

Why Do We Laugh

Comic Imagination

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Asking why humans laugh is like asking why humans breathe; our body is programmed to do it even after a millennium of evolution. The ability to laugh is as primitive as our cousins, the primates, and is built into our genetic code. Everyone, even blind and deaf people, have the ability to laugh from birth, it is not exclusive to any group in particular. “Laughter is a mechanism everyone has; laughter is part of universal human vocabulary. There are thousands of languages, hundreds of thousands of dialects, but everyone speaks laughter in pretty much the same way.”(Provine, 2002) But why do we really laugh? The majority of laughter happens in social scenarios, and does not usually involve any form of joke telling, but rather just the company of close friends getting along together. Comedy is a big part of why we laugh in this day and age, and many forms of comedy date back centuries, from before groups of Kyōgen and Nō performers, all the way to current popular stand-up comics such as Dane Cook. There are hundreds of theories about why humans laugh, but there are three main ones that have emerged on top of the pile: the superiority theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory. **Using works such as Saikaku’s *Five Women Who Loved Love*, and Akutagawa’s *The Nose*, among others, I propose a new theory, the human nature theory of laughter, where the three theories are all basing humor off of superiority, in which the majority of laughter comes from the human nature itself and our emotions and how we carry ourselves in society.**

The origin of the superiority theory dates back to before the supposed birth of Christ to well-known thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. Plato argued that it is proper to laugh at people being foolish. Aristotle believed that laughing at stupidity is a good thing, because you will become a better person for it, and if you don’t laugh at stupidity, you yourself are stupid. Thomas Hobbes, who wrote *Leviathan*, also noted that laughter is a form of self-congratulation, for being

superior of course. The idea of the superiority theory is that people laugh about other people's misfortunes or "schadenfreude", because we feel superior in the fact that it is happening to them and not us. Occasionally, we may laugh at ourselves, as Aristotle pointed out. There are three men that created the Evolutionary Superiority Theory, which could mean that superiority has been a common theme for laughter for even longer than complex societies have existed. Konrad Lorenz sees laughter as a controlled form of aggression, while Anthony Ludovici sees it as expressing superior adaptation. Albert Rapp argues that all laughter derived from one primitive behavior; triumphant laughter to let the group know that the danger has passed. "The superiority theory locates the essence of humor in the "sudden glory"(Hobbes) we feel when, say, we see Bill Gates get hit in the face with a custard pie. According to this theory all humor is at root mockery and derision, all laughter a slightly spiritualized snarl."(Holt, 2008)

The incongruity theory is more intellectually based, and was said to have been introduced by Aristotle. It explains how patterns organize our lives, and when something doesn't fit the pattern, we laugh. Schopenhauer explained that we laugh because we are getting something we're not expecting; and that kind of flipping upside down of what we expect and what actually happens causes the humor. The third theory, the relief theory, allows a person to vent the pent up energy inside. Once again, Aristotle articulated early models of this theory as well. It explains why people laugh at jokes about tragedies like the world trade center bombings and nuclear explosions in Japan to end World War Two.

The story *Five Women Who Loved Love* follows Seijuro, the son of a wealthy sake-brewing merchant. Seijuro was a playboy that made every courtesan fall in love with him. Just like usual in a double-suicide piece, his father disinherited him and sent him packing. His

mother had sent him a letter with an offer to leave the city, which he agreed to. He set out for the town of Himeji, and after some time began running a shop for a man named Kyuemon. The women after some time, all fell for him as well; but the shop owner's sister Onatsu, fell the hardest. The two eloped soon after and fled the town so that they may escape. They of course were caught, apprehended, and were to never see each other again. Despite being a double-suicide piece, all attempts at suicide failed and Seijuro died from a mistake and Onatsu joined the church for the rest of her life. You would think that stories centered on two lovers committing suicide in the name of love would be tragic, not something you would see in comic literature. All of the three theories can be seen in aspects of this story. We feel superior in many ways; maybe we feel superior to the fact that they couldn't get away and failed miserably at such a simple task as taking their own lives. Maybe we as readers feel superior because we know we wouldn't be dumb enough to get disinherited from our parents. There was a lot of incongruity, the couple thought they were smarter than the authorities and could escape, only to be brought back down from their pedestal to the realization of how lowly they truly were. You might also see relief theory, maybe when they had finally eloped and were surely going to escape; only to have that relief crushed in the end. Is it really superiority, incongruity, and relief you felt while reading, or was it something else? It is in the human nature to feel superior to other people, especially when they do something stupid that could have been avoided. I don't think that the laughter came from incongruity, because I am human. I laughed because they were dumb enough to think they could escape the higher authorities. Relief is a human emotion, which may have been felt when they escaped, but that emotion was quickly washed away after the failure. This then was turned to a feeling of superiority, knowing that you yourself wouldn't have been dumb

enough to be caught. I believe that all of the laughter in this story can be explained by the human nature, because emotions cause us to feel a particular way about certain situations and events that occur, and emotions are a human trait that is seen very rarely in other species. Other species don't know relief or incongruity, and as stated earlier, we developed our feelings of superiority through years of evolution from a weaker, vulnerable species to the superior race we have become today.

The Nose is about a priest named Zenchi Naigu; well it's about his nose anyways. This man had a nose that was 6 inches long and hung well below his lips and chin. He used a mirror for hours on end to find ways to make his nose seem shorter, to no avail. He would look for people who had the same problem as him, both in person and in scriptures. Finally a disciple came back from an errand Naigu sent him on, and had obtained knowledge on a way to reduce nose size. Much to Naigu's dismay, it seemed as though people were laughing out loud at him, more so than before his nose shrunk. This made him more upset than he was with the massive nose. One morning he woke up, and his long nose was back, much to his satisfaction. The story ends with Naigu believing that no one would laugh at him again and that he could be happy now. Once again, the three theories can be seen, but can all fall under the human nature theory. Of course, the superiority theory is obvious, the priest has obvious facial deformities and that causes him ridicule from other people. Some incongruity is seen as this high ranking priest is brought down and blasted with insults from the low ranking acolytes and townsfolk. There is also incongruity in the fact that a priest, who is supposed to care only about others, cares so much about his looks and self-esteem, which was acting extremely narcissistic and non-priest like. Also, the fact that Naigu couldn't laugh at himself shows how self-indulgent he was. The reader

may have felt as relieved as the priest when the nose shrunk, but once again that relief was ripped away when he took even more open ridicule than before and it eventually grew back. “The human heart harbors two conflicting sentiments. Everyone of course sympathizes with people who suffer misfortunes. Yet when those people manage to overcome their misfortunes, we feel a certain disappointment. We may even feel a desire to plunge them back into those misfortunes.” (Akutagawa, pp. 25) This is the human nature, we may feel bad, but at the same time we feel better than the hideous person next to us and want them to stay hideous. A common theme for relief between the two mentioned stories was that it was brief, and quickly vanished; just as relief in the real world works. A soldier may feel relieved when reinforcements show up, he may even laugh, but then that relief is quickly removed from his mind as the bombs continue to fall around him.

Playboy, Roasted à la Edo by Santō Kyōden focuses on a man that believes everything he reads and believes that he should become famous by becoming a playboy and having many lovers. Instead of actually trying to get lovers, he tries to set up ways to make it look like he has many lovers, none of which actually work. He eventually tries to pretend to have a double suicide, but can’t even do that right as both his and the courtesan’s clothes are stolen from them by robbers, which turn out to be his father and another man. We notice aspects of all three theories seen in this story once again, all similar to previous stories. We feel superior to this guy who can’t seem to do anything right. The incongruity in this rich boy trying to be disinherited and killing himself can also be funny. You might even be relieved when they find out who actually robbed them. Once again, the human nature makes us wonder why in the world this guy is even doing all of these things to himself. We feel better than him because we know who we are

as humans and know that nothing good would come from intentionally losing all of our money and running off with strippers and prostitutes.

Jokes are human made, and in that way show human nature and what types of things make us laugh. Jim Holt mentions that, “The joke is sometimes said to have been invented by Palamedes, the hero of Greek legend who outwitted Odysseus on the eve of the Trojan War.” (Holt, 2008) When attempting to choose from competing theories about humor, Jokes are probably the best thing a scientist can study, with jokes making fun of particular groups of people being the most common. These can include blonde jokes, ethnic jokes, gender jokes, religious jokes, and even the ever popular “Yo mama” jokes. The popularity of these jokes relies heavily on the culture and current events in the world, as seen throughout history. For example, during the civil rights movement, jokes about negroes were very popular, as noted in Jim Holt’s book. Also, in the 1970’s, jokes about dead babies were prominent, as abortion was in the national spotlight. For some strange reason, jokes about blind people are especially popular in Japan, as seen in “The Moon-Viewing Blindman” (Tsuki-mi Zato), when a man first befriended a blind man of a lower class, and then proceeded to act like a different person by disguising his voice and beating him up. Why do we laugh at these kinds of jokes? We, as individuals, and as humans, feel superior to the subjects of these jokes. What do you do when a blonde throws a grenade at you? You take out the pin and throw it back. You now feel superior to that dumb blonde person that was too stupid to take the pin out of the grenade before throwing it at you. As seen in Holt’s book, “With a bit of stretching the superiority theory can be made to cover almost all kinds of jokes, even those where contempt for the object of amusement gives way to

sympathy.”(Holt, 2008); superiority of course, is a common feeling we as humans feel on a daily basis.

Certain other aspects seem to be particularly funny in literature, especially to Japanese, like the penis and nose being used interchangeably. What makes penises so funny to humans? More importantly what is it that the Japanese find so hilarious about them that they include them in so many areas of literature all throughout the ages, and even have parades for them? It could be more the context than just the penis itself. “*Now no one will laugh at me anymore*, the Naigu whispered silently in his heart, letting his long nose sway in the dawn’s autumn wind.” (Akutagawa, pp. 27) He thinks no one will laugh at him anymore because he is back to having a massive nose, which is funny itself considering how much work he went through to shorten his nose. It’s also funny, if you are sick in the head, to just imagine a dick swaying in the wind with a big smile on his face. Humans have a hole inside that is not filled without making fun of someone else. Growing up during adolescence it is impossible to not find a group of students making fun of someone for having a small dick, with insults such as needle dick, and the occasional need for a microscope to find some poor child’s penis. There is also the game the penis game, where one person says penis and you go back and forth saying it louder and louder until one person quits due to embarrassment. The Japanese were on to something when they began so many centuries ago writing about penises in literature because obviously even today, there are so many jokes and ways to find humor from it. These days however, people are much more blunt about it, unlike the past, which could be because centuries ago it was much more frowned upon by elites to talk about these topics in literature, and even public places. It has been proven throughout history that the penis is in fact, a very funny thing to talk about.

It would be impossible at this point in time to limit any joke or form of comedy to one theory of laughter, but we can try. As seen in acts such as “The Delicious Poison” in *The Kyōgen Book*, We feel superior to the foolish servants who we think are dumb for trying to drink a “deadly poison”. There is also an incongruity noticed, when the servants seem to outsmart their master and flip the roles of the hierarchy in a kind of carnivalesque nature. In addition, readers may feel a sense of relief when the servants don’t actually die from eating the poison. The problem with trying to label anything specific to any category is that everything is a matter of perspective. The person you sit next to in your Monday lecture could find a dead baby joke to be the most hilarious thing ever, while you sit there utterly repulsed by the notion of eating a ground up baby with a salsa chip out of a blender. The point is, not everyone finds the same things funny, therefore, most reasons for laughter can’t be generalized into a single category, unless you point out the fact that we are humans and are going to laugh when something makes us feel better about ourselves or a certain situation. Comedy could be anything depending on who you are. You could be the person that annoyingly laughs at every comment made, or you could be the stone faced Russian guy in the movies that never laughs at anything and is a bit intimidating.

Buddhists see human nature as to be conscious and to desire. Humans always have a desire for something at all times; it could be for ice cream or to take over the world. Humans create the idea of self, which is only artificial and an illusion. Darwin sees the human being as but one of several exceptional forms of primates. Humans are the highest form of life on this planet, that we know of, and are the only ones capable of creating things such as emotions and humor. There are several species which seem to actually laugh, but we can’t really attribute that to anything intelligent. In Greek Mythology, King Oedipus discovered a great Sphinx, which

itself models the human nature. This has the body of an animal, representing our animal nature, the human head and torso modeling our human nature, and the wings of an eagle representing our spiritual nature. This Sphinx dwells within each of us, and sooner or later we will have to answer the question of who we are before it devours us. Humans have created almost everything we know of today and how we see it. A banana is a banana because someone decided to call it a banana. “Human beings do not all function on the same level of consciousness and being and thus do not have the same theory of human nature”.(Coppens) this can explain why some people find one thing funny and another thing not funny. We are all different people and have different values, but the reason for laughing can be explained by human nature. A human being is a “microcosm of the macrocosm, a replica, or synthesis, of all there is”.(Coppens) There can be nothing in the world that doesn’t exist in human nature, because if there were, we could never have become aware of it and entered into a relationship with it. Humans are multidimensional beings with interconnected natures, which we use as knowledge to understand the world.

Everyone has a different mindset when going about their lives; this is why everyone laughs for different reasons. Even as seen in our class, there was a diversity in people who found certain stories funny and others not. Certain topics and ideas click in the mind differently from one person to another, which is why those three previously mentioned theories can’t explain all aspects of laughter. It is impossible to explain everything in this world as perfectly as humans seem to have the goal to do. Humans are always seeking to make everything in life better and understand everything that we aren’t sure about, it’s an instinct; and some would say, a fool’s errand. Laughter is man-made, therefore the reason’s we laugh are man-made, and the theories for the reasons for why we laugh are man-made. It’s an endless cycle that can never be fully

answered; of course, humans will never stop trying. Emotions are a leading trait for human nature when it comes to comedy. When someone's in a bad mood, you tell them a joke to try to make them feel better. With the superiority theory comes emotions like anger and power. You may feel angry and therefore feel happy when you make fun of some poor nerd who tripped over his shoelaces. You may feel more powerful knowing you aced your last midterm and your best friend only got a C on it, as you joke with him about how stupid he is. With the incongruity theory there may be emotions such as confusion and admiration. Maybe you are confused by the sudden turning upside down of power, when a student goes up in front of the class to teach while the professor sits next to you. This could cause you to giggle a little bit knowing how awkward it probably is for both parties exchanging positions. You could also admire that brave student for going up there and doing something you could never do and laugh to yourself because you know you could never do it. With the relief theory there are obvious emotions such as relief and possibly sadness. You are relieved that maybe someone made it out of a house fire safely and laugh about it because it didn't happen to you. You may also feel sad hearing a joke about the twin towers falling but laughing about it is a coping mechanism to forget about the terror you felt when it happened. These are all emotions, created by homo sapiens, to explain how we feel and act under certain stresses and circumstances. What would laughter be without the act of laughing, without the idea of humor, and without happiness? Laughter is universal among all cultures, despite what stereotypes say about the Japanese people being too serious to laugh. There may be a question whether the three biggest theories of laughter in the west can be applied to Japanese comic literature or not, but there is no question that the human nature theory can and is applied to each and every culture out there. Without humans there is no laughter, no jokes, and no

emotions; therefore it is from the human nature itself that these things emerged and grew for centuries to be what we call comedy today.

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