

4. Superiority Theories of Humour

‘Everything is funny as long as it is happening to someone else.’ —Will Rogers.

The idea that laughter is linked to a sense of pleasure derived from other people’s misfortune begins with Plato, as we have seen, and it is continued through Aristotle. Cicero also writes of how laughter can be employed to defeat an adversary, and advocates using comedy in a way that ‘shatters obstructs or makes light of an opponent;’ in other words to assert superiority. The foundations for a Superiority Theory of humour were laid in the ancient world, then, and these early views on laughter had a bearing on how later philosophers approached the subject.

4.1 Rene Descartes: The Benefits of Ridicule

The French philosopher and mathematician, Rene Descartes (1596–1650), is sometimes regarded as the first modern philosopher, and certainly he was the first to address the relationship between laughter and superiority substantially. He is not particularly interested in humour, as such, concentrating for the most part on laughter alone. His ideas on the subject can be found principally in his last published work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), where he offers an account of the physiology of laughter:

Laughter consists in the fact that the blood, which proceeds from the right orifice in the heart by the arterial vein, inflating the lungs suddenly and repeatedly, causes the air which they contain to be constrained to pass out from them with an impetus by the windpipe, where it forms an inarticulate and explosive utterance [...] And it is just this action of the face with

this inarticulate and explosive voice that we call laughter.¹⁷

Descartes' conception of the bodily mechanics of laughter is outdated, but his focus on its explosive nature is interesting, as is his notion that laughter accompanies a sudden expansion of the lungs, and an interruption of normal breathing. These are characteristics that for some denote the aggressive nature of laughter: it is 'explosive' and therefore potentially hostile. This is important because it distinguishes laughter from smiling: a significant distinction for humour theorists and one that is central to the ideas of some contemporary philosophers, as will be seen. Another feature of Descartes' view of laughter is that it involves the interaction of mind and body; laughter is caused by 'the surprise of admiration or wonder, which, being united by joy, may open the orifices of the heart so quickly [that it] inflates the lung' (René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Article 125). The corporeal dimension of laughter has troubled many over the years: the physicality of the experience, and the apparent loss of self-control associated with it, has been considered unseemly, if not positively dangerous at various points in history; also the physicality of laughter is one reason why religions have a record of being squeamish about it.

In *The Passions of the Soul* Descartes is also interested in the emotions: what form they take, what causes them, what significance they have, and how they relate to laughter. He associates laughter in particular with three emotions: wonder, joy, and hatred. Though he mentions wonder and joy as possible causes of laughter, he focuses mainly on laughter's association with the less positive emotion of hate, particularly in its relationship with scorn, derision, ridicule and mockery. These represent joy mixed with hatred for Descartes, who feels that joy alone is incapable of producing laughter. Thus while 'it seems as though laughter were one of the principle signs of joy,' joy can only create laughter when it 'has some wonder or hate mingled with it' (*The Passions*, Article 125).

For Descartes ridicule can have a positive social function when it takes the form of 'modest bantering,' as this exposes vices; as a

17 René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Part II, Article 124 (Quoted in John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 21–22).

result he felt that it is perfectly permissible to laugh at other people, that the butt of a joke can actually deserve their derision, and that mocking laughter is socially responsible when it acts as a corrective to errant behaviour. Clearly there is an element of superiority in his view of the relationship between the joker and the butt's potential for improvement. While it is permissible for us to laugh at other people's jokes, however, we shouldn't laugh at our own because it is not fitting for us to appear surprised at the results of our own wit!

Creative Writing Exercise

Choose someone who you feel is morally lacking and, adopting their voice and character, write a letter to God attempting to justify the way they live their life. Errant politicians are often a good choice. Try to make them sound ridiculous by enlarging on what you feel are their transgressions. Remember Cicero's notion that it's possible to reveal the truth of a character via comedy. If you manage to write something that offers a successful humorous critique of that person, then you will have written a satire. The notion of superiority is central to satire of course: should you feel compelled to satirise someone it is generally because you feel superior to them and wish to improve society by exposing their shortcomings.

4.2 Thomas Hobbes: Sudden Glory

Pause and Reflect

Can you recall any humorous situations in which laughter wasn't in one way or another at someone else's expense? Do we always feel superior when we laugh?

Descartes' idea that humour can benefit society, and his willingness to associate it at least to a degree with emotions other than hatred, distinguishes him from the less compromising Superiority Theorist, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). While Hobbes didn't have that much to say about either humour or laughter, he is the key figure in the development of Superiority Theory, probably because he presented a succinct theory of laughter in an extremely lucid way. His theory needs to be seen in the context of his general theory of life and his

belief that human beings are in a ceaseless struggle for power that only ends at death; for Hobbes humour assists individuals in their fight for power. He discusses laughter in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (1650), where he refers to a ‘passion which hath no name’ and which is signalled by laughter:

I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour.¹⁸

This is the clearest early statement of what has become known as Superiority Theory. For Hobbes, individuals laugh at their sense of other people’s inferiority or absurdity; they laugh at a suddenly revealed shortcoming in others, in comparison with their own perceived sense of superiority. The emphasis on suddenness is presumably important in distinguishing feelings of superiority which produce laughter, from feelings of superiority which do not. It is only when eminence is abruptly/unexpectedly revealed that it has the desired effect. According to Hobbes people can also laugh at themselves, or rather their former selves, but only insofar as they recognise that they have moved on, and are now wiser and superior to that former self. He also felt that when people laugh at their own jokes, they are laughing at their skill in making that joke, and the sense of superiority they derive from that (‘a sudden conception of some ability in himself.’)

Hobbes believed that laughter is a product of malicious enjoyment at our own sense of triumph, then, and that there is always a degree of conflict and antagonism associated with it. As a consequence he objected to laughter on moral grounds, and didn’t think much of those who laugh at other people’s expense, feeling that such laughter tends to be a sign of cowardliness. There *are* forms of humour that are relatively benign, in that they don’t cause offence, but it seems

18 Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (1650), chapter IX (available at thomas-hobbes.com), unpaginated.

that superiority is at work here too:

Laughter without offence must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and where all the company may laugh together. For laughing to one's self putteth all the rest to a jealousy and examination of themselves; besides, it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmities of another sufficient matter for his triumph (Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements*, Chapter IX, 1650).

Laughter evoked by absurdity and infirmity is less negative when it isn't directed at specific people, and when it is common to all present. However, it is difficult not to feel that Hobbes is close to undermining his own theory here, particularly with his reference to absurdities 'abstracted from persons.' It is not a huge step to assume the possibility of people laughing at the concept of absurdity itself, rather than at absurd people as such. In social situations the object of laughter is surely not always someone we're comparing ourselves to, and we do indeed often appear to be laughing at something that is, to use Hobbes's term, 'abstracted from persons.' John Lippitt makes this point: 'When a loving parent laughs at the linguistic blunders committed by small children ('chish and fips'; 'par carks'), one can accept that there is a definite sense in which the parent is superior to the child, without accepting that this is *why* he or she is amused.'¹⁹ In such situations it seems plausible to assume that we are laughing at absurdity for its own sake, and when this is the case surely the concept of superiority is irrelevant? In one sense, then, the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section, 'Do we always feel superior when we laugh?' would appear to be no.

Creative Writing Exercise

Write a comic short story about a good-looking, intelligent character living in a picturesque town. Now write another comic short story featuring an ugly character who is not very bright living in the same picturesque town. Which story is easiest to write, and which is the most successful? Is ugly funnier than beautiful?

19 John Lippitt, 'Humour and Superiority.' See online resources.

4.3 Henri Bergson: The Mechanical Encrusted on the Living

Pause and Reflect

We often laugh at things that are out-of-step with the norm (for instance someone who talks or walks in an odd way), or when the norm is in some way overstated (for instance through excessive repetition). Think about why this might be so. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) thought he had an answer.

Henri Bergson is an immensely significant figure in the history of humour theory, and one of the few pre-twenty first century philosophers to devote a book-length study to the subject: *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900). Despite the reference to laughter in the title, his emphasis is less on laughter and more on humour and how it is created. As with Hobbes, Bergson's views need to be understood in relation to his general philosophy, particularly his opinion that human beings are animated by something called *Élan vital*: a vital force driving both evolution and creativity. According to Bergson we have an intuitive awareness of this force, and an understanding of its essential nature, but whenever we lose sight of it we also lose sight of our humanness. In short, the comic is associated with those moments when we *do* lose sight of it, and laughter becomes our prompt to rediscover it again.

For Bergson laughter is exclusively human: we only laugh at things that are either human or that are given significance by their relationship to humans. So if we laugh at an animal it is only because it has become humanised in some way. He argues that humour requires a degree of indifference too, and that emotions like sentimentality, affection, and pity tend to inhibit it. Laughter is also a communal phenomenon for Bergson: it thrives among people, and not in one person in isolation. We are a source of laughter when we are out of step with the social norm, and as soon as we become aware of that fact we adjust our behaviour accordingly:

when people perceive ridiculousness in themselves they take action to modify their behaviour; jesting at their expense can

bring it to their attention, of course, and hence laughter can ‘correct man’s manners.’²⁰

For Bergson, to function socially we require an awareness of our situation in the world, and an ability to adapt to our world where necessary. There are two forces at work in healthy individuals: ‘tension’ and ‘elasticity;’ the latter enables flexibility and adaptation, and whenever humans reveal themselves as *inelastic* they are a potential source of comedy. Human beings are not content merely to live, they strive to live in the best way possible; this necessitates flexibility, and because society is conscious of this requirement, it abhors complacency and the ‘easy automatism of acquired habits.’ Society looks down on those lacking the elasticity to adapt to necessary social developments: ‘it insists on a constant striving after reciprocal adaptation.’ So for Bergson laughter is created when we perceive instances of people’s inability to adapt to their social circumstances; laughing at people is socially acceptable way of identifying and criticising inflexibility. Bergson feels that laughter keeps alive something essential in human beings, it ‘keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which [if not for laughter] might retire into their shell and go to sleep,’ and in this way, ‘laughter pursues a utilitarian role of general improvement’ (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 23–24). So this is clearly a Superiority Theory of humour in the sense that people who behave correctly laugh at those who behave incorrectly, and Bergson’s view is a little like Descartes’ in that he feels laughter can be edifying and improving.

Bergson’s theory might sound a bit strange, and it probably needs a little more explanation; with his notion of rigidity versus elasticity in mind, consider the following words:

To sum up, whatever be the doctrine to which our reason assents, our imagination has a very clear-cut philosophy of its own: in every human form it sees the effort of a soul which is shaping matter, a soul which is infinitely supple and perpetually in motion, subject to no law of gravitation, for it is

20 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Green Integer Books, 1900) 21.

not the earth that attracts it. This soul imparts a portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates: the immateriality which thus passes into matter is what is called gracefulness. Matter, however, is obstinate and resists. It draws to itself the ever-alert activity of this higher principle, would fain convert it to its own inertia and cause it to revert to mere automatism. It would fain immobilize the intelligently varied movements of the body in stupidly contracted grooves, stereotype in permanent grimaces the fleeting expressions of the face, in short imprint on the whole person such an attitude as to make it appear immersed and absorbed in the materiality of some mechanical occupation instead of ceaselessly renewing its vitality by keeping in touch with a living ideal. Where matter thus succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of the body, an effect that is comic. If, then, at this point we wished to define the comic by comparing it with its contrary, we should have to contrast it with gracefulness even more than with beauty. It partakes rather of the unsprightly than of the unsightly, of *rigidness* rather than of *ugliness*. (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 30–1).

Laughter is created when the soul is in conflict with the body. There is something transcendent and infinitely flexible that informs humankind, but this sometimes clashes with our awkward material selves: the latter can inhibit this flexibility and render it mechanical and repetitive. Laughter is what keeps us ‘in touch with a living ideal’ by alerting us to the threat of stasis and the negative mindset of rigidity and repetition. Rigidity is funny, but it is also unwelcome, and laughter reminds us of this. So the ugliest faces are not necessarily the funniest for Bergson: the funniest are those which suggest rigidity, such as a fixed expression that implies a preoccupation with a single thought. He explains the humorous appeal of caricature in this way: a normal face is never fixed or perfect because it is animated by *Élan vital*, but caricaturists make them fixed by picking up on a telling trait, and reducing the whole face to that single characteristic. When this happens, stasis is at odds with *Élan vital*, and the conse-

quence is laughter. This notion could be used to explain the comic possibilities of any type of imitation, as imitation is only really possible insofar as something exhibits predictability and rigidity. Once again, repeatable behaviour conflicts with the vital human spirit because, as Bergson suggests, ‘the really living life shall never repeat itself’ (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 35). Similarly any form of ritual or ceremony always has the potential for humour because they too are dependent on repetition; indeed this applies to any form of adherence to routine. To illustrate the latter, Bergson cites the case of a shipwreck from which a number of passengers were saved by customs-house officials; upon saving them the officers asked the passengers if they had anything to declare. This is funny because the customs officers so rigidly stick to the rules of their occupation, behaving like automata rather than human beings. Clothes can also undermine our *Élan vital* because they conflict with the ‘winged lightness’ that the soul imparts on the body, undermining its gracefulness. We tend not to notice this when clothes are in fashion, because then there is a degree of compatibility between the wearer and the garment. However, when a garment is out of fashion it draws attention to itself, foregrounding the fact that nature has been tampered with: on such occasions, says Bergson, we will have witnessed, ‘the soul tantalized by the needs of the body: on the one hand the moral personality with its intelligently varied energy, and, on the other, the stupidly monotonous body, perpetually obstructing everything with its machine like obstinacy.’ (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 50).

The starting point for the comic for Bergson, then, is ‘when something mechanical’ is ‘encrusted on the living,’ both in relation to living individuals, and the living community as a whole (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 49). The comic is associated with ‘automatism,’ and the characteristics of comedy demonstrate this mechanical quality. He lists three characteristics in particular, arguing that something ‘may become comic either by *repetition*, by *inversion*, or by *reciprocal interference*’ (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 109). The first two speak for themselves, but by ‘reciprocal interference’ he means ‘bracketing in the same expression two independent meanings that apparently tally,’ an example of which would be a play on words

such as a pun. These three all imply inflexibility: repetition suggests duplication without variation, inversion suggests the expectation of duplication, and a play on words breaks down the sense of harmony that we feel ‘exists between language and nature,’ undermining the natural fluency of language (Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 111). The so-called ‘rule of three’ in humour is one example of repetition; jokes are often structured around threes, with the repetition signalling comic intent (an Englishman, Irishman, and a Scotsman, etc.). Stand-up comedians also often use repetition to structure their monologues: there is a technique sometimes called ‘reincorporation’ or ‘call back’ which involves comedians apparently moving away from a particular topic, only to come back to it again at various points throughout the performance. Sometimes they may pretend to be comically obsessed with the reincorporated topic. Inversions are common in humour too, of course; Bergson is interested in inversions that depend on a pattern having been established in recipient’s mind, implying the expectation of repetition which is undermined when the expected item is turned on its head. Word play which establishes a dual meaning is also a standard comic device (for instance, ‘a good pun is its own reword’); as suggested Bergson sees this as violating the relationship between language and the world. The following joke might be said to employ all three of Bergson’s comic elements:

Three nuns were walking down the road. Out from the bushes jumped a flasher. They were shocked! The first one had a stroke. The second one had a stroke. The third one couldn’t reach it.

This joke is underpinned by repetition, stressed by the count of three. It inverts our expectations too, turning the idea that the nuns are morally shocked on its head. This inversion only works because it undermines repeated behaviour (the normal behaviour of nuns). It also includes ‘reciprocal interference’ in the form of word play, employing a single word with different meanings within the same expression: the word ‘stroke’ here means both brain haemorrhage and sexual stimulation simultaneously.

As suggested, Bergson’s ideas are compatible with Superiority

Theory in that the laughter created by the comic works to mock those who demonstrate inflexibility, and humiliate them into readjustment; in this sense humour and laughter have a positive social role. As will be seen, however, his ideas also have much in common with Incongruity Theory, so much so that he could legitimately be considered as part of that tradition too.

Creative Writing Exercise

With the comic possibilities of inflexibility in mind, create a character whose life is governed by an amusing obsession. Their life can be normal in every other respect, but their obsession dominates their activities. Write a day in the life of your character. Begin by listing their actions throughout the day, and use the list as a foundation for the story. You should find that there are lots of comic possibilities, and many different ways in which you could develop the story. As a way of ending the story you might consider exploiting the reader's expectations and inverting some aspect of the repeated activity.

4.4 Humour as a Game

Pause and Reflect

Is there always an element of competition in humorous situations? Can you think of any occasions for humour that don't seem to have a competitive aspect?

Superiority Theories of the kind discussed above have influenced more recent theorists, including some who, like Albert Rapp, strive to formulate evolutionary models of laughter. In *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (1951) Rapp argues that laughter is a civilised expression of the triumphant cry which, for our primitive ancestors, signalled victory over an opponent. He coined the term 'thrashing laughter' to describe this, and maintains that in the modern world physical conflicts have been relocated to the arena of social humour, and 'thrashing laughter' can still be heard when a social adversary is bested in a battle of wits. The American academic, Charles Gruner takes Rapp's evolutionary laughter theory as a starting point. In books like

Understanding Laughter (1978) and *The Game of Humor* (1997), he argues that laughter and humour are invariably about winning, and like Rapp he suggests that joking and laughter take the place of physical combat in the modern world. His aim has partly been to defend humour from the negative implications of Superiority Theory, and the belief that humour and laughter are socially unacceptable just because they involve conflict and assertions of status. As the title of his second book suggests, he draws parallels between humour and games, claiming that humour is enjoyable for the same reasons they are: ‘The very idea of a game implies fun, leisure, entertainment, recreation, affable human interaction;’ but this doesn’t mean they too don’t have a primitive element, as gaming ‘also implies competition, keeping score and a winner and a loser.’²¹ Gaming isn’t considered anti-social, and equally there is no reason why we should be squeamish about laughter, regardless of its association with superiority. It is certainly true that a sense of competition seems to be useful to humour writers. When comedy writers work in teams, for instance, there is often a competitive element which spurs each writer to try and go one better than their collaborators. All humour writers are familiar with the concept of ‘topping the joke’; that is, taking a comic idea as far as it can go and extracting every last grain of comic potential from it. Perhaps this phenomenon goes some way toward supporting Gruner’s thesis.

Creative Writing Exercise

Joke-topping is a useful technique that can be employed by writers even when they’re working alone. You can develop comic ideas simply by asking, ‘what would be even funnier than this?’ Always be prepared to go back to your work and try to outdo your last effort. With this in mind, imagine a scene where two comedy writers are collaborating on a story in which a character is being searched by a doorman before entry into a nightclub. The two writers are arguing about the funniest thing that could be discovered in their character’s pocket. Have your two comedy writers try to outdo one another. As you develop the dialogue you will find yourself ‘topping the joke.’

21 Charles Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997) 2.

Charles Gruner extends Superiority Theory to all examples of humour, claiming that it applies in all situations. He went so far as to pose an annual challenge to The International Society for Humor Studies, inviting them to produce an example of humour that he ‘could not render “dehumorized” by removing its contest nature’—a challenge that he extends to readers of his book (Gruner, *The Game of Humor*, 176). Those who contest Superiority Theory sometimes cite examples of verbal ingenuity like puns as evidence that superiority doesn’t always apply to humour, but even here Gruner sees hierarchy and conflict: ‘creators of puns and punning riddles do so in order to “defeat” their targets/publics with brilliant verbal expressionism’ (Gruner, *The Game of Humor*, 145). He also argues against those like Christopher Wilson who, in *Jokes, Form, Content, Use and Function* (1979), claims that nonsense is a form of humour devoid of superiority or aggression because it creates amusement solely via incongruity. Gruner disagrees and deems instances of nonsense such as Spoonerisms (for example, ‘you hissed my mystery lecture’ as opposed to ‘you missed my history lecture’) to be mere speech errors that are amusing *because* they are errors, implying stupidity. He makes a similar case against so-called childish humour (‘what does blue look like from behind?’), and jokes that are oxymoronic (‘I’d give my right arm to be ambidextrous’), all of which don’t seem to have any element of superiority. For Gruner, ‘these jokes are funny only because of the stupidity of their authors,’ and if we laugh we are laughing because of our sense of the joker’s inferiority (Gruner, *The Game of Humor*, 155–6). This brings us back to the point made above about the necessity of having to compare ourselves to others in order for such things to be amusing; does the ‘author’ or the imagined speaker of such jokes have any bearing on their capacity to generate laughter, or is it possible to laugh merely at absurdity itself? Gruner’s theory suggests that absurdity in and of itself is not funny: it demands a human context and a hierarchy, be it real or imagined.

Creative Writing Exercise

All of the Superiority Theorists discussed so far would agree that

a character's potential to create humour partly depends on them appearing inferior to us in some way. Take a character based on someone you know and try putting them into a context in which they could not help but look ridiculous. A crude example might be someone who cannot sing placed in a situation where they are forced to perform a song. It is a good idea to experiment with point-of-view: try writing it in the third and the first person, and from different characters' perspectives. If you manage to create a scene that you feel is amusing, think about the nature of the humour: does it rely on your reader feeling superior? Would there be a way of rewriting the scene so that we felt admiration for the character, without losing the humour? Read the next section with this problem in mind.

4.5 Roger Scruton: Attentive Demolition

A contemporary philosopher whose work draws on Superiority Theory, but who ultimately dismisses it is Roger Scruton. In his essay, 'Laughter,' he agrees that laughter devalues its object in the eyes of the one who laughs, which is why while most people enjoy laughing, few relish being laughed at. However, there are many ways in which we can be said to laugh at things. It is true that scorn and mockery can elicit laughter, of course, but for Scruton such laughter has a 'quality of malice which can be heard or overheard only with revulsion.'²² Sarcasm too suggests a degree of malevolence that renders it difficult to enjoy; but he makes a noteworthy distinction between sarcasm and irony. Scruton points out that while irony is similar to sarcasm in some respects, in one important sense it is different. While it might be true that irony devalues the object, it does not also reject the object in the way that sarcasm does; in short, sarcasm is invariably negative, but irony is not. Using James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as an example, he points to the ironic comparison Joyce makes between his protagonist, Leopold Bloom, and Homer's Odysseus. It is ironic, of course, because Bloom is not a hero in the way that Homer's character is. However, readers tend to feel more affection for Leopold Bloom as a result of that contrast, *even though* the irony diminishes him by comparison. The irony creates a degree of pathos in relation to Bloom

²² Roger Scruton, 'Laughter,' in John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: State University of New York Press) 168.

and, according to Scruton:

His shortcomings are part of this pathos, since they reflect a condition that is also ours. Irony of this kind causes us to laugh at its object only by laughing at ourselves. It forces upon us a perception of our own kinship (Roger Scruton, 'Laughter,' 168).

We feel more positive toward Bloom as a result of him being affectionately mocked by Joyce, and we do so because we are reminded of our own frailties and our own lowly status as human beings.

Amusement for Scruton is a 'pattern of thought' that he calls 'attentive demolition.' This phrase brings to mind Superiority Theory of course, but he takes pains to deny this association: he argues that 'attentive demolition' does not create a Hobbesian hierarchy but, as seen with the example of irony in Joyce, a sense of 'kinship' between subject and object. The problem with Superiority Theories for Scruton is that they:

find the meaning of humour in what it does for the subject, rather than in how it represents the object. Humour is not, normally, self-directed. Indeed one of its values lies in the fact that it directs our attention unceasingly outwards. If we are repelled by the humourless person it is often because we think of him as interested only in himself (Roger Scruton, 'Laughter,' 169).

Humour is not as self-interested as Superiority Theorists suggest; in fact it most often steers us away from ourselves. Also it often has the effect of humanising, rather than denigrating its object. Fun at an individual's expense may actually be a necessary thing, and something that might be welcomed by that individual; after all, who wants to be perceived as 'interested only in himself'? For instance, Scruton wonders if it would even be possible to love someone who was genuinely flawless, a so-called 'great man,' in a normal way. In order to love them 'it may be necessary to find in him that which can be (however gently) laughed at,' and then if that individual were 'truly great', they would 'be willing to exchange the absolute security of the unlaughable for the comfort of human affection.' (Roger Scruton, 'Laughter,'

168). So while the notion of ‘demolition’ suggests superiority, hierarchy, and aggression, it can actually be about rendering individuals more human, and therefore more likeable. So in answer to the question posed in the last writing exercise, it should actually be possible to write a comic scene in which the so-called butt of a joke is humanised rather than undermined by ridicule. To take the example of a tone-deaf singer who performs before an audience: we may laugh at his inability to sing and his foolishness for making himself a figure of fun, but if his behaviour were to remind us of our own capacity to compromise our dignity then we may be inclined to qualify our sense of superiority; we might even feel this is an attractive facet of his personality which enables us to identify with him on a human level. In short we would like him more because he is more like us, and the humour will work to augment rather than diminish him in our eyes.

Creative Writing Exercise

Now that you know something about Roger Scruton’s take on Superiority Theory, have another go at rewriting the scene from the last exercise. This time try to use your ridiculous character’s comic predicament to reveal a frailty that might make your reader inclined to identify with him/her. You can do this via irony perhaps, making sure that your reader sees more about your character than your character sees.