

## 12. Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious

(1905)

Sigmund Freud

### Chapter III: The Tendencies of Wit

...It is easy to guess the character of the witticism [joke] by the kind of reaction that wit exerts on the hearer. Sometimes wit is wit for its own sake and serves no other particular purpose; then again, it places itself at the service of such a purpose, i.e., it becomes purposive. Only that form of wit which has such a tendency runs the risk of ruffling people who do not wish to hear it.

Vischer called wit without a tendency [or purpose] “*abstract*” wit, I prefer to call it “*harmless*” wit....

It is now easy to survey wit-tendencies. Wherever wit is not a means to its end, i.e., harmless, it puts itself in the service of but two tendencies which may themselves be united under one viewpoint; it is either *hostile* wit serving as an aggression, satire, or defense, or it is *obscene* wit serving as a sexual exhibition....

It now becomes comprehensible what wit accomplishes through this service of its tendency. It makes possible the gratification of a craving (lewd or hostile) despite a hindrance which stands in the way; it eludes the hindrance and so derives pleasure from a source that has become inaccessible on account of the hindrance....

The power which renders it difficult or impossible for the woman, and in a lesser degree for the man, to enjoy unveiled obscenities we call “repression,” and we recognize in it the same psychic process which keeps from consciousness in severe nervous attacks whole complexes of emotions with their resultant affects, and has shown itself to be the principal factor in the causation of the so-called psychoneuroses. We acknowledge to culture and higher civilization an important influence in the development of repressions, and assume that under these conditions there has come about a change in our psychic organization which may also have been brought along as an inherited disposition. In consequence of it, what was once accepted as pleasurable is now counted unacceptable and is rejected by means of all the psychic forces. Owing to the repression brought about by civilization many primary pleasures are now disapproved by the censor and lost. But the human psyche finds renunciation very difficult; hence we discover that tendency-wit furnishes us with a means to make the renunciation retrogressive and thuds to regain what has been lost. When we laugh over a delicately obscene witticism, we laugh at the identical thing which causes laughter in the ill-bred man when he hears a coarse, obscene joke; in both cases the pleasure comes from the same source [release of repressed/denied sexual desire].

### Chapter VII: Wit and the Various Forms of the Comic

...An examination of the comic, however superficial it may be, would be most incomplete if it did not devote at

least a few remarks to the consideration of *humor*. There is so little doubt as to the essential relationship between the two that a tentative explanation of the comic must furnish at least one component for the understanding of humor...

Humor is a means to gain pleasure despite the painful affects which disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this affective development and takes its place. If we are in. If we are in a situation which tempts us to liberate painful affect according to our habits, and motives then urge us to suppress these affects *statu nascendi*, we have the conditions for humor...The pleasure of humor results at the cost of this discontinued liberation of affect; it originates in the *economized expenditure of affect*.

Humor is the most self-sufficient of the forms of the comic; its process consummating itself in one single person and the participation of another adds nothing new to it. I can enjoy the pleasure of humor originating in myself without feeling the necessity of imparting it to another. It is not easy to tell what happens during the production of humoristic pleasure in a person; but one gains a certain insight by investigating these cases of humor which have emanated from persons with whom we have entered into a sympathetic understanding. By sympathetically understanding the humoristic person in these cases one gets the same pleasure. The coarsest form of humor, the so-called humor the gallows or grim-humor, may enlighten us in this regard. The rogue, on being led to execution on Monday, remarked: "Yes, this week is beginning well." This is really a witticism, as the remark is quite appropriate in itself, on the other hand it is displaced in the most nonsensical fashion, as there can be no further happening for him this week. But it required humor to make such wit, that is, to overlook what distinguished the beginning of this week from other weeks, and to deny the difference which could give rise to motives for very particular emotional feelings. The case is the same when on the way to the gallows he requests a neckerchief for his bare neck, in order to guard against taking cold, a precaution which would be quite praiseworthy under different circumstances, but becomes exceedingly superfluous and indifferent in view of the impending fate of this same neck. We must say that there is something like greatness of soul in this *blague*, in this clinging to his usual nature and in deviating from that which would overthrow and drive this nature into despair. This form of grandeur of humor thus appears unmistakably in cases in which our admiration is not inhibited by the circumstances of the humoristic person....

In the case of the rogue who did not wish to take cold on the way to the gallows we roar with laughter. The situation which should have driven this criminal to despair, might have evoked in us intense pity, but this pity is inhibited because we understand that he who is most concerned is quite indifferent to the situation. As a result of this understanding the expenditure for pity, which was already prepared in us, became inapplicable and we laughed it off. The indifference of the rogue, which we notice has cost him a great expenditure of psychic labor, infects us as it were.

Economy of sympathy is one of the most frequent sources of humoristic pleasure. Mark Twain's humor usually follows this mechanism...[One of] Mark Twain's stories relates how his brother constructed for himself subterranean quarters into which brought a bed, a table, and a lamp, and that as a roof he used a large piece of sail-cloth with a hole through the center; how during the night after the room was completed, a cow being driven home fell through the opening in the ceiling on to the table and extinguished the lamp; how his brother helped patiently to hoist the animal out and to rearrange everything; how he did the same thing when the same disturbance was repeated the following night; and then every succeeding night; such a story becomes comical through repetition. But Mark Twain closes with the information that in the forty-sixth night when the cow again fell through, his brother finally remarked that the thing was beginning to grow monotonous; and here we can no longer restrain our humoristic pleasure, for we had long expected to hear how the brother would express his anger over this occurrence. The slight humor which we draw from our own life we usually produce at the expense of anger instead of irritating ourselves.

The forms of humor are extraordinarily varied according to the nature of the emotional feelings which are economized in favor of humor, as sympathy, anger, pain, compassion, etc. And this series seems incomplete because the sphere of humor experiences a constant enlargement, as often as an artist or writer succeeds in mastering humoristically the, as yet, unconquered emotional feelings and in making them, through artifices similar to those in the above example, a source of humoristic pleasure....

One reaches some solution of humoristic displacement if one examines it in the light of a defense process. The defense processes are the psychic correlates of the flight reflex and follow the task of guarding against the origin of pain from inner sources; in fulfilling this task they serve the psychic function as an automatic adjustment, which finally proves harmful and therefore must be subjected to the control of the conscious thinking...Humor can now be conceived as the loftiest variant of this defense activity. It disdains to withdraw from the conscious attention the ideas which are connected with the painful affect, as repression does, and thus it overcomes the defense automatism. It brings this about by finding the means to withdraw the energy resulting from the liberation of pain which is held in readiness and through discharge changes the same into pleasure. It is even credible that it is again the connection with the infantile that puts at humor's disposal the means for this function. Only in childhood did we experience intensively painful affects over which today as grown-ups we would laugh; just as a humorist laughs over his present painful affects. The elevation of his ego, of which humoristic displacement gives evidence—the translation of which would read: I am too big to have these causes affect me painfully—he could find in the comparison of his present ego with his infantile ego.

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