

A Frog of a Different Color **By Jeffery Greb**

In his essay “Some Remarks on Humor,” E. B. White says, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”¹ He is correct, of course. Nothing will kill a joke as surely as having a go at explaining why it is funny. Knowing this, however, does not preclude the value of enriching our understanding of humor through examining some of the processes involved. In other words, such an investigation may kill an individual joke, but the death is worth the sacrifice to our greater understanding at large. Similarly, we may understand that which we call *love* is really a potent brew of organic chemicals bathing our brains in a prescribed sequence while simultaneously still be able to enjoy the sensation. Love’s magic still “works” even though the clockwork is exposed. Therefore, if our amble around the pond of humor croaks a few amphibians, we can rest assured the species itself will survive.

Laughter

One of the fascinating aspects of humor is the physiological response it provokes: laughter. Robert R. Provine notes laughter is both innate and involuntary (when spontaneous) among all higher primates, including humans.² For example, humans, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans all laugh when tickled.³ Spontaneous laughter is also largely outside of our conscious control. Everyone is aware of and most people have had personal experiences with laughter occurring at socially inappropriate moments. (Provine devotes an entire chapter to “Abnormal and Inappropriate Laughter: Clinical Perspectives.”) Whether appropriate or not, once it gets

¹ White, E. B. (1954), “Some Remarks on Humor” in *The Second Tree from the Corner*.

² Provine, Robert R. (2000), *Laughter: A Scientific Inquiry*.

³ Interestingly, Provine speculates that the difference between human and chimpanzee laughs may be due to our bipedalism. The different breathing physiology of quadrupeds probably accounts for chimps to laugh both inhaling and exhaling, sounding like a pant. Humans, in contrast, laugh by modulating an exhale.

rolling, laughter can be difficult to stop. As White says, “A human form convulsed with laughter, and the laughter becoming hysterical and uncontrollable, is as far out of balance as one shaken with the hiccoughs or in the throes of a sneezing fit.” Given the similarities between us and our cousins from whom we evolutionarily diverged millions of years ago, the trigger for our laugh response seems nearly as old as the trigger for the fight-or-flight response and equally independent from conscious control.

However, we primates can also initiate our laugh response. UCLA’s Greg Bryant points out the source of our need to consciously express a laugh:

Laughter in humans likely evolved from play vocalizations in our primate ancestors. We can be reasonably sure of this because we can see related vocal behaviors in many primate species today, as well as in other kinds of animals like rats and dogs. Scientists have described these play vocalizations as evolved from labored breathing during play. When animals engage in rough and tumble play fighting, for example, they get tired, and they also signal to one another they are playing. For instance, if during the play one animal bites another, it could be taken as an attack—but if they signal while panting that they are just playing, the play can continue without being interrupted by an unnecessary real fight.⁴

Provine notes similar laughing traits during tickling among chimpanzees. To further complicate things, both Provine’s and Bryant’s research show that this initiated laugh response is not only fundamentally different from the spontaneous response, but humans detect the difference with ease since it is an imitation of a “real” laugh. (Bryant points out the “real” laugh, *i.e.* spontaneous, is more “animal-like” in expression, more like a pant.) Therefore, the different responses must serve different purposes.

Provine devotes a chapter to analyzing instances of contagious laughter, including the phenomenon of television laugh-tracks. Given the requirements of his scientific inquiry, he limits his speculation regarding the cause, whereas I am freed from such constraints and not only

⁴ Bryant, Greg (30 Mar 2015), “You’re not fooling everyone with your pretend laughter” in *The Washington Post*.

choose to speculate but relish the opportunity. Hara Estroff Marano says that “some researchers believe that the major function of laughter is to bring people together.”⁵ Laughter serves a variety of socializing functions, one of which is to unify a group. The yawn may also serve a similar purpose. Like laughter, researchers recognize many instances of yawning that seem inappropriate. Olympic runners often yawn before a race; parachutists frequently yawn pre-plummet; firefighters sometimes yawn as they go into action. A yawn, therefore, may at least in part signal to a group a change of state. Imagine you are in a group of pre-language protohumans. When it is time to begin the day or bed down for the night, the leader yawns and the group yawns back, thereby demonstrating they are in sync with the leader. Like the laugh, it is also contagious behavior. (Of course, like the laugh it probably has multiple utilities to survive the process of evolution.) Applied to laughter, this socializing function helps explain things like why we laugh harder when in a group (do you laugh out loud more in a crowded theater or alone?) and the aforementioned laugh-track. While a laugh-track becomes obnoxious when it is noticed, it is worth the risk – and investment – to TV executives because it rarely takes our focus from the actors enough to register consciously. Provine believes our social brains have “neurological laugh-detectors,” and that laughter is essentially a social activity and relatively rare in solitary situations. Therefore, as irritating as a laugh-track may become when detected, if it is working unnoticed, it may actually add to our enjoyment. (For me, knowing that I am so easily manipulated somehow makes a laugh-track even more irritating!)

In a survey of 1,200 people, Provine found that only 10-20 percent of prelaugh statements were humorous by any sensible definition. He provides a sample list of 25 typical statements respondents indicated hearing immediately preceded a laugh on their part.⁶ The list includes

⁵ Estroff Marano, Hara (5 Apr 2005), “Laughter: The Best Medicine” in *Psychology Today*.

⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 41.

things such as “I’ll see you later guys,” “It was nice to meet you,” and “I see your point.”

Clearly, laughter is triggered by all sorts of things besides humor and has a socializing effect. To see this effect in action, imagine you come upon some friends, all of whom begin laughing uproariously as you approach, but you do not know what caused the laughter. What do you do? It is likely that you begin hesitantly laughing along with the group, and thus signal your desire to be accepted as a member, *even as you ask why the others are laughing*. Yes, laughing releases endorphins and reduces stress, so it feels good; however, that is why *they* are laughing, not *you*. You are asking to be admitted to their social circle. Now consider a rejection: You discover it is *you* at whom the others are laughing. Is group rejection by laughter more painful than a single person laughing? Of course it is! As Bryant says: “Genuine laughs between friends directed at an outsider can be threatening, and even done in jest toward a specific in-group target can be hurtful (e.g., teasing). This shows that laughter is a powerful signal with huge communicative flexibility.”

As I suggested above, laughter promotes a host of positive physiological effects. The belief that “laughter is the best medicine” is at least as old as the King James Bible (“A Merry heart doeth good like medicine”).⁷ Jumping to the 20th century, Provine emphasizes the notion of the healing effects of laughter were propagated as truth in a 1970s best seller by Norman Cousins, who claimed – without adequate supporting scientific evidence – to have been cured of ankylosing spondylitis (a degenerative disease) through laughter and vitamin C.⁸ His book came on the heels of biofeedback studies in the 1960s furthering that notion. Skeptical, Provine observes “laughter evolved for its effect on others, not to improve our mood or health” any more than walking developed to promote cardiovascular health. He also finds the scientific data to be

⁷ Proverbs 17:22

⁸ Specifically, Cousins watched a combination Marx Brothers’ movies and episodes of *Candid Camera*.

split and inconclusive on the subject. However, further research conducted since Provine's work has strengthened the case for the therapeutic effects of laughter. While recognizing that laughter's health benefits are due, at least in part, from the social interaction it provokes, Estroff Marano notes laughter reduces the intensity of pain and increases its tolerance, lowers glucose levels in diabetics and non-diabetics alike, and improves our affective environment. In addition, she cites a 2005 study indicating that laughter greatly improves arterial health and thus reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease. No matter what other benefits, though, it feels good to laugh. We like it when a laugh "happens."

Humor: A Definition

There is a lot more to laughter than what may first appear to the eye (or ear), but we have become distracted from our froggy friend, and it has hopped away. What of humor itself, rather than laughter, its product? What makes something humorous? The answer to this question is an even slipperier amphibian than explicating laughter because humor is both highly individual and situational. Compounding a definition is the additional fact that humor covers a grand territory, which is frequently described in terms of elevation from low to high (*i.e.* coarser, less refined to sophisticated, more refined). The lowest forms of humor are physical, scatological humor followed by slapstick. Toward the higher end are things like malapropisms and other purely cognitive constructions.⁹ After reaching adulthood, an individual's psychological development determines which points on this continuum a person finds humorous. An adult may still laugh at farts like a two-year-old or may now find such humor abhorrent. Furthermore, an individual may become arrested at any point on the continuum due to other factors limiting psychological

⁹ I once saw conservative pundit William F. Buckley, Jr., on his PBS television show *Firing Line* laugh gleefully (using a strangely chimpanzee-like pant) at then President Bill Clinton's incorrect use of the subjective case, *i.e.* *I* instead of *me*.

development similar to any other developmental measure (*e.g.* Kohlberg's theory of moral development). Sometimes, an individual may never graduate from physical humor to the more cerebral forms.

The addition of factoring in the specific situation compounds defining something as humorous. In a given situation something may be humorous that may not be so in a different situation.¹⁰ Situation may refer to timing with regard to proximity to an event (I will directly address the connection between humor and tragedy a little later), or audience (some topics considered humorous in homogenous groups are taboo in mixed groups, *e.g.* in a single gender group as opposed to mixed gender group), or both. Something may even become humorous upon reflection. While in the moment, an occurrence may not appear humorous, but once out of the situation and given a short time to reflect, a person may discover it was funny after all.

This growing list of qualifiers make defining humor in general terms a daunting and perhaps even impossible task, at least with any precision. Nevertheless, a general definition is possible, if not entirely satisfactory. Broadly, humor can be seen as an individual's reaction when confronted with the absurd, in the sense of a juxtaposition of incongruous opposites. *Most* humorous things contain this absurd element. Confrontation with the absurd seems to stimulate a laugh response in humans, even if it is a laugh of disbelief. The absurd often manifests itself through the appearance of something unexpected, thus containing an element of surprise. To see the absurd at work in different contexts, consider back-to-back scenes in what is generally accepted as one of the funniest films of all time: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.¹¹ In the first, while roaming the countryside King Arthur encounters two peasants rolling around in filth and is

¹⁰ As discussed earlier, inappropriate laughter does occur spontaneously, and may even become contagious; however, its very label as "inappropriate" denotes it is outside the regular and normal.

¹¹ Gilliam, Terry, & Terry Jones (directors) (1975), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

lectured by one named Dennis on the subjects of economics and politics. When Arthur is questioned about how he became king, it produces this representative exchange:

Arthur

The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, upheld Excalibur from the waters signifying that I, Arthur, should be king. That is why I am your king.

Dennis

Look, strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power must derive from a mandate from the masses, not some farcical aquatic ceremony.

(Among the obviously absurdist elements of this scene include the idea of a medieval peasant being better educated than a king.) This scene is immediately followed by Arthur's confrontation with the Black Knight, who is guarding a bridge and insists Arthur engage him in combat. Their fight results in all four of the knight's limbs to be severed in four swings of Arthur's sword. The knight continues to deny his mutilation while simultaneously threatening Arthur, even when he is reduced to a limbless stump.¹² (Interestingly, most people will mention the Black Knight scene, rather than the Arthur and Dennis scene, when the film comes up in casual conversation. Perhaps it is because the lower form of humor exemplified by that scene is more ubiquitous to our common sensibility as to what is humorous.) Although their content is vastly different, the absurd is an absolutely essential element to the humor of both sequences.

Humor also derives from *how* a story is presented. Mark Twain believes "[t]he humorous story depends for its effect upon the *manner* of its telling ..." which should be deathly serious.¹³ Twain employs this technique throughout his canon, notably in the tale that first helped get him

¹² I consider this juxtaposition of different types of humor to be one of the factors contributing to this film's greatness. Monty Python's ability to move seamlessly between types of humor (due, no doubt, to the various individual contributions of members of the troupe) guarantees something humorous for all levels of humor, thereby eventually touching the "funnybones" of most people. It is a quality shared by many great cinematic comedies, such as *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, World*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein*, and *Raising Arizona*.

¹³ Twain, Mark (3 Oct 1895), "How to Tell a Story," in *Youth's Companion*. Twain differentiates between the humorous, the comic, and the witty.

noticed and then built his reputation: “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”¹⁴ If you recall, in this tale the narrator has been sent by a friend to Angel’s Camp to inquire of Simon Wheeler as to whereabouts of another friend, the Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley. Wheeler has no knowledge about the Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley; in fact, he says so directly. Despite this, he proceeds to tell the narrator about the adventures of the inveterate gambler Jim Smiley, a man unknown to the narrator. The humor derives from the absurdity of the pointless and lengthy reply, as well as its bizarre account of Smiley’s antics, including the one surrounding the frog Dan’l Webster, and the reader’s understanding that the narrator’s friend knew exactly how Wheeler would respond and how the narrator would be trapped by this excessive talker. (See the elements of the absurd at play?) We can imagine a future meeting of the narrator and the friend who sent him to Wheeler and how the latter would laugh at the narrator’s recounting of what transpired, delighted by how his scheme unfolded. Furthermore, the reader derives pleasure from the narrator’s predicament of being trapped, or “button-holed” as Twain puts it, by Wheeler’s droning of useless information because the narrator is too polite to interrupt Wheeler and excuse himself.

This pleasure of the reader at the discomfort of Twain’s narrator introduces us to two more elements of humor; specifically, humor is always at someone’s expense, and the relationship existing between comedy and tragedy. Make sure you have read that first assertion carefully. It says everything humorous is at someone’s expense; all humor “makes fun of someone,” which is not the same thing as ridiculing someone.¹⁵ “Someone” is used here as a broader term than its literal denotation of an unspecified individual person. For example, a joke

¹⁴ Twain, Mark (18 Nov 1865), “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (originally published as “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog”) in *The New York Saturday Press* (also published as “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”).

¹⁵ Note the idiomatic use of “fun.”

may be at the expense of a group (white supremacists carrying tiki torches), a gender (an observation about the male tendency to avoid asking directions), or a nationality (Americans' bent for "super-sizing" everything). It may even be an abstraction, like unusual laws. (*E.g.* In Arkansas it is against the law to mispronounce the name of the state; Oklahoma has a prohibition making wrestling a bear unlawful; in Minnesota it is illegal to "oil up" a pig with the intent to recapture it; in Nevada you may not use an x-ray device to determine someone's shoe size; in Gainesville, GA, you can be arrested for eating fried chicken with utensils.) Even an abstraction like language may be the butt of a joke, *e.g.* a word like "cleave" means to join together and its opposite, to split apart. (Please note the absurdism in each of these examples.)

Essentially, "makes fun of someone" means there is a "butt" to every joke. Sometimes this can be obvious, even mean-spirited, when someone is made fun of directly, but oftentimes it is much more subtle. Joke-tellers can be the butts of their own jokes (a frequent phenomenon in stand-up comedy), or the butt can be a character completely unaware that anything is remotely funny or that anyone is laughing at their expense, a formula in effect in comedy involving any type of "straight man." Take, for example, the Peter Cook and Dudley Moore routine (first appearing on BBC television) called "The Frog and Peach."¹⁶ In it, Moore's character "interviews" Cook's failed restaurateur about his restaurant of the title. The failure of the restaurant only begins with the unappetizing name. Opened because the owner recognizes the restaurant market is missing a place where someone can find "a really big frog and a damn fine peach," the menu only offers two items: Frog à la Pêche (a large frog with a peach stuck in its mouth) and Pêche à la Frog (a peach stuffed with "about 300 squiggling black tadpoles"). Although Cook's character now has some awareness as to why the restaurant was doomed, we

¹⁶ Cook, Peter, & Dudley Moore (1966), "The Frog and Peach" on the audio recording *Not Only But Also*.

still laugh at his original hubris in creating it in the first place. (Is it necessary to talk about the absurd here?) Even humor as innocuous as a knock-knock joke has a butt: the person to whom the joke is told. Everyone knows the knock-knock formula. In reply to “Who’s there?” the teller speaks a phrase that the butt knows will be twisted into a pun in answer to “___ who?” The butt, therefore, has the opportunity to “spoil” the joke if the butt is clever enough to recognize what the twist will be. When he does not, “the joke’s on him.”¹⁷

Imagine you meet a friend, against whom you harbor no secret animosity or ill-will, for coffee. Your friend is nervous about a big presentation they will make in their office when they return. You can tell your friend dressed specially for the presentation and see the nervousness in their manner. When picking up the coffee, your friend’s cup loses its lid, and coffee splashes down the front of their suit. You laugh, even as you help sponge up the coffee with the ineffective brown napkins. Your friend is upset by the experience and more upset by your laughter. What do you say? If American, you probably say something like, “I’m not laughing *at* you; I’m laughing *with* you.” Your friend, however, is not laughing, not even close. Your apology is your attempt to explain yourself, but you do not even recognize your own mind. What you are trying to explain is that you cannot help yourself. You are not trying to be mean, but it was funny in spite of the distress it has caused your friend. You do not mean to “make fun of” your friend; however, your friend is still the butt of the humor. A more appropriate apology, then, might be: “I’m sorry for laughing, but it was funny.” (You probably should avoid telling your friend that they are the “butt.”)

The friend/coffee scenario also illuminates humor’s connection to tragedy. Although it is its own distinct element, it is related to the fact that every joke has a butt. The connection of

¹⁷ A favorite: “Knock, knock.” “Who’s there?” “Tinkerbell.” “Tinkerbell who?” “Tink your bell is broken. That’s why I’m knockin’.”

humor to tragedy is well-established and noted by many observers. As Steve Allen puts it, “Tragedy plus time equals comedy.”¹⁸ The ubiquitous Western symbol for the theater is even the overlapping dual masks of comedy and tragedy, connotating not only the categories of theater but their interconnectedness as well. In fact, the comedic community frequently debates how soon after a tragic incident it becomes appropriate for the event to be incorporated into humor.¹⁹

The quintessential source for all things tragic remains Aristotle.²⁰ Sadly, the section of *Poetics* directly dealing with comedy is lost.²¹ However, Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy demonstrates how the same dynamics are at work for comedy, and the connection is so strong because the two are inexorably linked by the way they both elicit response. Furthermore, comedy is not only connected to tragedy, but the reverse is also true. In a way, tragedy *needs* comedy. The two modes are frequently bound together in ways that not only provide respite for the audience in the middle of a tragic situation, but also continue to move forward the themes of the tragedy. Consider how each of these character examples perform that exact function in the course of their respective tragedies: the Gravediggers in *Hamlet* (1601), the Porter in *Macbeth* (1605), the drill instructor in *Full Metal Jacket*,²² and Tommy in *Goodfellas*.²³ The humor is not gratuitous to these dramas; in each case the humor furthers themes at work in the tragedy as a whole. In *Hamlet* Act V, the Gravediggers begin by humorously debating suicide (they are digging Ophelia’s grave) harking back to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy (III, i) before Hamlet enters the scene. The dramatic function of the Porter in *Macbeth* is to increase the tension as the lords (and the audience) wait for Macduff to return from the King’s chamber and

¹⁸ Allen, Steve (Feb 1957) “Steve Allen’s Almanac” in *Cosmopolitan*.

¹⁹ The comic Gilbert Gottlieb infamously made a joke, and took a massive amount of criticism for it, about the 9/11 attack the very next day during a Comedy Central roast of Hugh Hefner.

²⁰ Aristotle (about 330 BCE), *Poetics* (S. H. Butcher, tr.).

²¹ This missing text of Aristotle’s is central to Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1983).

²² Kubrick, Stanley (director) (1987), *Full Metal Jacket*.

²³ Scorsese, Martin (director) (1990), *Goodfellas*.

announce his murder. The subject of his musings about the effects of alcohol, however, center on how it increases sexual desire while simultaneously impairing a man's sexual performance. A great deal of the play explores gender roles, specifically the meaning of "manliness," from Lady Macbeth's "unsex me" speech and her boast to her husband that she would unhesitatingly murder her child while it nursed if she had promised as he had, to Macbeth being "unmanned" by the apparition of Banquo, to Malcolm telling Macduff to "dispute it like a man" and his reply "I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man" when he receives word of the murder of his family.

Director Stanley Kubrick frequently explores the serious topic of the nexus of sex and violence.²⁴ This connection is explicitly presented in *Full Metal Jacket* by showing how normal young men are turned into killers through harnessing their burgeoning sexual identity and power. (Roughly half the film takes place during basic training on Parris Island.²⁵) The drill instructor is tasked with the role of transforming the recruits from civilized young men into unthinking killers. He accomplishes this by first breaking them down, and from the start he does so through a constant barrage of (often hilarious) insults, such as "Did your parents have any children that lived?" and "You're so ugly you could be a modern art masterpiece." Sprinkled throughout are insults questioning their sexuality, like "I bet you're the kind of guy that would fuck a person in the ass and not even have the goddamn common courtesy to give 'em a reach-around." Later, they are forced to give their rifles girls' names and sleep with them and to march about the barracks as punishment alternately grabbing their rifles and genitalia while reciting "This is my rifle; this is my gun. This is for shooting; this is for fun." Our amusement in his constant ridicule

²⁴ E.g. *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Shining* (1980), and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

²⁵ The training sequences are echoed throughout those of actual combat, culminating in the execution of a female sniper by Joker (Matthew Modine) making the same "war face" he did at the behest of the gunnery sergeant when we first meet them.

of Lawrence (aka Private Pyle played by Vincent D'Onofrio) begins to fade as we recognize the depth of his psychic pain. It finally disappears altogether when Lawrence “snaps” at the end of basic training and murders the drill instructor before committing suicide.

In *Goodfellas*, Scorsese shows us how a neighborhood kid named Henry (Ray Liotta) is seduced into the violent world of the New York mob. The character of Tommy (Joe Pesci) personifies the charisma and allure of the gangster life coupled with its mercurial and deadly violence. Tommy is the psychopath who can be charming and entertaining until he suddenly turns violent. A memorable scene uniting the two traits takes place in a restaurant the mobsters frequent when Tommy cuts short his amusing, albeit violent, anecdotes after Henry tells him he is funny. Everyone at the table becomes tense when Tommy demands Henry tell him, “Funny how? Funny like a clown? What, do I amuse you?” All believe violence will erupt until Tommy indicates he is merely joking with Henry. In relief, the table returns to good humor until the owner approaches with the bill. Tommy suddenly attacks him by smashing a wine bottle on his head, much to the amusement (and relief that his ire is directed elsewhere) of his crew.

Comedy is not only attached to tragedy, but it also functions in the same way. Aristotle’s explication of the workings of tragedy can be summarized thusly: In the course of a tragedy, the hero, in whom we can see ourselves, experiences a reversal of fortune causing suffering. The combination of these things inspires pity and fear in the audience; “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves” (*Poetics*, XIII). Seeing these things occur from the psychologically safe distance of an observer leads to the purging of the feelings of pity and fear, called *catharsis*, which in turn leaves in their place a feeling of pleasure.

Comedy (humor) works exactly the same way, although the magnitude of the suffering can be

greatly reduced.²⁶ Recall the friend/coffee scenario: We laugh at our friend because we harbor the fear of the same thing happening to us, and when it happens instead to the friend, the relief of it not having happened to us brings the laughter. As W. C. Fields purportedly says, “Comedy is tragedy happening to someone else.”²⁷ While not strictly true in Aristotelian terms, the gist of truth is there. White also speculates on this connection:

But there is often a rather fine line between laughing and crying, and if a humorous piece of writing brings a person to the point where his emotional responses are untrustworthy and seem likely to break over into the opposite realm, it is because humor, like poetry, has an extra content. It plays close to the big hot fire which is Truth, and sometimes the reader feels the heat.

That extra content, which White labels “Truth,” is ultimately a truth about ourselves.

These fundamental qualities of humor should not be imperiled by our desire to avoid offending others. In the course of humor, offense is practically inevitable and sometimes even desirable. As film-maker Taika Waititi says, “The only real way to fight bullies is with humor. Comedy is a very, very important weapon against bigotry and hate and intolerance, and we have to continue to use it because it’s a great way of disarming bullies and poking enough holes in their belief system.”²⁸ Of course, those in a position of social weakness should not be attacked through humor and thereby have their suffering increased. Provine and Bryant both caution against using humor as a weapon directed at the socially marginalized because of humor’s power. However, the *intent* of humor really does matter when calculating its appropriateness. There are few scenes in the comedy masterpiece *Blazing Saddles* that cannot be viewed as offensive.²⁹ In particular, offensive racist terms and actions fill the screen from beginning to end.

²⁶ The magnitude of suffering *can* be greatly reduced, but it may also remain at the tragic level in many circumstances. I explore this fact later under the category of black humor.

²⁷ I cannot find an unimpeachably reliable citation for this quotation; however, Angela Carter (perhaps inspired by Fields) certainly writes in her novel *Wise Children* (1991), “Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people.”

²⁸ Chuba, Kristin (16 Oct 2019), “Taika Waititi on Satirizing Hitler in *Jojo Rabbit*: ‘Comedy Is a Very Important Weapon Against Bigotry’” in *The Hollywood Reporter*.

²⁹ Brooks, Mel (director) (1974), *Blazing Saddles*.

But the purpose behind dramatizing the racism is to unmask and ridicule it, not to present it as a viable world view. To censor those things that make us cringe *because we can see our own culpability in them* weakens our ability to confront and correct such wrongs. Similarly, efforts to remove the N-word from Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) miss the point. You cannot make people understand the wrongs of racism without showing them racism in action. Humorists must be free to do battle with injustice by dancing on the fringes of politeness and accepted social norms. Humor is too great a tool for attacking nonsense to have it removed from the human arsenal due to fear of offending others. Sometimes, the humorist will go too far.³⁰ Although we should not ignore such transgressions and should point them out, we must recognize that attempting to censor all that *may* offend is too extreme of a response. Sometimes, offense is necessary and even the point.

Categories of Humor

Now that we've taken a look at laughter and explored some of the principal qualities of humor, let's arrange things into categories, or genres, so that we can grasp the extent of humor's range of types.³¹ Categorization can be perilous because it is, by its very nature, somewhat arbitrary and capricious. It also implies things manifest themselves in clear, specific forms which do not overlap, whereas most things, including humor, resist an absolutely exclusionary definition of their natures. Humor seems an especially resistant example, particularly humorous creations as opposed to spontaneous humorous events. Something crafted with the intent of being funny often strikes several tones simultaneously, a musical chord rather than an individual note. For example, The Three Stooges are often simply referred to as slapstick, and they are in the main,

³⁰ The controversy surrounding the incident between Chris Rock and Will Smith during the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony perfectly illustrates the dynamics I'm describing at play.

³¹ I prefer the term *category* to *genre* because the latter carries a scholarly connotation that is not useful here. I'm unaware of any scholarly grouping of genres of humor, just layman groupings like mine.

but their routines also include an extraordinary amount of wordplay that should not be overlooked. In the 1944 short film “Crash Goes the Hash” (Jules White, director), Larry confuses *canapés* with the homophonic *can of peas* and spreads the latter on dog biscuits to serve to guests at a fancy dinner. (The guests believe the caviar has become moldy.)

No “official” list of categories of humor exists, and a quick internet search reveals a multitude of suggestions with a variety of lengths and organizational structures. I prefer looking at humor along a continuum (in part because of humor’s tendency to overlap categories) from low to high. The lower forms (also referred to as “broad”) are more physical, and the higher (aka “sophisticated”) are more cerebral. The terms “low” and “high” more accurately relate to brain function as opposed to figurative elevation and emphasize different aspects of the definition described above; however, all categories connect to the same general elements we’ve already explored. Their differences are a matter of degree. The lower forms sometimes do not require language at all; the higher are usually heavily language dependent.³² These differences may have their root in the fact that we each have a body and share similar potentially embarrassing physical experiences with it, so humor involving bodies needs no verbalization to understand. These are just tendencies, however, not hard and fast rules without room for deviation.

Some adults cannot abide the lower forms of humor. They consider them juvenile and crass, which they are (at least usually). To them, a fondness for the lower types of humor is something to be outgrown. While I understand their attitude, I believe it to be the wrong approach. I have a preference for humor at the higher end of the continuum, but I still enjoy the full range of categories. I’m pleased that I’m amused by both a fart and a witticism regarding epistemology, even if I prefer the latter. Of course for some, distaste for a particular type of

³² Of course, the reverse can also be true, which points to the difficulty in categorization.

humor may not be a conscious choice, but rather an emotional response due to some earlier trauma. Such a limitation, however, is different from deliberate, conscious rejection due to the perception of humor being beneath one's standing. That seems a foolish case of snobbery. Why would I want to limit the scope of what I find funny or beautiful? Life is too short for that.

Moreover, as a rule of thumb, lower forms of humor often provoke more demonstrative responses with louder, heartier laughter. Because we all have experienced excremental mishaps, slipped and fallen, and will one day die, the catharsis triggered by the humor can be more satisfying. This, too, is in no way a hard and fast truth, however. As noted above, many people abhor lower forms of humor and respond to it negatively. They cannot understand how others can find a video of someone being struck in the genitals with a baseball remotely funny. Likewise, a skilled comedian can elicit howls of laughter from humor presented entirely at the highest end of the continuum. (These facts exemplify the limited utility of categorization!) Regardless, all humor still has a "butt" and often pushes the edge of politeness.

While we hop through this list of six categories, I won't be stopping to fully explicate the elements of our overall definition of humor for each example. You'll have to do some of that for yourself. Instead, I'll be connecting them to the overall definition and then highlighting the specific qualities for each category through examples as we move from low to high. As said above, these categories are best used for describing humorous incidents within comedic works, rather than used for works in their entirety. More general descriptions (*e.g.* broad, refined) better apply to entire works than the specific categories described below.

For a quick example of why this practice is best, consider the classic Marx Brothers' film *Duck Soup*, in which Groucho Marx plays Rufus T. Firefly, the leader of the country of

Freedonia.³³ Like all of the Marx Brothers' creations, the film is filled with rapid, silly wordplay. Chico Marx plays Chicolini, a spy who is masquerading as a street cart peanut vendor.

Firefly

Have you got a license?

Chicolini

No, but my dog – he's got millions of 'em. Believe me, he's some smart dog. You know, he went to the pole with Admiral Byrd.

Firefly

I'll bet the dog got to the pole first.

Chicolini

You win!

Firefly

Come up here. I want to scare the cabinet.

Chicolini

Peanuts!

Firefly

Hey! Do you want to be a public nuisance?

Chicolini

Sure. How much does the job pay?

Firefly

I've got a good mind to join a club and beat you over the head with it.

Chicolini

Peanuts to you!³⁴

It also is filled with purely physical comedy, like the memorable and completely silent “Mirror Scene.” In it, Harpo Marx's character Pinky has infiltrated Firefly's home and is disguised as him, complete with Groucho's greasepaint moustache and dressed in an identical nightshirt and cap with tassel. Pinky breaks a wall-sized mirror, exposing an improbable doorway. When Firefly investigates, Pinky pretends he is merely a reflection by mirroring his actions. Suspicious, Firefly engages in numerous silly motions (including the Charleston dance), which Pinky mirrors to perfection.³⁵ The film itself is also a satire on fascism, which was on the rise during this period

³³ McCarey, Leo (director) (1933), *Duck Soup*.

³⁴ Some help with the last joke: “Nuts to you!” is a statement of disdain from the period.

³⁵ This description does not do this scene justice. If you are unfamiliar with it, I urge you to take three minutes and watch it. You may then recognize other scenes inspired by it. (See the fight scene between Inspector Clouseau and Cato in *The Revenge of the Pink Panther* [Edwards, Blake (director) (1978)].)

of worldwide economic upheaval. As satire, it is not at all nuanced, in contrast to, for instance, *To Be or Not to Be*, which satirizes a similar topic.³⁶ *Duck Soup*, therefore, incorporates multiple examples of different categories described below but consistently does so at the low end of the spectrum of the higher categories it uses. Therefore, the film is best described as a “broad comedy” rather than by an individual category, like slapstick or satire. (As I said above, categorization is perilous!)

Scatological

The lowest form of humor is scatological. For our purposes here, scatological refers to humor deriving from bodily functions, not solely excretory functions as the name would indicate. As such, I’m including sexual humor under this category. Scatological humor encompasses the sight, sound, smell, feel, and taste of burps, farts, stomach and intestinal rumblings, urine, feces, vomit, odd laughs, sneezes, hiccups, snores, and sex.³⁷ These share the common association of being directly related to our animal/bodily natures. Therefore, they are also things over which we frequently cannot exercise conscious control.

I can hear sounds of agreement mixed with perplexity. Yes, people do find those things humorous, every one of them, but why? What makes them humorous? The snap answer is that social norms require these types of things to be private and exposing them drives the catharsis. This explanation, while true enough, is inadequate for two reasons. First, ignoring the fact that not all societies share the same values and norms, current social norms have not been in place for as long as these things have been considered humorous. Second, young children not yet acculturated find them funny, at least those items on the list with which they come in contact and understand. Hence, violating a social taboo is a layer added onto the already extant humor

³⁶ Lubitsch, Ernst (director) (1942), *To Be or Not to Be*.

³⁷ This list is not proscriptive.

associated with scatological events, so we will need to explore a little deeper to understand the source of the humor.

According to Piers Mitchell, ancient Roman latrines were filthy places lacking hygiene by any modern standards.³⁸ The floors and seats were laden with urine and feces. Moreover, Romans excreted communally. From this we can infer that in their culture, shyness regarding such matters was nowhere close to what it is today. Yet, Petronius's *Satyricon* (about 1 CE) is filled with scatological humor the Romans enjoyed. In English (albeit Middle English), "The Miller's Tale" from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (about 1390) provides explicit examples of this type of humor in the time of Richard II. Without presenting a detailed paraphrase, suffice it to say "The Miller's Tale" is an early version of a "farmer's daughter" joke, although the particulars involve a carpenter and his wife Alisoun, rather than a farmer and daughter. The tale includes Alisoun being grabbed by the "queynte" (*i.e.* cunt), having an illicit affair, using a "shot-window" (*i.e.* a privy vent), and proffering her ass in the dark to be kissed in place of her mouth (which it is). Her lover also literally has a red-hot poker shoved up his ass when he attempts to fart in another character's face. Scatological humor continues through François Rabelais's *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (about 1532-1564) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Among the examples in the latter are Gulliver urinating on the palace of the Lilliputians to extinguish a fire, being clutched to and revolted by the grotesquely huge breast of a Brobdingnagian woman, and the Yahoos flinging their excrement at him. Scatological humor obviously predates current cultural norms.

The second point, that young children laugh at scatological humor, is similarly dissuasive to the argument that the root of this category of humor is its violation of social norms. Babies

³⁸ Beck, Julie (8 Jan 2016), "Roman Plumbing: Overrated" in *The Atlantic*.

begin laughing for a variety of reasons, but according to researcher Caspar Addyman, “Adults laugh at something when they find it surprising or unusual; it’s exactly the same for babies.”³⁹ In other words, like adults, babies laugh at the absurd. To a baby who has not yet developed a sense of object permanence, peek-a-boo is an absurd event. So is “blowing a raspberry,” placing your tongue between your lips and blowing, *i.e.* producing a sound outside the realm of normal “speech.” At first the laughter is simply a spontaneous tickle response. Eventually, a child recognizes that a raspberry is also a clear imitation of flatulence, that they or an adult is making a sound through the mouth usually expressed from the rear. For a child, therefore, blowing a raspberry is absurd first because of its novelty, and later its absurdity is rooted in its scatological connection.

The link between the scatological and the absurd is thus developed at a young age. As children learn a society’s rules, the scatological gains a connection to the tragic, in the limited sense discussed above. The embarrassment associated with violating social norms regarding bodily functions creates catharsis when another person makes that violation. Embarrassment is the key to the catharsis; a fact seized upon by Monty Python’s Flying Circus in their recorded sketch “Are You Embarrassed Easily?”⁴⁰ In the sketch, the troupe take advantage of the limitations of the sound-only medium through the use of inappropriate words and evocative sounds that play upon the imagination of the listener.

Scatological sounds alone are enough to easily promote humor about flatulence. One of the memorable scenes in *Blazing Saddles* involves a group of cowboys dining on plates of beans around a campfire. The men slowly begin to show signs that the beans are working their gaseous magic as they burp and fart individually. The sounds quickly pick up pace until they reach a

³⁹ Philby, Charlotte (24 Oct 2012), “Revealed: The Serious Science Behind a Baby’s Laugh,” in *The Independent*.

⁴⁰ Idle, Eric, *et al* (1972), “Are You Embarrassed Easily?” on the audio recording *Monty Python’s Previous Record*.

crescendo of overlapping squeaks and honks that would please an avant-garde musician. The “Fartbook” episode of the Canadian television program *Letterkenny* is similar.⁴¹ Instead of creating a cacophony of flatulence, however, the farts are discussed individually, separated into types, and ranked. (Rather than simply scatological humor like the farting in *Blazing Saddles*, the episode becomes a broad satire on social media, as indicated by its title.)

Creating humor associated with offensive smells doesn’t necessarily require the accompaniment of offensive sounds; one only needs to mention the smell. In the first Star Wars movie, Princess Leia only needs to mention the smell to produce the humorous effect when she and her rescuers fall into a garbage compactor by mistake.⁴² *Raising Arizona* has a scene involving smell fitting our definition of scatological even more directly.⁴³ We see brothers Gale and Evelle Snoats escape prison, emerging from a hole in the muddy ground during a torrential downpour in a mock symbolic rebirth. In subsequent scenes, their clothes and faces are coated in what appears to be dried mud. After sitting for a time in the McDunnough living room, Ed (Holly Hunter) wrinkles her nose and then asks, “What’s that smell?” Gale (John Goodman) replies, “We don’t always smell this way, Ms. McDunnough. I was just explaining to your better half here that when we were tunnelin’ out, we happened to hit the main sewer line – dumb luck that.” We suddenly realize it isn’t just mud they’re covered with.

Scatological humor based around flatulence and defecation are ubiquitous, perhaps because it is something people do every day. It appears in a cartoon: What looks to be a frog offers what appears to be a mushroom to a man in a lab coat. The caption reads: “Here’s the sample you asked for, doc.” (Ah, it’s a toad not a frog!) In a joke:

⁴¹ Tierney, Jacob (director) (2016), “Fartbook” *Letterkenny*.

⁴² Lucas, George (director) (1977), *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.

⁴³ Cohen, Ethan & Joel Cohen (directors) (1987), *Raising Arizona*.

A bear and a rabbit are in the forest taking a shit. The bear looks over at the rabbit and says, “Do you ever have a problem with shit sticking to your fur?” “No, I don’t,” replies the rabbit. So the bear picks up the rabbit and wipes his ass with it.

Despite the abundance of fart and shit humor, all bodily functions are fair game. For example, recall the sequence involving Mr. Creosote in *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*.⁴⁴ Mr.

Creosote is the frighteningly obese and gluttonous restaurant patron whose first exchange is:

“Ah, good afternoon, sir. And how are we today?” “Better.” “Better?” “Better get a bucket. I’m going to throw up.” True to his word, he repeatedly projectile vomits, spraying other patrons and staff, as well as the aforementioned bucket, while simultaneously ordering the entire menu.

(Obviously, satire is going on here in addition to the scatological humor.) Still, the only bodily functions that come close to the ubiquity of toilet humor are sexual.

Sexual humor carries an additional layer on top of those already present for other forms of scatological humor. This extra layer is pretty heavy, since it connects with the prime mandate from our genes: replicate or die. Furthermore, the human species has evolved to be relatively unique in our sexual proclivities. Jared Diamond goes to length discussing some of these distinctions and the theories as to how they are evolutionarily beneficial.⁴⁵ Among these differences are concealed ovulation and concealed copulation. Because of the former, human sex has developed for purposes beyond the purely procreative. And because of the latter, being caught *in acto flagrante* carries a level of panic. We have also evolved behaviors like monogamy and psycho-physical responses like the orgasm.⁴⁶ Other primates have not evolved similarly, so human sex has much more humor potential than, say, gorilla sex.

⁴⁴ Jones, Terry (director) (1983), *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*.

⁴⁵ Diamond, Jared (1992), *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*.

⁴⁶ Of course, some individuals are excited by things like exhibitionism and polygamy, but that is because these acts and others like them are outside the statistical normal range of behavior. Besides, such people tend to keep those types of things private; it is the taboo nature of the acts which they find exciting. (Don’t worry, I’m going no nearer to Freud than this!) Therefore, the appellation of sexual humor isn’t upset by them.

As we've seen, empathy is a key component of catharsis, and the sexual urge is so strong that we identify with the situations people get themselves into trying to reach sexual satisfaction. Sex, and everything surrounding it, becomes very fertile ground for humor. For instance, although some religious sects try to deny it is a normal, natural impulse, this universality includes masturbation. "The Contest" is a famous *Seinfeld* episode in which the friends make a bet as to whom will be the last to give in to the masturbatory urge.⁴⁷ It is also the title joke in the film *American Pie*, a teenage comedy that gets its name from a male character, who is a virgin, being caught masturbating with a pie after he's been told a vagina feels like a warm apple pie.⁴⁸

Most sex isn't about procreation; it's about finding pleasure (or at least *trying* to find it). Sexual pleasure, then, is a topic ripe for the humorous picking:

A man and a woman get into an argument over who enjoys sex more.

The man says, "Men obviously enjoy sex more. Why do you think we're so obsessed with getting laid?"

"That doesn't prove anything," the woman replies. "Think about this: When your ear itches and you put your finger in it, wiggle it around, then pull it out, which feels better – your ear or your finger?"

No matter one's gender, the search for pleasure can lead to exploring new things. A story about sexual exploration long thought to be apocryphal turned out to be true when a copy of the segment turned up in 2000.⁴⁹ The event occurred on *The Newlywed Game*, a long running television gameshow in which the host Bob Eubanks would ask newlyweds questions separately to see how well they knew their spouses. In the segment, Eubanks has already asked the husbands and now asks the wives, "Where, specifically, is the weirdest place that you personally, girls, have ever gotten the urge to make whoopie?" A contestant named Olga replies, "In the ass." (Her husband thought she'd reply, like the others, with a location, "In the car.")

⁴⁷ Cheronos, Tom (director) (1992), "The Contest," *Seinfeld*.

⁴⁸ Weitz, Paul and Chris Weitz (directors) (1999), *American Pie*.

⁴⁹ "Maternity Day" (1977), on *The Newlywed Game*. The video can be found at the fact-checking site *Snopes.com*.

Giving pleasure to your partner can also be pleasurable in itself and so that too becomes a target for humor. In the movie *Parenthood*, Karen Buckman (Mary Steenburgen) complains to a friend that she is worried about how tense her husband Gil (Steve Martin) is.⁵⁰ The friend suggests she try performing fellatio on him while he's driving.⁵¹ One night on the way home, Gil is particularly tense, and without warning she decides to take her friend's advice. Startled, Gil slams the family van into a light pole and triggers a flood of first responders, all of whom want to know how the accident happened.

This desire to please one's partner automatically carries within it the fear of being inadequate to do so. In the *Seinfeld* episode "The Hamptons," the character George (Jason Alexander) comes in from a swim and is changing out of his swimsuit.⁵² Failing to lock the door, it is opened accidentally by another guest who then clearly looks at his genitals and laughs while she apologizes. Fearful that she will report to a second woman he hopes to sleep with that he is physically inadequate, George desperately yells out, "I was in the pool!" The incident sets off a discussion of the phenomenon of penis shrinkage (leading Elaine [Julia Louis Dreyfuss] to comment, "I don't know how you guys walk around with those things") and George's quest for revenge when his desires are thwarted because of the incident.

As it should be clear by now, scatological humor covers a lot of area in many different ways. The humor may appear self-contained as a single-subject joke, like:

A woman tells a pet shopkeeper, "I want an animal that can really satisfy me."
He replies, "I've got a frog here that's been trained to please a woman with its tongue."
She says, "It's not possible to train a frog to do such a thing!"
"You don't believe me? Go to the back room, take off your clothes, and put this frog between your legs. He'll go right to work."

⁵⁰ Howard, Ron (1989), *Parenthood*.

⁵¹ In high school, a friend confessed to me that he'd thought the term *auto-fellatio* had something to do with cars.

⁵² Cheronis, Tom (director) (1994), "The Hamptons," *Seinfeld*.

Intrigued and somewhat desperate, she takes the frog and does what he says. Nothing happens, so she calls out, “He’s not doing anything!”

The shopkeeper bursts into the room and says to the frog, “This is the last time I’m going to show you how to do this!”

The humor may appear combined with other forms of scatological humor, as in the *Seinfeld* episode titled “The Chinese Restaurant.”⁵³ In this episode, George explains to Jerry that he’s desperate to use the pay phone in order to reconnect with a woman named Tatiana. He explains that while in the middle of having intercourse with her for the first time, he “begins to perceive this impending intestinal requirement, whose needs are going to surpass, by great lengths, anything in the sexual realm.” Furthermore, her apartment has no “buffer zone” to provide necessary privacy should he excuse himself from the sex to shit. Unable to resolve the conflict, he abruptly tells her he has to leave, pulls up his pants, and exits without further explanation. Finally, the scatological humor may also be a means to serve another form of humor, like the examples from *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* and the “Fartbook” episode of *Letterkenny*, mentioned above, that use scatological humor to make satirical commentary.

That’s an awful lot of territory covered for some lowly poop, pee, fart, and sex jokes!

Slapstick

Slapstick is the next category of humor on our continuum from low to high. The form owes its name to the *Batacchio*, a prop used in the *commedia dell’arte*, an improvised type of pantomime humor beginning in 16th century Italy. The *Batacchio* is a paddle-like board with an attached, hinged stick, which loudly claps the paddle when swung. The sound provides the illusion of the paddle striking its “victim” much harder than it actually does.⁵⁴ True to its history, slapstick humor is physical and involves either stylized violence or pantomimed silly movements

⁵³ Cheronos, Tom (director) (1991), “The Chinese Restaurant,” *Seinfeld*.

⁵⁴ The *Batacchio* was adopted by the English in the 17th century as an integral component of “Punch and Judy” shows, puppet shows wherein Punch wields a slapstick against other characters.

or both. While slapstick may include sounds, the sounds alone are not integral to the humor but may add an additional “layer.” In other words, any sounds, be they vocalizations or environmental, are not the real source of the humor; in general, slapstick can be appreciated without any sound at all.

A key quality in this description is the stylized nature of the violence. The violence is clearly not genuine and carries no real consequences. When Moe twists Curly’s nose with a pair of pliers in a Three Stooges routine (or Larry’s or Shemp’s, for that matter), not only can we tell the pliers are made of rubber, but the victim suffers no after-effects. The same is true when one of them is struck by a hammer or a saw is drawn across his head. Obviously, this would not be the case if the action was “real.” With no one actually hurt, no real pain suffered, we are free to laugh. We can label the violence as “cartoon violence” of the type suffered by the hapless Wile E. Coyote plummeting off a cliff, burying himself under an avalanche, or blowing himself up in his attempts to capture the elusive Roadrunner. Although Coyote may show signs of damage (*e.g.* an exaggerated lump rising from his head, patches of fur gone and skin exposed), he walks away and appears fully restored when we see him next.

This unrealistic quality remains when the consequences are slightly more real than those in a Three Stooges’ short or a cartoon. Characters may limp around with comically exaggerated bandages and plaster casts, and though they howl in pain, their howls are distinguishable to us as different from the sounds of actual pain. Leonard Steinkopf argues humans differentiate between genuine pain signals and faked signals primarily through context cues.⁵⁵ In the case of slapstick, those cues make the stylized nature of the pain abundantly clear. No one having a saw dragged across their head wails in genuine pain without a distinct lacerating injury accompanying it, for

⁵⁵ Steinkopf, Leonard (14 Jun 2016), “An Evolutionary Perspective on Pain Communication” in *Evolutionary Psychology*.

example. In slapstick, it is unusual for bloodletting to accompany the violence. If it does, it too is so exaggerated that it clearly isn't real, like in the famous *Saturday Night Live* sketch in which Dan Aykroyd, as Julia Child, is accidentally cut and bleeds profusely, gushing fake blood all over the kitchen while simultaneously continuing to speak ebulliently.⁵⁶

These qualities of slapstick lead us to its connections to both the absurd and catharsis. In the case of pantomimed silly movements, the odd nature of the movements creates the absurdity. For example, in the silent short film "The Cook," the cook (Fatty Arbuckle) and the waiter (Buster Keaton) team up for multiple sequences of flinging and catching food in the kitchen, as well as both performing bizarre interpretive dancing in the dining room.⁵⁷ Elaine, in the *Seinfeld* episode "Little Kicks," also performs a dance, one of jarring, unrhythmic movements that startle, bewilder, and bemuse other partygoers.⁵⁸ "The Ministry of Silly Walks" sketch on *Monty Python's Flying Circus* involves a British ministry of the title, whose mission is to provide grants for the development of silly walks, and shows multiple formally dressed Englishmen (complete with bowler hats) idiosyncratically loping about London.⁵⁹ For each of these examples, catharsis is triggered because of our identification with these characters who are blissfully unaware of the absurdity of their movements. We fear that we may also be guilty of committing this type of social embarrassment while remaining unaware we're doing so. Seeing it enacted purges the fear and leaves pleasure in its stead.

As we've already seen, slapstick violence is cartoonish, which creates its own absurdity. It is incongruous for someone to be blasted in the face with a shotgun, pull their mouth back into place, and then speak, but that is exactly what Daffy Duck does after Elmer Fudd shoots him,

⁵⁶ Wilson, Dave (director) (9 Dec 1978), *Saturday Night Live*.

⁵⁷ Arbuckle, Roscoe (Fatty) (director) (1918), "The Cook."

⁵⁸ Ackerman, Andy (director) (1996), "Little Kicks," *Seinfeld*.

⁵⁹ MacNaughton, Ian (director) (1970), "Face the Press (or: Dinsdale!)," *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

and Daffy tells Bugs Bunny he is “despicable.”⁶⁰ The absurdity remains even when the cartoon violence is presented more realistically, as it is in cartoons directed more explicitly toward an adult audience. While it can be argued that even early cartoons like those in *Merrie Melodies* and others contain a lot of humor directed more toward adults than children, fears about children learning violent behavior from them led them to be sanitized.⁶¹ Consequently, producers make the choice to not only shift to an adult audience but also to simultaneously present the violence more graphically. *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*, a long-running show-within-a-show segment of the animated series *The Simpsons* illustrates this trend well.⁶² These vignettes depict Itchy the cat and Scratchy the mouse doing battle with the role reversal of the mouse getting the better of the cat – a clear parody of the trope used in earlier cartoons like those of Tom and Jerry. Unlike Tom, who might suffer injuries similar to the ones of Wile E. Coyote described above, Itchy suffers things like dismemberment, decapitation, and disembowelment accompanied by squirting red blood. The absurdity remains, however, because Itchy will return unscathed.

While the violence in a cartoon is obviously unreal, the violence in live-action slapstick carries the same absurd quality. It is absurd for characters to survive a variety of situations without death or at least severe and debilitating injury. Examples of this type abound in slapstick. In an episode of the Mel Brooks and Buck Henry created broad television spy parody *Get Smart*, the bumbling Agent 86 Maxwell Smart (Don Adams) attempts to use the ejector seat in his car to reach a high window to sneak into a building.⁶³ He has Agent 99 (Barbara Feldon) eject him, so

⁶⁰ C.f. Jones, Chuck (director), “Rabbit Fire” (1951), “Rabbit Seasoning” (1952), & “Duck! Rabbit, Duck!” (1953).

⁶¹ Whether or not viewing stylized violence affects children’s in-person behavior is still subject to debate, but most research has found that it doesn’t, despite the commonly held belief that it does. C.f. Blumberg, F. C., Bierwirth, K., & Schwartz, A. J. (26 Aug 2008), “Does Cartoon Violence Beget Aggressive Behavior in Real Life? An Opposing View”, *Early Childhood Education Journal*.

⁶² Itchy and Scratchy first appear when *The Simpsons* are interludes within *The Tracy Ullman Show* (1988) and continue through today.

⁶³ Nelson, Gary (director) (1967), “Where-What-How-Who Am I?” *Get Smart*.

he can grab the windowsill. After a brief pause, the car seat careens down. A beat later, what is clearly a dummy plummets into view absolutely parallel to the ground. The instant the dummy is out of view behind the car, Max hops to his feet and gets back into the vehicle and says, “Let’s go 99.” “Where to Max?” “The nearest hospital. I just broke every bone in my body.” In *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*, Chief Inspector Jacques Clouseau (Peter Sellers) swings on a set parallel bars in the upstairs exercise room at an estate.⁶⁴ When he attempts a dismount, he flings himself down an adjacent stairwell. We cut to the bottom of the stairs to see him (*i.e.* a stunt man) tumbling down, coming to rest out of view behind a couch. He pops up instantaneously and says, “Well, that felt good!” He then begins his interrogation of the staff. The absurd is also clearly on display in the film *The Hangover* when the bachelor party group hear a strange noise coming from the trunk of the car they’re driving.⁶⁵ Stopping to investigate, a naked Chinese man (Ken Jeong), who neither they nor we know is there, leaps from the trunk and attacks them before racing away on foot.

Although not speaking explicitly about slapstick, comedian Buddy Hackett connects all humor to pain.⁶⁶ Without mentioning Aristotelian catharsis, he gives a succinct summary of it in relation to slapstick. He says, “When someone slips on a banana peel, [the audience is] laughing because it isn’t them” who slipped on the banana peel. The banana peel motif is a great example of slapstick and a staple of the genre beginning in the early 1900s, perhaps starting on the vaudeville stage with “Sliding” Billy Watson.⁶⁷ The motif first appeared on film in the Harold Lloyd silent short “The Flirt.”⁶⁸ It continues to this day, long past the time when such litter was a

⁶⁴ Edwards, Blake (director) (1976), *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*.

⁶⁵ Phillips, Todd (director) (2009), *The Hangover*.

⁶⁶ Diamond, Matthew (1997), “The College of Comedy with Alan King,” *PBS Great Performances*.

⁶⁷ Turner Garrison, Laura (2012), “How Did Slipping on a Banana Peel Become a Comedy Staple?” *Mental Floss*.

⁶⁸ Gilbert, Billy (director) (1917), “The Flirt.”

common hazard on city streets. In fact, a character slipping on a banana peel is the final joke at the end of a three-and-a-half-hour comedy featuring Buddy Hackett, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*.⁶⁹ In it, the male characters all lie in the hospital under police guard, each with their own exaggerated bandages, casts, and forms of traction due to suffering various injuries at the film's climax. Hackett flings a banana peel to the floor. Into the room march two of the characters' wives led by Ethel Merman as the bossy mother (and mother-in-law). Just as she shouts, "Now see here, you idiots!" she slips on the peel and lands on her keister with legs akimbo. Everyone, except the women and her son (Dick Shawn), bursts into laughter to end the film.

Like scatological humor, slapstick covers a lot of area. Also like the scatological, it rarely appears in a "stand-alone" form; rather, slapstick is usually linked with other broad forms of humor within which the slapstick is an element. Unlike scatological humor, slapstick does not generally appear in verbal jokes, although comedians skilled at narrative can often paint a clear enough picture to include it in their routines. (Think of some descriptions by Robin Williams, for example.) Slapstick is most frequently a visual form, however. It is the hapless burglars Harry and Marv doing battle with Kevin in *Home Alone*.⁷⁰ (For instance, Marv [Daniel Stern] is hit in the face by a clothes iron on a rope. As he lays dazed with an iron-shaped mark on his face, he is roused when a tarantula is placed there and screams hysterically.) It is Mongo (Alex Karras) knocking a horse unconscious with a punch to the chin in *Blazing Saddles*. Slapstick is also the ubiquitous pie fight, which has appeared in myriad forms from the vaudeville stage to the present. Its first film appearance is disputed, but perhaps its greatest example occurs in the aptly titled "The Battle of the Century."⁷¹ The second reel of this Laurel and Hardy silent short

⁶⁹ Kramer, Stanley (director) (1963), *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

⁷⁰ Columbus, Chris (director) (1990), *Home Alone*.

⁷¹ Bruckman, Clyde (director) (1927), "The Battle of the Century."

featuring the fight was lost, but it was rediscovered in 2015 and can now be found online.

Accounts of the production vary, but the fight used at least 3,000 pies (possibly as many 10,000), dwarfing the numbers of other massive movie pie fights, like the one in *The Great Race* (2,000 pies).⁷² The fight begins, by the way, when someone slips on a banana peel.

Finally, if my discussion of slapstick has left you feeling as if this type of humor is not to your tastes due to its dependence upon violence, albeit stylized, I urge you not to judge so hastily. The golden era for slapstick humor on film is the silent era. Slapstick marries to this form beautifully since the humor is not reliant upon sound. If you are unfamiliar with them, look at some of the short films of Fatty Arbuckle, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, Ben Turpin, and Buster Keaton, as well as others. My personal favorite is Keaton. Somehow, he makes the slapstick not only funny but simultaneously exhilarating and uplifting as well.⁷³

Black

The next category is about tragedy and death: black humor. A major difference between this category and slapstick is that the “pain” is real. For this category, Steve Allen’s equation of “Tragedy plus time equals comedy” is crucial to our understanding despite its vagueness: The maxim begs the question, “How much time?” The answer, however, is multidimensional; time isn’t the sole variable. A study by A. Peter McGraw, Caleb Warren, Lawrence E. Williams, and Bridget Leonard reveals that time, severity, and proximity all play roles in answering the question.⁷⁴ Minor “tragedies” occurring to ourselves or someone close to us can be funny almost immediately, as can be more major events happening to people we don’t know. (Think back to

⁷² Edwards, Blake (director) (1965), *The Great Race*.

⁷³ My impression may be due to his amazing facility at performing his constant stunts without injury. According to Keaton, his nickname “Buster” was given to him as a child by none other than Harry Houdini, who had watched him take a tumble without getting hurt and said, “That was sure a buster!”

⁷⁴ McGraw, A. Peter, Caleb Warren, Lawrence E. Williams, & Bridget Leonard (12 Aug 2012), “Too Close for Comfort, or Too Far to Care? Finding Humor in Distant Tragedies and Close Mishaps,” in *Psychological Science*.

the scenario of the friend with the spilled coffee, for example.) Conversely, a bigger tragedy happening to us is not funny near the time it occurs but may become funny after a longer period of time. Gil Greengross, writing about this study in *Psychology Today*, has a succinct example:

Think about the difference between being hit by a car (very upsetting) to stubbing your toe (not very upsetting). If you were hit by a car, you would not be prone to find it funny immediately, probably because it took a physical and emotional toll on you. But over time, when you are more detached from the situation, you can look back and find the whole accident to be funny. On the other hand, if you had a non significant injury to your toe, it might seem funny at first, but this feeling will wane in the long run. That is exactly what the researchers found. Ninety-nine percent of the subjects thought a car accident occurring five years ago would be funnier today than it was on the day of the accident, while only 18% thought that an injury to the toe would be funnier five years later.⁷⁵

In the study, McGraw, *et al*, refers to black humorous events as “benign-violations” and reasons the differing responses are due to the perceived level of threat. “This benign-violation account suggests that distance facilitates humor in the case of tragedies by reducing threat, but that closeness facilitates humor in the case of mishaps by maintaining some sense of threat.”⁷⁶ The implication for this category of humor is that the humor becomes very subjective, much more so than in the earlier forms we’ve examined.

We already explored at some length the connection between tragedy and humor, and so this type of humor’s link to Aristotelian theory should be clear. Because of this category’s explicit association with tragedy, Aristotle’s analysis of the tragic doesn’t need much explication to recognize how it connects with this comic form; they both produce catharsis the same way. In black humor, an actual tragedy occurs that with time and/or social distance can turn the response from tears to laughter. The form of “pity and fear” inspired by tragic events is clearly identifiable, much more so than for some forms of scatological humor or higher forms yet to be

⁷⁵ Greengross, Gil (14 Sept 2012), “When Do Tragedies Become Funny?” in *Psychology Today*.

⁷⁶ “Mishaps” are incidents of lesser consequence, like the toe injury in Greengross’s example.

discussed. The shift from the tragic to the comic, then, is dependent upon the subjective interpretations of each audience member.

Consider, for example, a type of black humor called a “dead baby joke.” The form includes jokes like: “What’s the difference between a truckload of dead babies and a truckload of bowling balls? You can’t unload bowling balls with a pitchfork.” And, “How many dead babies does it take to paint a house? It depends on how hard you throw them.” These jokes are crass, crude, and juvenile, but, as we’ve seen, many humorous things can be described that way. The real question to ask, therefore, is: Are they funny? The answer is: It depends. A young person with no children is more likely to be amused than a parent, while a parent who lost an infant is likely to never find these jokes funny in any way.

The absurd component of black humor, however, functions in a straightforward manner. From the perspective of the absurd, a dead baby joke works in the same way as a knock-knock joke. (Even when adults find a dead baby joke funny, they react similarly to adults’ reactions to knock-knock jokes, with mild amusement rather than howls of laughter.) The primary difference between the types of jokes, the tragic content, is what determines whether something in this category is funny to a specific individual. This phenomenon highlights how the absurd and catharsis, the two main components of humor, work together to create most humor. Fans of performer Michael Jackson (and survivors of sexual abuse) didn’t find anything humorous in jokes about him at the time of his trial for child molestation in 2005. For others, however, the accusations confirmed suspicions they already harbored, allowing for humor. Non-fans joked: “How do you know when it’s Michael Jackson’s bedtime? The big hand touches the little hand.” And, “What’s the difference between Michael Jackson and a grocery bag? One is white, plastic, and dangerous to children; you put groceries in the other.” The absurd element for each joke is

the “surprise” in the answer to the riddle’s question, the same as a knock-knock joke. Therefore, the reaction of an individual to the tragic element of the jokes, not the absurd element, determines whether it is humorous to them.

Most black humor isn’t as potentially off-putting as my examples so far suggest; I’ve provided them to show some implications of McGraw’s, *et al*, research. Black humor is typically much less provocative. For instance, in the film *Pulp Fiction*, Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) tells Vincent Vega (John Travolta) that her character in a television show for which she did a pilot episode was supposed to tell a corny joke each week.⁷⁷ When he asks what the joke in the pilot was, she demurs, but at the end of their eventful evening, she confides in him: “Three tomatoes are walking down the street – a poppa tomato, a momma tomato, and a little baby tomato. Baby tomato starts lagging behind. Poppa tomato gets angry, goes over to the baby tomato, and squishes him, and says, ‘Catch up.’” Although essentially a pun hinging upon the homophonic *catch up* for *ketchup*, the joke qualifies as black humor due to its reliance on infanticide, albeit of a member of a fruiting vegetable family rather than a human family, for its humor. Obviously, by its nature it offers no tragic “threat” to the audience (unless there is an unknown tomato family it offends), so it doesn’t pose a problem of the kind a dead baby or Michael Jackson joke might.

Overall, the cerebral humor of Woody Allen belongs in a higher category; however, his metaphysical musings belong under black humor and further illustrate how the category can be non-threatening. On the subject of death, Allen says, “Death should not be seen as the end but as a very effective way to cut down expenses.” And, “There are worse things in life than death. Have you ever spent an evening with an insurance salesman?” And, “I don’t want to be immortal through my works. I want to be immortal through not dying.”⁷⁸ Allen obviously leans heavily

⁷⁷ Tarantino, Quentin (director) (1994), *Pulp Fiction*.

⁷⁸ All these Woody Allen quotations are taken from <https://www.quotetab.com/woody-allen-quotes-about-death>.

upon the absurd, but the abstract nature with which he confronts existential dread (our own along with his) also softens our reactions so that the remarks are humorous rather than painful. He doesn't so much conjure our own eventual demise as hint at it; however, we all carry around an awareness of the inevitability of our death, which niggles in our subconscious. One way we combat the dread it generates is expressed by the idiom "whistling passed the graveyard."⁷⁹ Laughing in the face of our ultimate end gives us a sense of control over it. While we cannot prevent our death, we can use laughter to rob it of its power to terrify.

The tragic in black humor isn't confined to death; it also includes things like birth defects, maladies, and cognitive impairments. "Guy with no arms and legs" jokes fit this category: "What do you call a guy with no arms and legs on your porch? Matt." And, "What do you call a guy with no arms and legs on the wall? Art." And, "What do you call a woman with no arms and legs lying on a grill? Patty." Again, these jokes are crass and juvenile, but generally not threatening. Neither is the humor in the movie *Rain Man*, even when the cause of it is the infirmity of the "title" character.⁸⁰ For example, when Raymond (Dustin Hoffman), who is an autistic savant, attempts to compliment a woman, he tells her, "You're very sparkly." She may be non plussed, but we understand his reasoning and smile, just as we do when his brother's girlfriend Susanna (Valeria Golino) teaches Raymond to kiss. After the kiss, she asks him how it felt, and he replies, "Wet." His humorous literal response stems from his disability.

Black humor is usually presented with a lighter touch than you might expect, which allows it to appear frequently with little controversy. The film *S.O.B.* is called by *Rotten Tomatoes* "one of the blackest – and consistently funny – Hollywood satires ever put to film."⁸¹

⁷⁹ The origin for the phrase is probably the Robert Blair poem "The Grave" (1743), which has a description of a school-boy "[w]histling aloud to keep his courage up" while passing a churchyard in the dark.

⁸⁰ Levinson, Barry (director) (1988), *Rain Man*.

⁸¹ Edwards, Blake (director) (1981), *S.O.B.*

In it, film-maker Felix Farmer (Richard Mulligan) is shot to death by police while attempting to steal back the negatives of his film *Night Wind*, which were taken by the studio. In moment of drunken bravado, his friends (led by William Holden as Culley), decide to steal his corpse from the funeral parlor. Following a variety of mishaps involving other bodies, they adorn Felix with women's heart-shaped sunglasses and a Viking helmet and prop him up in a chair as they drink toasts to him. In the morning, they give him a Viking funeral by setting him and his dinghy aflame. (The body of another in the funeral parlor is the beneficiary of Felix's extravagant Hollywood funeral.)

Black humor also runs throughout the popular films of brothers Joel and Ethan Cohen. A good portion of the movie *The Ladykillers* centers on members of Prof. Goldthwaite Higginson Dorr's (Tom Hanks) motley gang of riverboat casino thieves attempting to murder the only witness to their crime, Marva Munson (Irma P. Hall).⁸² Instead, each of them is killed, including Dorr, and their bodies all tumble off the same bridge onto a garbage scow and oblivion. When Donny (Steve Buscemi) dies in *The Big Lebowski*, the Dude (Jeff Bridges) and Walter (John Goodman) attempt to provide him with a funeral on the cheap.⁸³ Walter eulogizes him while standing on the edge of an ocean-facing cliff and holding aloft Donny's cremated remains in a Folger's coffee can. When he pours out the ashes, the sea breeze blows them back, and the Dude's face and clothes are covered by Donny's remains as he stands in stoic repose.

Clearly, black humor involving fictional characters doesn't offer the same potential for offense (which can be seen as failing to convert the tragic to the comic) as the same situations involving real people. In those cases, McGraw's, *et al*, finding that distance – spatial and/or

⁸² Cohen, Ethan & Joel Cohen (directors) (2004), *The Ladykillers*. (This film is a remake of a 1955 British film of the same name directed by Alexander Mackendrick.)

⁸³ Cohen, Ethan & Joel Cohen (directors) (1998), *The Big Lebowski*.

temporal – gains importance for humor. The annual Darwin Awards provide examples of how real tragedy can be humorous when it happens in a unique way to someone we don't know. According to their website, "The Darwin Awards salute the improvement of the human genome by honoring those who accidentally remove themselves from it in a spectacular manner!"⁸⁴ For example, Ronald Cyr, 65, of Van Buren, ME, was awarded a Darwin on November 28, 2019. Apparently inspired by the old-time tooth extraction method of tying the tooth to a doorknob and then slamming the door, Cyr rigged a handgun in a similar fashion in the name of home protection. Returning home on Thanksgiving, he accidentally triggered the boobytrap when he opened his own front door and fatally shot himself. Darwin awards Honorable Mentions for people who don't quite do the job, as well as the rare Living Darwin Award for those who manage to eliminate their ability to reproduce without dying. One of the latter was awarded to an unnamed Buckeye, AZ, man who on November 27, 2018, accidentally blew off his own genitalia with a handgun while shopping at Walmart. Arizona's open-carry law does not require a holster to be used, and when the handgun in his waistband slid into his pants, the man tried to extract it, discharging it instead. We may pity Cyr and the anonymous Arizona man, but not to the extent that we are uncomfortable laughing at them.

One of the most famous Darwin Awards stories turned out not to be true, but they leave access to the story on their site for its amusement value.⁸⁵ It concerns two Arkansas men, Thurston Poole and Billy Ray Wallis, and their frog gigging trip. When returning home, the older model truck's headlights fail, so the pair end up using a .22 shell for a fuse. Driving down the road, the bullet overheats, and because the fuse box is under the dash on the driver's side, when

⁸⁴ www.darwinawards.com

⁸⁵ Comedian Lewis Black has repeated the story as part of his stand-up routine, and it appears in "Other Idiots from Arkansas" on his recording *The White Album* (2000).

it discharges, it strikes Poole in the right testicle, causing him to swerve the vehicle sharply and crash. Wallis reportedly says, “Thank god we weren’t on the bridge when Thurston shot his balls off, or we might be dead!” When she is notified of the accident, Poole’s wife Lavinia asks how many frogs the boys got and did anyone remember to take them from the truck. True or not, that’s good black humor, and it is no less funny because it turned out not to be true. Before it was definitively debunked by the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, it made the rounds as a true story, and it remains humorous even as a fictional one.

I want to pause at this point to acknowledge this is the arbitrary spot on my continuum separating the lower forms of humor from the higher. As we’ve seen, versions of lower forms can appear within the higher and vice versa, but it’s also true that the lower tend travel together like a rollicking troika. As mentioned earlier with the example of the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup*, even broad comedies have instances of higher forms; however, in most broad comedies the trio of scatological, slapstick, and black humor drive the humor bus. Consider the broad comedy *There’s Something about Mary*.⁸⁶ The film is about the efforts of Ted Stroehmann (Ben Stiller) to win back the heart of his high school love Mary Jensen (Cameron Diaz). Scatological humor gets the film going. When we meet Ted preparing for their high school prom, he accidentally zips up his genitalia in his tuxedo pants, somehow managing to get “the beans above the frank,” as Mary’s stepfather (Keith David) puts it. Ted is hospitalized and loses track of Mary. Later, to quell his nerves before he and Mary go on their first date, Ted masturbates in his hotel bathroom and ejaculates just as Mary knocks at his door. After desperately failing to find the ejaculate, Ted opens the door. Mary immediately spots the white substance dripping from Ted’s ear, assumes

⁸⁶ Farrelly, Peter & Bobby (directors) (1998), *There’s Something about Mary*.

it's hair styling foam, and rubs it into her own hair, plastering it stiffly skyward for the duration of the date.

The movie is packed with incidents of slapstick. Some memorable sequences involve Puffy the dog, who hates men. A diminutive Border terrier, Puffy attacks both Pat Healy (Matt Dillon) and Ted. Pat drugs the dog, who drops into cardiac arrest, but Pat revives the animal using an exposed electrical cord as a defibrillator. (Puffy emits some smoke but is otherwise fine.) Ted, however, becomes locked in a no-holds-barred battle royale with the little pooch. After applying a variety of professional wrestling moves on Puffy, Ted ducks the dog's flying attack, and Puffy careens out the upper story window. (We next see the dog in a full body cast.) In another memorable incident, Mary's brother Warren (W. Earl Brown) hooks a hapless Ted through the lip when he is casting a massive fishing lure. Warren is also the source of the film's black humor because he is mentally disabled. Although the humor around Warren usually manifests itself as slapstick (*e.g.* the aforementioned fishhook, setting himself on fire after wrecking a go-cart, physically assaulting anyone who touches his ears), the cause is always his disability, which makes the humor black. We're laughing at the actions of a disabled person caused by his disability.

I must continue to stress as we move into the higher end of my continuum of humor that I'm often presenting examples within larger works. We've already seen how most works contain multiple categories within them but keeping this perspective in mind becomes more important from this point forward. When introducing the absurd as a vital element to humor earlier, I used back-to-back scenes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, specifically the scene referred to as "constitutional peasants" followed by the dismemberment of the Black Knight. ("It's only a flesh wound.") I suggested most people remember the latter (an example of black humor) rather than

the satire of the former, perhaps because lower forms are more universal and create a more satisfying catharsis. Consequently, if I mention a work with which you're familiar, your mind may naturally go to a scene using a low form. If that should occur, resist that impulse, and focus on the categorical examples themselves.

Now, let's continue our climb toward the higher forms of humor.

The Underdog

Thematically, underdog humor is connected to philosophical Naturalism, an ontology that says that human beings, like other sentient entities, are at the mercy of forces outside their control: heredity and environment. In literature, Naturalism begins in 19th century France with Émile Zola, moves to Britain with Thomas Hardy, and spreads to America through the likes Frank Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane. The movement influences the Modernists of post-WWI, and its influence continues to today.⁸⁷ Thomas Hardy sums up the ideas of Naturalism in the last stanza of his sonnet "Hap," which asks:⁸⁸

... How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Pain, happiness – these states are not of our, or another's, direct making; rather, they reflect the natural progression of events ("Crass Casualty") and blind chance.⁸⁹ In spite of any illusion to the contrary, we simply are not masters of our own fates, or as Mongo succinctly puts it in

⁸⁷ E.g. Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1887) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) mirror each other in both dramatic situation and theme. Both involve characters struggling with bewildering catastrophic circumstances caused through no fault of their own with the only relief provided by sharing the tragic struggle with comrades.

⁸⁸ Hardy, Thomas (1898), "Hap" in *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*. (The poem was written in the 1860s.)

⁸⁹ Philosophers may (do?) argue and split hairs over Naturalism, Materialism, Determinism, and the like because that's what philosophers do. For the implications they hold for humor, however, they can be lumped into the same bag.

Blazing Saddles when asked the motives of the villain, “Don’t know. Mongo only pawn in game of life.”

Underdog humor is more closely tied to the elements leading to catharsis than to the absurd. In all comedy, the protagonist is closer in stature to the audience than in tragedy, making the reversal of fortune and resulting suffering not as great and therefore not tragic. The comedic formula also means the protagonist can return to their previous station at the end, whereas the tragic protagonist’s fall is usually literally fatal. We identify closely to the underdog, and their reversal of fortune, therefore, is more relatable than that of the protagonist in some other forms of humor, such as black.

The prototypical example of the underdog is the character created by Charlie Chaplin called “the Tramp.”⁹⁰ The character is still so indelible that an image of him probably instantly popped into your head at his mention, even though the character’s last appearance is in *Modern Times* (1936), quite a long time ago. (Imagine the popularity of the character in his heyday when Tramp look-alike contests were frequently held.⁹¹) The Tramp’s characteristic features include a too-tight coat coupled with baggy pants and oversized shoes, a springy cane, an expressive small moustache, and a somewhat anomalous bowler hat. The costume helps create the character, first by forcing Chaplin to move in a funny wobble because of it. More importantly, it helps imbue the Tramp with an air of a person fallen on difficulties who nevertheless works to maintain his dignity in the face of his circumstances. These qualities are reinforced by his actions as the Tramp moves about in a world in which he behaves with the manners of a gentleman while it largely treats him with disdain. For example, he routinely doffs his hat to others, who either

⁹⁰ The Tramp, or sometimes called the Little Tramp, first appeared in *Mabel’s Strange Predicament* (Sennet, Max [director], 1914), but became so ubiquitous that the figure is virtually synonymous with Chaplin.

⁹¹ There’s an apocryphal story that Chaplin himself entered one such contest in San Francisco and came in 20th.

ignore the gesture entirely, or if they return the motion, it is immediately clear their action is merely reflexive and they regret doing it.

Living by his wits in a hostile world, the Tramp is someone with whom we can instantly relate. He is motivated by good and willingly takes what menial labor is offered to him, although he is not above cutting corners at times and evades society's authority figures when they try to impose their unjust punishments upon him for his transgressions. We'd all like to think we could be like the Tramp and suffer the blows life rains upon us without losing our core values and falling into despair. The Tramp is therefore a true *Everyman*,⁹² a stock character type to whom an audience closely relates but, unlike a tragic hero, does not actively engage in conflict until the situation absolutely demands it.⁹³ When most underdogs engage with a conflict, they do so in a bumbling, albeit often endearing, manner.

In a documentary about the animator Chuck Jones, Steven Spielberg calls one cartoon "the *Citizen Kane* of the animated short," high praise from such an accomplished filmmaker.⁹⁴ The cartoon Spielberg refers to is "One Froggy Evening," a short that features music but pantomimes dialogue.⁹⁵ It begins with our underdog construction worker laboring on a building demolition. He discovers the building's cornerstone and finds a box inside with a document dated 1892. Leaping from the box comes a frog, who performs the song "Hello! Ma Baby" while strut-dancing with a hat and cane. Recognizing an opportunity to rise out of his unsatisfyingly menial life, the worker sneaks away with the box and frog. First, he goes to a talent agent, but the

⁹² The term *Everyman* in this context is a reference to the 15th century allegorical morality play *The Sumonyng of Everyman*.

⁹³ The rash and rapid action of the tragic hero is often the cause of the tragedy. *E.g.* Hamlet debates whether to kill Claudius for so long we may forget that what causes his tragedy is his rash action of stabbing through the tapestry and accidentally killing Polonius instead.

⁹⁴ Selby, Margaret (director) (2000), *Chuck Jones: Extremes & Inbetweens – A Life in Animation*.

⁹⁵ Jones, Chuck (director) (1955), "One Froggy Evening."

frog doesn't perform; it merely squats and croaks. Of course, once thrown out of the agent's office, the frog again performs his routine.

The worker decides to promote the frog himself and uses all his money to rent a theater. Eventually, he draws a crowd with the promise of free beer, and the frog sings merrily on a tightrope backstage. The man quickly tries to raise the curtain, but the rope breaks. He finally gets the curtain open as the frog floats down to the stage using a parasol as a parachute. Unfortunately, the audience only ends up seeing a squatting, croaking frog, and pelts the man with fruit and vegetables.

We next see the man destitute on a park bench with the frog happily performing for him. A police officer happens by and signals the man to be quiet. When he claims it is the frog doing the singing, he is committed to an asylum with the frog tagging along and "entertaining" him in his cell. Upon his release, he discovers that a new building is being erected on the same site. He stashes the frog within the new cornerstone. We then jump to 2056 to see a futuristic demolition man discover the same frog and run off with the same dreams of riches.

The underdog humor in "One Froggy Evening" stems from our identification with the construction worker and his expectations. If we discovered a singing, dancing amphibian, we too would expect fame and fortune to follow. Because the frog is actually magical, we empathize with his failure, and we laugh at it because of the catharsis created through seeing him fail instead of us, as well as the absurd premise of a singing frog.

In my discussion of laughter and its effects, I mentioned there is supporting evidence that laughter, and by extension humor, may lead to positive physiological outcomes. The same is true for the psychological.⁹⁶ Consequently, underdog humor frequently appears among traditionally

⁹⁶ C.f. McClure, Max (1 Aug 2011), "Stanford psychologists find that jokes help us cope with horrifying images," in *Stanford Report*.

marginalized groups as a way to take back their agency through actively confronting stereotypes and sometimes their own groups' culpability in perpetuating them. To see this in practice, let's look at examples of comedians using underdog humor on the subject of their gender, ethnicity, and race respectively.

Amy Schumer is a comedian famous for jokes about things like unrealistic body images placed upon women, as well as sexual and behavioral double standards, through stand-up and a variety of TV shows and movies. Perhaps one of her most famous routines is the sketch titled "Last Fuckable Day."⁹⁷ Schumer, out for a walk, encounters Julia Louis Dreyfus, Tina Fey, and Patricia Arquette, all actresses noticeably older and more experienced than she, enjoying a tea party of sorts next to a pond. Schumer tells them how she loves their work, and Louis Dreyfus asks her if she's "that girl from the television who talks about her pussy all the time?" emphasizing both the difference in age ("girl") and in focus. Schumer learns the trio are celebrating Louis Dreyfus's last fuckable day, that arbitrary moment when the media decides a woman is no longer believable in a role involving sexuality.⁹⁸ The sketch emphasizes it is a media creation in multiple ways. One of these is we hear the trio laughing about some man Arquette slept with as Schumer approaches, so we infer they are still sexually active women. They also use the example of Sally Field going from playing Tom Hanks's love interest in *Punchline* (1988) to playing his mother six years later in *Forrest Gump* (1994). Finally, they discuss how male actors are always considered virile, no matter their age. Although Schumer appears somewhat horrified to be labeled thusly, the women explain what a relief it is to not have to worry about the unrealistic expectations society places upon women. Louis Dreyfus

⁹⁷ Brennan, Neal (director), (2015), "Last Fuckable Day," *Inside Amy Schumer*, season 3, episode 1.

⁹⁸ Kathy Bates caused a stir when, at age 55, she slid naked into a hot tub revealing her breasts and butt in *About Schmidt* (2002) with Jack Nicholson. Sadly, the scene would not have been considered remarkable if she had been 20 years younger.

demonstrates her new freedom by chugging a pint of melted ice cream and then unleashing a reverberating belch and a massive fart.

During millennia of subjugation, Jews naturally developed both financial and food anxiety. These in turn led to the stereotypes of Jews being tightfisted and obsessed with food. Today, although the pressures that led to the behaviors behind the stereotype are not as great and most American Jews no longer have an abnormally intense anxiety about them, some still focus on money and food.⁹⁹ In *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) breaks the fourth wall to tell an old joke about two Jewish women vacationing at a resort in the Catskills.¹⁰⁰ They complain about how awful the food is, and one adds, “Yes, and the portions are so small.” Another Jewish comedian, Jackie Mason, explains one of the differences between Jews and gentiles is that the latter do not develop any emotional attachment to their food.¹⁰¹ One of his examples is that gentiles go to Europe and come back with pictures of statues and museums. A Jew, however, returns from Europe and declares, “I had a piece of cake in Austria!”

In the stand-up special *Chris Rock: Bigger and Blacker*, Chris Rock focuses on racism to a large extent, which is typical for him.¹⁰² After first decrying young Blacks for complaining about racism, he says, “Nothing more racist than a old black man, you know why? ‘Cause the old black man went through some *real* racism. He ain’t go through that ‘I can’t get a cab’ shit. He *was* the cab! White man just jump on his back: ‘Main Street!’” But he also points out how racism is still very real and what it looks like. He tells of his affluent neighborhood in New Jersey with hundreds of homes but only four Black people: Mary J. Blige, Jay-Z, Eddie Murphy, and him. The quartet are clearly exceptional and famous Black entertainers. (He

⁹⁹ Sadly, this behavior causes some gentiles (and Jews) to perpetuate the stereotype.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, Woody (director) (1977), *Annie Hall*.

¹⁰¹ Mason, Jackie (writer) (1988), *Jackie Mason On Broadway*.

¹⁰² Truesdell, Keith (director) (1999), *Chris Rock: Bigger and Blacker*.

downplays his own gifts.) He then describes his white neighbor: “He’s a fucking *dentist*. He ain’t the *best dentist in the world*, he ain’t going to the dental hall of fame, he don’t get plaques for getting rid of plaque. He’s just a yank-your-tooth-out dentist. See, the black man gotta fly to get to somethin’ the white man can walk to.” Rock also confronts the audience directly: “Shit, there ain’t a white man in this room that would change places with me. None of you. None of you would change places with me, and I’m rich!”

A last form abounding in underdog humor for us to consider is the traditional television situation comedy, or sitcom for short.¹⁰³ The typical sitcom is brief, a half hour airtime, and involves a cast made up of different stock types with the main character being an underdog. The program begins with a situation (*i.e.* a problem) the underdog will try to solve in the half hour, usually resulting in them bungling it in some way only to be rescued at the end by a *deus ex machina*, frequently in the form of the underdog’s spouse.¹⁰⁴ (In those cases when the spouse functions this way, the spouse is often the character from whom the underdog is trying to hide something, and its discovery ends the conflict.) You can see this form in *The Honeymooners* with Ralph Kramden as underdog, *I Love Lucy* with Lucy in that role, through *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Home Improvement* to *The New Adventures of Old Christine* and *Insecure*. The situations the underdogs find themselves in are usually mundane and easily relatable, as is the escalation of the problem as the character tries to work their way out of it. In the end, the underdog faces a comeuppance, often by having to confess their idiocy, and is forgiven. Then order is restored until next week’s show. (As an example, and metaphor, consider the episode

¹⁰³ Atypical sitcoms also exist and most involve underdogs but let’s not wander down that road.

¹⁰⁴ Latin for “god out of the machine,” *deus ex machina* refers to a convention in ancient Greek theater of having an actor playing a god and heretofore absent from the drama appear on stage to solve the conflict. (The “machine” was literal; the actor would be lowered from above or raise through a trapdoor.) Aristotle eschews the practice and demands conflicts be resolved through internal elements of the drama.

purported to be Lucille Ball's favorite where Lucy and Ethel becoming overwhelmed by chocolates on the assembly line.¹⁰⁵)

Ah, if only life itself were so neatly fulfilled.

Parody and Satire

While underdog humor stresses catharsis through situations involving mild tragedy (*i.e.* benign-violations), parody and satire both lean heavily on the absurd, so for this reason I've linked them under the same category. As we'll see, their differences are important; however, this absurdist element connects them. Heads and tails on a coin may have different faces but remain two sides of the same thing, and the equivalent can be said for parody and satire. One way to differentiate between them is that parody is the gentler of the two and satire the pricklier.

Parody takes the characteristic features of a form and exaggerates them for humorous effect. For example, consider this parody that uses horror as its source material. In the film *Alien*, Kane (John Hurt), a crew member on the spaceship *Nostramo*, returns to the ship with a lifeform attached to his face.¹⁰⁶ After the lifeform detaches and Kane resuscitates, he and the other crew members laugh in relief as they enjoy a meal. Suddenly, Kane begins choking, sputtering, and showing other signs of distress. Believing him to be suffering a seizure, his comrades flip him onto his back on the table. To everyone's surprise and horror, a creature that was incubating inside Kane bursts through his chest and escapes the room. In the Mel Brooks parody *Spaceballs* (1987), we see a group of characters, one of whom is also played by John Hurt, in a kind of space bar. As he begins showing signs of distress, he says, "Oh no, not again!" as the same alien

¹⁰⁵ Asher, William (director) (15 Sept 1952), "Job Switching," on *I Love Lucy*.

¹⁰⁶ Scott, Ridley (director) (1979), *Alien*. Although most may consider the film to be science fiction, thematically it more properly fits the horror genre.

bursts from his chest. In the parody, however, the alien doffs a hat and cane, then strut-dances along the bar while singing “Hello! Ma Baby.”

Brooks inserting the routine from “One Froggy Evening” into an iconic scene from *Alien* demonstrates for us the qualities of parody. We laugh because we remember the horror of seeing the alien explode from Kane’s chest, and the absurdity of seeing it replayed incorporating the key humorous element from the cartoon creates the parody. Brooks’s dancing alien, however, does nothing to diminish our horror when we again see the source. The parody doesn’t “damage” it.

Like *Spaceballs*, Brooks uses many of his films to parody an entire genre, rather than a single work or source. *Spaceballs* primarily parodies the “space opera” *Star Wars*, but it has many references to *Star Trek* and other movies set in space (e.g. *Alien*). *Blazing Saddles* parodies classic westerns; the title of *Silent Movie* (1976) makes the parody clear; *High Anxiety* (1977) uses the films of Alfred Hitchcock as its source; *The History of the World, Part 1* (1981) parodies a variety of historical dramas; *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993) takes key scenes from a myriad of Robin Hood films; *Dracula* and its sequels inspire *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995). Of his parodies, only *Young Frankenstein* (1974) sticks closely to a “single” source, the first two Frankenstein films made by Universal Studios in the 1930s. When watching any of his parodies, we never get the sense Brooks holds anything but fondness and affection for the source material. The sources themselves are never purposely mocked or ridiculed. As we shall soon see, this quality is one which differentiates parody from satire.

Ernest Hemingway’s distinctive writing style prompted a now defunct contest, some entries of which parody Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”¹⁰⁷ A famous section near the end of Hemingway’s story reads:

¹⁰⁷ Hemingway, Ernest (1927), “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories*.

. . . What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. . . .

In a collection of selected entries, Jay Jennings uses a tennis match to parody this passage in “A Clean, Well-Sighted Ace”.¹⁰⁸

. . . What was it he feared? It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing and the American’s score was a nothing which in tennis is called love. When you have love, you have nothing, Nick thought. When you have finished a match with nothing, you receive no money. Except endorsements. There are always endorsements, Nick thought.

The humor in the parody stems from taking a serious passage dramatizing a confrontation with the existential void and applying its form to a tennis match. Though the parody makes us smile, it doesn’t diminish the power of the original to evoke in the reader questions of life’s meaning.

Imagism is a school of poetry born during the Modernist Period wherein the poet conveys their ideas through images, as opposed to other devices such as exposition. The Imagist believes in the idea that if an image is recreated faithfully, a poem evokes a response in the reader like what the original subject did in the poet. This method frequently results in poetry that is open to a variety of interpretations, since the Imagist selects images which convey multiple ideas simultaneously, adding depth and nuance to what may at first appear mundane. One such poet is William Carlos Williams. A famous and evocative poem by Williams is “This Is Just to Say”:¹⁰⁹

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which

¹⁰⁸ Jennings, Jay (1989), “A Clean Well-Sighted Ace,” in *The Best of Bad Hemingway: Choice Entries from the Harry’s Bar & American Grill Imitation Hemingway Competition*.

¹⁰⁹ Williams, William Carlos (1938), “This Is Just to Say,” in *Collected Poems: 1909-1939, Vol. 1*. Like Hemingway, Williams is also a disciple of Ezra Pound.

you were probably
saving for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.

One valid reading of Williams's poem is that its purpose is to encourage readers to enjoy those things that bring them pleasure rather than saving them until an unknown future. After all, if you save them, you run the risk of them being "eaten" by someone else. Another equally valid interpretation focuses on the form of the poem as a note of apology to the speaker's significant other. Those embracing this view point out the disingenuous nature of the apology (*e.g.* the speaker asks forgiveness and then rubs in the of owner of the plums' face how delicious they were). Erica-Lynn Gambino exploits this reading in her poem, also titled "This Is Just to Say":¹¹⁰

(for William Carlos Williams)

I have just
asked you to
get out of my
apartment

even though
you never
thought
I would

Forgive me
you were
driving
me insane.

Like the other parodies we've examined, Gambino's reply doesn't mock Williams's larger point; rather, the shift in focus to the reaction of the recipient of the original enlarges the context to a

¹¹⁰ Gambino, Erica-Lynn (1997), "This Is Just to Say," in *The Muse Strikes Back: A Poetic Response by Women to Men*.

dynamic between a couple by demonstrating, in part, the absurdity of communicating passive-aggressively through notes.¹¹¹

Parody tickles, but satire skewers. Parody is a burlesque that provides a humorous imitation, whereas satire derides its subject matter. The “butt” of a parody can be seen as “in on” the joke; however, satire seeks to make the butt a subject of scorn and even contempt. Satire weaponizes humor to attack an idea, an individual, an institution, a type, a nation, or even all of humankind. It’s important, therefore, that the subject of a satire is of sufficient stature to be “taken down a peg” from a position of puffery. Directing satire toward the weak is not humorous.

Mark Twain is a master of both parody and satire, and while he sometimes uses both nearly interchangeably, clear distinctions can be made in his work. In *Roughing It* (1872), his autobiographical, albeit exaggerated and fictionalized, recounting of his adventures in the American West, Twain tells of being lost in a snowstorm somewhere Nevada. He and his two companions lose their horses and become disoriented at night in the driving snow. Certain they are going to die, each man forswears their particular vice: drink for one, cards for the other, and tobacco for Twain. In the morning, they discover they slept just yards from the stage inn and sheepishly go inside. Later, Twain feels the tugging urge of his pipe and sneaks away for a smoke so that the other more virtuous men won’t see him break his vow. He creeps to a nearby barn seeking cover, and he rounds the back corner just in time to see one companion rounding the opposite with his bottle to his lips and the other immersed in a game of solitaire on the ground between them. We laugh to see ourselves in this parody and can relate to making promises in desperation which we fail to keep when life gets easier again (inducing catharsis).

¹¹¹ This observation is in no way meant to imply that Gambino’s poem doesn’t carry larger ideas of its own simply because it’s a parody.

On the other hand, Twain's essay "Fennimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" mercilessly attacks the Leatherstocking Tales of James Fennimore Cooper.¹¹² (The most famous of these tales is *The Last of the Mohicans*.) While Cooper takes the brunt of the satire, he is merely a strawman for the entire artistic and philosophical period of Romanticism. Romantics, in this sense, prize the extraordinary individual over the typical, nature over civilization, and intuition over knowledge. The movement presents an idealization of existence. Twain, however, is an ardent Realist who seeks to capture life as it is, not how we wish it to be. Given Cooper's aesthetic, his hero Natty Bumppo (also known as Hawkeye, Leatherstocking, Deerslayer, and other colorful names) and his retinue often exhibit impossible abilities unknown to normal people. Twain provides page after page of illustrations.

For instance: one of his acute Indian experts, Chingachgook (pronounced Chicago, I think), has lost the trail of a person he is tracking through the forest. Apparently that trail is hopelessly lost. Neither you nor I could ever have guessed out a way to find it. It was very different with Chicago. Chicago was not stumped for long. He turned a running stream out of its course, and there, in the slush of the old bed, were that person's moccasin-tracks. The current did not wash them away, as it would have done in all other cases—no, even the eternal laws of Nature have to vacate when Cooper wants to put up a delicate job of woodcraft on the reader.

If Cooper had still been alive, it's doubtful he would have found any of this funny; it's not fun to be the butt of satire.

Twain's essay is a formal (or direct) satire, which is presented in first person. Furthermore, it exemplifies the subspecies of a Horatian satire, where the speaker is a witty and often urban voice commenting upon human foibles in a relaxed and informal tone. In another formal type, Juvenalian satire, the speaker is often a dignified moralist. "A Modest Proposal" (1729) by Jonathan Swift fits this category. The speaker of this famous essay assumes the shape of the benevolent humanitarian seeking a solution to the problem of the Irish suffering the twin

¹¹² Twain, Mark (July 1895), "Fennimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," in *North American Review*.

problems of overpopulation and starvation. The plight of the Irish, of course, stems from the English taking all they have of value, including food, and leaving the population, particularly the children, literally starving. Swift's speaker walks us through the issues with a logic with which we can't help but agree, until he springs his trap:

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.

The "modest proposal" turns out to be that the Irish should be employed to raise children to sell to the English as food. The solution of Swift's speaker, then, is a literalization of the metaphor that England is devouring Ireland. The butt of his satire is not his oblivious speaker, per se. Rather, the butt is the English, the group from which his speaker as well as his very readers come, and he holds a mirror to their faces revealing the hypocrisy of their moral façade.

Informal (or indirect) satire is most commonly presented through a fictional narrative. In these cases, the satire can be the entire narrative or a portion. The butt could be represented by all the characters, a few, or a single character. It can even be an idea, as it is in Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron."¹¹³ In it he posits a future where everyone is truly equal. No one is smarter, more beautiful, more athletic, *etc.*, than anyone else. Of course, there are still exceptional people because exceptionalism is in part genetic. To equalize the world for the non-exceptional, therefore, the exceptional are forced to always wear handicap devices, so they can't take "unfair" advantage of their gifts. Consequently, we see things such as a reporter unable to report the news because of his stammer, and the reaction that his attempt is more important than actually getting out the report, so he deserves a raise. The exceptional are also clearly identifiable by their handicap devices; they just can't use whatever gifts make them exceptional.

¹¹³ Vonnegut, Kurt (Oct 1961), "Harrison Bergeron," in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

The title character is one of these exceptional people. He is, in fact, a kind of Nietzschean *Übermensch*, and he proclaims himself emperor then frees others of their handicaps and demands they use their natural gifts on live television. As he and a dazzlingly beautiful ballerina perform, they are both shot dead without warning by the Handicapper General. The studio musicians are commanded to restore their handicaps, and equality is restored.

Vonnegut makes clear that equality itself isn't the subject of his satire; rather, the story shows the difficulties inherent in trying to legislate absolute equality through things such as governmental fiat. He also shows that true equality means everyone must conform to the lowest common denominator by taking the idea to its logical extreme. This is a type of argument called *reductio ad absurdum*, where the falsity of a premise is revealed through demonstrating its absurd logical conclusion. In addition, he shows that the exceptional are still recognizable despite (or more accurately because of) their handicaps, which itself invalidates the idea that absolute equality is truly achievable. However, Vonnegut also presents the opposite extreme: the dangers of the unfettered use of their gifts by the advantaged by having his *Übermensch* declare himself emperor at his first opportunity. The exceptional should not use their gifts to exploit those who are weaker. The satire, therefore, isn't about the folly of working toward a more equal and just society; instead, it skewers the notion that such work is as simplistic and easily achievable as some claim.

Parody, then, uses the absurd to take something familiar and non-humorous into humorous territory. Satire takes a non-humorous subject to an absurd extreme to make a larger social point through ridicule of the original. Again, within a single work we may find we get flipped between both sides of this coin because they both rely heavily on the absurd. How we feel about the original subject may determine how funny a parody is; how invested we are in the

butt of a satire may determine whether we laugh at a satire. If we are close to the subject of satire, we feel no catharsis, only the sting of ridicule.

Sophisticated Critic

I've called my final category of humor the sophisticated critic to attempt to capture the range of qualities it covers. Simply put, the category focuses on observances and commentary about everyday life. Consequently, like parody and satire, the humor springs mostly from the absurd elements at play. If you recall, scatological humor, at the low end of my continuum, leans heavily on its underlying fear of embarrassment relating to bodily functions. We all have bodies and are therefore relieved to see someone else enact our fears in place of us (catharsis). The absurdity of a fart in church hits us because of its surprise and inappropriateness; its primary source of humor, though, derives from our ability to relate to the prospect of our own bodies betraying us by exercising a completely natural function at a socially inopportune time.

It's also important to remember that the terms "low" and "high" as I'm using them refer to levels of cognition required to appreciate the humor, which is especially crucial given the word "sophisticated" in the name of this category. "High" is more indicative of this form's heavy dependence on language, rather than meaning "highbrow." Because both oral and written language are abstract symbol systems, it often requires some depth of linguistic understanding in order to find funny the humor based upon it. Toddlers laugh at a fart but don't understand word humor like a slightly older child does. Consider the example of "Pig Latin," the children's pretend language where you move the initial consonant sound to the end of a word and add an "ay" sound. ("Pig Latin" is pronounced *Igpay Atinlay* in Pig Latin.) Obviously, some children enjoy using it so much that they master it, much to the irritation of their parents. Adults, however, can also find Pig Latin references and use humorously. Bill Cosby takes a detour when

discussing wedding vows to reflect on the word “obey,” remarking that it’s a funny word because it sounds like Pig Latin.¹¹⁴ In *Young Frankenstein*, Frederick (Gene Wilder) rails that the Creature (Peter Boyle) has a rotten brain, screaming, “It’s rotten! Rotten, I tell you!” The Creature begins to growl in response, so Igor (Marty Feldman) tells the doctor to “Ixnay the ottenray.” In the first instance, we laugh because an ordinary word follows the phonology of a children’s game; in the second, we laugh because an adult under pressure uses a children’s code system to convey a “secret” message. In both cases, the absurd is the main source of the humor.

Part of Pig Latin’s humor stems from its sound. When exposed to a true language with which we are unfamiliar, we intuitively detect an underlying grammatical structure, even when the individual words carry no meaning for us.¹¹⁵ (We may not even be able to decipher distinct words.) Our ears, experienced language detectors, recognize Pig Latin as false, however. By poorly mimicking a true language, the sound of Pig Latin itself becomes absurd. Absurd sounds also emanate from real English. One clear form of that is the tongue-twister. While most humor from a tongue-twister comes from the absurdity of our inability to easily recite it despite our being fluent in the language, some of them carry the added dimension of the concept the tongue-twister conveys. “She sells seashells at the seashore” is a ubiquitous example of the former; “A synonym for cinnamon is a cinnamon synonym” exemplifies the latter. In the second case, understanding the meaning of “synonym” adds to the humor instead of confining it to a string of words difficult to speak aloud. Likewise, “If you notice this notice, you will notice that this notice is not worth noticing.” In this case, to fully appreciate the tongue-twister we need to understand the different meanings of the word “notice” when used as different parts of speech.

¹¹⁴ Coby, Bill (director) (1983), *Bill Cosby: Himself*.

¹¹⁵ C.f. Northeast University College of Science (17 Apr 2014), “Our brains are hardwired for language,” in *ScienceDaily*.

Oxymorons combine two words of a contradictory nature. As a figure of speech, an oxymoron is useful because the juxtaposition of these opposites creates a new abstraction expressing a concept differing from that of either word singly. In context, they typically provide no problem of understanding for native English speakers, and their contradictory nature generally goes unnoticed. Removed from context and presented in isolation, however, is a different matter. Presented alone, the absurdity of an oxymoron takes center stage, producing humor. “Jumbo shrimp,” “working vacation,” “larger half,” “original copy,” and the like cease to be convenient devices to express more complex ideas and become absurdly humorous examples of the inadequacy of language.

Related to an oxymoron in its absurdity, a malapropism is the insertion of an incorrect, albeit similar sounding, word in place of the correct one. For example, when asked of his boxing future after a loss, Mike Tyson said, “I might just fade into Bolivian.” While not technically malapropisms, MLB Hall of Famer Yogi Berra is famous for his many misstatements, which are other branches on the malapropism tree. The quantity of Berra’s output caused his statements of this type to be labeled “Yogisms.” His most famous, such as “It ain’t over till it’s over,” have become part of the popular lexicon. A few lesser known, but funny, Yogisms include: “It gets late early out here.” And, “No one goes there nowadays. It’s too crowded.” And, “In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.” And, “I never said half the things I said.”

Changing a word’s function within a different context is another form of this category of humor. For instance, changing common nouns and pronouns into proper nouns can cause delightful confusion. The quintessential example of this phenomenon is the classic Abbott and Costello routine “Who’s on First?” in which interrogative pronouns (*e.g.* who, what, why) and

other common words and phrases (*e.g.* because, I don't know, tomorrow) are substituted for the proper nouns of baseball players. In a similar vein, the show *Arrested Development* has an attorney name Bob Loblaw (Scott Baio).¹¹⁶ When said aloud, his name sounds like *blah, blah, blah*. It also produces the tongue-twister headline, "Bob Loblaw Lobs Law Bomb."

Forms of wordplay, then, are one expression of this category. The example I used much earlier of some banter from the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* to show how different categories of humor overlap within larger works also fits our discussion here. So does this exchange from *Blazing Saddles* when the evil Attorney General Hedley Lamarr (Harvey Korman), who is really in charge, oversteps his apparent authority and ends a meeting of the Governor's (Mel Brooks) cabinet with an exchange reminiscent of "Who's on First?":

Larmarr
Meeting adjourned. Oh, I'm sorry sir. You say that.
Gov
Say what?
Lamarr
Meeting adjourned.
Gov
It is?
Lamarr
No, you say that.
Gov
Say what?
Lamarr
Meeting adjourned.
Gov
It is?

The exchange is silly, but the humor is sophisticated because it relies on our recognition of the absurd syntactic ambiguity creating confusion between the questions and responses.

Daniel C. Dennett is a philosopher and cognitive scientist who focuses on exploring the evolution of consciousness. He (and others) see the advent of language as the important

¹¹⁶ Hurwitz, Michael (creator) (2003), *Arrested Development*.

milestone in that process, and the pattern-seeking nature of the human brain as the key factor in language development. Using children's language acquisition as a guide, he points out that once children begin to acquire words “. . . the pattern-finding powers of the brain get to work finding relations between them and other available affordances.”¹¹⁷ We are hardwired, as it were, to look for patterns. This wiring can lead us astray, however, as is the case with auditory pareidolia, where our brain “hears” meaningful sounds when none exist. As Phillip Jaekl points out, these illusions include things such as hearing faint voices when an air conditioner is running and messages in a toy doll's imitation of a baby's babel.¹¹⁸ This phenomenon is so pervasive, John Updike plays with it in his funny and poignant short story “A&P,” a dramatic monologue in which the narrator Sammy abruptly quits his job as a checker in a grocery store of the title over principle.¹¹⁹ Before does, however, he rings up a purchase. “I go through the punches, 4, 9, GROC, TOT – it's more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it begins to make a little song, that you hear words to, in my case ‘Hello (bing) there, you (gung) hap-py pee-pul (splat)’ – the splat being the drawer flying out.” Most of us are similarly affected by mind-numbing repetition and smile in recognition.

The idea behind auditory pareidolia appears in a famous TV commercial, which first aired during the 1995 Super Bowl, and its popularity led to a number of spin-offs. In the ad, a solitary frog croaks at the camera. It is joined by a second, who also croaks its own unique one syllable croak. A third frog joins the trio, and they begin croaking their individual croaks. Soon, however, the croaks synchronize, and we suddenly realize the three syllables taken together at the right tempo sound out, “Bud-weis-er,” the name of the beer being sold by the ad.

¹¹⁷ Dennett, Daniel C. (2017), *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*.

¹¹⁸ Jaekl, Phillip (20 Jan 2017), “Why We Hear Voices in Random Noise,” in *Nautilus*.

¹¹⁹ Updike, John (22 Jul 1962), “A&P,” in *The New Yorker*.

Of course, humor in this category isn't limited to odd sounds and mistakes in understanding and hearing. Accurate language is also grist for the humor mill. In the aforementioned Updike story, Sammy describes the girls in bathing suits walking "up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle," which highlights the difference between the relatively new (at the time) supermarket and the still pervasive shopping method of going to different stores for different goods (*i.e.* a greengrocer for fruit and vegetables, a butcher for meat, a dry goods store for preserved goods, *etc.*).

Nor must the humor be limited to a native speaker's language. In a section of *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), Mark Twain discusses "The Awful German Language":

. . . [A] few remarks about one of the most curious and notable features of my subject – the length of German words. Some German words are so long they have perspective.

Observe these examples:

Freundschaftsbezeigugen.

Dilettantenaufdringlichkeiten.

Stadtverordnetenversammlungen.

These things are not words, they are alphabetical processions. And they are not rare; one can open a German newspaper at any time and see them marching across the page . . .

Reading this example, you may find it difficult to distinguish why it is *not* satire, and your difficulty stems from examples being excerpts. Within the context of their longer respective works, things like purpose and tone are clearer. Both of Twain's essays I've quoted use real examples: accurate paraphrases and direct quotations in the satire; actual German words and grammar in the latter. The *purpose* of Twain's essay on Cooper, however, is to mock Romanticism, to expose it as a flawed aesthetic mode, and his tone reflects it. In the other essay, Twain blames the language for his failure master it rather than himself. His readers, however, recognize this incongruity, as well as the knowledge that English offers even more problems for non-native speakers learning it than German does.

Nor is the Updike example a parody, although it is an exaggeration. The difference, again, is that of purpose. The implausible description of the aisle's contents comes to us through a frustrated and somewhat disgruntled clerk, and they serve the story to help reveal the *character's* feelings about the store, not Updike's. The author's purpose is not to parody the store but to dramatize a moment of critical decision impacting a character's development into an adult. (Also, as with previous categories, no example is purely one type.)

Forms of wordplay alone don't define the boundaries of sophisticated critic humor. The comedy of Steven Wright provides an illustrative segue. Sometimes Wright's jokes directly fit wordplay types we've looked at so far in this category. He says, "A lot of people are afraid of heights. Not me, I'm afraid of widths." Here, the humor is the absurdity of the fear when he switches to a different spatial dimension. No one has plummeted to their death from something exceptionally wide. "Cross country skiing is great if you live in a small country." For this, the humor comes using the two meanings of "country" in the same sentence as if they're synonymous. When Wright says, "Change is inevitable. Except from vending machines," we laugh because we've been shifted from what sounds like an aphorism about the impermanence of life to the commonly experienced mundane reality of a machine eating our money by the double meaning of "change."

That last example is transitional for my purposes here. Notice it is still heavily dependent upon the absurd through the use of multiple meanings of a word. However, Wright's joke, "Hard work pays off in the future. Laziness pays off now," is different. So is, "A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory." These jokes don't hinge on the use of language; they hinge on our expectations of their form. Like the joke using "change," they appear to be aphorisms, general truths expressed in a pithy and memorable manner, such as "A penny saved is a penny

earned.” The end of each statement, though, ironically undercuts our expectations. Hence, they cease to be *pithy* and instead become *witty*. An aphorism may be witty, like Ben Franklin’s “Fish and visitors stink after three days,” but they are not ironic.

Notice as well that with this shift away from language itself as the source of the humor, the absurd element is not as great as with wordplay alone. These are not like Pig Latin, tongue-twisters, oxymorons, or “Who’s on First?” Witticisms cultivate more self-recognition than those other types to grow the humor. We probably readily agree that hard work today pays off in the future. At the same time, we recognize our own failure to live up to that standard and that our failure is based upon our immature desire for immediate gratification. We also recognize feelings of our own innocence are self-delusion based upon selective memory. Everyone’s clear conscience is ultimately a form of holier-than-thou hypocrisy. The absurd still lurks in the surprises inherent to the assertions, but the attributes leading to catharsis have stepped more to the fore. These types of statements are another form of the sophisticated critic.

Some of the greatest wits in English over the last century or so include Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Parker, and Will Rogers. Wilde says things like, “Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.” And, “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” And, “A good friend will always stab you in the front.” Dorothy Parker’s witticisms include, “Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly goes right to the bone.” And, “Women and elephants never forget.” And, “That woman speaks eighteen languages and can’t say ‘no’ in any of them.” Will Rogers says, “Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.” And, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.” And, “Last year we said, ‘Things can’t go on like this,’ and they didn’t. They got worse.” And the Aristotelian, “Everything is funny, as long it’s happening to someone else.”

The core of this category is observation, and this is where the great humorists and comics live. They may dip down into lower categories on the continuum, but the fount of their humor is here. As we've seen, Mark Twain is one; George Carlin is another. Carlin certainly uses a lot of satire. He also touches scatological humor, as in his notorious routine "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television," although, even here, his true focus is satire.¹²⁰ Yet, much of his humor is pure observation without attaching judgment. A great example is his comparison of baseball and football.¹²¹ He observes the different language used in and around the two sports, baseball's being pastoral and football's militaristic, without choosing sides. The bit culminates in his description of the games' objectives:

In football the object is for the quarterback, also known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack that punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line.

In baseball the object is to go home! And to be safe! I hope I'll be safe at home!

The football description is delivered in a rapid, imperative voice; his voice describing baseball is childlike and insipid. The routine is just plain funny, and when it comes right down to it, isn't that really what we most want from humor?

As with the larger framework of all my categories taken collectively, variations of the sophisticated critic intermingle in practice. They share a kind of good-natured cynicism that we are all fools together, and we are fooling ourselves to think otherwise. (We can't even depend upon the language we have come to depend upon.) This category more than any other I've articulated encapsulates the human condition of being authors of our own foolishness. Or, as

¹²⁰ Carlin, George (writer) (1972), "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television," on the audio recording *Class Clown*.

¹²¹ Carlin, George (writer) (1984), "Baseball and Football," in *Carlin on Campus* (HBO).

Groucho Marx's resignation letter to the Friars' Club says, "I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members."

That's All Folks!

Much more can be said about humor, but I feel like I have said all I came to say. We hopped around a bit, first looking at laughter and then humor itself, exploring why something is funny by emphasizing it as our reaction to the absurd and the pleasure we derive through catharsis. Lastly, I detailed my categories of humor to provide a framework from which we can understand its functioning in specific terms. Hopefully, I didn't dissect too many "frogs" in the process, and if you now find you've got an excess number of dead frogs, may I suggest you try making some Frog à la Pêche.

As I've said, this essay is meant to provide a framework for understanding humor. If you found it interesting but want to let it go from here because you're worried you may never laugh again, feel free. If you want to consider its ideas when reflecting on something humorous, that's good too. However, one thing you should *not* do is think that it somehow provides a formula for creating humor. First, my categories are not proscriptive, and humor may be successfully approached, explicated, and understood through numerous other frameworks. More importantly, *understanding* humor is one thing; *being humorous* is a whole different Pêche à la Frog. Or, as actor Edmund Gwenn purportedly said on his deathbed, dying is "[n]ot nearly so difficult as playing comedy."¹²²

Humor is one tool in the emotional toolbox human beings carry to make sense of the world and our place in it. While you should never use a hammer on someone's head, you need a

¹²² There are many different versions and speakers attributed to this quotation, but the sources seem the most secure for the version of Edmund Gwenn speaking to George Seaton in 1959 found in: Rau, Neil & Margaret, (1966), *Act Your Way to Successful Living*.

hammer when a nail needs pounding. If we removed the hammer from our toolbox, we would be forced to make do with screwdrivers and wrenches when we encounter a nail. That may work, but not as well as the hammer.

As a final thought to see things I have discussed in action together, consider the following paraphrase of a joke that Robin Williams tells under the closing credits of the marvelously offensive documentary *The Aristocrats*:¹²³ A rabbi walks into a bar with a frog on his shoulder. The bartender asks, “Hey, where’d you get that?” The frog says, “Brooklyn. There’s hundreds of them just walking around.”

¹²³ Jillette, Penn & Paul Provenza (directors) (2005), *The Aristocrats*.