

Understanding Humour

Many theories exist about what humour is and what social function it serves. The prevailing types of theories attempting to account for the existence of humour include psychological theories, the vast majority of which consider humour-induced behaviour to be very healthy; spiritual theories, which may, for instance, consider humour to be a "gift from God"; and theories which consider humour to be an unexplainable mystery, very much like a mystical experience.

The benign-violation theory, endorsed by Peter McGraw, attempts to explain humour's existence. The theory says 'humour only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling, or threatening, but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable or safe'. Humour can be used as a method to easily engage in conversation by taking away that awkward, uncomfortable, or uneasy feeling of social interactions. Others claim that humour cannot or should not be explained. Author E.B. White once said, "Humour can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."

As with any art form, the acceptance of a particular style or incidence of humour depends on sociological factors and varies from person to person. Throughout history, comedy has been used as a form of entertainment all over the world, whether in the courts of the Western kings or the villages of the Far East. Both a social etiquette and a certain intelligence can be displayed through forms of wit and sarcasm.

Questions 1 and 2

Answer the following questions using ONE word from the passage above.

1. Which group of theories about humour describe it as being good for us?
2. What function did comedy have in the royal courts of the past?

(Correct answers are on the next page)

Correct answers:

1. psychological
2. entertainment

For more 'short answers' practice, try this exercise which comes from a General reading test:

['Short answer' questions exercise](#)