

# The Body and The Machine: Functionalities and Failures of AI- Generated Comedy

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## INTRODUCTION

*“I don’t play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for life.” - Oscar Wilde*

As artificial intelligence and coded software become increasingly capable of generating original literature, the first instinct of many academics in humanist fields of study is to dismiss such technological advances, perhaps out of fear that artwork and literature made by humans will be rendered obsolete by perfectly productive machines. However, comedy and laughter pose an unique problem for those who are seeking to program it. Literary theorists and comics alike have long avowed that, as Henri Bergson writes in 1901, “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human” and that man is uniquely defined as “an animal which laughs”<sup>[1]</sup>. Comedy subsequently emerges as an art-form predicated on a distinctly human life-force driving it forward. Thus, the question arises: **is artificial intelligence, as a non-human creator, categorically excluded from generating successful comic artwork?**

## TECHNOLOGY

GPT-2, a new advancement that is ten times the size of the original GPT software, is a large transformer-based language model with 1.5 billion parameters, trained on a dataset of 8 million web pages<sup>[2]</sup>. In order to create compelling, realistic sentences and dialogue, it attempts to predict the following word in a sentence using its database. GPT-2 features a variety of ‘model sizes’ that correspond to the coherence of the text; 0.7 is the standard temperature for coherent but creative text generation<sup>[3]</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

Using the ‘comedies of manners’ of the widely canonized and beloved playwright Oscar Wilde, I ran the sample through GPT-2 in hopes of identifying in what ways the software is able to **effectively mimic comedy** and where the software **lacks sophistication**. I then analyzed the outcomes of GPT-2 along with the success of its various ‘temperatures’ of model sizes using the lens of comic theorists Henri Bergson and Suzanne Langer.



## SAMPLE

**I. LORD GORING.** [Still looking at him.] You are not serious enough, Robert.  
**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.** I am not serious enough.  
**LORD GORING.** Well, at any rate you are not serious.  
**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.** Why not? You couldn’t be serious about anything else.  
**LORD GORING.** I dislike people who are serious. They always seem of a different kind.  
**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.** Ah! I am serious.  
**LORD GORING.** You are serious, and yours is a great fault.  
**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.** This is what a man should be. This is what a woman should be.  
**LORD GORING.** The flaw in your religion, Robert, is that you can’t stand serious enough. Every one in your religion is serious.

**II. LORD WINDERMERE.** I adore you. You are like all other women. But what is there that you are really interested in?  
**MRS. ERLYNNE.** Oh! dull work, of a kind. I adore dull men. They always find something charming to do.  
**LORD WINDERMERE.** What do you do?  
**MRS. ERLYNNE.** I check my watch. If it is any good, I will tell you the result. [Hands on salver.]

## ANALYSIS

GPT-2 successfully identifies and replicates ‘**Wilde-isms**’, a common occurrence in Wilde’s comedies of manners, in which a character makes a broad categorical statement that defies the expectation of the audience in its content. This demonstrates the capability to identify ‘bits’ and recurring devices in a comic work that a reader may only be able to detect as generally comical. GPT-2 is also able to effectively locate recurring themes of Wilde’s comedies, such as religion, levity, and romance. The GPT-2 model effectively demonstrates Bergson’s comic theory of “**mechanical inelasticity**”; that the laughable element of comedy is “just where one would expect to find the... living pliability of a human being”. Bergson posits that there is comedy when humans “adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present”; this aligns with the exact function of GPT-2, which is to generate text based on the line before. Overall, the underlying tone of the GPT-2 generated dialogue effectively matches Wilde’s; the sentence structure, vocabulary, and short quips that characterize Wilde’s comedies appear in the GPT-2 imitations, regardless of temperature.

However, GPT-2 is never able to effectively produce the comic narrative structure that elevates Wilde’s comedies into masterworks. In addition to the consistent dry humor, Wilde’s comedies follow in the tradition of the **deus ex machina** device: the comedy and delight of the loose ends of a narrative neatly falling into place in the end. “A good comedy”, literary theorist Suzanne Langer writes, “builds up to every laugh”<sup>[5]</sup>, implying a consistent underlying structure to a successful comedic play. Though each line taken out of context may be read as comical, GPT-2 lacks a fundamental underlying narrative, due to the predictive, short-sighted nature of the technology. In addition, GPT-2 lacks the “**human life-feeling**” that defines comedy. As both Langer and Bergson attest, comedy is a result of “the realization in direct feeling of what sets organic nature apart from inorganic”. Because GPT-2 lacks an essential human quality, the artifice of the creation is evident even to an unskilled reader. Comedy is funny because it suggests a shared humanity between the audience and the work; this element evaporates when the work is generated artificially.

## CONCLUSION

Though GPT-2 lacks cohesive narrative structure and the human aspect that defines comedy, the fact that it can identify latent recurring devices used in literature and replicate them is exciting for even the most rigid humanist. It appears unlikely that GPT-2 would be able to write the next master comedy without assistance; however, it may be used by humanists to recognize literary devices or the syntactical style of certain authors.

## SOURCES

[1] Bergson, Henri. “Laughter.” *Reader in Comedy*, edited by Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 221-7.  
[2] <https://openai.com/blog/better-language-models/>  
[3] <https://www.gwern.net/GPT-2>  
[4] <https://www.tcd.ie/library/exhibitions/wilde/>  
[5] Langer, Suzanne. “The Comic Rhythm.” *Reader in Comedy*, edited by Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 270–5.  
[6] <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/111>