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wit, humor, and the comic: At present both "wit" and "humor" designate species of the **comic**; that is, any element in a work of literature, whether a character, event, or utterance, which is designed to amuse or to excite mirth in the reader or audience. The words "wit" and "humor," however, had a variety of meanings in earlier literary criticism, and a brief comment on their history will help to clarify the differences between them in present usage.

The term "wit" once signified the human faculty of intelligence, inventiveness, and mental acuity, a sense it still retains in the term "half-wit." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it came to be used also for ingenuity in literary invention, and especially for the ability to develop brilliant, surprising, and paradoxical figures of speech; hence "wit" was often applied to the figurative language in what we now call *metaphysical poetry*. And in the eighteenth century there were attempts to distinguish the **false wit** of Abraham Cowley and other metaphysical stylists, who were said to aim at a merely superficial dazzlement, and "true wit," regarded as the apt rephrasing of truths whose enduring validity is attested by the fact that they are universal commonplaces. Thus Alexander Pope defined "true wit" in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) as "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." See *neoclassic*.

The most common present use of the term derives from its seventeenth-century application to a brilliant and paradoxical style. **Wit**, that is, now denotes a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft, and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise; a typical form is that of the *epigram*. The surprise is usually the result of a connection or distinction between words or concepts which frustrates the listener's expectation, only to satisfy it in an unexpected way. Philip Guedalla wittily said: "History repeats itself. Historians repeat each other." Thus the trite comment about history turns out to be unexpectedly appropriate, with an unlooked-for turn of meaning, to the writers of history as well. The film actress Mae West once remarked: "Too much of a good thing can be—wonderful." The resulting laughter, in a famous phrase of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, arises "from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing"; it might be more precise to say, however, "from the sudden satisfaction of an expectation, but in a way we did not expect."

Mae West's remark is what the *psychoanalyst* Sigmund Freud called "harmless wit," which evokes a laugh or smile that is without malice. What Freud distinguished as "tendency wit," on the other hand, is aggressive: it is a derisive and derogatory turn of phrase, directing the laugh at a particular person or butt. "Mr. James Payn," in Oscar Wilde's barbed comment on a novelist of the 1890s, "hunts down the obvious with the enthusiasm of a short-sighted detective. As one turns over the pages, the suspense of the author becomes almost unbearable."

Repartee is a term taken from fencing to signify a contest of wit, in which each person tries to cap the remark of the other, or to turn it to his or her own advantage. Attacking his opponent Disraeli in Parliament, Gladstone remarked that "the honorable gentleman will either end on the gallows or die of some loathsome disease." To which Disraeli rejoined: "That depends on whether I embrace the honorable gentleman's principles or his mistresses." *Restoration comedies* often included episodes of sustained repartee; a classic example is the give-and-take in the discussion of their coming marriage by the witty lovers Mirabel and Millamant in William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), Act IV.

"Humor" is a term that goes back to the ancient theory that the particular mixture of the *four humours* determines each type of personality, and from the derivative application of the term "humorous" to one of the comically eccentric characters in the Elizabethan *comedy of humours*. As we now use the word, **humor** may be ascribed either to a comic utterance or to a comic appearance or mode of behavior. In a useful distinction between the two terms, a humorous utterance may be said to differ from a witty utterance in one or both of two ways: (1) wit, as we saw, is always intended by the speaker to be comic, but many utterances that we find comically humorous are intended by the speakers themselves to be serious; and (2) a humorous saying is not cast in the neatly epigrammatic form of a witty saying. For example, the chatter of the old Nurse in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is verbose, and humorous to the audience, but not to the speaker; similarly, the discussion of the mode of life of the goldfish in Central Park by the inarticulate and irascible taxi driver in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is unintentionally but richly humorous, and is not cast in the form of a witty turn of phrase.

More important still is the difference that wit refers only to the spoken or written word, while humor has a much broader range of reference. We find humor, for example, in the way Charlie Chaplin looks, dresses, and acts, and also in the sometimes wordless cartoons in *The New Yorker*. In a thoroughly humorous situation, the sources of the fun may be complex. In Act III, Scene iv of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio's appearance and actions, and his utterances as well, are humorous, but all despite his own very solemn intentions; and our comic enjoyment is increased by our knowledge of the suppressed hilarity of the plotters who are hidden auditors onstage. The greatness of a comic creation like Shakespeare's Falstaff is that he exploits the full gamut of comic possibilities. Falstaff is humorous in the way he looks and in what he does; what he says is sometimes witty, and at most other times humorous; while his actions and speech are sometimes unintentionally humorous, sometimes intentionally humorous, and not infrequently—as in his whimsical account to his skeptical auditors of how heroically he bore himself in the highway robbery, in the second act of *1 Henry IV*—they are humorous even beyond his intention.

One other point should be made about humor and the comic. In normal use, the term "humor" refers to what is purely comic: it evokes, as it is sometimes said, sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself. If we extend Freud's distinction between harmless and tendency wit, we can say that humor is a "harmless" form of the comic. There is, however, another mode of the comic that might be called "tendency comedy," in which we are made to laugh at a person not merely because he is ridiculous but because he is being ridiculed—the laughter is derisive, with some element of contempt or malice, and serves as a weapon against its subject. Tendency comedy and tendency wit, rather than humor, are among the devices that a writer most exploits in *satire*, the literary art of derogating by deriding a subject.

On the alternative use of the term "comic" to define the formal features of a type of dramatic or narrative plot, see *comedy*; on the form of humor-in-horror in some present-day literature, see *black humor*. For diverse theories of wit, humor, and the comic, together with copious examples, refer to Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1916); Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936); D. H. Monroe, *The Argument of Laughter* (1951); Louis Kronenberger, *The Thread of Laughter* (1952); Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist* (1960); Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humor Seriously* (1994).