

5. Sample Essay: Analyzing Humor with Sources

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Cats and Humor: The Purrfect Pick-Me-Up

Everyone has their own sense of humor and their own reasons to laugh, developed over a lifetime and reflective of our individual needs and experiences. For some, telling or hearing a witty joke provides comic relief to the mundanity of everyday life. For others, witnessing the “fails” of other people might elicit laughter and lift one’s spirits. Still others find humor in the darker experiences of life and maintain their sense of humor in the face of suffering and despair. And so on, senses of humor number as many as the people walking the earth. While there is no single theory to explain the diverse ways that humor impacts human experience, reflecting on our individual senses of humor can help us to understand that experience more fully. What do we laugh at? Why? These are questions that many of us never face, but doing so allows us to see the complex roles that humor plays in our lives and identities. While many things in this world make me laugh, the most consistent source of humor in my life lately comes from cats. Watching online cat videos on *YouTube* and *TikTok* has become a daily activity that allows me a little humorous escape from the stresses of everyday life.

We all know that sometimes life can be a bit too much. In these times, when the stress of jobs and school and global pandemics and political divisions and weird weather and everything else seem to compound and overwhelm us, it is important to have a healthy way of relieving that stress. For some, exercise or therapy might be the best options; for me, it’s humor. Of course, this is not unique to me. Many people turn to humor in times of stress or suffering, and this is one of the common sources of people’s humor: relief. While many have written on the subject of humor, perhaps the most famous to develop thoughts on humor as a mode of relief was the psychologist Sigmund Freud. In his essay “Humor,” Freud develops his thoughts on humor and describes our sense of humor as an attitude we adopt toward ourselves and our situations “in order to ward off possible suffering” (77). In other words, when we make a joke or seek out humorous entertainment in times of stress or suffering, we are doing so to combat that suffering and find pleasure in our lives. This can take many shapes from making jokes about death or “dark humor” to the simple act of seeking something amusing when you know you’re having a hard time. For me, when life gets to be overwhelming, I like to stop, take a deep breath, pull out my phone, and find some lighthearted cat content to put a smile on my face.

Sometimes I think the internet was created solely for the sharing of cat videos—or at least I think the world

would be a better place if all we did on the internet was share cat videos. Lucky for us, while there are lots of other things to do and learn on the web, there are plenty of cat videos to watch too. Any number of these videos can make me laugh, but lately I've been really enjoying the way the *TikTok* users edit short and hilarious cat content using the app and its many sounds. One of my favorite such videos uploaded by @meredithdylan captures the essence of what makes a great, funny cat *TikTok*. In the video, captioned "my working theory is that she's stupid," we see a cat approach an automated feeder looking for a meal. For those unfamiliar with these devices, they are designed to help limit a pet's food intake and help control weight. Many cat people end up needing feeders like this as housecats are notoriously lazy and can get fat, leading to complications like diabetes down the road. The feeder works by limiting access to food except at certain times. When the cat is allowed to eat and approaches the feeder, a chip in its collar or an implant signals the feeder and opens the food bowl giving the cat access. When the cat is not allowed to eat, the feeder will not open. In the more advanced models, like the one in @meredithdylan's video, a message might appear (as if the cat can read it) letting everyone know that now is not feeding time. This is precisely what we see in the video as the cat approaches the feeder and a message displays on its screen saying "Sorry! No mo [*sic.*] until later!" To a cat lover, seeing a hungry cat denied food might not inspire laughter. On the contrary, some might initially feel sorry for this furry girl. However, because of the clever editing, such a reaction quickly turns to humor as the 9-second video unfolds.

Upon reaching the closed feeder and seeing it fail to open, our feline heroine responds by looking at the camera—most likely held by her owner/person—then back at the feeder. The video then cuts to a slightly closer shot of the cat standing menacingly over the feeder and glaring at its forbidden food. As all this happens the sound of a piano, voice, and drum machine play. Many viewers will recognize this as the intro to Rihanna's "Take a Bow," but you don't need to know the song for the video to make you laugh. All you need to do is listen to the lyrics. It's the lyrics that makes the video really humorous because right as the editing shifts from the cat looking at the camera to her staring intensely at the unopened feeder, the opening line of the first verse of the song plays: "You look so dumb right now" sings Rihanna, and viewers immediately associate the "you" in the song with the cat in the video. Every time I see this video it brings a smile to my face and a pleasant chuckle.

Watching a cat struggle to understand the machinations of human beings and being playfully mocked by RiRi's soulful voice is exactly the kind of pleasant, lighthearted, humorous content that can lift my spirits on a tough day. But why? What really amuses me in this video are the incongruities it presents. According to Giovanni Sabato, "people laugh at the juxtaposition of incompatible concepts and at defiance of their expectations—that is, at the incongruity between expectations and reality." In other words, when we encounter things we didn't expect or little inconsistencies, they can often lead to humor. Likewise, when we create such incongruities, we often create humor. In @meredithdylan's video, the editing creates such incongruities for viewers. When the cat turns from the closed feeder to the camera and then hovers menacingly over the feeder, we as viewers do not just see a cat. Because of the way the video is framed and described by the caption, our minds immediately make associations that give human-like qualities to this animal's actions: she is not just being a cat, but rather her actions take on the significance of a human faced with an inanimate enemy in the locked feeder. In the mere seconds that we watch this video, our minds project onto the cat human motivations and emotions, creating a type of incongruity that may lead to humor, for, as Francis Hutcheson says, "some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts, very often makes us merry." In other words, when we see animals behaving in ways that remind us of humans, we might find this behavior amusing. This type of incongruous reaction to pets is common and often the source of humor in pet videos and life experience. This general incongruity might be the source of some humor in the video, but it goes beyond that as we consider the music's role in the video too.

While some might initially see a hungry cat being denied food as a source of sorrow rather than humor, the

use of Rihanna’s music and the line “you look so dumb right now” has the potential to shift that response to laughter in most cases. Because we associate the “you” in the song with the cat on the screen we are enacting the incongruity of attributing human action and motivation to a non-human animal. In doing so, we are also mocking that animal’s intelligence. While the mockery of another’s ignorance is a common source of humor according to the Superiority Theory, there is more to this video than just that. Because we know that an animal cannot really be understood in the same way as a human, the mockery here is a slight violation of the natural order: we cannot really expect a cat to read the words on the feeder’s screen and understand what’s happening, so realistically the cat is not dumb, just a cat. So, when Rihanna sings those words and we take them as a description of the animal, we are witnessing a type of violation of a physical norm: cats are not humans and cannot be expected to behave as such. This violation is key to understanding why this video is funny to a cat lover and not simply upsetting. Giovanni Sabato summarizes Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren’s Benign Violation theory of humor thusly: “Humor results ... when a person simultaneously recognizes both that an ethical, social or physical norm has been violated and that this violation is not very offensive, reprehensible or upsetting.” When our rules are broken in a way that causes no real harm or offense, we can find humor in that violation. In this example, mocking a cat for not being as smart as a human is a violation of a physical norm (biology and the natural order of things), but one that causes absolutely no harm to the animal or the world at large and can therefore be enjoyed as humorous.

The incongruities and benign violations in this short video all contribute to the overall absurdity of the video, making it one of my favorite quick-comedy-fixes in the midst of stressful times. In his essay “The Logic of the Absurd,” Jerry Palmer provides a map for understanding this type of humor, particularly in film and video. According to Palmer, absurd humor occurs as the result of two moments in a gag or humorous bit:

- 1) a peripeteia: a shock or surprise that the narrative constructs for us;
- 2) a pair of logical syllogisms, leading to contradictory conclusions:
 1. a) that the process is implausible
 2. b) that the process nonetheless has a certain measure of plausibility, but that it is less than the implausibility (54).

In other words, a video like this is absurd because it presents us with something benignly shocking—i.e., a cat being derided for being “dumb” when it is just being a cat—that is built out of a process that is simultaneously implausible, but also believable. In the video, it is absolutely implausible that a cat would be able to read the message telling it to come back later; however, it is also plausible that *if* the cat could read, then it would be perfectly reasonable to call it “dumb” for continuing to hover over the feeder. By creating this absurd situation through the editing and addition of music, @meredithdylan’s simple video becomes for viewers an absurdly humorous relief from whatever may be happening beyond the boundaries of *TikTok*.

Any time I need a quick jolt of joy, I know that cats have got my back both in the form of the delightful videos that populate my social media feeds and my actual cats at home. Of course, I’m not the only one who loves a funny cat. The stranglehold that cat videos, cat memes, and internet cats like “Grumpy Cat” have on online culture attests to a larger truth about one of the ways that humans find humor. While many of us laugh at many things, a vast population of people love to laugh at cats specifically, and an even larger group at pets/animals in general. Recognizing this potentially provides us another way of understanding our relationship to nonhuman animals and our senses of humor. Or maybe the truth is simpler than that: cats are just funny.

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