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HUMOR

Humor is that which gives rise to mirth or amusement, though the notion often eludes precise definition. The psychology of humor has elicited much theorizing, the common denominator of which is that the element of surprise, of shock, or of unexpectedness is a necessary (even if not sufficient) condition for the humorous experience. Humor interrupts the routine, familiar course of thought and action; it activates the element of play which (as Johan Huizinga stressed) is a component of culture. Acting as the personality's safety valve, humor seems to effect a release from constraint or excess tension. Floating nervous energy in search of an outlet activates the organs of speech and muscles of respiration in such a way as to produce laughter. At the same time humor can afford a sudden insight into the ridiculousness of a situation, or an opportunity to vent anger and aggression, as in the case of a joke or witticism directed at a personal foe or at an enemy in wartime that places him in a ridiculous light.

Erotic Aspects. Sexuality has been the subject of humor since the dawn of recorded history. This is in no small part because of the incongruity between the attraction or the pleasure felt by the actor in an erotic situation but invisible to the observer, who can only note the objectively graceless or even repellent behavior by which third parties procure sexual gratification. The sexual act in itself has nothing aesthetic, even if the pleasure obtained from the physical contact of two human bodies borders on the ecstatic. From this fundamental incongruity derives the piquancy of the countless jokes, anecdotes,

tales, cartoons, and pictures in which sexuality is the central theme. At the same time sexual tensions in the subject—and fears of sexual aggression—can also be alleviated by the mechanism of humor.

Homosexuality and Humor.

Homosexuality occupies a special place within the domain of sexual humor, both because of the intense taboo with which the very mention of it was once invested, but also because of the perceived incongruity of erotic attraction between two members of the same sex—its departure from the cultural expectation of heterosexuality. The individual who departs too markedly from the gender role norms of the culture is bound to be a target of disapproval, expressed at least in the form of humor. Moreover, homosexual activity itself, aimless and pleasureless as it is to the heterosexual observer, can be the object of rage and contempt but also of a humor that incorporates symbolic aggression. Humor in regard to homosexual activity can be an escape route or symbolic excuse for the inconsistent behavior, or can express absolution from the cultural taboo in the form of an expressive laugh or indirect approval of what cannot be explicitly acknowledged. As homosexuals have come to be recognized as a socially discrete element of Western society, "fag jokes" have taken their place beside ethnic jokes as facets of intergroup tension.

Humor in sexual matters may also reflect the tensions between the official norm of society, which condemns all sexual expression outside of marriage, and the unofficial admiration and envy accorded the individual who successfully violates the taboo and obtains the forbidden pleasure. There is also the implicit denigration of the passive partner, who is seen as being used for the pleasure of the active one while obtaining nothing in return. These dichotomies are intensified in the case of the doubly tabooed and intensely paradoxical homosexual experience, which demands an explanation and justification that Western society has thus far been

unable to find to its own satisfaction. Humor in gay circles can also have the function of a defense mechanism that scores points at the expense of the hostile larger society, exposes its hypocrisy and inconsistency, affirms the values of the deviant subculture, and rejoices in every erotic success achieved in defiance of the taboos and the obstacles contrived by the social order to enforce them. The need of the outgroup to maintain its morale can also be served by the mechanism of humor that releases the accumulated tensions provoked by the constant need for psychological self-defense. This was especially true when nearly all except "obvious" homosexuals had to maintain a heterosexual façade by sundry and ingenious means calculated to deceive the outside world—with all the incongruous and embarrassing situations that ill chance could inflict on the closeted subject.

Humor as a Dimension of Personality. It is universally recognized that humor as a creative activity is a rare and highly specialized psychological trait. The editor of one of America's most popular humor magazines in the 1960s commented at a public lecture that although every day's mail brought his office letters with jokes, cartoons, suggestions for features and the like, still in the whole history of the periodical only a half dozen had ever been judged suitable for its pages. Children do not possess a sense of humor; it is the outgrowth of experience and education, of a mastery of the surrounding world. Humor is also a largely masculine affair: all the great humorists throughout history have been men, even if women have excelled in other literary genres, and even the image of the clown is a male, not a female figure. Arguably, the woman as comedienne is playing a male role.

Psychoanalytic studies of the humorist have brought out the importance of the oral-erotic element in character formation, and also of the manic-depressive personality. Humor entails a subtle dialectic of ability to laugh (from

the hypomanic side) and depth of feeling (from the depressive one). The realist in literature who tinges his writing with humorous traits is able to face the harshness of life and yet erect a screen of defensive humor that shields him from its pain and sorrow. The humorist has an intensity and seriousness inherited from the father, but also a strongly developed superego with cheerful propensities derived from the mother. A student of the humorist as personality type has found aversion to marriage, a pronounced wanderlust, and lack of a regular profession as the outward signs, with a split personality, a tendency to self-reflection, to play fondly with the trivial and absurd, and indifference to the world's opinion as the inner traits of character.

This inventory suggests a marked overlap with at least certain facets of the homosexual personality. A specific alloy of the masculine and feminine foreign to the heterosexual mentality, a decided antipathy to marriage, satisfaction in an unattached, roaming lifestyle, a need to reflect upon one's fate in the midst of a hostile society, and a deep-seated indifference to its opinions and judgments are all traits of the homosexual in Western culture. Even the capacity for self-irony, the ability to accept the ridiculous in one's situation as a homosexual, can be positive, survival-enhancing qualities. Noted humorists who were homosexual were Edward Lear, "Saki" (Hector Hugh Munro), and Alexander Woollcott (the prototype of the hero in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*).

Homosexual Jokes. Jokes on the subject of homosexuality are legion. They are usually invented by people hostile to homosexuals and so are tinged with malice. They can turn on the double meaning of particular words: "What do gay termites eat? Woodpeckers." "Have you heard about the gay burglar? He couldn't blow the safe, so he went down on the elevator." "Is it better to be born black or gay? Black—you don't have to tell your parents." "What do

you call a gay bar without any stools? A fruit stand." In the Deep South a gay man is a "Homo Sex You All." They can reflect hostility and violence directed against homosexuals: "A gay man was lying on the sidewalk with a broken arm and a bloody face. When passers-by asked what had happened, he said: 'Would somebody please tell that marine on the fifth floor that fairies can't fly.'"

A particular genre of homosexual joke turns upon the husband who finds his wife in flagrante delicto with another man but is indifferent to the insult to his honor or even focuses his attention upon some irrelevant detail of the situation. A modern variant of this motif is: "The husband of the wife raped by the Mexican bandit is in the meantime forced to hold the bandit's testicles up out of the hot sand. When the wife later complains that the husband has not acted the part of a man, he replies: 'Is that so? Why, twice when he wasn't looking, I let his balls drop in the hot sand.'" Another version of the tale ends with the lines: "Here's my bed, and that's my wife in it." "But who's that young man in bed with her?" "Oh, that's me when I'm not here." The implicit notion is that this is a homosexual "front marriage" of the sort meant primarily to deceive the outside world, but also for financial or social advantage.

Other jokes turn upon the real or assumed competition between homosexuals and women for the favors of the male sex: A worried, elderly clergyman arrived at a hotel lounge that was a rendezvous for prostitutes and their clients. He was searching for a son who had run away from home with funds embezzled from the church. A lady of the night swooped down on him and asked: "Are you looking for a naughty little girl?" "No," replied the clergyman, "I am looking for a naughty little boy." The woman threw up her hands in despair: "Lord knows what's to become of us women these days!" A brief joke is: Homosexual (passing whore in street): "Prostitute!" Whore (in rebuttal): "Substi-

tute!" Another story turns upon a homosexual patronizing a brothel in Paris: "Would you like a lovely French girl?" "No, I'm tired of French girls." "How about a Swedish beauty then?" "No, I'm tired of Swedish girls. Do you happen to have a good-looking boy?" "Monsieur, I shall call a gendarme." "Don't bother. I've had enough of gendarmes too."

A particular type of joke turns upon not only the ability of homosexuals to recognize one another, but also the heterosexual's fear (quite intense, in the past) of being taken for one: A field boss at a steel mill calls the office and tells the brand-new clerk that he needs three men to be sent out at once as blowers on a hot job. The baffled clerk calls the main office and says: "Send three men here in a hurry for a hot blow job." The voice at the other end says: "Hold your horses. The supervisor's two assistants are both here, but we're not so sure of the stock-room clerk."

Camp. A variety of humor common to male homosexuals, but by no means their exclusive property, is *camp*. *Camp* is grounded in gesture, performance, and public display; it turns upon an inversion of values that trivializes the serious but takes the frivolous seriously. The targets of *camp* are the values of conventional middle-class society, but the barbs are never fatal, because a good measure of toleration for the unconventional is implied (and needed). *Camp* also entails an element of self-irony, an acknowledgement that one is only "clowning" and not to be taken at face value. The "no man's land" of the homosexual who is consciously departing from the masculine yet cannot be truly feminine belongs in the domain of *camp*, and is often the point of departure for its refined manifestations. Oscar Wilde's celebrated tour of the United States was one of the first media successes of high *camp*—of which the "counter-culture" of the late 1960s and after was to see many more.

AIDS Jokes. AIDS has produced its quota of topical jokes: "Do you know

what GAY means? Got AIDS yet?" "What do they call a troupe of homosexual musicians? Band-AIDS." "What do they call gay lawyers? Legal AIDS." "How do homosexuals spell relief? No AIDS." "How do you know that the flowers in your garden have AIDS? When the pansies start dying." "What do near-deaf homosexuals carry? Hearing AIDS." "How did Liberace catch AIDS? He forgot to clean his organ between hymns." The circulation of such jokes shows how quickly a new repertoire can be created, and also how cruel and vicious public attitudes can be.

Conclusion. Humor emerges in anonymous forms as social commentary on the events of the day, in individualized forms as the expression of a personality with a gift for satire and wit. Until quite recently the gay subculture had only "word of mouth" as means of communicating, but today the leading gay periodicals carry cartoons, stories, and jokes meant to provoke mirth in their readership. The periodical *Christopher Street* began as a rival to *The New Yorker* with its urbane and sophisticated humor, but was never able to rise to the level of its model. Yet as the gay world becomes more emancipated, it should be able to laugh at its own foibles and those of straight society, to partake fully in the humanity defined by the saying: "Man is the only animal that laughs."

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HUSTLERS

See Prostitution.

HYDRAULIC METAPHOR

The idea that sexual energy accumulates in the body until sufficient pres-

sure is generated to require an outlet has over the centuries had considerable appeal. The notion acquires plausibility through observation of the wet dream, which eventually occurs in males if the semen is not evacuated through intercourse or masturbation. A more banal (though less sexual) model is that of the bladder's periodic filling and consequent need to void urine.

The first statement of the doctrine is probably owing to the Roman philosopher-poet Lucretius who says that the semen gradually builds up in the body until it is discharged in any available body (*On the Nature of Things*, IV, 1065). In its later development this idea has the corollary of separating sexual desire from the object to which it may be directed, and this separation has done valuable service in freeing sexual science from normative notions specifying that some particular object-class (as one gender only) is the only appropriate goal. As a device for relieving erotic tension, a homosexual outlet stands on the same plane as a heterosexual one.

A curious attestation of the hydraulic concept comes from colonial America. In his reflections on an outbreak of "sodomy and buggery" in the Bay Colony, William Bradford (1590-1637) noted: "It may be in this case as it is with water when their streams are stopped or dammed up; when they get passage they flow with more violence and make more noise and disturbance, than when they are suffered to run quietly in their own channels. So wickedness being here more stopped by strict laws and more nearly looked into, so it cannot run in a common road of liberty, as it would and is inclined, it searches everywhere and at last breaks out where it gets vent."

Some Victorians defended prostitution as a necessary evil. Without this safety valve, they held, the pent-up desires of men would be inflicted on decent women, whose security depends, ironically, on their "fallen" sisters. The Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler even extended