

## 1 Introduction and Overview

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The field of Humor Studies is different from other academic areas in that it is typically a secondary consideration. Humor scholars in various universities are most often assigned to an academic area such as Anthropology, Art, Business, Education, Health, History, Law, Linguistics, Literature, Medicine, Music, Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, Religion, Sociology, or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). And then within their particular field they specialize in humor studies. However, conventions and publications of the International Society for Humor Studies, the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, and other humor organizations tend to be eclectic and cross-disciplinary. For example, we often attend humor discussions and read articles that are outside of our own particular discipline, so we are constantly learning (and teaching) about disciplines other than our own.

Many humor scholars are attempting to develop a “Universal Theory” of humor analysis that can be applied to all disciplines, but we’ve noticed that each of these “Universal Theories” tends to favor the particular discipline of the person who is making the proposal. We call our own theory, “Features, Functions, and Subjects of Humor”; we fully realize that it is not a leak-proof umbrella hanging over all of the other theories about humor, but at least it provides a beginning.

### **How Can We Determine a Person’s “Sense of Humor”?**

In the humor classes we teach, and in the books and articles that we write, we often receive the following softened criticism: “This information is insightful and significant, and I can apply it to my life, but it isn’t really humorous.” After receiving this same criticism over and over and over again, we began to figure out that there are two reasons that people have this perception. The first reason is that we’ve devoted our lives to humor, and therefore, we find everything humorous. In our lives, everything is humorous. For ourselves, we have a very broad definition of “sense of humor.” But we have gradually come to realize that most other people don’t have this same broad “sense of humor.” Instead, they have a narrower “sense of ambiguity and wordplay,” or a “sense

of sarcasm,” or a “sense of parody, or paradox.” When they are investigating humor, some people look for and find the superiority or hostility aspects of humor, or the incongruity and incongruity resolution aspects of humor, or the release and relief aspects of humor.

If you’re a linguist or a literature scholar, you might analyze a joke as a miniature discourse in which the set-up is loaded in the direction of the mundane, and the punchline is loaded in the direction of the dramatic, which allows the listener to reinterpret the set-up as dramatic. The joke is seen as a miniature discourse with a script, like the script of a play or a screenplay, and the punchline is seen as the denouement or epiphany that reveals the real meaning of the joke. This requires what we see as a “sense of epiphany.” People with a “sense of epiphany” tend not to see weird things as “ridiculous” or “ludicrous” (laughable), but rather as “insightful.”

Some humorists and humor scholars stress the **features** of humor, like ambiguity, exaggeration, understatement, hostility, incongruity, irony, or surprise of humor. They might ask if surprise, for example, is a necessary or sufficient condition for humor. Surprise might be a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition. If a person were to open Jeffrey Daumer’s refrigerator and find human appendages, that would be a surprise, but it would not be humorous.

Other humorists and humor scholars stress the **functions** of humor, like to amuse, to tease, to test limits, to establish superiority or gain control. Sociologists might consider how humor is used to bond people in a social group, or to ostracize or intimidate people who are not in that group. Educators might stress how humor can be used to teach concepts, or help students remember these concepts, or make students feel less stressed in a classroom environment. Psychologists might consider how humor is used to cope with difficulties, save face, establish superiority, or tease or insult someone. Literature teachers might contrast the nature of humor that is used in Shakespeare’s comedies and romances (mainly wordplay and puns), and that used in his tragedies (for comic relief). Rhetoric and Composition teachers might investigate the difference between an error (unintentional deviation from the norm) and a rhetorical device (intentional deviation from the norm). Linguists might use humor to investigate the nature of intentional and unintentional ambiguity. Business types might investigate how humor can be used to befriend the customer and sell products. And politicians might investigate how humor requires people to see issues from more than a single perspective, and might therefore be used to create a less polarized political environment. Historians might study what the humor of a particular historical period reveals about people’s attitudes and beliefs. These historians study the *zeitgeists* (spirit of the times) of different decades, like the roaring twenties, or centuries, like the Renaissance. And humor offers significant insights into these *zeitgeists*.

Finally, humorists and humor scholars investigate the **subjects** of humor. This is especially important for historians and sociologists, because humor tends to be edgy, and therefore the subjects often tend to be the taboo aspects of society. These taboo aspects are the subjects that we are not supposed to discuss, but they are the most significant subjects in our lives – ethnicity, gender, political leanings, religious beliefs, sexuality, etc. Because these are taboo areas in our culture, much of our censorship relates to these subjects, but because the subjects are so important to us we must think about them, but we're not supposed to joke about them. But of course we do. The jokes that are told in comedy clubs make conservatives feel uncomfortable, because the jokes contain obscenities, vulgarities, profanities, swear words, or four-letter words. These conservatives are also bothered by jokes about sex, or body parts, or religion. So for a long time, we have had censorship from the right. But in recent times we are living in an age of “political correctness,” so we are being censored from the liberal and progressive left as well, so now we are not supposed to tell ethnic jokes, or gender jokes, or old-people jokes. Indeed, we are not supposed to tell jokes that target any marginalized group or individual. However, we feel that there is no subject, conservative or progressive, that should be off-limits, as long as we have genuine empathy for the targeted group, and as long as our wording communicates this empathy.

## Chapter Overviews

### 2 Anthropology and Ethnic Studies

In Chapter 2, our main focus is on humor created by and about Native Americans, who are also referred to with such terms as “First Nation” people and as “American Indians.” They are the people who were on the American continent many years before the 1492 arrival of Columbus, who mistakenly called them “Indians,” because he thought he had arrived in the West Indies. However, we need to explain that there are many different tribes of American Indians, and we are focusing on the Navajo Indians, who live mostly in parts of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. One of the reasons we chose to focus on them is that we have both been acquainted with Navajo Indians since we were children, and they are one of the largest tribes in the United States. They are famous for their Navajo rugs, which are hand-woven from the wool of the sheep that they still raise. They played an important part in World War II, when they helped the United States marines during the last years of the war. They worked hard to devise and memorize a code using mostly their own language. It was the only code that was never broken during the war, and was kept secret until the mid-1960s. Most of the men who were official Navajo code-talkers have by now passed away.

### 3 Irony, Parody, and Satire in Art

Arthur Koestler's descriptions of artistic originality, scientific discovery, and comic inspiration are explored in this chapter, along with expressionism, minimalism, and the Dada movement. Other items include humorous architecture and a history of artists who have incorporated humor, irony, parody, and/or satire into their work. What goes into the creation of different kinds of caricatures and cartoons is also treated, as is the challenge that viewers have in figuring out the expressionism of Vincent Van Gogh's works and of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. When artists rely on minimalism, they leave viewers with a big responsibility to figure out what is being communicated. Surrealism is a technique that artists use to present viewers with puzzles to figure out. Comic artists are also eager to jump into politics, which is how English got such terms as *Teddy Bear* from the name of Theodore Roosevelt, *Simple J. Malarkey* as a play on Senator Joe McCarthy's name, and the title of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about 9/11, *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

### 4 Business

Two kinds of humor will be explored in this chapter. First is the use of humor inside businesses, i.e. the kinds of things that companies do to help their employees stay happy and productive. These activities can range from having bulletin boards reserved for cartoons, company newsletters that share positive information about employees, "break-rooms" supplied with humorous reading or viewing materials, and having leaders who genuinely get acquainted with their employees and figure out ways to relate to them, including acknowledging people's "special" days or accomplishments. The second kind of humor is what businesses do to develop positive feelings between themselves and their customers. This can range from cheerful and humorous advertisements to the marketing of humor-related products, and the training of employees to be at least "pleasant," even if not out-and-out humorous, to customers. Some companies encourage their employees to wear costumes for Halloween and/or little reminders of other holidays.

### 5 Computer Science

Of course, everyone is aware of how computers and other new technologies are revolutionizing the creation and distribution of humor and the way that witticisms, as well as art and photographs, can be sent simultaneously to millions of people. But even more significant is the way that computers can change the attitudes and thinking processes both of small groups of people and sometimes of the whole world. Computers also allow the distribution of new kinds of information and new kinds of humor. In his *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler says that there are three types of creativity, and that they all

relate to incongruity and incongruity resolution. The first type he calls “Artistic Originality,” the second type “Scientific Discovery,” and the third type, “Comic Inspiration.”

As new concepts emerge, we recycle old words and phrases, often from fantasy and science fiction, as with the term *Godzillagram* for a huge packet, *Munchkin* for a teenage techie, *Trojan Horse* for a program that infiltrates a computer, and *Tree Killers* from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Only through the quick and widespread communication enabled by computers could such terms make their way around the world.

## 6 Education and Children’s Literature

In Education and in studies of child development, computers have made tremendous differences, especially in what and how new kinds of information are taught to students from pre-schools to sophisticated graduate programs. One of the biggest differences in recent years is that teachers and administrators realize that there is so much information in the world that we can no longer teach every child the exact same thing. In modern schools, many children in the same class are working with different concepts and ideas. In the first humor class that we taught to students in our university’s Honor Program, we were surprised to see how much they knew about finding online humor, and then we were even more surprised to see that individually they were using quite different approaches and sources. One of the things that surprised many of our college-age students was that the online use of a smiley face, made with a colon followed by a hyphen and a parenthesis, was invented way back in 1982 – several years before our students were born. We weren’t even able to illustrate this “old-fashioned” kind of “smiley face,” because our computer automatically changes the three symbols into what we now see as a smiley face ☺.

## 7 Gender Studies

This is a chapter that we went back to and rewrote after the rest of this book was prepared, because of the many ways that gender issues entered the political scene near the end of 2017 and on into 2018. Sexual harassment – some of it under the guise of humor – became a huge political issue. Because it is such a sensitive subject, many writers and cartoonists have preferred to use humorous cartoons and quips to bring up the subject. Also in real life, both males and females “carefully” tell sex-related jokes or bring up current news as a way of “testing” the attitudes of their acquaintances.

## 8 Geography

While different countries have their own kinds of humor and use their own languages to communicate, there is also physical humor that transcends language

barriers, as in the silent movies that starred such actors as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Place names are an efficient way to communicate the contents and the “mood” of particular books or dramas as with Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa*, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, Ian Fleming’s *From Russia with Love*, and Richard Rodgers’s *South Pacific*. Many of the cartoons and the memes and jokes that are online come from what we used to call “foreign countries.” With our ever-growing interest in travel and tourism, the general public is communicating more with people from other countries. Sometimes, we see humorous pictures of unusual geographical scenes such as an amazing trail going up a formidable mountain or an old, abandoned car with a tree growing out of its front window. Movie-makers look for intriguing place names such as in Neil Simon’s play *Biloxi Blues*, and in the Coen brothers’ film *Fargo*. Car-makers have discovered that they can borrow the excitement of travel by choosing romantic-sounding place names for their cars. A Chevrolet sedan is named the *Monte Carlo*, Kia has a sedan named *Sorento* (after Sorrento, Italy), while Subaru’s *Outback* takes its name from Australia’s frontier.

## 9 Gerontology

Because of better healthcare, growing old isn’t what it used to be. For example, in the United States, people aged over 60 now outnumber those under the age of 15, which means that humor about old age is undergoing considerable changes. At one of our Humor Conferences, comedy writer Max Shulman told us that if he told a joke that came too close to home for his readers, they would not enjoy it because they would think, “Oh no! That’s me!” However, in our classes with senior citizens we have found the opposite to be true. When someone in the class tells a funny story about something that has happened to them, the other seniors in the class who have had a similar experience are the ones who laugh the loudest. They are happy to see that they are not alone in the kinds of new experiences and feelings that they are experiencing. An especially well-liked meme in one of our classes was about an old man confiding that his childhood punishments have now become his old-age treats, i.e. going to bed early, not leaving his house, and missing a party.

## 10 History

The German word *Zeitgeist* translates into “Spirit of the times,” which is an appropriate phrase to use when we describe the many fairly recent developments in humor about minorities and the kinds of humor that became popular through television sitcoms, professional comedians, and the increasing responsibilities that come to people who are left with the responsibility of interpreting the memes or the cartoons that their friends forward to them. Historian Joseph Boskin, who directed the Urban Studies and Public Policy Program at Boston

University, has collected the kinds of jokes that people share when they are carpooling, working out at the gym, riding the subway, or just getting through a rough week at work. He uses these jokes as an example of “survival humor,” because they relieve the tension that is part of everyday life that includes getting acquainted not only with different people but also with new customs and technologies including microwave ovens, hidden cameras, secret recordings of telephone conversations, and all of the mysteries of modern medicine as compared to the “good old days,” when people thought they were managing well if they went once a year to visit the town doctor.

### 11 Journalism

“Home Town” newspapers used to present mostly local news and opinions, while today the news is truly international, and in many ways the existence of social media is taking the place of what in our grandparents’ generation would have been in the local newspaper. But today there are far fewer local newspapers and many of those that still exist have partnered with national services, such as that provided by *USA Today*, a shortened version of which is now tucked inside our local paper, the *Arizona Republic*. Most television stations also have partnerships so as to provide local, national, and international programming and news. And in trying harder to compete with national news sources, many local papers now give more space and attention to contributions from readers. In the *Arizona Republic*, the letters-to-the-editor used to be tucked away in small print, but such letters now have a whole page of their own with boldface headings on each letter. And in the middle of the page is a large color reproduction of a syndicated cartoon, usually related to politics or other current news. The cartoon is usually one by the *Arizona Republic*’s own Steve Benson, but about once a week, there will be a cartoon from some other paper’s syndicated cartoonist. Because of President Donald Trump’s campaign against what he calls “Fake News!” people are now more skeptical of what they read and hear on radio and television. However, comic strips are still being published. They rely on both the kind of humor that grows out of daily life and out of national and world politics, but they are no longer the draw that they were when we were children. In Alleen’s family, there were six children and, at any one time, more than half of these six children were at the age to watch for the delivery of the paper so they could be first to grab “the funnies.”

### 12 Law

Lawyers and judges are increasingly involved with humor, especially in relation to disagreements about the creation and protection of trademarks and about accusations of copyright infringement, plus, there is a whole genre of anti-lawyer jokes. These are popular because many people resent paying money



to lawyers when they are already in some kind of trouble. Their frustration is increased by the necessity of having to hire a lawyer to present their side of the story. In most court cases, one side wins and the other side loses; however legal matters are increasingly complicated so that in such disagreements both sides often feel they have lost. Another kind of online humor related to law is the reprinting of laws that are basically humorous – maybe because they are so out of date that they are funny, or maybe because they relate to local customs or practices that are unknown to readers outside of their area. Also, the general public enjoys reading reprints of the recordings made by court stenographers whose job it is to keep an accurate record of all the questions that are asked and all the answers that are given in court cases. These are often filled with unintentional humor. Also, the public's interest in matters of the law are an increasingly popular subject for television where several “judges” conduct minor cases in front of TV cameras. Judge Judy is one of the first, and still the most popular, of these judges.

### 13 Linguistics

Linguists specialize in the study of language, and so of course they are interested in verbal humor, whether it is intentional or accidental. They use what is sometimes called “script model grammar” to focus on small discourses where they make distinctions between intentional ambiguity – sometimes called “double-entendre” – and accidental humor. Many common jokes are loaded toward the mundane, but then the “punchline” suddenly makes the reader or listener reconsider and come up with a dramatic interpretation, which comes as a joke. For adults and teenagers, this sudden insight is often related to a “naughty” or sexual interpretation. And of course, there are many other ways that linguists work with humor, partly because part of their training deals with learning about other languages and other cultures. This additional knowledge often lets them recognize the differences between accidental and purposely created humor, and also gives them more insight than most people have into the many meanings of sentences.

### 14 Literature

It is hard to define literary humor, because there are as many different approaches to literature as there are people creating, as well as reading and interpreting literature. One good example is the literary metaphor, as written about by Northrop Frye when he interprets the four seasons of the year as symbols for our lives. He relates spring to romance, summer to comedy, fall to irony, and winter to old age and death. Of course this literary comparison to seasons of the year works only for certain parts of the world, but it is nevertheless a good illustration of how scholars work to help readers and writers



understand how literary allusions are based on the experiences of readers. Comedies are more likely to have happy endings and to deal with the earlier parts of people's lives, while tragedies have sad endings and often deal with the later parts of life and the disillusionment that many people feel as they see that their lives are not turning out as they imagined. Gothic humor is associated with the dark side of life, i.e. haunted houses, deep forests, or mysterious caves, etc. The classic distinction between comedies and tragedies is that comedies have happy endings, while tragedies have sad endings. Gothic humor is usually associated with the dark side of life, i.e. haunted houses, deep forests, and mysterious caves. People create ironic humor when they feel all is lost. Juvenalian satire is dark and bitter, while Horatian satire is mild and amusing.

### 15 Medicine and Health

Obviously it is good for people who are having health problems to be cheered up by friends and family as part of their treatment. Because of this, humor is finding its way into hospitals and other treatment centers, and into organizations and care centers for the elderly. In many ways, such humor is as good for the caregivers as it is for the patients. Nevertheless, we feel a need to warn that humor is just one part of life and that responsible humor scholars need to be careful not to raise false hopes for family members and patients.

### 16 Music

Probably all of us have fond memories that are in some way connected to music. Lucky children – at least in America – remember the “Happy Birthday” song or being at a parade and enjoying the music of a marching band, or maybe they have enjoyed singing with other children as they rode a bus or walked together for some important event. Two-thirds of the Broadway shows that have had over 1,200 performances have been musicals. Also, many of the best comedians were first trained as musicians and continue using the skills they learned in their public performances. And even in serious and sad operas, composers often rely on music to provide comic relief.

### 17 Names

Names play a huge part in our lives, not only the name each of us is given at birth to go along with our inherited family name, but also both common and proper names of products, places, and things. Now with television, it's amazing how quickly very young children can identify brand names of their favorite foods and of the toys they want relatives to buy for them. Deep in the minds of adults are also the names of the places they lived and the schools they attended and of their teachers and even of some of their most memorable classmates. This chapter shows how names can go through processes of generalization

and/or specialization and how the same name can have positive connotations for one person and negative connotations for someone else.

### **18 Performing Arts: Theatre, Dance, and Music**

Throughout their lives, ordinary people have most of their experience with performing arts through television and movies, but still their love for such experiences probably traces back to memories of feeling butterflies in their own stomach when they were in a school play or stood in front of a crowd to recite a poem they had learned. Their memories will be all the sweeter if their early experience was a success and if people responded positively to it.

### **19 Philosophy**

Serious humor scholars subscribe to varying philosophies about humor. To some it is an inexplicable mystery, to others it can be explained as a Theory of Relief – something that helps people with life’s challenges. Still others believe in the Superiority Theory of Humor, which says that we laugh at events and people and even animals because it makes us feel superior, or at least “in charge.” A similar kind of feeling is explained in the Incongruity Resolution Theory, which says that humor helps people ponder on similarities and differences.

### **20 Physical Education and Sports Mascots**

If we are in a good mood, we might smile or even laugh as we watch a toddler try to stand up or climb onto his mother’s lap. However, there are many other things about our physical bodies that serve as the basis for humor. Clowns in circuses and cheerleaders and mascots at athletic events do things with their bodies that can be seen from long distances and still make an audience smile or respond in some other positive way. We also go to the zoo to smile at how various animals use their bodies and we cheer – and sometimes laugh – at what happens in playgrounds as small as school yards, and as big as stadiums that seat thousands of spectators.

### **21 Politics**

Because of modern media, especially television, we are now seeing the same kinds of humor that children use when they call each other names and think up clever ways to insult their playmates. We hope that by the time this book is published, the mass media and the politicians who play leadership roles through insulting each other will have regained some of the old-fashioned kinds of politeness that used to characterize political conflicts. We think that humor helps people see both sides of an issue and therefore can help us be less polarized.