



Refrains of Cruelty: A Stylistic Analysis of Raymond Antrobus' Poem *Heartless Humour Blues*

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Abstract

This essay presents a stylistic analysis of Raymond Antrobus's poem "Heartless Humour Blues". Through the close examination of form, sound, imagery, tone, themes, stylistic devices, pragmatics, and discourse, the essay shows that Antrobus' use of repetition of the refrain "heartless sense of humour" speaks about cycles of trauma, cruelty, and generational inheritance. Antrobus's refrain becomes a curse, uniting family members in the patterns of neglect and abuse. It also shows how discourse patterns and pragmatic speech acts transform laughter into a weapon of cruelty and avoidance. In addition, the final analytical line alienates the narrative cycle with straight hostility. Ultimately, the essay argues that Antrobus subverts traditional villanelle repetition to expose the entrapment of trauma, making language itself the carrier of generational pain.

Keywords: heartless sense of humour, repetition, refrain, generational trauma, irony, pragmatics, discourse, villanelle subversion, inheritance, cruelty disguised as laughter, alcoholism, polyphony, juxtaposition, colloquial diction, cycles of abuse

Biography of the Poet

Raymond Antrobus is a British-Jamaican poet whose writing discovers themes of self-identity, deafness, and diasporic cultural-heritage. His early works comprise *Shapes & Disfigurements* (2012) and *To Sweeten Bitter* (2017), which recognized his voice as a poet of personal and cultural reflection. His debut full-length collection, *The Perseverance* (2018), won multiple awards and celebrated for its exploration of themes like family trauma, communication, and the experience of deafness. His second collection, *All the Names Given* (2021), continues these themes, while escalating the questions of colonial history,

inheritance, and the silences of language. He has also published children's poetry, such as *Can Bears Ski?* (2020), introducing young readers to the experience of deafness. His recent work, *Signs, Music* (2024), develops his interest in sound, silence, and cultural memory. The work confirms his place as one of the most significant contemporary British poets (*Nevermore Poem*.2024).

Introduction

Raymond Antrobus's poem "*Heartless Humour Blues*" explores the themes of generational trauma, cruelty disguised as laughter, and the inheritance of



negative surviving mechanisms. The poem is built around the concept of refrain or catch phrase “*heartless sense of humour*”. This chorus echoes the cyclical structure of the *villanelle* but undermines its traditional purpose. Antrobus’s refrain functions as a curse, binding family members in cycles of neglect, alcoholism, and abuse. This essay undertakes a stylistic analysis of the poem across multiple levels to show in what way Antrobus transforms repetition into a means of entrapment, making language itself the carrier of congenital agony.

Poem: “Heartless Humour Blues”

1. My mother says my father had a heartless sense of humour.
2. That winter she fell, ice on the road—
3. She can’t forget her bruise, his laughter.
4. Not even his shadow helped her up or soothed her.
5. He watched from the kerb—boozy red-eyed Dad—
6. laughed when she said he had a heartless sense of humour.
7. I think that’s how he handled pain, drink his only tutor.
8. Maybe laughter was the only thing he had?
9. No, my mother says, he had a heartless sense of humour.
10. In Hackney Downs, his past became my future,
11. walking drunk by filter beds, noticing how grass sags,
12. laughing at myself with my heartless sense of humour.
13. He’d tell some tragic story, then laugh, his jaw looser,
14. and if laughter won a round of drinks, be glad
15. of what can be bought with that heartless sense of humour
16. My mother tried again and the next man abused her—
17. another man with a drink and cigarettes to drag,
18. laughed with my father’s heartless sense of humour.
19. When Tabitha said our cousin stabbed his father
20. I laughed, and she closed up, turned away, sour.

21. Ray, where did you get that heartless sense of humour?

(Raymond Antrobus, *All the Names Given*, 2021 and *Best Poems.Net*).

Summary of the Poem

In the poem “Heartless Humour Blues”, the speaker speaks about his father’s cruel laughter and its long-lasting impression. The mother remembers she falling on ice and being mocked by the speaker’s father instead of being helped. The speaker reveals the father’s dependence on alcohol and humour as managing tactics. On the other hand, the refrain “heartless sense of humour” persists transforming the family injuries into a series of storytelling. The speaker however accepts inheriting this mannerism, where he laughs at his own misfortune while wandering Hackney Downs. He recalls that his father used to twist tragedy into jokes to gain drinks and social approval. But unfortunately, his mother’s later partner also repeats same form of abuse and perversion. The poem ends with a cousin’s question, confronting the speaker with the inheritance of that heartless humour and the generational trauma it represents.

Analysis

Form and Structure

The poem borrows from the *villanelle* tradition with its repeated refrain “heartless sense of humour”, but it is flexible and less rigid. This flexibility demonstrates the instability of the father’s life and the fractured legacy of his characters. It further suggests inescapability from the vicious circle of life, which is reflected in the series of events as part of a sequential trauma. The structure also generates a *spiral effect*, where the refrain keeps recurring, but each time with slightly reformed context. This only shows vigour and potency of the same cruelty that manifests differently across generations.

Examples

The line 1: “My mother says my father had a heartless sense of humour.” creates the refrain and develops the recurring structure.



In Line 6: “laughed when she said he had a heartless sense of humour”, and line 9: “No, my mother says, he had a heartless sense of humour”, repeats the refrain by mimicking villanelle-like recurrence but flexible in nature, showing entrapment rather than resistance.

The final refrain is set in an interrogative form, breaking the narrative into confrontation, the narrator refrains “heartless sense of humour”, which repeatedly appears in lines 1, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, and 21.

Villanelle Structure

A *villanelle* is a fixed form of nineteen lines, five tercets plus one quatrain. It relies on two refrains that alternate and repeat, creating a cyclical, incantatory effect. These refrains are urgent imperatives, driving the poem’s emotional intensity. Repetition of the refrain “heartless sense of humour” is not an imperative but an accusation. This shows the tone, that is bitter, ironic, and resigned. The repetition, further underscores cruelty and trauma rather than resistance. Also, each recurrence does not move toward transcendence but circles back to the same wound, showing trauma as inherited and normalized in family.

Sound and Rhythm

The refrain’s rhythm is substantial, almost unsharpened, which echoes the heaviness of repetition in trauma. For example: *slant rhymes* such as *tutor/future/looser/humour* (lines 7, 10, 13, 15) are all mimicking *drunken speech*. Here, the words do not quite fit, but they slide into each other. The uneven pacing, where some lines are clipped, and others are sprawling reflects the erratic tempo of memory and the instability of the father’s presence. Overall, the *refrain rhythm such as “heartless sense of humour”* emerges ingenuously and functioning like a curse.

Imagery and Symbolism

Ice and Bruise: The mother’s fall is depicted as both literal and metaphorical, where the coldness of the father’s response is shown as the lasting mark of neglect.

Alcohol: More than a motif, it becomes a character in the poem like “drink his only tutor” (line 7), suggests alcohol as a teacher, shaping his behaviour and worldview.

Hackney Downs and Sagging Grass: The landscape is weary, reflecting the speaker’s own sagging spirit. The setting grounds the poem in a working-class urban environment, where neglect and hardship are normalized.

Shadow: The father’s shadow failing to help is symbolic of absence of paternal care, even in its most minimal form. For example: line 3: “She can’t forget her bruise, his laughter.” Here, “bruise” echoes trauma, and laughter imply cruelty. Line 5: “boozy red-eyed Dad” shows a vivid image of alcoholism. In lines 10–11: “Hackney Downs... noticing how grass sags.” *sagging grass* reflects self-decline. Finally, the line 4: “Not even his shadow helped her up or soothed her”, *shadow* as an imagery that speaks about the absence of care.

Tone and Voice

The mother’s voice is sharp and accusatory, and the speaker defines the father’s laughter as cruelty.

The speaker’s voice is ambivalent: He oscillates between empathy “Maybe laughter was the only thing he had?” (line 8), and resignation “laughing at myself with my heartless sense of humour” (line 9). The final direct address “Ray, where did you get that heartless sense of humour?” (line 21), breaks the narrative wall by becoming almost his mother’s accusatory tone toward the speaker himself, which reflects a moment of direct or self-confrontation. However, the tone can also be comprehended as the speaker’s move towards inner journey or self-introspection.

Themes

Generational Trauma: The refrain acts like a genetic code, passed down from father to son, and even mirrored in the mother’s second partner, which is reflected in line–12: “*laughing at myself with my heartless sense of humour.*”

Masculinity and Repression: Laughter is weaponized as a mask for vulnerability. Also, the



inability to express tenderness becomes a defining trait in the poem.

Cycles of Abuse: The poem insists that cruelty repeats itself, not just in one family, but in a wider social pattern such as, cousin stabbing his father and another abusive partner of his mother. This is demonstrated in lines 16–17, “*the next man abused her— / another man with a drink...*”

Identity and Inheritance: The speaker questions whether he is doomed to embody the same “heartless humour,” which shows not only his self-awareness, but also the familial entrapment as a social norm. Additionally, refrain becomes a marker of identity, which is passed down like a surname.

Stylistic Devices

Refrain as Intonation: The repeated phrase is both accusation and remains an *identity marker*. It functions like a menace by uniting the entire family.

Irony: The loud laughter usually seems joyous but becomes scarring. This overturn is central to the poem’s authority. For instance, in the syntax “laughed when she said he had a heartless sense of humour” (line 6), the father laughs at allegation.

Juxtaposition: The poem juxtaposes between laughter versus bruises and humour versus tragedy. Overall, the poem thrives on contrasts that highlight dissonance. For example: the cousin’s stabbing versus the speaker’s laughter, which is illustrated in lines 19–20.

Colloquial Realism: Everyday diction, for example, “boozy red-eyed Dad.” (line 5) and “round of drinks” (line 14) builds the poem in a lived experience by resisting romanticization of family.

Narrative Layering: The multiple voices of mother, father, speaker, and cousin create a polyphonic effect and portray the functioning of trauma, which resounds transverse relationships. The poem also determines a modern *anti-villanelle* by using repetition to expose cruelty, rather than remodelling it. Its catchphrase becomes a generational curse, connecting father, mother, and son in series of abuse and neglect. Stylistically, it combines *idiomatic-realism* with formal resonances of traditional poetic structures, creating a tension

between the normal and the eternal. The imagery of *alcohol*, *bruises*, and *sagging landscapes* emphasize the themes of trauma, suppression, and family legacy. Finally, the poem challenges the self-identity, where the speaker recognizes the “heartless humour” as both an inheritance and a burden.

Pragmatic Perspectives

Pragmatics looks at contextual usage of language, including implied meanings, speaker intentions, and the social dynamics at play, which are illuminated throughout the poem, and as follows:

Refrain as Speech Act: The recurrent phrase “heartless sense of humour” functions like an accusation. It performs a pragmatic act of judgment by strengthening the father’s cruelty and influencing the speaker’s identity.

Irony and Implicature: Pragmatically the laughter seems ironic here because it does not indicate joy but cruelty, evasion, or surviving. The implicature indicates that humour covers pain rather than lessening it.

Politeness and Face-Threatening Acts: The mother’s statement is a straight *face-threatening act* against the father’s dignity, revealing his inability to show empathy. The son’s reiteration of the phrase displays that such judgments are normalized in family discourse.

Inheritance of Speech Patterns: The son adopts the same refrain, showing his pragmatic habits of speaking about pain, which are passed down generationally and not just the behaviours alone. For example: in line 8, laughter signals avoidance rather than joy.

Final Address “Ray, where did you get...”: This is a pragmatic shift from narration to direct confrontation. It oscillates the speech act from portrayal to examination by demanding liability.

Discourse-Level Analysis

Discourse analysis examines the construction of meaning across larger boundaries of the poem, which includes voice interplay, narrative flow, and social context.



Narrative Progression

The discourse interchanges from the mother's memory to the father's cruelty and the speaker's emphasis on his cousin's violence, which shows open conflict. This progression displays the circulation of trauma through the family discourse.

Intertextual Echoes

The refrain imitates the structure of a *villanelle*, but in terms of discourse, it acts like a chorus in a folklore, which places the narrative in a repeated moral judgment. The poem does not throw light on single voice but it showcases a layered discourse or polyphony. The mother's voice is an impeachment, and the father's voice is a laughter, whereas the speaker's voice is both self-critique and reflective. The cousin's anecdote is portrayed as an external violence. This polyphony creates a *dialogic discourse* in which meaning emerges from pressure between the voices.

Cycles of Discourse

The reappearance of the refrain across different contexts determines how discourse itself continues trauma. The phrase becomes a discursive inheritance by shaping relationships and identity.

Closure and Breakdown

The final line disrupts the cycle by shifting to unswerving address. In the view of discourse analysis, this is a rupture created in the family, which the speaker confronts through possible resistance and repetition.

At the pragmatic level, the poem shows the functioning of laughter and humour as cruel speech acts, masking pain and perpetuating exploitation. At the discourse level, the repetitive refrain develops the narrative as a cycle of trauma by surrounding judgment into family tale. These levels of analysis reveal that the poem is not just about personal events, but illustrates that language is the carrier of pain and trauma over the generations.

Conclusion

Raymond Antrobus's poem "Heartless Humour Blues" has described the role of stylistic aspects such

as tone, repetition, and discourse in transforming a refrain into a vehicle of genealogical trauma. The periodic phrase "heartless sense of humour" has evolved from indictment to inheritance, presenting laughter as veiled brutality. The poem has fixed this attribute to family identity and has passed it down across relationships. Antrobus' refrain has operated as a curse, uniting the speaker and his family within cycles of abuse, neglect, and alcoholism. The poem stylistically has destabilized *villanelle* tradition by using refrain as a poetic technique, thus exposing societal arrangement. Through pragmatic speech acts, ironic juxtapositions, and layered voices, the poet has exposed that language itself has disseminated pain and trauma. Finally, the poem has stood as both a personal calculation and a broader observation on humour, especially when it has become heartless, a weapon that injures rather than heals.

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