flaws in the act of reminding us that our flaws are not all they see. This combination of critique and encouragement is sometimes best conveyed by "laughing at".

Gawain returns to King Arthur's court to recount his adventure and explain that he now wears this girdle as a sign of his faults. Arthur sympathetically attempts to comfort him. The knights and ladies, by contrast, "Laugh loudly there-at." They decide to make a joke with Gawain and his self-imposed penance as its punchline. They will *all* wear green girdles. Neither Arthur's comfort nor the Knight's absolution could make Gawain remove the girdle. But the court's joke can change its meaning. When the whole court wears it, the girdle no longer represents indelible sin but the "renown of the Round Table". It is a joke on Gawain, because it takes the message he intended to send and turns it upside-down. But it is also an act of friendship, to save him from despair over sin. They laugh at him "lovingly". God almost plays a similar joke with the cross. Once a symbol of death, the cross is transformed by God's sacrificial love into a symbol of death's defeat. The poem's ending captures this reversal: "May He Who bore the crown of thorns / Bring us to his bliss!"

A New Heart: Laughing Despite

Sometimes we need our friends to laugh lovingly at us to correct our mistaken perception of ourselves and the world. But at other times, our perceptions are not mistaken at all. The world overwhelms us as tragic or terrifying because, sometimes, it is. How can we find the courage and hope to face it? When friends help us laugh despite the tragedy and terror. They can't always change the world, but they can give us a change of heart.

The film *Notting Hill*, although a light-hearted romantic comedy, features people with real problems. They lose their jobs, get trapped in abusive relationships, and are abandoned by their spouses. One woman suffers a paralyzing injury that means she

and her husband can never have children. But we learn all this within a specific frame. The characters are enjoying a dinner party together when one says, “We really are the most desperate lot of underachievers. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. In fact, I think it’s something we should take pride in. I’m gonna give the last brownie as a prize to the saddest act here.” The characters tell their stories with a mix of serious reflection and wry self-deprecation. The scene ends with their dissolving into laughter as the last person’s tragic tale is declared a “pathetic attempt to hog the brownie”. The friendship is what makes the dinner table a charmed circle. Here, they can tell their troubles, face the pain they bring, and contain that painfulness within the shared laughter that reminds them of what does make their lives worth living.

It might seem like laughter can fix only small problems—you can only make light of what was already light to begin with. But laughter has greater power than that. J. K. Rowling’s popular *Harry Potter* series depicts a large-scale battle of good against evil. The Dark Lord Voldemort is seizing power over the wizards’ world. Those enemies he cannot enslave, he kills. In the final book, Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione set out to find and destroy the magical sources of Voldemort’s strength. The journey is long and arduous. They don’t know where to go. Ron abandons them. We see the toll this takes on Hermione, when the film shows her huddled mournfully in a corner of their tent. Harry also sees her distress. He goes to her and extends his hand in an invitation to dance. He waltzes, spins, and twirls her until he helps his friend’s fear and sadness dissolve, for a moment, into laughter.

This brief scene shows how keenly the

filmmakers appreciated Rowling’s insight into the power of laughter and friendship to combat evil and fear. In one book, Harry learns how to fight a boggart, a shape-shifting monster that takes the form of whatever its victim fears most. His teacher explains, “The thing that really finishes a boggart is *laughter*.” You fight the boggart with the charm *Ridikulous*, which forces it into a comical shape. But it isn’t defeated until you actually laugh at it—and that is not necessarily easy.

Rowling shows that laughter and joy, besides being very powerful, are also incredibly difficult. A worse monster than the boggart is the dementor, an undead being that sucks out its victim’s soul through the mouth. Dementors weaken victims before their attack by draining all happiness from them. When a dementor is near, you remember all your worst memories, your life’s darkest moments. The charm that repels a dementor requires that you relive the happiest memory you can. But many people can’t fight dementors because remembering happiness proves too hard. They give in, as Gawain almost does, to despair.

The happy ending, or *eucatastrophe*, that belongs to fairy-stories and comedies is sometimes castigated by critics as escapism, wish-fulfillment, or weakness. But the happiness that it takes to fight a dementor requires tremendous strength—as much strength as it takes to maintain hope in the face of danger or charity in the face of hatred. One night, Harry is attacked, not by a dementor, but by Voldemort himself. His spirit invades Harry’s body and possesses him, telling him that he and his friends have lost. They are so *weak*, so *vulnerable*! And Harry almost succumbs—until he sees his friends come into the room.

In the BBC show *Sherlock*, Sherlock Holmes also comes close to death. He is shot and has a split-second to figure out how to survive. He does not perform one of his usual brilliant deductions. Instead, he imagines himself speaking to his brother Mycroft, to Molly at the hospital, to Anderson in forensics. He asks them questions: What is the bullet doing? Which way should he fall? When the aloof, arrogant detective needs help most badly, he thinks of his friends. Harry does the same. To fight Voldemort, Harry remembers his happiest moments with his best friends. He remembers finding them safe and sound after their first dangerous adventure. He remembers the sound of Hermione’s laughter. And he gasps to Voldemort, “You’re the weak one, and you’ll never know love or friendship. And I feel sorry for you.” At that, Voldemort’s spirit is expelled from Harry’s body.

In Rowling’s world, friendship, love, and laughter provide some of the most powerful weapons against the evil of destruction and the evil of despair. The charm that repels a dementor is *Expecto Patronum*. *Patronum* which comes from the Latin *patronus*, a term which, like *paracletus*, means “defender” or “advocate.” *Expecto* is the same Latin verb used in the Nicene Creed: *expecto resurrectionem mortuorum, et vitam venturi saeculi*: “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” It is a verb of hope. Rowling and other great artists reveal powerful lifelines that can rescue hope from despair: enjoying friendship and remembering friends; laughing and the memory of laughter.

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