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## Comic relief: Exploring the philosophy of humour

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### Abstract

To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification. (Henri Bergson)

Having observed several versions of the Relief Theory, we can note that today almost no scholar in philosophy or psychology explains laughter or humour as a process of releasing pent-up nervous energy. There is, of course, a connection between laughter and the expenditure of energy. Hearty laughter involves many muscle groups and several areas of the nervous system. Laughing hard gives our lungs a workout, too, as we take in far more oxygen than usual. But few contemporary scholars defend the claims that the energy expended in laughter is the energy of feeling emotions, the energy of repressing emotions, or the energy of thinking, which have built up and require venting. Funny things and situations may evoke emotions, but many seem not to. If any friction exists between the teller and the receiver, no humour takes place. The friction or the hostility kills it. This feature reminds the comment on the success of a comic character that a comic character is enjoyed only when he/she is acceptable.

**Keywords:** Laughter, humour, repressing emotions, relief theory, incongruity

### Introduction

Ancient medicine advocates the four fluids namely, blood, phlegm, choler and bile as the deciding lineaments of the nature of human beings. The fluid which dominated in the body was the source of a specific character. Popularized by Ben Jonson, this type of analogy helps to identify and study character traits. As given in the *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "The obsessional humour riding the character is the source of the 'comedy'". In the ancient times it was consciously used to relieve the character as believed in the medical world. In due course of time the humours turned out to be symbols which helped analyzing the actions of the characters. So, to scrutinize a humorous character, one need to know what humour is. Various theoretical concepts are found of which emerged certain theories which are used by popular writers as attempts to explore this enigmatic category. The knowledge of these theories may throw more light on the logistics of how it works. According to the standard analysis, the humour theories developed by D. H. Monro which expose the underlying source out of which humour is born, are the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory<sup>[2]</sup>. There are some other theories relating to humour, but knowing about the first three traditional and commonly discussed theories would suffice exposition.

**The comic character:** While analyzing the tragic and comic pleasures in the book, *Introduction to English Criticism*, B. Prasad comments on Plato's belief thus: "Here Plato hits upon a profound Truth: no character can be comic unless he is loveable". Plato's view, though given centuries ago, is undeniable and applicable till date when it comes to the conveyance of a joke, a comedy, or a humour<sup>[3]</sup>. Recently Soundary expresses her view in her article titled "Humour as the Focal Point of Charlie Chaplin's Comedies: A Very Short Introduction" that the humour of Charlie Chaplin remains priceless and timeless and pertinent even to the contemporary ages as he has always portrayed the issues of the low or middle class masses<sup>[4]</sup>.

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Issues like poverty and class divisions are often portrayed through his character called the 'Tramp'. Though laughter is not always an essential feature of humour, it can serve as a beginning point of socializing. The very fact that laughter evolves in company strengthens its social bond and the following theories analyse the importance of humour from various writers' perspectives.

### The superiority theory of humour

Thomas Hobbes, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Superiority theorist, elaborates on the Superiority Theory as humour arises from elated superior feeling, hatred for others and undermining the weakness in people. Further weakening the dominance of the Superiority Theory, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were two new accounts of laughter which are now called the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. Neither even mentions feelings of superiority. The Relief Theory is a hydraulic explanation in which laughter does in the nervous system what a pressure-relief valve does in a steam boiler. The theory was sketched in Lord Shaftesbury's 1709<sup>[5]</sup> essay "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor," the first publication in which *humor* is used in its modern sense of funniness<sup>[5]</sup>. Scientists at the time knew that nerves connect the brain with the sense organs and muscles, but they thought that nerves carried "animal spirits"- gases and liquids such as air and blood.

The following cartoon, drawn by the noted Indian writer and cartoonist R. K. Laxman, taken from his book *A Dose of Laughter*,<sup>[6]</sup> serves as a valuable illustration to understand and analyse the superiority theory of humour (Fig. 1):



Fig 1: A Physician in the Laboratory

If observed, quite apparently, the doctor feels superior to the young, trained medical person who is looking for a vacancy in the former's laboratory. The latter seems disappointed to find out that the job opening is filled with a tested ape. The former is elated, may be, on two grounds. One is his ability to train the ape and the other may be that the young man is replaced by an ape tested and improved upon under his supervision. Among the trio, the young man is the comic target. The doctor and the ape (though not involved itself willingly or consciously) seem to be having a better claim

over the young man. And definitely this situation is hostile to the young man, especially, when it leaves himself to feel that he is inferior to the animal. Thus, the Superiority Theory of humour thrives by making the humour targets feel inferior providing the teller a better claim in society. But the limitations are inevitable because feeling far above the comic targets is not an essential feature of humour. Sometimes pathetic situations too can provide a feeling of superiority. This theory is also considered an insufficient theory of humour because the most needed amusement is missing here. Without eliciting a glorious feeling of humour, a comic scene cannot be enjoyed fully.

### The incongruity theory of humour

The Incongruity Theory, having drawn the eminent scholars to an amendment, remains to be the popular theory of humour in comparison with the Superiority Theory. The Latin meaning of the word 'Congruere' is "to come together, to agree" (Morreall 10). *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*<sup>[7]</sup> defines 'Incongruous' as "strange and not suitable in a particular situation" (657). This theory propagates the violations of all kinds of law, logic, expectation or existing pattern. The required amusement for producing humour is elicited by insensible portrayal of verbal, or illustrated art work. Thinking off the track, or deviating from the normal mental structure is propelled by this theory. Laughter occurs at the understanding of incongruous things, elements, or events. Not only the human incongruity produces laughter but also the incongruous machineries. Pun, satire, irony, witty sayings, and biological malformation, etc cause comic amusement as they all deviate from the expected pattern since they appear as one thing while they mean the other thing.

Another sketch (31) from R. K. Laxman's *A Dose of Laughter* is taken as an example of incongruous humour (Fig. 2).



Fig 2: A Scientist and the Laboratory Rats

A close observation of this picture will bring laughter as the situation has reversed roles. The laboratory rats tend to react to the scientific test accordingly and the scientist who collects data for further study. The behavioural pattern exhibited by the laboratory rats deviate from the normal expectations upon them. The intentional ruining of the

research by the rats and the confusion that occurs to the scientist produce incongruity, and perceiving it produces comic amusement and thereby laughter.

### The relief theory

The next prominent theory, often considered the third of the three traditional theories, is the Relief Theory. It emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the function and the effect of this theory sounds more medical or scientific-oriented than philosophical. Aristotle, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud are some of the prominent people who have analyzed the way this humour theory functions<sup>[8, 9]</sup>. It is believed that Aristotle in his *Poetics* has elaborated on tragedy as a way towards catharsis and on comedy as a way of dissolving, or releasing the bottled-up emotions. The Earl of Shaftesbury opines that the comic genre frees up the suppressed emotions; the idea later getting resonance in Freud who believes that jokes are the medium of expressing all repressed emotions. In the same way, Herbert Spencer took laughter as a tool to relieve the system under trouble.

### John morreall's theory of humour

However, the Incongruity Theory too has its own setbacks. John Morella notes the inconsistency of this theory by underscoring the idea that perceiving incongruity is insufficient for humour. He believes that only in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this falsified idea was brought out. He considers it a fake idea because the incongruous perception of events, things, etc, may also lead to other emotions like confusion and misunderstanding, and not always to humour. Following Immanuel Kant, the most effectual 18<sup>th</sup> century German Philosopher, he finds fault with the enjoyment of incongruity as Philosophers disagree with the idea. Morreall says that laughing at incongruous elements is childish or lack rationality. Children laugh at the incongruous elements and therefore it is not an expected behaviour with the adults. The philosophical world expects the irrational element to be eliminated and not to be celebrated. Morreall views, "To appreciate incongruity would be immature, irrational, masochistic, or all three"<sup>[10]</sup>. He concurs that enjoying incongruity alone is not enough to analyse humour and its worth.

### The philosophy of Charles Baudelaire

Charles Baudelaire, one of the leading philosophers of the nineteenth century France who is also regarded as the first translator of the renowned American writer Edgar Allan Poe, is appraised to have concocted the term 'Modernity'. Having associated himself with the Decadent Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a movement originated in France in the fields of art and literature, Baudelaire was very much aware of the pleasure present in aberration, coarse humour and the nonpareil feelings of the humankind over the surroundings and even over its own kind which are some of the traits of the Decadent Movement. He believes that the evil intent present in comic elements are signs of demonic nature possessed by human beings. Because humour which springs out of the weakness of people often cause a feeling of superiority in others. Not only are the physical weaknesses laughed at but also the cultural weaknesses. Eventually such a humour which is born out of the follies of people tends to be hostile. In these situations the tellers may feel superior to the targeted people.

### Conclusion

As observed by the aforesaid thinkers, if the human mind is stringent with the external forces, happenings, or elements, it takes to relieve the pent-up emotions through laughter. Yet, these ideas were not proved scientifically. Regarding comic amusement, the Relief Theory renders less meaning. As stated already, these three theories contribute in their own ways to analyse the nature and the value of humour. Each theory sounds unique though they are incomplete in one way, or the other. Humour Theories are numerous and are evolving, and writers around the world have thought about it and have added more to the already swelling literature being written till date. Hence, it would not hurt to visit a handful of writers who have known about the power of humour and its magical use in life. Familiarizing with excerpts from a list of writers may succor to know the breadth and depth of humour.

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