

DAVE BARRY

DAVE BARRY is a humorist whom the *New York Times* has called “the funniest man in America.” Barry was born in 1947 in Armonk, New York, and graduated from Haverford College in 1969. He worked as a journalist for five years and lectured businesspeople on writing for eight years while he began to establish himself as a columnist. His humor writing now appears in several hundred newspapers and has been collected in more than twenty books, including *Bad Habits: A 100% Fact Free Book* (1985), *The World According to Dave Barry* (1994), *Dave Barry in Cyberspace* (1996), and *Dave Barry Hits Below the Beltway* (2001), the last about American politics. In 1988 Barry received the Pulitzer Prize for “distinguished commentary,” although, he says, “nothing I’ve ever written fits the definition.” (He thinks he won because his columns stood out from the “earthshakingly important” competition.) Barry lives in Miami with his family.

Batting Clean-Up and Striking Out

This essay from *Dave Barry’s Greatest Hits* (1988) illustrates Barry’s gift, in the words of critic Alison Teal, “for taking things at face value and rendering them funny on those grounds alone, for rendering every ounce of humor out of a perfectly ordinary experience.” Like Suzanne Britt in the previous essay, Barry contrasts two styles of dealing with a mess.

The primary difference between men and women is that women can see extremely small quantities of dirt. Not when they’re babies, of course. Babies of both sexes have a very low awareness of dirt, other than to think it tastes better than food.

But somewhere during the growth process, a hormonal secretion takes place in women that enables them to see dirt that men cannot see, dirt at the level of *molecules*, whereas men don’t generally notice it until it forms clumps large enough to support agriculture. This can lead to tragedy, as it did in the ill-fated ancient city of Pompeii, where the residents all got killed when the local volcano erupted and covered them with a layer of ash twenty feet deep.¹ Modern people often ask, “How come, when the ashes started falling, the Pompeii people didn’t just *leave*?” The answer is that in Pompeii, it was the custom for the men to do the housework. They never even *noticed* the ash until it had for the most part covered the children. “Hey!” the men said (in Latin). “It’s mighty quiet around here!” This is one major historical reason why, to this very day, men tend to do extremely little in the way of useful housework.

¹ Pompeii, in what is now southern Italy, was buried in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. —EDS.

What often happens in my specific family unit is that my wife will say to me: “Could you clean Robert’s bathroom? It’s filthy.” So I’ll gather up the Standard Male Cleaning Implements, namely a spray bottle of Windex and a wad of paper towels, and I’ll go into Robert’s bathroom, and it *always looks perfectly fine*. I mean, when I hear the word “filthy” used to describe a bathroom, I think about this bar where I used to hang out called Joe’s Sportsman’s Lounge, where the men’s room had bacteria you could enter in a rodeo. 3

Nevertheless, because I am a sensitive and caring kind of guy, I “clean” the bathroom, spraying Windex all over everything including the six hundred action figures each sold separately that God forbid Robert should ever take a bath without, and then I wipe it back off with the paper towels, and I go back to whatever activity I had been engaged in, such as doing an important project on the Etch-a-Sketch, and a little while later my wife will say: “I hate to rush you, but could you do Robert’s bathroom? It’s really *filthy*.” She is in there looking at the very walls I *just Windexed*, and she is seeing *dirt! Everywhere!* And if I tell her I already *cleaned* the bathroom, she gives me this look that she has perfected, the same look she used on me the time I selected Robert’s outfit for school and part of it turned out to be pajamas. 4

The opposite side of the dirt coin, of course, is sports. This is an area where men tend to feel very sensitive and women tend to be extremely callous. I have written about this before and I always get irate letters from women who say they are the heavyweight racquetball champion of some place like Iowa and are sensitive to sports to the point where they could crush my skull like a ripe grape, but I feel these women are the exception. 5

A more representative woman is my friend Maddy, who once invited some people, including my wife and me, over to her house for an evening of stimulating conversation and jovial companionship, which sounds fine except that this particular evening occurred *during a World Series game*. If you can imagine such a social gaffe. 6

We sat around the living room and Maddy tried to stimulate a conversation, but we males could not focus our attention on the various suggested topics because we could actually *feel* the World Series television and radio broadcast rays zinging through the air, penetrating right into our bodies, causing our dental fillings to vibrate, and all the while the women were behaving *as though nothing were wrong*. It was exactly like that story by Edgar Allan Poe where the murderer can hear the victim’s heart beating louder and louder even though he (the murder victim) is dead, until finally he (the murderer) can’t stand it anymore, and he just *has* to watch the World Series on television.² That was how we felt. 7

²Barry refers to Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843). The story (minus Barry’s World Series ending) appears on page 117 of this book. — EDS.

Maddy's husband made the first move, coming up with an absolutely brilliant means of escape: *He used their baby*. He picked up Justine, their seven-month-old daughter, who was fussing a little, and announced: "What the child needs is to have her bottle and watch the World Series." And just like that he was off to the family room, moving very quickly for a big man holding a baby. A second male escaped by pretending to clear the dessert plates. Soon all four of us were in there, watching the Annual Fall Classic, while the women prattled away about human relationships or something. It turned out to be an extremely pivotal game.

Journal Writing

Are you ever baffled by the behavior of members of the opposite sex—or members your own sex, if you often find yourself behaving differently from most of them? List traits of men or women that you find foreign or bewildering, such as that they do not want to talk about their feelings or that they can spend countless hours watching sports on television or shopping. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the next page.)

Questions on Meaning

1. What is the **PURPOSE** of Barry's essay? How do you know?
2. How **OBJECTIVE** is Barry's portrayal of men and women? Does he seem to understand one sex better than the other? Does he seek to justify and excuse male sloppiness and antisocial behavior?
3. What can you **INFER** about Barry's attitude toward the differences between the sexes? Does he see a way out?

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. Barry's comparison is organized point by point—differences in sensitivity to dirt, then differences in sensitivity to sports. What is the **EFFECT** of this organization? Or, from another angle, what would have been the effect of a subject-by-subject organization—just men, then just women (or vice versa)?
2. How does Barry set the **TONE** of this piece from the very first paragraph?
3. The first sentence looks like a **THESIS SENTENCE** but turns out not to be complete. Where does Barry finish his statement of the essay's thesis? Does it hurt or help the essay that the thesis is divided? Why?
4. How does Barry's **ALLUSION** to Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (par. 7) enhance Barry's own story?
5. **OTHER METHODS.** How persuasive is the historical **EXAMPLE** cited in paragraph 4 as **EVIDENCE** for Barry's claims about men's and women's differing abilities to perceive dirt? Must examples always be persuasive?

Questions on Language

1. Define these words: hormonal (par. 2); implements (3); callous, irate (5); jovial, gaffe (6); prattled, pivotal (8).
2. Paragraph 4 begins with a textbook example of a run-on sentence. Does Barry need a better copyeditor, or is he deliberately going for an effect here? If so, what is it?
3. What effect does Barry achieve through his frequent use of italics (for example, “*just Windexed*,” par. 4) and capital letters (“Standard Male Cleaning Implements,” 3)?
4. Why does Barry use the word *males* instead of *men* in paragraphs 7 and 8?

Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY.** From the list you compiled in your journal (previous page), choose the trait of men or women that seems to have the most potential for humor. Write an essay similar to Barry’s, exaggerating the difference to the point where it becomes the defining distinction between men and women.
2. How well do you conform to Barry’s GENERALIZATIONS about your gender? In what ways are you stereotypically male or female? Do such generalizations amuse or merely annoy you? Why?
3. **CRITICAL WRITING.** Barry is obviously not afraid of offending women: He claims to have already done so (par. 5), and yet he persists. Do you take offense at any of this essay’s stereotypes of women and men? If so, explain the nature of the offense as coolly as you can. Whether you take offense or not, can you see any virtue in using such stereotypes for humor? For instance, does the humor help undermine the stereotypes or merely strengthen them? Write an essay in which you address these questions, using quotations from Barry as examples and evidence.
4. **CONNECTIONS.** Write an essay about the humor gained from exaggeration, relying on Barry’s essay and the previous one, Suzanne Britt’s “Neat People vs. Sloppy People.” Consider why exaggeration is often funny and what qualities humorous exaggeration has. Use quotations and PARAPHRASES from Barry’s and Britt’s essays as your support.

Dave Barry on Writing

For Dave Barry, coming up with ideas for humorous writing is no problem. “It’s not about anything’s a topic for a humor column,” he told an interviewer for *Contemporary Authors* in 1990, “any event that occurs in the news, anything that happens in daily life—driving, shopping, reading, eating. You can look at just about anything and see humor in it somewhere.”

Writing challenges, for Barry, occur after he has his idea. “Writing has always been hard for me,” he says. “The hard part is getting the jokes to come,

and it never happens all at once for me. I very rarely have any idea where a column is going to go when it starts. It's a matter of piling a little piece here and a little piece there, fitting them together, going on to the next part, then going back and gradually shaping the whole piece into something. I know what I want in terms of reaction, and I want it to have a certain feel. I know when it does and when it doesn't. But I'm never sure when it's going to get there. That's what writing is. That's why it's so painful and slow. But that's more technique than anything else. You don't rely on inspiration—I don't, anyway, and I don't think most writers do. The creative process is just not an inspirational one for most people. There's a little bit of that and a whole lot of polishing."

A humor writer must be sensitive to readers, trying to make them smile, but Barry warns against catering to an audience. "I think it's a big mistake to write humor for anybody but yourself, to try to adopt any persona other than your own. If I don't at some point think something is funny, then I'm not going to write it." Not that his own sense of humor will always make a piece fly. "Thinking of it in rough form is one thing," Barry confesses, "and shaping and polishing it so that you like the way it reads is so agonizingly slow that by the time you're done, you don't think anything is funny. You think this is something you might use to console a widow."

More often, though, the shaping and polishing—the constant revision—do work. "Since I know how to do that," Barry says, "since I do it every day of the week and have for years and years, I'm confident that if I keep at it I'll get something."

For Discussion

1. Do you agree with Barry that "[y]ou can look at just about anything and see humor in it somewhere"? What topics do you think would be off-limits for humor?
2. What does successful writing depend on, according to Barry? What role does inspiration play?
3. How might Barry's views on writing be relevant to your own experiences as a writer? What can a humor writer teach a college writer?