

Martin's Simplification of Freud's Theory of Laughter

Imagine a few volleyballs floating on the surface of a swimming pool.

Imagine that swimmers submerge those volleyballs at different depths in the swimming pool, including one on the bottom. At the same moment, all of the swimmers release the volleyballs. The volleyballs rise, breaking through the surface. They fly above the swimming pool.

The different heights to which the volleyballs rise is proportional to the depth to which each had been submerged.

Freud is saying that the swimming pool is your subconscious. The depth to which the volleyball is pushed is similar to the suppression of different kinds of oppression within the human psyche.

What Freud refers to as a "pointed joke" is aimed at releasing that oppression—at least on a symbolic level. He is saying that the intensity of the laughter is proportional to the amount of suppression that is symbolically released by the joke.

Thus, he says, pointed jokes have much more potential to generate intense laughter than non-pointed jokes. The different types and levels of suppression felt by different individuals also results in different levels of laughter reactions, with those feeling most oppressed having the potential for laughing the hardest. The joke, of course, must be good enough to activate that release of sense of oppression. The types of oppression and suppression that can be symbolically relieved by jokes ranges across the breadth of human consciousness, from political and economic oppression to sexual suppressions, and everything in between.