

# Theories in Comedy Explored

## Superiority Theory

**Philosopher:** *Thomas Hobbes*

**Work:** *Leviathan* (1651)

## Summary

The **Superiority Theory** argues that we laugh because we feel superior to someone else. According to Hobbes, humour often stems from recognizing the faults, mistakes, or ignorance of others and feeling a sense of triumph or self-elevation. In other words, laughter is a form of “**sudden glory**”—a brief boost to our ego when we realize we're better off, smarter, or more aware than the person being laughed at.

**"The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves."** – *Thomas Hobbes*

## Explanation

- Laughter becomes a response to inferiority in others.
- It creates a sense of social distance or hierarchy—we're on top, and the subject of the joke is beneath us in some way.
- It often occurs in group settings where the act of laughing at someone, or something unites the group in a shared feeling of superiority.

**Clumsiness** – When someone trips or spills something, we might laugh because we're not the ones embarrassed.

**Ignorance** – Jokes about people misunderstanding something obvious can make us feel smarter.

**Mistakes or Failures** – Laughing at someone who fails at a simple task reinforces our sense of competence.

**Social Awkwardness** – When characters behave inappropriately or say something embarrassing, the audience feels more socially apt.

## Examples in Comedy

### TV & Film

- **Michael Scott in *The Office***: His social cluelessness and inappropriate behaviour make us laugh because we recognize the errors he doesn't.
- **Mr. Bean**: His bizarre logic and exaggerated behaviour give viewers a sense of superiority due to their own "normality".
- **Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*)**: His laziness and lack of intelligence create a comic contrast with the viewer's own self-image.

### Stand-Up Comedy:

- **Roasts**: Comedians target celebrities or public figures, making jokes at their expense. The audience laughs partly because they aren't the ones being ridiculed.
- **Comedian's and self-deprecation**: Sometimes a comedian genuinely makes fun of themselves to become more relatable to an audience and other times pretends to make fun of themselves just to highlight how others are *even worse*, in turn flipping the script.

### Online:

- **Fail compilations** on YouTube or TikTok: People getting hurt, messing up, or embarrassing themselves—audiences laugh from a safe distance, feeling thankful it's not them.
- **"Karen" memes**: Often mock people who overreact or act entitled, offering a way to feel superior in behaviour or attitude.

### Reflection Questions:

- Is all humour that makes us feel superior harmful?
- Can superiority humour be used to critique or challenge authority?
- What's the difference between laughing *at* someone and laughing *with* someone?

## Relief Theory

**Thinker:** *Sigmund Freud*

**Work:** *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905)

### Summary

Relief Theory suggests that humour is a psychological safety valve. It allows us to release pent-up emotional energy; especially related to thoughts or feelings that are normally repressed or considered socially unacceptable. In other words, comedy gives us permission to momentarily express taboo ideas, unconscious desires, or uncomfortable truths in a socially acceptable way—through laughter. Therefore, laughter relieves the nervous energy that builds up when we suppress our true feelings, particularly about controversial subjects such as sex, death, sexuality, and discrimination.

### Explanation

The mind generally represses thoughts that are inappropriate or stressful; jokes can "trick" the mind into releasing these hidden feelings in a less threatening form. We laugh as a way of releasing tension like steam escaping from a pressure cooker. Freud believed this was especially true for humour that revolves around taboos, double meanings, or hidden aggression.

**Taboo humour** – Jokes about death, sex, religion, or politics.

**Dark humour** – Laughter in the face of tragedy or despair.

**Wordplay & double entendre** – Jokes that mask a deeper or forbidden meaning.

**Cathartic humour** – Relief from shared pain or anxiety, especially in stressful times.

## Examples in Comedy:

### Stand-Up Comedy:

- **George Carlin** and **Richard Pryor** often tackled race, politics, drugs, and religion—topics that made people uncomfortable—but made them laugh.
- **Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*** mixes comedy with deep, emotional storytelling, providing release from tension built around trauma and identity.

### TV & Film:

- **Bo Burnham's *Inside***: Uses comedy to process depression, anxiety, and isolation. The laughter comes from uncomfortable recognition.
- **Saturday Night Live** Political sketches: letting people laugh about social stress or political controversy, often just after a major event.
- **Deadpool (2016)**: A superhero film filled with dark, self-aware jokes about death and violence, allowing the audience to enjoy these heavy themes playfully.

## Reflection Questions

- Have you ever laughed in a situation that felt inappropriate? Why?
- Can humour be a healthy way to process trauma or stress?

# Incongruity Theory

**Philosophers:** *Immanuel Kant* and *Arthur Schopenhauer*

## Summary

Incongruity Theory holds that humour arises when there's a disconnect between what we expect and what actually happens. Laughter is triggered when our brains anticipate one outcome but are surprised by something completely different, illogical, or absurd.

"The sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." – *Immanuel Kant*

Schopenhauer built on this, saying we laugh when there's a mismatch between a concept (what we believe should happen) and reality (what actually happens). The humour lies in the contradiction.

## Explanation

Our minds constantly predict outcomes and look for patterns. A joke disrupts that pattern—we expect one thing, and something else happens. The "punchline" of a joke flips the script, forcing the brain to quickly shift perspective. Laughter is a reflex to this mental switch—a kind of cognitive surprise.

- **Surprise**
- **Absurdity**
- **Misdirection**
- **Contrast between setup and payoff**

## Examples of Incongruity in Comedy

**Jokes:**

- **"I want to die peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather... not screaming and yelling like the passengers in his car."**  
- You expect a peaceful image... then the punchline flips the meaning.
- **"Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything."**  
- A scientific setup leads to a pun that plays with language and meaning.

## TV & Film:

- **Monty Python and the Holy Grail:** A medieval adventure that includes absurd modern jokes (like a killer bunny), totally subverting audience expectations.
- **Brooklyn Nine-Nine:** Uses rapid-fire punchlines, unexpected character behaviour, and misdirection for laughs.

## Stand-Up Comedy:

- **Tig Notaro** and **Mitch Hedberg** are known for dry, offbeat one-liners that rely on subtle twists in logic.
- Many comedians build a setup that seems to go one direction, only to end with something surreal or ridiculous.

## Everyday Life:

- Laughing when someone **says something serious in a silly voice**.
- Double takes when someone **acts inappropriately in a formal setting**—like breakdancing in a business suit.

## Reflection Questions

- Can a joke be funny if it's totally expected?
- Do all forms of humour rely on surprise?
- What are the times you have laughed because you were caught off guard?