

## Tone and Humor

Target Academic Level: High School & College

### Lesson Overview:

After reading *Glass Bikini* by Kristin Bock, students will look closely at “Overcome”, “How Rabbits Finally Took Over the World”, and “In Back of the Liquor Store” to examine the effect that tone has when it comes to humor in poetry.

### Before Lecture:

Read the three selected poems (“Overcome”, “How Rabbits Finally Took Over the World”, and “In Back of the Liquor Store”) aloud as a class.

### Lecture:

Though poetry may be better known for dealing with serious subject matters like love and loss, poets from Shakespeare to Stephen Dobyns, and now Kristin Bock, have shown that there is room for wit in poetry. There are many ways to make use of poetic devices, like figurative language and word choice, in order to heighten humor in a poem. For “Glass Bikini”, we are going to look at how tone can be utilized in order to create humor.

- For example, the poem “Overcome”:
  - The poem opens with: “And it came to pass, art became extinct.”
    - “And it came to pass,” is spoken in a matter-of-fact tone that reads as though what the speaker is saying is inevitable. Humor here is created by the assumption that the reader is taking what is being said as truth, and is along for the ride with the speaker, willing to suspend disbelief for the duration of the poem because of the speaker’s certainty.
    - “*People whizzed in Duchamp’s missing fountain.*”
      - In the shorter length of the sentence and lack of embellishment or wordiness, the tone here creates humor in the way that it fails to acknowledge its own absurdity-- something nearly taboo is being described in a practical, nonchalant way. The contrast between what is being described and the rational tone creates humor.
    - “They blew each other like whistles where *L’Origine du monde* used to hang.”
      - In the simile “blew each other like whistles,” the speaker’s tone becomes colloquial and joking, as though they are talking with a close friend. Humor is created by the speaker’s boldness in making a statement to the reader that might be viewed as inappropriate to say to someone that is not a friend.
- “How Rabbits Finally Took Over the World”

- The poem opens with: “Some time after the extinction of whales, babies were born in pieces.”
  - This beginning works similarly to the beginning of “Overcome” in the sense that the tone is very certain of itself, and asserts that what is being said is true. The contrast in the rational tone and the obvious ridiculousness of what is being said produces humor.
- The poem goes on to say: “We dumped the remains of our babies in the woods... To our dismay, the single parts arose and animated.”
  - The tone here is humorous in the way that it defies expectation. The line, “We dumped the remains of our babies in the woods,” in the world as the reader knows it, would generally cause distress and grief. Bock works against this expectation by keeping the tone rather passionless and laconic, stating simply: “To our dismay, the single parts arose and animated.”
  - The use of the word “dismay” produces humor in the way that it seems to the reader to be a grand understatement-- in the world as we know it, losing your child, then watching their remains animate would likely cause an emotional response far beyond ‘dismay’.
- The lines that read: “One species sported a head, a lung, and a huge, inverted foot with eight toes. It hopped around at an astonishing speed, and in inclement weather, it raised its foot above its head like an umbrella,” also employ tone in order to generate humor.
  - The use of the word “species” is just outside of conversational diction, thus, it comes off as serious, even scientific. The speaker talking so certainly about this creature as ‘truth’ is humorous to the reader, since they know that what is being described is fantasy.
  - Similarly, the use of words like “sported”, “astonishing speed”, and “inclement weather” create humor in the way that they are words that are so familiar to the reader, yet they are being used to describe something that is entirely unfamiliar and strange to the reader. The rather mundane use of language paired with the unfamiliar creature becomes almost uncanny, and certainly humorous.
  - The use of image in the lines, “in inclement weather, it raised its foot above its head like an umbrella,” works similarly. Here, the humor comes from using everyday language and unconcerned tone to talk about something that is mythical, and rather droll.
- “In Back of the Liquor Store”
  - The poem reads: “When I turn the corner, a giant pair of scissors looms over me and leers as if I’m some kind of rodent. *I’m just looking for a place take a drink, I say, I’m road-weary and the heat is brutal.*”

- Tone is used in these lines to produce humor in the way that the speaker is unflinching in their storytelling, despite the obvious fictionality of what is being said, from the perspective of the reader.
- The use of the simile, “as if I’m some kind of rodent,” adds humor in the way that it demonstrates that the speaker’s emotions have been affected by this pair of scissors, as they have been made to feel belittled. To the reader, the absurdity of being belittled by a pair of scissors is not acknowledged in the speaker’s tone; thus, becoming humorous.
- The lines: “I watch it cut down the boxes. *Wow, that was deft*, I say. It pretends to ignore me, but I can tell it’s glad for the praise,” create humor in a similar way.
  - First, “*Wow, that was deft*,” becomes humorous in its own ridiculousness: complimenting a pair of scissors, to the reader, is silly. Yet, the tone of the speaker remains terse and sincere. Again, this contrast causes humor in the poem.
  - “It pretends, to ignore me, but I can tell it’s glad for the praise,” also capitalizes on this humor: the image of a pair of scissors being shy and disregarding a compliment, in itself, is funny for the reader. The addition of the speaker’s analysis of, “I can tell it’s glad for the praise,” further compounds this humor. Again, the speaker is being quite logical and composed while speaking about something that is obviously make-believe to the reader.

#### Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What other poetic devices did you see Bock utilize in “Glass Bikini” to create humor?
2. What about the content of these poems makes them fit for humor?
3. How else might tone be used to create humor in a poem, other than the contrast in tone and subject matter that we discussed?
4. What other ways did you notice tone was expressed in these poems? Think about sentence length, word choice, etc. How might these things differ to create a serious tone instead of a humorous one?
5. When do you think it is useful to bring humor into poetry?

#### Writing Prompts:

1. In “Overcome”, Bock creates a humorous scene of what might become of a place like an art museum in a dystopian society. Think about a place that might be very different in a dystopian society-- the hospital, school, the library, etc.-- and, using the prose form as Bock does, write a humorous scene of this place.
2. “How Rabbits Finally Took Over the World” introduces the reader to new species and creatures. In your own poem, invent a new creature and write a bit about its life-- what might it do in inclement weather? How does it move? What is it called?

3. As discussed, humor can be created by contrasting tone and subject matter. Think of a serious or absurd scenario, as Bock does in these poems, and write about them using a composed, detached tone. Use this contrast to allow the poem to be funny about something otherwise serious.

## Writing Social and Political Commentary in Poetry

Target Academic Level: High School & College

### Lesson Overview:

After reading *Glass Bikini* by Kristin Bock, students will closely read the poems “Everything Coming Up Rifles”, “Pluto”, and “The President’s Dream”. These poems will be used to explore techniques that can be used when writing political and social commentary/critique.

### Before Lecture:

Have students read the poems “Everything Coming Up Rifles”, “Pluto”, and “The President’s Dream”, and outloud. Lead a brief class discussion on what each poem might be saying about current societal and political issues.

### Lecture:

In the midst of a collection that is largely fantastical and dreamlike, Bock brings important issues, like the current social and political climate, to the surface. While the impulse may be to use very serious and literal language to speak about such topics, it is not despite their dreamlike tones and narratives that Bock’s poems are successful, but *through* their illusory dispositions that these poems are able to enter important conversations. Through poetic devices like imagery, symbolism, and metaphor, Bock appeals to the imagination and emotions in the discussion of larger matters.

- For example, examine the poem “Everything Coming Up Rifles”:
  - This poem speaks on the issue of gun violence and gun rights, which is an ongoing conversation in today’s society. Instead of plainly stating statistics and views on this issue, “Everything Coming Up Rifles” speaks entirely in image and metaphor.
  - The title “Everything Coming Up Rifles”, of course, plays on the saying, “everything coming up roses,” which generally has positive connotations. The beginning images fall in line with this saying, keeping the idea of rifles in the place of ‘roses’ with the lines, “Rifles are pushing up in the garden,” and “Bouquets of rifles adorn our tables.”
    - The saying that usually has positive connotations and the images that are seen as beautiful (flowers in the garden and a bouquet) now replaced with something like a rifle is very unsettling by contrast and by moving away from expectations. Thus, the use of imagery is able to affect the reader emotionally.
  - The poem then allows rifles to enter other images: “Shadows on the floorboards are rifles,” “Sidewalks are cobbled with rifles,” and “Coloring books are thick with rifles.”

- The mundaneness of each example, from sidewalk cobblestones to coloring books, is able to communicate the idea that guns are becoming common and typical in today's society.
  - By simply presenting succinct images, like an old view-finder or slideshow, ideas and emotions are clearly conveyed to and felt by the reader.
- The poem "Pluto" similarly works by turning away from the impulse to speak literally about important issues.
    - "Pluto" is written almost as an invitation or advertisement. Bock writes: "Come bomb cookers, come poison maskers," "Come water boarders," and "come lone gunmen," calling to specific groups of people.
    - In lines like, "Come bomb cookers," Bock is able to bring about conversations on war. With lines like, "come fag haters, come proud proud boys," Bock brings about a larger conversation on homophobia and gay rights, and in lines like, "come joyful lynchers," Bock enters the ongoing conversation on racism.
      - Similar to "Everything Coming Up Rifles" Bock does not need to say much in order for these ideas to reach the reader; this succinctness alone speaks to the overarching knowledge, and therefore prevalence, of each issue in today's world.
    - Staying with the imaginary nature of the collection, the poem ends: "there's a place for you here, inside my vacuous core of ice and ash," calling back to the poem's title and speaker, "Pluto".
      - Instead of outwardly stating the writer's emotions towards each group listed by the poem, Bock creates an imaginary situation in which the writer would readily see each group mentioned sent away to Pluto. The fantasy situation presented uses the imagined scenario symbolically to show the underlying stance of the poem.
      - Speaking representatively through the imagined situation allows for the addition of, "inside my vacuous core of ice and ash," which indicates suffering for those mentioned in the poem. This, again, allows the poem's underlying beliefs to be inferred without stating them plainly.
- The poem "The President's Dream" also uses an imaginary scenario as a way of conveying a stance on current issues.
    - "The President's Dream" creates a fictional story of the president retelling a dream, thus speaking from the point of view of the president.
      - In the president's voice, the poem says, "So, there I was with the kid, the board, the pitcher and the sopping cloth and it seemed like the right thing to do."

- The use of a fictional situation allows the writer to portray the character in a way that fits their own understanding of them, thus demonstrating the poem's stance on the given character.
- Here, using the character's own voice to rationalize harming a child with a dismissive and deductive tone through words like, "So," and "it seemed like the right thing to do," demonstrates how the use of fantasy allows the writer to clearly show their understanding of a certain character.
- Because Bock is using the scenario of a dream, the poem is not bound by reality. This allows for lines like, "Then, a giant hand lifted me off the ship and threw me onto the arterial ground. Sometimes monsters are so big you can't see them."
  - By the portrayal of the president character in the rest of the poem, the reader can infer that the line, "Sometimes monsters are so big you can't see them," is speaking towards the character themselves. The element of dream and fantasy allows for this symbolic use of language.
- The poem ends, "There should be a word for a kiss between monsters. For stuck ponies. For kids in cages like that."
  - The fact that the poem remains in the realm of dream and fantasy makes the end of the poem even more shocking, as the reader will recognize, "For kids in cages like that," from the current border crisis in the United States.
  - By placing an image that can be read as entirely true amongst images that are obviously imaginary, Bock demonstrates the idea that the current reality is 'unreal' and absurd enough to exist inside of an imagined nightmare.

#### Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. How does using poetic elements like metaphor and symbolism impact your relationship or reaction to the issues being discussed in Bock's poems?
2. What is the effect of entering societal and political dialogues through fantasy and the imagination rather than speaking literally? What is the benefit of this? Are there any downfalls?
3. Each of the poems that we looked at today were written in prose form. What about this form seems to be fitting for this kind of content?
4. What other poems from this collection did you see working similarly to speak on current issues? Did they use any other poetic techniques?

#### Writing Prompts:

1. As mentioned, the poem "Everything Coming Up Rifles" is almost like a slideshow, or a photo album, and works by presenting image after image to create an emotional reaction in the reader. Think of a current issue that is important to you, this can be the climate

crisis, issues of immigration, rights of marginalized groups, and so on. Once you decide on an issue that matters to you, think of an object that is symbolic of that issue, like the rifle in Bock's poem. Enter this object into a series of images like Bock does in "Everything Coming Up Rifles".

2. "Pluto" is written almost like an advertisement: the planet is speaking almost as though it is a travel destination, or a nice place to move to. Working with a current societal or political issue, write a poem that functions as an imagined advertisement. It can be somewhat humorous and sarcastic like "Pluto", or more serious.
3. "The President's Dream" uses a fantasy situation, complete with monsters and ponies, to communicate the absurdity of a societal issue. Think about an issue in today's society that seems absurd to you, and plainly write an image that demonstrates this issue down on paper. Now, create a fantasy situation that is obviously imaginary and nightmare-like, using what you have written down as the poem's last line.



## Elements of Fantasy in Poems, Differentiating Prose and Poetry

Target Academic Level: High School & College

### Lesson Overview:

After students have read *Glass Bikini* by Kristen Bock, the class will analyze and discuss “The Gift”, “A Snowman Crying Tears of Fire”, and “Field Trip to the White House” to learn more about how to use elements of fantasy in a work of poetry.

### Before Lecture:

Have students read “The Gift”, “A Snowman Crying Tears of Fire”, and “Field Trip to the White House” outloud with the understanding that today’s lecture will focus on the use of fantasy in poetry, and different ways that poetry is different than prose forms.

### Lecture:

Though poetry often enters the realm of image and symbol, outright fantasy is something typically more prevalent in longer written forms, like short stories and novels. Poetry has long dealt with matters of the mind and heart, which seemingly doesn’t very often lead one to the illusory or hallucinatory imagination. However, Kristen Bock sustains a dreamlike quality for the entirety of her collection, *Glass Bikini*. By marrying elements of fantasy with elements of poetry, Bock is able to bring the world of fantasy into her poems.

- As an example, take the poem “The Gift”.
  - The poem begins in a way that calls towards fantasy/fairytale conventions: “In the beginning, there were Flame Trees.”
    - “In the beginning,” is reminiscent of, “Once upon a time,” opening to an imaginary past, which Bock does here with the mention of “Flame Trees.”
  - The poem continues in a way that nods towards the storytelling tone of fairytales in which an imaginary world is presented as factual, and with great detail.
    - This can be seen in lines like, “Soon, all the pants in the city sparkled with golden thread. The hats in the city were golden thimbles and flashy golden saucers,” and, “When the dresses in the city began to spin into golden tornados the People went blind.”
  - Since the poem is written in the prose form and utilizes many elements of prose writing, Bock utilizes poetic techniques in order to differentiate “The Gift” as poetry.
    - One way that “The Gift” presents itself as poetry is through the use of sound work. This can be seen in the line: “They slid on their bellies in search of the Flame Trees, but the Flame Trees bent down and burned them.”

- Here, we see sibilance used in words like “slid”, “bellies”, and “search”, internal rhyming in words like “bellies” and “trees”, and consonance/alliteration in the repetition of the ‘b’ sound in “bent” and “burned”.
- Similarly, the poem “A Snowman is Crying Tears of Fire” uses sound work to differentiate itself as a poem.
  - “A Snowman Crying Tears of Fire” is also reminiscent of fairytales and fables. This is evident in certain narrative elements, like the fact that a snowman is able to communicate.
    - For example, there are lines of dialogue attributed to the snowman:
 

*“Stigmata, the snowman mouths to the boy, turning his palms to the moon.  
Hot coals for eyes, you know.”*
  - The poem is also similar to fables in the way that it seems to be speaking towards a larger lesson or wisdom.
    - This is demonstrated in the lines, *“We are alike, you and I, says the snowman-- with our corny hats, just waiting for the world to knock us down and laugh,”* and *“I see, says the snowman, and rage never targets its intended.”*
  - “A Snowman Crying Tears of Fire” differentiates itself as a poem in its use of sound-- primarily sibilance.
    - Sibilance can be seen in lines like: *“Why did you hurt me, the snowman asks, his mouth half-crushed, full of snow and stones,”* and *“A snowman is crying tears of fire. They burn straight through his mittens.”*
- The poem “Field Trip to the White House” also uses sound devices to define itself as poetry.
  - The poem itself is narrative and speaks in a storytelling tone, painting a scene of a Gingerbread Man chasing children through the White House.
    - The storytelling voice and the animation of a life-size gingerbread man is reminiscent of fantasy.
  - “The Field Trip to the White House” employs a great deal of sound work and music that sets it apart from prose.
    - For example, the line: *“The towering cookie chases the children. Its high, booming laugh echoes down dim corridors.”*
      - Here, we see alliteration/consonance of the ‘ch’ sound in “chases the children,” alliteration/consonance of ‘d’ in “down dim corridors,” and repetition of the ‘r’ sound in “towering,” “children,” and “corridors.”

- Sound work is also prevalent in the lines, “Nonetheless, parents drag their children through the mazes by the wrists. But the Gingerbread Man is quicker than anyone can imagine.”
  - Consonance is seen in the repetition of ‘n’ in “nonetheless,” “parents,” “children,” “Gingerbread Man,” “can,” and “imagine.” There is a repetition of sound/almost rhyme within and at the end of many words: “children,” “man,” and “can imagine,” and also in “Gingerbread” and “imagine,” with the repetition of ‘gin’.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. Other than sound work, how do these three poems define themselves as poems rather than prose pieces?
2. How does your understanding of and reaction to a fairytale-like story differ when it is presented as a poem?
3. What are potential advantages of bringing elements of prose genres like fantasy, horror, etc. into poetry?
4. In what other ways do you see these poems separating themselves from other prose forms to be read as poetry?

Writing Prompts:

1. “The Gift” imagines a world where something in nature becomes destructive and changes the course of human life. Imagine a fictional plant form like Bock did, and write a poem about how humans might react to this plant form, and vice versa.
2. “A Snowman Crying Tears of Fire” seems to touch on larger human truths about rage and how we are all more alike than we think. Using elements of fantasy, write a poem that reaches towards a larger lesson or truth.
3. With “Field Trip to the White House” in mind, write a poem imagining a field trip to somewhere that students would only go in the fantasy realm-- this can be another planet, an imagined place, or somewhere just out of reach.