

# Humour essay

[Art & Culture](#), [Comedy](#)



Humour is a complex issue that has been looked at through several disciplines including philosophy, and within anthropology. Debates ensue as to what humour is and if it can be defined.

Were an extraterrestrial to visit earth and ask what the purpose of laughter was, we would provide an answer that suggests laughter often comes from something humorous. Humour often informs us of an individual's own classifications of what causes laugh reflexes within themselves. What some people would consider being humorous, such as a misrepresentation of speech or misplacement of context others may not. Humour is not necessarily a consequence of verbal communication, it may stem from physical acts, objects or people that appear to act outside of the norm. Peculiarly enough some entities within society are expected to provide people with entertainment and humorous content, sustaining the opposite. Clowns in a circus context aim to produce laughter and entertainment from an audience, yet it is not unusual for clowns to be feared.

So how is it that humour can be said to unify people within a society? Using comedians and politics, as examples, to illustrate the types of humour directed at audiences, the idea of social bonds being strengthened and fundamental to widespread culture will be considered in this essay. Some scholars looking at humour have found that it is necessary to look at theories on laughter at the same time. If we are to simply state that humour is something that makes anyone laugh then we need to look at the physical attributes of laughter, and perhaps compare them to other physical reactions to external stimuli. If it is possible these stimulants may also be put into categories so we can develop some understanding of humour. (Monro 1953)

acknowledges in his opening chapter that laughter is a universal happening amongst human animals, and that some may attest that laughter appears within other groups as animals, such as hyenas. Like other emotions, such as fear and anger, laughter triggers a physical reaction, often a shaking of the body, clapping of the hands and flushing of the face along with noise from the throat. Whilst these physical signs can be recognised, and due to our own experiences we understand what they are feeling, it is almost impossible to describe why.

Monro (1953) delves into a discussion on fear as an emotion and reaction attempting to find common characteristics. Concluding that a true explanation of laughter must include a physical and mental account of the occurrence. Laughter, for the sake of debate, is the result of a humorous occurrence.

Thus, what the essence of humour, and laughter, is first needs to be examined. Most obviously are jokes or forms of speech directed in a tone and manner that conclude with a punch line bringing a story to humorous climax. Jokes can come in the form of wit, gags or even practical jokes. Other forms of humour can come from spoonerisms and wordplay that focuses on the clever use of language, or often as a mistake. Famous forms of humour such as satire and irony can be recognised. Satire being a form of a 'poetic medley' that is used, primarily in a non-humorous way, though it has become closely linked with humour.

Satire often contains irony and sarcasm, irony is used in the sense that a person constructs a sentence opposite to its original meaning, and the

listener is expected to understand this. Sarcasm is also a form of irony often told by comedians in stories, or from one person who is ridiculing another. Like other forms of satire, irony and sarcasm promote words that are intended for a different meaning within the context. To identify the support of humour within social circles, it becomes necessary to address public humour. Here humourous events performed in public create an ideal or social norm. Granted everyone has different ideas of humour, to which there exist comedians with alternative styles and acts to promote laughter from their audience. Public humour can be best witnessed as a form of political humour, though this did not occur until 1960's in America and later on in Britain. During the 60's the great American comedians were generally white males, whose humour was used for the ' American people', the ' people' were more important than the politicians.

In Britain we have had an aristocracy and sense of class, Americans have never experienced this, jokes on ' American people' took a different stance. Jokes directed at Politicians were never made from comedians who lived pre- and post- war. Jokes that were made were directed to show a social and political distance. During the late 50's and early 60's new comedians appeared on the scene, these often came from social minorities such as Jews and Blacks. For a new era in humour these comedians set the pace for challenging civic decency, which the previous generation of whites had stuck to. Shocking forms of humour that appeared sexually explicit or attacking the government took a stand. The African- Americans generally had ' blue' (humour that is considered to be vulgar or off topic for the moral mainstream) humour directed at them, because this is what they wanted.

This change was a benefit to society politically and industrially it dealt with personal politics and effectively ‘told it how it was’, by addressing the audiences who, to people such as Bob Hope, were grouped as the ‘other’ (minorities, or non-white, middle class Americans).

It became possible to exist in a ‘free-talking’ and ‘free-thinking society’. By the 80’s comedians had taken it another level, many comedians had made their own ‘f\*\*\* you’ brand of comedy, such as Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, whose early work containing the word ‘N\*\*\*er’, helped to transform an era of racism and self-hatred. At this point it could be argued that the drastic change of comedy within American society improved situations amongst the ethnic minorities, America itself, therefore, became more accepting of its ‘people’. The bonds between minorities was strengthened amongst themselves and further extended to the typical ‘white American’. This allowed for a ‘free-thinking’ country, possibly helping the breakdown of aristocracy in Britain, and transformed the world, and the world of comedy as it was then known.

Due to the class systems existing in Britain, which during the 50’s and 60’s was becoming increasingly multi-cultural, it would have been obscene to have publicly ridiculed politicians in anyway. This gap was slowly bridged in the 1960’s by Jimmy Edwards, a comedian at the time, who became a candidate for the Conservative Party in Paddington, London. This then led on to a ‘satire movement’ of politics in Britain, then ‘alternative comedy’ emerged in 1979, many comedians at this time where from middle-class backgrounds yet they enforced a ‘surprising’ humour on their audiences.

Here onwards Britain adopted a stance where anyone was accepted, many comedians on stage were known for their persona, such as being gay, 'left-wing', female, black etc. Like the States, Britain had found a balance between comedy and politics. The acceptance of minorities in Britain again (as with America) united them together, and formed an understanding and acceptance amongst the British people. It also accounts for the release of tension within British classes.

It could be argued that a sense of class still exists within Britain, since differences are made between academics and 'working classes, yet it is relaxed. Jokes circulate everywhere in Britain with reference to class, politics, race and religion, yet these are more than often taken light-heartedly and provide acceptance amongst British citizens. Public humour in its simplest form can be observed from the position of a comedian. Stand-up comedy in particular, has only until recently, emerged within the field of political humour. Thirty years ago to rebuke attitude towards politicians was unheard of, presently political humour is amongst the most popular, along with religion, current global and local issues and self-attack on the comedian. Other forms of humour will also appear in cartoon strips and caricatures, which illustrate these issues.

These issues unite the audience with the comedian and provide for them an environment where shared views merge in understanding, often agreement. Jokes, of any form, are a form of communication. Handelman and Kapferer (1972) advocate that in order for jokes to be communicated between individuals that a 'joking license' must be allocated. Often a license is

formed on friendships and relationships, once one has been established it is unlikely that a new one will be needed.

This ‘license’ thus constructs a context where a ‘frame’ is set up around the activity. This ‘frame’ allocates who can participate in the joking construct, often this may be carried out in the form of speech used to construct the first joke. They differ between two types of frame; ‘setting-specified’ and ‘category-recognised’. Rules envelop both these frameworks. The former being a highly fragile frame, the latter being one established amongst friends.

Once a context has been determined the participants are able to insult and abuse one another without disturbing the framework. It becomes arguable to suggest that using Handleman and Kapferer’s model that upon entering a stage comedians set a context where what they say is within a framework, controlled by boundaries. The audience acknowledge that the comic is issued with a ‘joking license’. The comic then proceeds to choose topics of discussion that will result in laughter from the audience. Topics used in stand-up are humorous, but to what extent can be considered that the context that has been created around the comic i. e.

style, language and expression, can also account for applause? Many comedians use humour in a way that shocks audiences, which would be considered unacceptable in many circles yet they are forgiven, often for their persona. Racist jokes are common in this sense, many people may laugh but not be racist, others may be offended Jokes told about people from a particular group by a group member are perhaps another form of aggressive

outlet, as with Pryor in the 1980's his racist language appeared to dissolve racial verbal attacks against him and many black people. Rappoport (2005) suggests that this particular type of humour allows the audience to join in, and rise above such humour, or political correctness as much of it will now be considered. Public, often political humour could be considered key to rescuing social bonds. As has been discussed, the breakthrough in the United States with political humour helped rescue social bonds within their wider society. It appears after this change, due to an interconnected world, ideas moved through into Britain and allowed for similar changes to be made. There has never been so much racial, political, ethnic, or general public humour throughout the world, yet it may appear that such conformation of attitude to comedy (from the 60's to the 80's) has welcomed a more aggressive humour. Humour has done a job whereby groups within society can bond together despite race, religion, class, or political views.

Boundaries within society and personal views help keep standards in society in check. Humour may have more to contribute to society in terms of uniting people together by constantly placing people and objects in the public eye, where the public will stand together on universal issues