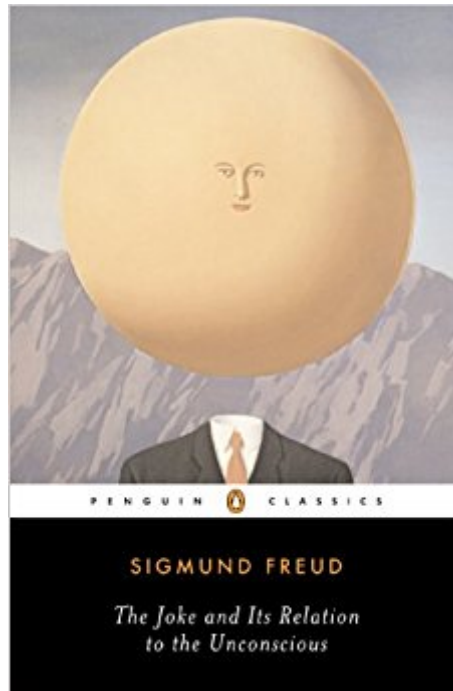




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# The Joke And Its Relation To The Unconscious (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Why do we laugh? The answer, argued Freud in this groundbreaking study of humor, is that jokes, like dreams, satisfy our unconscious desires. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* explains how jokes provide immense pleasure by releasing us from our inhibitions and allowing us to express sexual, aggressive, playful, or cynical instincts that would otherwise remain hidden. In elaborating this theory, Freud brings together a rich collection of puns, witticisms, one-liners, and anecdotes, which, as Freud shows, are a method of giving ourselves away. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was born in Moravia and lived in Vienna between the ages of four and eighty-two. In 1938 Hitler's invasion of Austria forced him to seek asylum in London, where he died the following year. Freud's career began with several years of brilliant work on the anatomy and physiology of the nervous system. He was almost thirty when, after a period of study under Charcot in Paris, his interests first turned to psychology, and another ten years of clinical work in

Vienna (at first in collaboration with Breuer, an older colleague) saw the birth of his creation: psychoanalysis. This began simply as a method of treating neurotic patients by investigating their minds, but it quickly grew into an accumulation of knowledge about the workings of the mind in general, whether sick or healthy. Freud was thus able to demonstrate the normal development of the sexual instinct in childhood and, largely on the basis of an examination of dreams, arrived at his fundamental discovery of the unconscious forces that influence our everyday thoughts and actions. Freud's life was uneventful, but his ideas have shaped not only many specialist disciplines, but the whole intellectual climate of the last half-century. Joyce Crick was for many years a senior lecturer in German at University College London. In 2000, she was awarded the Schlegel Tieck Prize for her translation of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* for Oxford University Press. John Carey is an emeritus professor of English at Oxford, a fellow of the British Academy, and chief book reviewer for the London Sunday Times.

Freud presents a very intriguing analysis of verbal jokes, tying them to the unconscious as he previously did in his analysis of dreams. He particularly uses the metaphor of "economy" to characterize overall the process of joke-making, as he posits that the mind uses jokes to lessen psychic "expenditure" by releasing energy through the joke. Especially intriguing is his analysis of "tendentious jokes," which the teller directs aggressively at a third person, in the presence of a second person. I only wish Freud had considered the practical joke as well, though one may extrapolate from his analysis of verbal jokes to ideas about physical, non-verbal jokes--that may discomfit, humiliate, or even harm the victim.

Nice gift for a thinking friend.

A very good insight into joking and its underlying manipulations and uses. The translation made things heavy going though. I will look for it translated by someone else, for comparison.

Has some good points but a lot of them seem to be based on 19th century views. What's described as daring and provocative humor is no longer the case. (With comedians like Louis CK talking about baby carcass disposal bag dispensers in malls and what not) That took away most of the fun, and made reading tedious.

This book is about several traditional types of meaning-based jokes. It was Freud's earliest attempt

to publish a book on his theory of the unconscious, and one Freudian scholar (Tomas Geyskens) even believes, unrealistically, that this text is the best example of Freud's theory of sublimation in art. Every basic class of jokes is included here, although not properly identified according to their actual type. Freud even includes a sophisticated kind in which ambiguous language is used as a means of indirect communication. But these indirection jokes, like all others, are analyzed by theorists today as "incongruity resolution." According to this erroneous view humor lies in our mere satisfaction in discovering just what is going on in a joke, in particular as it "resolves," partially or fully. That theory holds that what is mainly funny is the process itself of getting the joke. This is a false theory that certainly must be abandoned, especially considering the better alternative that I have devised. There are in fact two classes of linguistic jokes, which the authoritative theorists lump together as one. One is merely a glorified pun or witticism, while that which thinly veils a foible in double meaning, should be known as an indirection, or "irony" joke. Freud illustrates the joke of indirection in the example about the doctor, in that passage where he explains "double meaning proper." That notion describes well the kind of ambiguity that is used both in indirect communication and in a glorified witticism. But he also discloses, unknowingly, a third class, citing the one about a foolish café customer who hasn't paid his bill and tries to return a piece of cake to pay for his drink because he "hadn't eaten" the cake. This kind of joke is neither irony nor glorified or expanded witticism, since it directly presents self-deception -- and as that theme appears in stories like those by Isaac Bashevis Singer -- not by allusion as in most jokes. Freud cannot explain jokes well even on a superficial level. Nevertheless, his main joke theory is clear and almost identical to the "incongruity resolution" theory. He proposes that what makes most jokes funny is that they embed an irrational discourse, lingering from childhood interest, within a rational, mature-minded framework, so that their ultimate outcome is more or less half sense and half nonsense. This view does have general applicability in that the embedding applies both to jokes that end with an assertion that requires decoding (as in indirection), or a locution that helps to partially decode what came before (thus a glorified witticism). Although Freud makes no strong connection between jokes' formal attributes and Jewish culture, one of the stories from *Tales of Sendebear*, a medieval romance text, turns on equivocation. That suggests such meaning-hinged comedies were prototypical jokes. A central version of *Sendebear* is the Hebrew one, implying that the modern ambiguity-based joke might, or should have evolved from stories such as this. The "nobody" episode in Homer's *Odyssey* is another example. While this book does not include many one-liners, it makes careful note of the "tendentious" humor that such shorter jokes often exhibit. Freud mentions a quip spoken by Heinrich Heine that might be considered a one-liner, but he doesn't understand the humor in what Heine

says. Freud's examples feature salient double meanings, which he both fails to notice and to interpret as to their humorous force in general. What is the humor in double meaning? Freud should know, since it relates to his own psychology, but he doesn't have a clue. That is ironic, and the major oversight. Nevertheless -- while Freud denied it -- all such things can be explained on only one theory. Freud's psychology would have been ideal for a theory of humor, since an adjustment to reality defines the growth of the psyche. What could be more perfect than a humor theory based on the science of accepting reality and dealing with existence? In other words, humor is always an allusion to a flight from reality, and all of psychoanalysis is centered around this idea. Although he does appear to have noticed this in the case of humor, he did not know how to develop or explain it. Now this difficulty of Freud's is related to the fact that he did not understand the actual meaning of desire, but that is a different topic. Lost in the subtlety of jokes, Freud was not able to find a way to link his psychoanalysis with humor. This resulted in his erroneous view that jokes are a throwback to childhood nonsense and word games. Many claim that his examples are obscured by barriers of culture and language, yet this is unimportant. It's not that Freud's jokes are bad (though perhaps they are not great), but he did not understand them. Translation is never a major issue in Freud's ideas here. Consider that, if he were right, then jokes would be no more funny than Spoonerisms. And when Freud tries to hijack all of the terms of humor theory one by one, "humor," "comedy," "wit" and "jokes" and assign unfounded meanings to them he is quite mistaken. That is just one of this book's several outrageous moves. Note, however, that Freud is not wrong to imply as he does a connection between the uncertainty of mental development and stability, and jokes. He acknowledges this relationship by taking the illogical, frivolous and nonsensical as rebellion against mature reason. Freud is still rather far from the truth though he implies that jokes are allusive, or in other words that they are partial rebellions against reason and not complete ones. He seems to realize that they don't explicitly present the source of their power. But Freud misses the precise sort of transgression that jokes vaguely reference. It is not a crucial matter, moreover, whether they violate meaning or logic. In either of those cases, they support only a "selfish self-deception" theory of humor, the theory that comical folly is a kind of diminutive ambition. Jokes and comedy often express rebellion against the intended meanings that people impose. There is an old humor concept, mainly Jewish, in which one or more characters equivocate between the use, ownership or the possession of a thing. This happens in Isaac Bashevis Singer's story of Schlemiel and his wife passing the coin between them as a series of payments. Precisely the same theme appears in Freud's joke about the cake, not paid for, being returned for exchange. The intention of others is the reality of meaning that irritates the self-centered psyche. All gaffes are mistakes of meaning or of

the recognition of other people and the real world. That is the essence of what a gaffe is at least as we are evolved to interpret it emotionally, through humor -- even though our sense of humor exaggerates the degree of blame, as we pounce on more involuntary errors and treat them as though they were literally comical. One commenter to this review asks me to provide more of the evidence against Freud that I claim to have. He said, either tell me why Freud is generally wrong about humor or show how he failed to understand a few jokes. I think that what I just said above fulfills the first part of the request sufficiently. But the latter request is also basically already fulfilled. I'm not going to publish my analyses of Freud's jokes in this review. That's asking way too much. Just go to my review of Noel Carroll's short introduction book on humor and you see the same Freudian pattern of jokes refuted. What you see there is essentially what I say about the jokes in Freud's book and his interpretation of them. But the simple proof is that jokes are not funny on the basis of their resemblance or allusion to childhood word games. Punch lines don't merely fail to follow logically, but they involve double meaning. Freud doesn't explain the prevalence of double meaning, but he cannot because he doesn't know it's there half the time -- he misses it in several examples. Sure, it may be difficult to explain such jokes properly and I have become skilled at it as the result of several years of intense research and thinking. I certainly was not good at it overnight or had no natural talent. There is not a single section or argument in the book that follows logically or conforms to human experience. If anyone thought otherwise, a debate would be arranged to defend such a view. That isn't happening, and this smug silence only reflects the inability of defenders of this material to face reality. If society and academe were truly rational (obviously they're not), it would be only a matter of time before this insignificant garbage were removed from the intellectual landscape, ceasing to confuse, intimidate and mentally impoverish thousands of innocent readers. It is tragic that my own words are taken as the aggressive and tyrannical, when they are liberating. Certain books are preserved because of who wrote them, and because they stand as landmarks along a course toward a better view. This is one of them. An honest and clear evaluation of Freud's view of jokes shows that it is entirely false, and could safely be forgotten. What the previous "no" votes to this review show isn't that it is unfounded or unhelpful, but that certain individuals are disappointed by the failure of someone they admire. They are flatly refusing to respect reason and truth. It's as though they believe Freud is right about humor just because he's Freud. But throwing a few rocks at the truth and ignoring it won't make it go away. In this case it is unfortunate that a historic document is presented as actual theory, as it will cause confusion and ignorance for many generations. I wrote an entire book chapter which thoroughly discredited Freud's theory of jokes, humor, and the comic. I showed how, in several examples, he did not even

get jokes in the basic sense, let alone manage to explain their psychological meaning.

For Freud jokes were not just fooling around, not primarily a means of play, not in short something of trivial importance. Rather they were expressions of our deepest instinctual drives and needs. Like errors in everyday life they are governed by an inner intentionality, and purposiveness. Here it might be said that Freud exaggerates or is too extreme in his point- of- view and does not explain all humor by it.

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