

**Humour:  
some theoretical and clinical remarks**

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**Abstract**

The model used by Freud to explain the secret of laughter in response to wit is one of energy release. And yet, although his starting point was a reductionistic interpretation dominated by the concepts of censure and the bypassing of censure through unconscious desire and the need for release of accumulated tension in the organism, Freud was able to go beyond the limits imposed by his own definition in his analysis of his carefully collected Jewish jokes and so provide us with an analytical model valid for both literature and art. In the wake of Freud's writings and of research carried out by Kris and Gombrich, the author sets out to demonstrate how there is a third form of logic involved in wit and humour, in addition to the primary and secondary process, which relates them to literature and art.

Keywords: humor, literature, art

"If it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego" (S. Freud, 1927, p. 166)

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When he wrote *Psychopathology of Everyday life* (1901), Freud had just recently concluded his powerful research on dreams (Freud, 1900). This was a brief pleasurable interlude for Freud during which he extended the results of his research on dreams to linguistic slips. Shortly afterwards, while he was working on the drafting of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1905), he began to tackle the question of wit (Freud, 1905b).

These were the years when the science of linguistics was beginning to gain ground and F. De Saussure had made the important distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Of this, however, Freud was quite unaware for the reason that De Saussure was afflicted by a neurotic perfectionism which entailed that any publication of his ideas had to be left to his research students (De Saussure, 1916).

The model used by Freud to explain the secret of laughter in response to wit is one of energy release. And yet, although his starting point was a reductionistic interpretation dominated by the concepts of censure and the bypassing of censure through unconscious desire and the need for release of accumulated tension in the organism, Freud was able to go beyond the limits imposed by his own definition in his analysis of his witty Jewish jokes and so provide us with an analytical model for their meaning that was valid for both literature and art (Gombrich, 1967; Orlando, 1973; Meghnagi, 2003).

After Freud, psychoanalytic research was involved with the problem of attributing meaning to humorous communication in its various defensive and creative aspects in the removal of anxiety and distress and in the reprocessing and construction of new meanings. (Reik, 1929, 1954, 1962; Kris, 1952; Gombrich, 1953-1966; Sacerdoti, 1988; Corrao, 1989; Fornari, 1989; Meghnagi, 1991).

In the case of wittiness, Freud wrote, 'a preconscious thought is abandoned for a moment to unconscious processing and the result is picked up immediately by conscious perception.' (Freud, 1905b). The fact that the joke is a preconscious idea

has profound implications. It means that the joke's message, unlike a dream, presupposes the presence of a hearer.

The interpretation of the joke doesn't only involve the hearer exclusively. A successful joke can in fact be re-used and reprocessed by others and further transmitted. The recipient isn't only the hearer, but all those who can appreciate the joke even in the absence of the original teller. This means that if the message is successful it can be taken up again and reprocessed. In linguistic terms the message is a communicative act intended for an unlimited number of present and future recipients – as in literature and art. The pleasurable effect is linked to the sense ordering deriving from a twofold confusion – the momentary result of a unification of opposites and the overcoming of existing splits in thought, emotion and reality.

When it's a case of showing the secret of the pleasurable effect of a joke, the tendentious joke lends itself admirably to interpretation. Sex and aggression appear to materialize the underlying psychic blockage. The quicker the psychic defences are bypassed the more effective the result is. Successful jokes are passed on and like a little work of literature can spread round the world.

In the case of an innocent joke things appear to be more complex. The child playing with words seems to do so out of pure innocence. The pleasure got from a word and from a sense of absurdity is played out over 'a transitional area' between waking language and the dream language that releases new meanings. The sense of joy is linked to a feeling of triumphing over the cages imposed on us by the world and the coded patterns of thought and language.

In fact, even innocent jokes have an underlying basis of fantasy that can be linked to primitive object relationships where ambivalence and psychic splitting

predominate. Given the pregnant meaningfulness of the emotional categories of 'good' and 'bad' that underlie emotive and cognitive processes (Freud, 1925), the type of 'confusion' activated by the joke device through the interplay of unique combinations of emotional states and imaginary experience needs to be established each time.

A 'particularly favourable' opportunity for the tendentious joke arises when the intentional rebellious criticism is directed at one's own self or, more cautiously put, at someone that one's own person is part of – a collective person, for example, one's own people.

A particularly favourable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share – a collective person, that is (the subject's own nation, for instance). The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes (of which we have given plenty of instances) have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates the subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke work. Incidentally, I don't know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character (Freud, 1905b, pp. 111-112).

The difference between wit and humour lies in the role played by the super-ego. At the roots of a witty joke, Freud postulates that a preconscious thought is abandoned for a moment to unconscious processing; the wittiness would then consist in the contribution the unconscious gives to the comic effect.

Let us decide, then, to adopt the hypothesis that this is the way in which jokes are formed in the first person: *a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome of this is at once grasped by conscious perception.*

Before we examine this hypothesis in detail, we will consider an objection which might threaten our premiss. We have started from the fact that the techniques of jokes indicate the same processes that are known to us as peculiarities of the dream-work. Now it is easy to argue against this that we should not have described the techniques of jokes as condensation, displacement, etc., and should not have arrived at such far-reaching conformities between the methods of representation in jokes and dreams, if our previous knowledge of the dream work had not prejudiced our view of the technique of jokes; so that at bottom we are only finding in jokes a confirmation of the expectations with which we approached them from dreams. If this was the basis of the conformity, there would be no certain guarantee of its existence apart from our prejudice. Nor indeed have condensation, displacement and indirect representation been taken by any other author as explaining the forms of expression of jokes. This would be a possible objection, but not on that account a just one. It would be equally possible that it was indispensable for our views to be sharpened by a knowledge of the dream-work before we could recognize the real conformity. A decision will after all depend only on whether a critical examination can prove on the basis of

individual examples that this view of the technique of jokes is a forced one in whose favour other more plausible and deeper-going views have been suppressed, or whether such an examinations is obliged to admit that the expectations derived from dreams can really be confirmed in jokes. I am of the opinion that we have nothing to fear from such criticism and that our procedure of "reduction" has shown us reliably in what forms of expression to look for the techniques of jokes. And if we gave those techniques names which already anticipated the discovery of the conformity between joke-technique and dream-work, we had a perfect right to do so and it was in fact nothing more than an easily justifiable simplification (*ibid.* pp. 166-167).

In humour, the contribution to the comic effect is due to the super-ego intervening'. Outside 'this context,' Freud hastened to add, 'the super-ego is a strict master'. This explains the lighter nature of laughter at humour, its discretion and absence of stridency. But if this were really the case – and Freud believed it to be

– there's still a lot to be learned about the super-ego's functions.

Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocation of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humour. [...]. Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.

[...]. As regards the origin of jokes I was lead to assume that a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision. A joke is thus the contribution made to the comic by the unconscious. I just the same way, *humour would be the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego.*

In other connections we knew the super –ego as a severe master. It will be said that it accords ill with such a character that the super-ego should condescend to enabling the ego to obtain a small yield of pleasure. It is true that humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in joke, that it never finds vent in hearty laughter. It is also true that, in bringing about

the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion. But (without rightly knowing why) we regard this less intense pleasure as having a character of very high value; we feel it to be especially liberating and elevating. Moreover, the jest made by humour is not the essential thing. It has only the value of a preliminary. The main thing is the intention which humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: “Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children- just worth making a jest about!”

If it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego. Furthermore, not everyone is capable of the humorous attitude. It is a rare and precious gift, and many people are even without the capacity to enjoy humorous pleasure that is presented to them. And finally, if the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering, this does not contradict its origin in the parental agency. (Freud, 1927, pp. 162-166).

Unlike in other forms of human communication, in higher forms of humour *the other* doesn't appear ‘as a dead person’. It is neither killed nor eliminated. It can

enter the communication, become an interlocutor and undergo transformation. The humorous joke is directed at an introjected part of itself, loved or feared, accepted or rejected, or both at once. The hearer discusses and interacts with these inner parts in search of a higher meaning that transforms the distress and gives meaning again to existence. The interior, or exterior, oppressor is invited to transform itself. Humour responds to the cruelties of the world with a third type of logic that goes beyond the register of accusation and counter-accusations. Its link with the father-child relationship has to do with a protective father, and is the sign of a capacity to look at the world without interference from idealizing projections and life's disappointments.

After the earliest stages of oral sadism, which personal experience and the effects of wit are connected with, the next step is humour which, in line with Freud's remarks, is linked to a more evolved stage, to a more mature, or at least less destructive, experience compared to what is expressed in cynical, sarcastic or ironic jokes. In people who are on good terms with themselves, underlines Hannah Segal, there is constant free symbolic formation, through which they can be consciously aware of and control the symbolic expressions of their underlying primitive fantasies. In this perspective one of the important tasks performed by the ego in a situation of depression is that of coping not only with depressive anxiety but also with unresolved primitive conflicts by means of symbolization. The anxieties we haven't been able to cope with previously, owing to the extreme concrete nature of our experience with the object and the substitute objects of the symbolic equations, can be gradually faced up to by the more integrated ego by means of symbolization and insofar as they can be integrated. In a situation of depression, and subsequently, the symbols are formed not only by the total destroyed and recreated object, which is characteristic of the depressive condition itself, but also by partial objects typical of a schizoparanoïd condition. (Segal, 1980). An over-rigid super-ego prevents the development of humour and gives

rise to obsession-type phenomena. Particularly disturbed personalities can, for example, make use of the logic of wit while not actually understanding it. The joke may *seem* like one, but only for the hearer and not for the teller, who doesn't understand it or may misunderstand the meaning of the laughter produced by the joke.

All this at least partially explains why these patients may become apparently 'less creative' and 'more banal' as they get better. As in Woody Allen's film 'Zelig', recovery is paid for by an apparently diminished capacity for 'creativity'. When Zelig is cured his life becomes more run-of-the-mill, but perhaps more 'authentic' for all that.

In humour, interior and exterior reality, even of the most distressful kind, doesn't destroy the imaginative functions of thought, and anxiety ends up transformed positively. As is the case with art, humour provides escape from life's tensions and helps to fortify the organism's immune responses, to the point that some more sensitive doctors have introduced it alongside comicalness and wit in their departments' therapeutic practice.

The narcissistic triumph in humour is an ethical act of liberation which has as its background a rejection of anything that dulls thinking. The humorist performs a creative act that unifies *logically* incompatible opposites for the sake of an alternative logic that overturns reality. Since projection isn't performed in a void, and since we have a continual need for each other all through our lives, syntonic enjoyment of jokes and humour is also based on the mutual reassurance of having momentarily demolished and simultaneously reconstructed – destroyed and recreated – something new, albeit limited to words. In this aspect it is possible to speak about the presence of a 'tertiary' process, as distinct from a primary or secondary process.

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