

Humor (text pages 589-606) is hypothesized to be a social activity that alters the status of the humorist(s) positively and that of the object or victim negatively. Of the two traditionally distinguished "classes" of humor, so-called "ostracizing" humor (the kind we easily see as nasty) singles out a specific victim (or class of victims), with others present or absent being either incidental affiliates of the humorist (and one another) or else unaffected. Jokes "on" individuals or groups are examples. "Affiliative" humor, on the other hand (the kind that makes you feel so good that you cannot imagine it having any negative effect), seems focused on creating or maintaining group cohesiveness, with the identity of the "victim(s)" often more or less incidental, or understood (a good comic creates this effect). "Affiliative" humor can take the form of putting down some other group in the process of promoting one's own group, or it can consist of within-group congeniality that has no apparent "victim," but promotes within-group cooperation or patriotism, seemingly no more than incidentally "against" (or at the expense of) any other group. Humor can be seen as sometimes representing social-intellectual play (practice?) and sometimes being the "real thing" -- the actual establisher and demonstrator of alliances or affiliations, thus concomitantly of ostracism when the humor is group-bound or less than universal in its congeniality.

Humor probably began in one-on-one interactions [e.g., tickling or "friendly (physical) horseplay" that perhaps not incidentally (at least eventually) excluded others]. With the rise of complex sociality and mental abilities, it became a mental kind of "horseplay" and the sizes of groups involved expanded with the rise of widespread discriminative nepotism, and especially of social reciprocity (and potent social selection), until it became functional in larger groups including even entire huge nations.

The question is raised whether, despite its apparent background in exclusive affiliations and alliances, humor, like morality, (1) can be envisioned as having a universal or "pure" potential, or (2) is somehow bound, as with the "play" (practice?) of team competitions (as in sports), to being played out at levels below the entire human population, thus in terms of small and large but limited alliances. In other words, what can we possibly do with either humor or morality -- these apparently group-bound and group-furthering phenomena -- that will cause them to further the cause of universal world peace rather than (apparently) reduce its likelihood? Can affiliative humor be expanded until no one is ever a victim? Or should we seek to eliminate humor? Or what?

Mark Twain summed up in a really ironic way the significance presumed here for affiliative humor when he said, well before the First World War (he died in 1910), "A German joke is no laughing matter."