

## Clowns: Humorous or Horrifying

Most of us can probably remember a time during our childhood when we were in the presence of a clown. Those white faced colorfully dressed characters that would make balloon animals, tell jokes, and try their best to entertain and get a laugh. To this day some kids still squeal with excitement when they see one, connecting a clown with enjoyment. However, there is another side of the story for some. Not all people find these jolly jokesters quite so hilarious. In fact, clowns instill fear in many people. There is a reason why clowns are, in many cases, the stars of horror films. The question, though, is why do some people think of clowns as comedic characters while others want to run away screaming at the mere sight of a red nose? Are clowns humorous or horrifying? I will be looking at three different disciplines to help answer my question; the philosophy of fear, child psychology, and the arts. In answering this question, I hope it will help me understand my own fear of clowns better, and help others who fear clowns to have a better understanding as well. In addition, I hope it explains to the people who are not afraid of clowns, why some individuals find them so terrifying.

In order for us to further understand clowns, we must first look at their history. The origin of the word "clown" is not entirely known, but most people believe that it came from the Scandinavian word "Clod", which means a fool. Clowns date back as far as the ancient Egyptians and were used as entertainment for Pharaohs. Clowns continued into the ancient Chinese culture as the only characters that could poke fun at the emperor and live to tell about it. Court jesters from the medieval time period are also considered clowns. These individuals

were actually extremely skilled and privileged. They were expert dancers, jugglers, joke tellers, and more. As long as what they did was amusing to the king, they were treated very well. However, as soon as they did something that the king did not enjoy, their lives were not quite as comfortable; and likely non-existent. The clowns of France and Italy added a new aspect to the joke tellers of the earlier time periods. These clowns were sad and tragic; usually including a painted tear on their white, powdered faces. This new clown emotion is interesting. It goes along with the idea that the funniest people are usually the most depressed. The clowns of today are known for their humorous banter, but another usual quality for them is their over-the-top expressions. They go from super happy to extremely sad in an instant. This probably makes them more relatable to children because it makes their feelings easier for children to decipher, but it also adds a level of unpredictability to the clown.

## **Philosophy of Fear**

Fear of clowns, known as “coulrophobia”, is not a new concept. In fact, people have been afraid of clowns for hundreds of year. It’s not uncommon either. There is an entire website dedicated to the fear and hatred of clowns called [ihateclowns.com](http://ihateclowns.com). Workshops have even been organized to help individuals get over their fear of clowns. So the question is not *if* people are afraid of clowns, we already know this is true, but *why?* The first thing to look into is what fear actually is. Fear does not have a universal, exact definition. It has been described in many different ways. The best definition that I have found says that “[fear is] an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a

threat". These "threats" can be real threats, such as a murderer with a loaded gun, or perceived threats, such as a tiny spider on the floor of your room. So are clowns real threats or perceived threats? This is where the two groups, clown-fearers and non-clown-fearers, might have differing opinions. People who find all clowns terrifying might say that every clown is a real threat. On the other hand, someone who finds nothing about a clown scary might say that every clown is simply a perceived threat. I don't think we can jump to a definite conclusion on this idea, on either side of the argument, that will encompass *every* clown. It all depends on the type of clown we are talking about. If the character in question is holding a giant, blood-covered machete, we can probably assume that he is a real threat. However, if he is creating cute balloon animals for a group of kids, he might just be doing his job, and therefore, is a perceived threat. So, that means that whether or not a clown is a real or perceived threat is not only up to the viewer, but it also is highly dependent upon what kind of clown it is, the situation it is in, etc. There are also different types of fear itself. There are irrational fears and rational fears. Rational fears are fears that are biologically inside of us. These fears are instilled in us to help keep us alive, they tell us when something is dangerous and deadly. Rational fears are the fear of jumping off of a cliff or running through a burning building. We are supposed to be afraid of these things, and these are fears that are, for the most part, common throughout every human being. Irrational fears are a little more complicated and changing. Every individual has different irrational fears, and there are A LOT of them. People can be afraid of anything, and there is usually a silly name to go along with it. Irrational fears are usually minor, causing only a slight uncomfortable feeling around an object or in a specific situation. When these irrational fears get out of control and start to consume a person's life, they are

called phobias. This raises another debate: Is the fear of clowns a rational fear or an irrational fear? This question can be answered a little more easily than the argument about them being real or perceived threats; that is because we know for a fact that not all people are afraid of clowns. It is not part of our genetic makeup to fear these painted characters. I wish I could say that my fear of clowns is a rational one and that anyone not scared of these terrifying creatures is crazy, but I cannot. We can safely say that clowns are simply an irrational fear. Whether or not that fear manifests itself into a phobia is specific to each individual.

Now we know that clowns are an irrational fear, but where does that fear come from? Theodore Roosevelt said "We have nothing to fear but fear itself". Most people have heard this quote and use it as a source of inspiration to follow their dreams, but it is also a really great possible explanation to why we fear what we fear. Perhaps what we fear is not the object itself but our idea of it. When it comes to irrational fears, we make up a situation in our minds of what that object or circumstance may cause. Someone may see a tiny spider and imagine it jumping on their face and biting them repeatedly. It is not the spider itself that they are necessarily afraid of, but the situation that they imagine. Maybe Roosevelt was right, that we have nothing to fear but fear itself; that imaginary scenario we makeup in our heads. Think about the incongruity theory of humor. This theory states that a situation is humorous when the result is not what makes sense or is expected. Perhaps people who fear clowns have such a horrifying initial expectation, that a sudden change in this expectation is still not enough to make the situation humorous. I think play mode is extremely important in this case. If a person with a fear of clowns can't get into play mode, then the incongruity theory can't successfully

take place either. Which, in turn, makes it nearly impossible for the person to find humor in the situation.

## **Child Psychology**

When most Americans hear the word clown, they immediately picture a child's birthday party. Children flocking towards this brightly colored character, roars of laughter, and smiling faces are common images. It's almost just assumed that every child loves clowns. This, however, is not always true. A study was done that showed a large majority of children actually dislike clowns. For the purpose of this paper, I am instead going to focus on just the ways clowns have a positive impact on children. I assume that children dislike clowns for the same reasons adults do; those reasons which I discussed previously. The most surprising way clowns impact children is through the use of "Medical Clowns". These clowns are not your average birthday party clown. These clowns are "trained professionals who apply innovative techniques to mitigate the pain and anxiety of hospitalized children and their families" (Lev-Wiesel). Medical clowns are mainly used in pediatric settings. An interesting study was done to test the effectiveness of these experts. The study focused specifically on children who were victims of sexual assault. Medical clowns are often brought into hospitals during the children's anogenital examinations. These examinations are very intrusive; sometimes triggering memories from the assault. Children experience all different anxiety levels during this. Some children even have to be put under anesthesia because of how traumatizing the examination can be.

The study split the children into two groups: one group would go through the examination without the use of a medical clown, and the other group would utilize the clown. After the examination they asked the children numerous questions about their stress level, pain level, etc. One of the most interesting questions they asked was what the most memorable part of the exam was. 100 percent of the kids that did not have the aid of the medical clown said that the examination itself was the most memorable part. In the group that did use the clown, a majority of the children said the clown was more memorable than the examination. On average, the children in the medical clown group experienced less physical pain and less anxiety. Results even showed that the adult accompanying the child was positively affected by the clown's presence. These results raise an interesting question. How can simply the presence of a clown lower *physical* pain? There is an unquestionable connection between fear and pain. The more fearful we are, the more painful an experience is going to be. Therefore, by lowering the fear in a situation, or simply creating a distraction, we can literally make something less painful. This is where the medical clowns come into play. How do the medical clowns create humor in such a stressful situation? I think the most probable answer is through the use of the superiority theory. When clowns make fools of themselves and act silly and stupid, it helps children feel superior. They feel a sense of empowerment. Therefore, this brings them into play mode, a sort of disengagement from the situation, and they are able to relax and laugh. The relief theory could also be used in this scenario. During the examination there is undoubtedly a ton of tension and stress. When the clown is being humorous and goofy, the children laugh which releases all of that pent up anxiety.

## The Arts

As a fine arts major myself, I really wanted to use this discipline. I think it is an extremely important factor that some people don't take into account when they think about coulrophobia. In my opinion there are two categories of clowns: the birthday party clown and the horror movie clown. The birthday party clown is brightly colored, has pristine makeup, happy expression, exaggerated features, and is usually holding some kind of fun prop like a horn or a toy. The horror movie clowns are a little more varied thanks to the imagination of Hollywood, but they still tend to follow a trend. Their clothes are usually tattered and torn. Their makeup is sometimes coming off to reveal the face of the human underneath, their hair is a mess, etc. How do these artistic choices effect how our mind reacts to the character? We can look at the basic pattern of humor. That is the four part formula that causes humor starting with the cognitive shift. The cognitive shift occurs when our expectations are not met and a sudden change occurs. The birthday party clown is going to be more of a surprise and shock to most people. He is more over-the-top and outrageous, causing our mind to go into step two of the pattern. That step is the arrival at play mode. One characteristic of play mode is that the more fictional something is, the easier it is for us to disengage and get into play mode. Again, the birthday party clown is a much more fictional looking character. This allows us to feel more distanced and safe; leading to play mode. The horror movie clowns are purposefully designed to have more human-like qualities which make them more believable and therefore, less trustworthy. In order to achieve play mode the viewer must feel secure and safe. The birthday party clown then makes its way to part three: enjoyment. Now that we feel safe with the clown

and are in play mode, we can start to appreciate the silly antics of the jokester. We then arrive at the final stage which is laughter. So, in these ways, we can see how much of an impact the artistic choices have on the clowns effectiveness. What about those of us who even find the birthday party clowns horrifying? This ties back to the philosophy of fear. For whatever reason, our mind makes up a scary scenario in our minds instead of a humorous one. This makes it impossible for us to achieve play mode. Instead, we continue to grow the terrifying image in our minds of what this clown might do; unable to feel that disengagement and distance from the character and impending horror.

## **Conclusion**

I think the history of clowns is hugely responsible for the fear that clowns instill today. In the olden times, clowns were purely humorous characters. When the Italian clowns began to show other emotions, the clowns began to feel more relatable and real to us, making play mode more difficult to achieve. After that, movies were made about clowns living among us, artists began to find ways of making clowns more and more scary, and it was all downhill from there.

Like most irrational fears, we can't quite put our finger on why we some people are scared of all clowns. However, we can take comfort in the fact that what we fear might really just be fear itself. If we can change the way our mind envisions a run-in with a clown, we may even be able to conquer our fear. Our minds may need to be tricked into play mode, or maybe just slowly trained to trust the clown.

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