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HUMOR AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

1 What makes people laugh? Is a pie in the face funny? Is a person slipping on a banana peel funny? Lord Chesterton said, “Every man is funny if he loses his hat and has to run after it.” If the hat chaser is a portly dignified type, wearing a tuxedo and carrying a walking stick, he probably *is* a funny sight. But suppose the person is fragile, elderly, and carrying a cane. Still funny? As funny? Probably not, because we like to see the pompous taken down a step or two.

2 Most people enjoy jokes, brief narratives that build with anticipation to a climactic twist. The twist is the “punch line.” To understand it is to “get it.” Should be easy, but is it? Students of humor agree that to “get it” the audience and the person who tells, writes, or draws the funny story must be on the same page. That is, they must share social or linguistic references. For example, students everywhere would appreciate the story of the professor who had a strict rule about final exams. Anyone writing after the bell would automatically receive a zero. On this occasion, when the bell rang, one student carried on for another five minutes before calmly submitting his paper.

“That’s a zero for you,” said the professor.

“Don’t you know who I am?” asked the student.

“I don’t care who you are,” snapped the professor. “You could be the son of the college’s president. You get a zero.”

“You really don’t know who I am?” persisted the student.

“No.”

“Good.”

With that, the student slipped his examination into the middle of the stack of student papers and walked out. Get it?

3 A key characteristic of a joke is that it is often irreverent, laughing silently at social distinctions. This is apparent in the popular “fly in the soup” stories. The setting is a restaurant. The customer summons the waiter.



“Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”

“Ok. I’ll bring you a fork.”

“Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”

“Don’t worry; it’s not hot enough to burn him.”

“Waiter, what is this fly doing in my soup?”

“Looks like the backstroke, sir.”

“Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”

“Keep your voice down, sir, or everyone will want one.”

The humor derives from the reversal of the status between the waiter and the customer. The waiter, generally of lower status, says things to the customer that are disrespectful, and moreover, that actually dismiss or belittle the customer’s anxiety.

- 4 Many aspects of the human condition are sources of humor. For example, “light bulb” jokes use stereotypes to poke fun at categories of people.

“How many lawyers does it take to change a light bulb?”

“How many can you afford?”

“How many automobile mechanics does it take to change a light bulb?”

“Six. One to scratch his head, one to say, ‘Not till Thursday,’ and four to total the bill.”

“How many *real* men does it take to change a light bulb?”

“None. *Real* men aren’t afraid of the dark.”

“How many conservatives does it take to change a light bulb?”

“Three. One to change it and two to reminisce nostalgically about the old light bulb.”

- 5 People often turn to animals to make fun of human behavior. Cartoons and jokes with animal characters make us laugh at our own foibles (but at a comfortable distance). For example, Garfield, the overweight cartoon cat who is addicted to lasagna, is particularly popular in the United States, where obesity is a national problem.



- 6 Jokes often reveal hostility between the sexes. For example, in a certain country, a foreign journalist researching gender roles noted that it was customary for women to walk several steps behind their husband. A war broke out. The journalist observed that men were now walking several yards behind their wives. “This is wonderful,” he enthused to several women. “What’s the explanation?” “Land mines.”

- 7 In America, stressful family relationships are tickled in “mother-in-law” jokes.

“I just returned from a pleasure trip. I took my mother-in-law to the airport.”

“What’s the punishment for bigamy?”

“Two mothers-in-law.”

A definition of mixed emotions: “My mother-in-law drove off a cliff in my new car.”

Are these jokes funny in your culture?

- 8 A pun amuses with words or expressions that have more than one meaning. Puns don’t translate easily because idioms are essential to understanding. Try this one:

The zebra said to the lion, “Let’s change roles.”

The lion responded, “I’m game.”

Here’s one that requires some background information. A driver on a country road observed a farmer standing in the middle of a large field doing nothing. The driver called out to the farmer.

Driver: “What’s going on?”

Farmer: “I’m trying to win a Nobel Prize,” answered the farmer.

Driver: “How is that?”

Farmer: “I hear they give the Nobel Prize to people who are out standing in their fields.”

- 9 While the immigrant experience is full of privations, it too is a source of humor as well as pathos. The following is a story enjoyed by my family for generations. My Yiddish-speaking grandparents knew little English when they immigrated to America. Grandpa had to find work while Grandma had to find housing. Landlords,



primarily the descendants of earlier German settlers, were not eager to rent to large families. When grandmother answered an advertisement for an apartment, she and the landlord communicated in a mix of German, Yiddish, and English. “Do you have any children?” asked the landlord in German. “*Nein*,” answered my grandmother. “Sign the lease on the dotted line,” said the happy landlord. The next day, Grandpa, Grandma, and their very happy nine children moved in. We never knew if Grandma intentionally misled the landlord or if there really was language confusion.

- 10 Chesterton’s person chasing a hat is called “low” humor or slapstick because it is physical and not intellectually demanding. In contrast, the most sophisticated humor is satire, which holds up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn. Nowhere today is satire as biting as in political humor. Political cartoons enliven newspapers, and political demonstrations overflow with laughs. During George W. Bush’s two presidential campaigns, his personality, character, and programs were boldly satirized by the group “Billionaires for Bush.” These university students were costumed in formal dress: the men in tuxedos and top hats; the women in evening gowns, dripping jewelry, and crowned with tiaras. They danced raucously. They carried posters boasting such messages as, “My opponent wants to eliminate dependence on foreign oil. There is no foreign oil; it all belongs to us.” Not every Bush supporter wanted to “get it.”
- 11 Thus does humor illuminate the causes and possible solutions to serious and pressing problems. James Thurber, America’s beloved humorist, wrote: “Humor is a serious thing. This great natural resource must be preserved at all costs.”

===== QUIZ =====

The words in parentheses are antonyms. Circle the one that logically completes the sentence.

1. The angelic child’s (**virtues** / **vices**) won her an award for good citizenship.
2. The proverb says, if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. In other words (**persist** / **desist**) and you will be successful.
3. Garfield’s addiction to lasagna has made the (**portly** / **slender**) cat very famous.
4. “I love New York” (**enthused** / **complained**) the energetic tourist.



5. Under cover of darkness, the troops (**boldly** / **furtively**) crossed the river.
6. Politicians owe it to the voters to address their (**pressing** / **superficial**) concerns.
7. Angered by the paparazzi, the celebrity (**snapped** / **cooed**) his answers to questions.
8. The intoxicated couple danced (**raucously** / **gracefully**) to the music.
9. On her death bed, the loving grandmother (**summoned** / **dismissed**) her children and grandchildren.

Use context to match the sentence beginning to its sentence completer.

10. On their 50th anniversary, the couple... _____
11. Too pompous to be careful, the... _____
12. Powerful people who are frauds and hypocrites better... _____
13. Charlie Chaplin mimicked dictators... _____
14. Speakers were very dignified... _____
15. The politician's reputation was ruined... _____

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| a. arrogant fool tripped and fell. | d. at the Nobel Prize ceremony. |
| b. irreverently in his films. | e. hide their follies from the satirist. |
| c. reminisced about their wedding. | f. by biting television commercials. |

Circle the best choice for each underlined idiom.

16. Comedians often poke fun at their own inadequacies. They _____ themselves.
 - a. tell jokes about
 - b. threaten to stab
 - c. tell falsehoods about
17. People who fall in love usually decide to...
 - a. spend time together.
 - b. wear protective padding.
 - c. consult an eye doctor.
18. The lovesick boy didn't sleep very well because he had a...
 - a. fever and sore throat.
 - b. very noisy neighbor.
 - c. breakfast date with his girlfriend.



19. The applicant said, “I was happy to sign on the dotted line.” He had completed a _____ with his signature. a. research survey b. contractual agreement c. textile design

Circle the best choice for each underlined figurative word or phrase.

20. Political demonstrations may overflow with laughs because...
 a. the posters are clever. b. the opposition opens the sewers. c. there is mass hysteria.
21. Political cartoons enliven newspapers.
 a. add interest b. announce births c. rate relevant movies
22. People from the same background are expected to be on the same page. They...
 a. belong to the local library. b. have similar frames of reference.
 c. read from the same newspaper.
23. We like to see someone pompous taken down a step or two.
 a. pushed down the stairs b. on a short ladder c. made humble
24. The joke struck a responsive chord and called forth a strong feeling based on a memory. The comparison is to the realm of...
 a. history. b. education. c. music.

Circle the best choice for each question.

25. Paragraph 1 opens with a question. The answer is found in...
 a. Sentence 3. b. Sentence 4. c. the last sentence.
26. In Paragraph 2, the joke illustrates the idea expressed in Sentence...
 a. 1. b. 3. c. 7.
27. “Fly in the soup” jokes illustrate the point that jokes frequently...
 a. dismiss anxiety. b. mock social distinction. c. respect status differences.
28. Animal characters in jokes often...
 a. have human weaknesses. b. are national symbols. c. are household pets.



29. The punch line in the Grandma-landlord story is based on...
- a. a proverb. b. a pun. c. a number.
30. Language mastery is less necessary to understanding...
- a. satire. b. slapstick. c. human vice.
31. The main ideas in this Reading Passage are developed through...
- a. examples. b. reasons. c. chronologies of events.
32. The Reading Passage uses questions to...
- a. conduct research. b. engage the audience. c. test knowledge.
33. The main idea in Paragraph 5 is illustrated by...
- a. feminine icons. b. a cartoon figure. c. funny anecdotes.
34. In Paragraph 6, following the pattern of _____ is essential to getting it.
- a. list of details b. emphasis c. time order
35. In jokes, the pattern of development is from...
- a. main idea to details. b. contrast to contrast. c. details to the main idea.
36. In the “fly in the soup” jokes, the waiter _____ the customer’s feelings.
- a. applauds b. ignores c. misunderstands
37. Based on the “light bulb” jokes, we can make which assumption?
- a. Lawyers are greedy. b. Automobile mechanics work efficiently.
 - c. Lawyers have technical skills. d. Real men work well together.
38. The foibles that the cartoons in Paragraph 5 examine are...
- a. laziness and temper. b. gluttony and foolishness. c. jealousy and sloppiness.
39. In the third “mother-in-law” joke, the joker has mixed emotions because his mother-in-law is dead and his car is...
- a. demolished. b. insured. c. airborne.
40. The group “Billionaires for Bush” makes the very serious point that...
- a. liberal reforms spoil poor people. b. profit is the highest value.
 - c. university students are frivolous partygoers.

