

Witz and its Relation to the Unconscious: Technique and Taxonomy

Sigmund Freud's 1905 *Jokes (Witz) and their Relation to the Unconscious* is one of his most accessible works from the first period of his career. The book actually depends very little upon his first topography of unconscious-preconscious-conscious, though he uses it to reach certain conclusions about the motive force behind the energy of what is amusing. He argues that the amusing is a kind of comic catharsis in which the "free discharge" of latent energies becomes manifest.

In general, however, the book is more a close study of the kinds of humor and some of the general circumstances and techniques that help create them. In this sense, much of Freud's discussion better fits a model like Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, in which the tacit aspects of knowledge can come into focal understanding when examined. What Freud has discovered, and often mapped quite well, is the semantics and phenomenology of jokes, which is often subsidiary rather than truly signals of the unconscious. He develops in the book three broad categories of what is funny, though each is less developed by Freud than the previous type:

- 1) **Witz** (the Joke) requires three persons, one in cooperation with the teller laughing at a third's expense. It is Janus-faced in that it takes advantage of the ambiguity in a wit that can be used against another. Freud sees this as arising from "an economy of expenditure in inhibition."
- 2) **The Comic** requires two persons because as "an economy of expenditure in thought" it compares and contrasts another with a certain standard or action; this can include the physical, including caricature or buffoonery.
- 3) **Humor** needs only one person since as "an economy of expenditure of feeling" one has sympathy with the teller, even if the teller is oneself. Humor can be mixed with the joke or the comic and can be present alongside painful emotions (765ff.)

For Freud, the amusing requires form, content, and social context, as well as the unconscious energies of his broader theories. The form of the joke (the witticism, the comic scenario, the humorous story) takes up the bulk of his analysis. It generally involves some kind of conciseness of word choice and delivery, as well as often practicing substitution of words and concepts, even putting to use the absurd or the physical. The form of the comic in his discussion requires a tighter integration of form and content. Content and context, which he examines primarily with reference to social tendencies of display and aggression, shape the joke in a variety of ways, and he explores not only various psychological goals, but also the responses of the hearers. Taking the chapters out of order, we can notice the following:

Various Verbal Techniques (Chapter 2) [Form]

Chapter 2 discusses the basic forms of the joke (or *witz*), focusing specifically on how words and concepts use the techniques of substitution, condensation, displacement, and indirection.

- *Verbal and ideational condensation*: mixed word –formation; with modification (whole/part; change of order; slight modification; full sense)
- *Double meaning*: proper name significance; metaphorical and verbal meaning; play on words; ambiguity; allusion
- *Other kinds of verbal and ideational change*: puns, double-wit in which is removed, nonsense, automatic error, unification, representation by opposition, outdoing-wit, indirect allusion, omission, least-wit, direct comparison, forced or particular attribution

The Comic's Basis in Mimesis (Chapter 7) [Form]

Chapter 7 also examines the various forms that the more broadly comic can take, though all of these involve some form of comparison and contrast which is based in our bodily and psychical manner of imitation of another or others, so while *Witz* arises for Freud from unconscious energies, the comic is more mimetic.

- *The Role and the Pleasure of the Naïve*: We laugh at the person who naively stumbles on to the comic, especially if their innocence is to be expected, such as that of children. Later (762ff.), he examines how the basic kinds of the comic are present in the infantile (or childish) experience.
- *The Motion-Based Comic*: We sympathetically feel and evaluate the physically funny action, though we tend to find it funny for cognitive reasons, judging an action excessive or lacking in some way, and this may invoke our own sympathy or ego. This has its basis in ideational mimicry.
- *The Situation-Based Comic*: This is similar to the motion-based scenario but involves more complex routines. Here, Freud notes the way in which we may feel superior to others.
- *The Expectation-Based Comic*: This notion involves our ability to anticipate the future. We bodily identify with and expect the potential outcomes of certain motions or actions. Freud suggests that three of these forms are actually reducible to our propensity for mimicry. Caricature and the unmasking of another's pretensions through parody and travesty are prime examples of these.
- *The Imitation-Based Comic*: The comic is, therefore, often the pleasure of imitating another, yet because it is also a matter of superior or inferior contrast, the comic becomes a matter of the degrading of the other. The sub-type of comparing substandard wit to quality wit employs wit within this larger comic category. This is especially true with the intentionally inadequate product that is to be spoofed.

Freud gives six characteristics that maximize the comic (758-761):

1. Being disposed towards laughter
2. The expectation of comic pleasure
3. No cognitive distractions to disrupt laughter
4. Not focused upon correcting the behavior at hand
5. An ability to be objective towards the behavior
6. The compatibility of associated pleasures

Nature of Psychological Tendencies (Chapter 3) [Content]

In chapter 3, Freud prepares for his thesis that *Witz* (the joke) must be a three-sided affair. To do this he examines various kinds of jokes or wit, most of which rely on some social prohibition:

- *Harmless wit*: Harmless wit functions as a kind of control group because it intends mutual enjoyment for all who hear.
- *Sexual wit, obscenity, exhibitionism*: These forms use smut or more cloaked sexual jokes to either release sexual desire often for another person present, or to involve others in sexual desire for those absent. This can also take forms of attempted seduction or aggression.
- *Hostile wit*: Hostile wit is seeking a socially acceptable way to attack another, especially in class-based or gender-based situations. Invective is made possible in such circumstances through the rejoinder. Rebellion against authority is also masked in such forms.

- *Cynical, skeptical, and blasphemous Wit*: These are other types of wit in which negatively judged attitudes can be more safely expressed. This can include forms of self-criticism in which a despised group makes fun of themselves in a less harsh manner than the more powerful party.

The Social Processes that Shape Laughter (Chapter 5) [Context]

While social context has been assumed throughout much of the discussion of the techniques and tendencies of jokes and the comic, chapter 5 explores the points of convergence between motive and sociality, especially those particular autobiographical circumstances that give rise to *Witz*. The role of the third person is that of comic judge or evaluator since the joke is a matter of form directed against another. (Does Freud ever allow for the judge and target being the same, as he allows for gallows humor being performed by one person for him or herself?) The role of surprise for the third party in the humorous contrast is as important as the discharge of what is prohibited for the first person, the teller.

The Psychogenesis of Wit (Chapter 4) & Relation to the Unconscious (Chapter 6) [Economy]

Only in chapters 4 and 6 does Freud unpack in any detail the psychoanalytic approach to *Witz*. Jokes are designed to gratify some sort of prohibited tendency, what he labels the “economy of psychic expenditure” (680).

1. Certainly, there is pleasure in the ideational and verbal formation of jokes, as there is in the discovery of the unfamiliar. More to the point, however, is the recovery of that which is familiar but goes unnoticed.
2. We also derive various forms of pleasure in returning to childhood behaviors, play, jest, and the general overcoming of shame.
3. In particular, then, is the opportunity for the teller (and at times the audience) to express what is normally prohibited.
4. Thus, *Witz* has a quality of fore-pleasure that assists the teller in socially expressing the normally unacceptable thus bringing together play-pleasure (#1-2) with removal-pleasure (#3).
5. Thus, wit-work is “a foreconscious thought is left for a moment to unconscious elaboration and the results are forthwith grasped by the conscious perception” (718).
6. The brevity and conciseness of wit often appears quickly without time for planning and is elaborated only in retrospect.
7. These represent the regressions to infancy and its basic desires.
8. Wit-work does not have the same complete freedom that dream-work has, for example the use of the opposite or of absurdity is more limited by technique.
9. While dreams are always about the individual alone, *Witz* is a social activity and its individual pleasure is only one aspect.

Discussion Questions

1. What aspects of Freud’s taxonomy of jokes or the comic do you find most insightful?
2. How necessary is Freud’s topography of the unconscious (his spatial language of surface and depth) to understanding laughter, jokes, the comic or humorous?
3. Have you ever experienced the “shock of recognition” concerning your mixed or hidden motives when telling a joke?
4. Can there be a tendency-wit that employs the elements of delight and play for reasons other than sexual exhibition or aggression?
5. What elements of humor (used in a general sense) has Freud overlooked in his analysis?
6. Can Freud’s approach account for a true ethic or morality of humor?