Imitation, Parody, and Composition

by PAUL H. GRAWE
Winona State College

I will always remember that day in high school when I was first made aware that composition should be creative and a matter of personal experience. It was not, as we so frequently assume in teaching composition, a great liberating experience. We were given a simple open assignment to write a poem on anything we wished. That was all. And the only thing that came into my mind was a vast terror that I wouldn't know what to write or how to write it.

I also remember the poem I finally handed in. "Inspiration" struck after I had gone to bed the night before the assignment was due. Mentally, I developed the total, two-stanza poem and then rushed from my bed to find pencil and paper before the idea vanished. It was a dreadful piece in heroic couplets, a completely unimaginative, cliché-ridden description of a robin. I was not impressed with what I had written, but I was glad to be done with the assignment.

Too often as I look over open and general area assignment papers today, I have the uneasy feeling that my present students are repeating my own experience with creativity and personal expression. Like me, they are terrified by a blank piece of paper and a vague command to write a poem "about my world," or "my favorite thing." Like my poem, their work seems often a desperate effort to get something, anything down on paper. They are so busy finding something to write on and a basic organizational principle to use, that any more sophisticated matters such as style, a definite attitude toward the material, or a definite sense of the probable reader are totally forgotten or ignored.

There is, of course, a great deal to be said for creativity and for personal expression, but we may need a great deal of sophistication in our assignments if we are to achieve them. Above all, we are unlikely to be able to directly assign students the task of being creative. One of the best methods of indirectly soliciting creativity from students, I believe, is to assign parodies. Parody sets students free in a remarkable and strange way. My best way of explaining why it does so is to say that

parody, right from the beginning, gives the student something to do. Even if he has no idea what he will write on, he is not left confronting a blank sheet of paper. Instead, he can continue to read good work that might provide a vehicle for his composition. As a pure by-product of the assignment, he is paying closer attention to his reading as purposeful, organized, stylized writing.

Once an embryonic idea does come to him, the student can try it on several models to see what kinds of possibilities open up. Whether he succeeds or fails in fitting his idea into a particular model, he is developing the sense that a writing assignment is not a single idea, but a developed pattern. Whether his idea does or doesn't fit a particular model, he is getting some sense that his parody will have to develop definite attitudes toward its audience and material if it is to be a satisfactory imitation or exaggeration of the original.

When the student finally has both an idea and a model in mind, the model will often force him to work up to his fullest abilities. Say the student has chosen to write about a tank crossing Viet Nam as John Steinbeck described a tractor crossing miles of Oklahoma fields in Grapes of Wrath--as one of my students did this year. Steinbeck's choice of hard, clean adjectives will force the student to search for his own, equally powerful adjectives. The student may be tempted to write a melodramatic ending, but Steinbeck's consistent impersonality will force him to see and to imitate the elegance of understatement. While the student working without a model easily slips back "to his own level" or even below it, just to finish the assignment, the student parodist is forced to put his ideas into advanced, artistic forms he could hardly be expected to master on his own.

The amazing thing about parody assignments is that they are so greatly enjoyed by so many students. Students enjoy reading parody--witness Mad Magazine among many others--but more importantly, a great many of them can enjoy writing parody. Last year in one of my classes, more than one fifth of the class wrote extra parodies beyond the assignment, evidently simply because they enjoyed it. The obvious explanation for this joy students take in parody is that parody appeals to a youthful sense of fun. Take, for example, the following parody of Robert Frost's elegantly simple poem "The Pasture," which begins:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'n't be gone long.--You come too.

The student parodist, who was in a sophomore college survey of American literature, wrote:

The Bowling Alley

I'm going out to have an evening's fun;
I'll only stop to have a beer or two
(And wait to see the dancers--just a few):
I'll be gone quite awhile--you stay here.

I'm going out to bowl with the team
That's number one in the league. It's so fun
To go out with the boys after we're done.
I'll be gone quite awhile--you stay here.

The parodist in this case was only a better than average student. But with the crutch of Frost's elegant simplicity, she found a voice that was creative and memorable. Despite a metric problem in the second stanza, the student, in general, managed to imitate Frost's sophisticated and subtle reliance on the iambic line. But, most importantly, freed from worrying about saying anything, the parodist went on to advanced techniques, notably the assumption of a persona of the other sex.

While humor is obviously a significant factor in students' interest in parody, perhaps a better way of explaining their enthusiasm is to recognize that young students have unique abilities of verbal imitation. The older we become, the less imitative we become. At eight or ten, most of us could learn a new language fluently without formal training; at sixty, none of us could. At forty-five, few of us are given to imitating the verbal idiosyncracies of those around us; at fifteen, our teacher's favorite phrase or our parents' too-oft-repeated formula are sources for careful imitation and hilarity.

When a student attempts serious imitation, he gives up the easy successes of burlesque and the sure reinforcement of humor. Yet, after I have explained to my students the essentially dual nature of imitation--serious and comic--I find that a great many of them prefer to attempt to say something personally meaningful to them rather than to debunk a literary style. Aided by the serious tone and elevated techniques of a great original, they often write something that gives them great satisfaction and that says things they would never dare say on their own. The following serious parody of the "What the Thunder Said" section of T. S. Eliot's Wasteland came from one of the brightest students in the same class in American literature.

Here is no love but only hate
Hate and no love and the desolate world
The world populated with machines
Which are machines of hate without love
If there were love we should stop and care
Amongst the hate one cannot stop or share
Laughter is silent and peace is in jeopardy
If there were only love amongst the hate

Dead machines mouth of carious teeth that cannot kiss
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even kindness in the machines
But automatic selfish existence without love
There is not even awareness in the machines
But dull lifeless eyes ignore and overlook
From doors of crowded tenements
If there were love
And no hate
If there were hate
And also love
And love
A seed
A leaven among the hate
If there were the sound of love only
Not the H-bomb
And the missiles singing
But the sound of love over hate
Where the peace-dove sings in the olive trees
Love peace joy love peace joy
But there is no love

Imitation, as a pedagogical device, has been around a long time. Milton learned his craft in part through it, as did Cicero before him. It is an ideal tool for pushing students to the limits of their ability and beyond those limits with the aid of the great works of their heritage. It appeals to the vivacious humor of youth and to youth's imitative instincts. In advanced sections, it can be used as an introduction to the analysis of literary techniques. And, though classical in origin, it often achieves our elusive modern goals of creativity and personal expression.

Paul Grawe is an assistant professor in the English Department of Winona State College.