

Round 1

Clowns—A Brief Look Into Their History and Mythology

Liam Klenk, *Theatre Art Life*: Oct. 2024

Clowns... they have been called tricksters and jesters as well. We've all seen them. In the circus, on the streets, at children's birthdays, in hospitals... Besides providing excellent entertainment, clowns are an important figure due to the influence they have on us. Amazingly, they bring us far more than just laughter. Instead, they trigger a whole range of emotions. Joyful amazement. Sadness. Sometimes, even irrational fear. This is a brief look into their history and mythology.

Clowns are mentioned in the history books going back thousands of years. Jesters, for example, date back at least as far as ancient Egypt.

Jesters and clowns developed from the mythological figures of “tricksters.” Tricksters are archetypal characters who appear in the myths of many different cultures around the world. The trickster is also unconstrained by form or gender. In Norse mythology, the trickster Loki is a shape-shifter who could move freely between genders. At one point, he even became a mare who later gave birth to Odin's eight-legged horse.

In later worldwide folklore, the trickster is incarnated as a clever man or creature, who defends himself by using trickery to survive the dangers of the world. It was around then that they became known under a new name: jesters. They cross and often break both physical and societal rules. They are known to challenge principles of social and natural order. Playfully, they disrupt life as we know it to then re-establish it on an alternate basis.

Early jesters were popular in Ancient Egypt and entertained Egyptian pharaohs. The Romans also had a tradition of professional jesters. In their society, these individuals were called Balatrones. They moved freely in the company of high society members due to their talent to amuse and distract.

In the 11th and 12th centuries in Europe, the title minstrel (“little servant”), was the name for a wide range of entertainers, including singers, musicians, jugglers, tumblers, magicians, and jesters. Both, men and women, were employed as minstrels and there is a record of a female jester called Adeline owning land in Hampshire in 1086.

In the 12th century, the title of follus or “fool” began to be mentioned in documents, often when these jesters had been rewarded with land as payment for loyal service. By the 13th century, some talented jesters were beginning to achieve superstar status. In Europe and India, the most eminent jesters were household names. Just as famous as stand-up comedians are today.

The jesters in China seem to have been celebrities as well. In some biographies and historical texts, it is mentioned that the jokes of jesters were passed around among ordinary people and that everyone was quite dazzled by them. One such Chinese jester recorded in history was Dongfang Shuo. Court jester to emperor Wu during the Han Dynasty.

An individual court jester in Europe could emerge from a wide range of backgrounds: a university dropout, a monk thrown out of a priory, a juggler, an acrobat, or maybe an apprentice in a shop or craft who was fooling around too much. Important was that these individuals had exceptional verbal communication skills, as well as physical dexterity to be noticed by noblemen and find success.

Most jesters during these ancient times doubled as entertainers and advisors. However, they advised largely through their art, in a diplomatic, metaphorical manner. Jestors were believed to be neutral observers. They stayed at the periphery of the game of politics. This reassured many a king that their jester's words were not spoken with ulterior motives.

Jesters were able to soften the blow of a critical comment in a way that prevented a dignified personage from losing face. Humor was and always will be the great antidote to tense situations. For example, amongst the Aboriginal Murngin tribe in Australia, it is the duty of the clown to act outrageously if men are drawn into a conflict. It makes everyone laugh, confuses, defuses, and pacifies the aggressors.

In the early Middle Ages in Europe, jesters were expected to accompany their kings and masters to the battlefield in times of war. The jesters' job was to wage psychological warfare. The night before battle, they boosted their army's morale with songs and stories. Then, the next morning, when the two armies took up their opposing positions, the jesters would race up and down on foot or horseback between them. Their mission was to calm the nerves of their own men by making them laugh at jokes or sing songs. At the same time, the jesters would also shout mock abuse to their enemies to demoralize them. A dangerous job as you can imagine. Quite a few jesters were killed on those battlefields.

Our modern clowns are strongly associated with the tradition of the circus clown. This developed out of earlier comedic roles in theatre or comedy shows during the 19th to mid 20th centuries. Then, as well as today, many circus clowns have become well known. Many are a key circus act. The first mainstream clown role was portrayed by Joseph Grimaldi (1778 – 1837). He also created the traditional whiteface make-up design.

In the early 20th century, with the disappearance of the rustic simpleton or village idiot character of everyday experience, North American circuses developed characters such as the tramp or hobo. Examples include Charlie Chaplin's *The Tramp* (1914), and Emmett Kelly's *Weary Willie* based on hobos of the Depression era.

The 1980s gave rise to the evil clown character. Often, children are afraid of clowns. Many adults as well are known to have a clown phobia. Authors like Stephen King began to explore this phenomenon in their stories. In our time, researchers have explored as to where the fear of modern-day colorful clowns under their white masks and large red noses comes from. They conclude that deindividuation is a major factor. A state in which one's identity is hidden. For example, during Mardi Gras, a costume party, or if you are online in an anonymous chat room, you and everyone else there are deindividuated, too.

When a clown wears a mask covering their face and never revealing their identity, they are also deindividuated. And, for some, this may trigger age-old instinctive fight or flight responses. Maybe the deindividuated individual will dare to take actions they normally never would. Deindividuation is one of the hallmarks of clowns. They wear baggy outfits, large wigs and full make-up with a fake nose which obscures their faces even further. Their true identity becomes something far removed. Irrelevant even for the spectator.

And, as in the days of old, clowns still thematize not only joy, but also pain, sadness, societal norms, stereotypes, and problems. All under the guise of humor. Some years ago, a friend of mine who performs as a clown, summed the ambivalence up quite nicely. "The impact of a clown is not due to his being funny. It is due to us feeling that underneath the slapstick and humor there is an abundance of pain and sadness. Challenges, just as there are in everyone's real lives."

"We laugh with relief and sometimes also unease as the clown reveals what lies beneath for those who want to see. At the same time the clown shows the audience to laugh in the face of adversity. He shows them that life goes on. That it always will. And that it shouldn't be taken too seriously."

Round 2

Send in the Clowns

Stephen Sondheim

Isn't it rich?
Are we a pair?
Me here at last on the ground,
You in mid-air,
Where are the clowns?

Isn't it bliss?
Don't you approve?
One who keeps tearing around,
One who can't move,
Where are the clowns?
There ought to be clowns?

Just when I'd stopped opening doors,
Finally knowing the one that I wanted was yours
Making my entrance again with my usual flair
Sure of my lines
No one is there

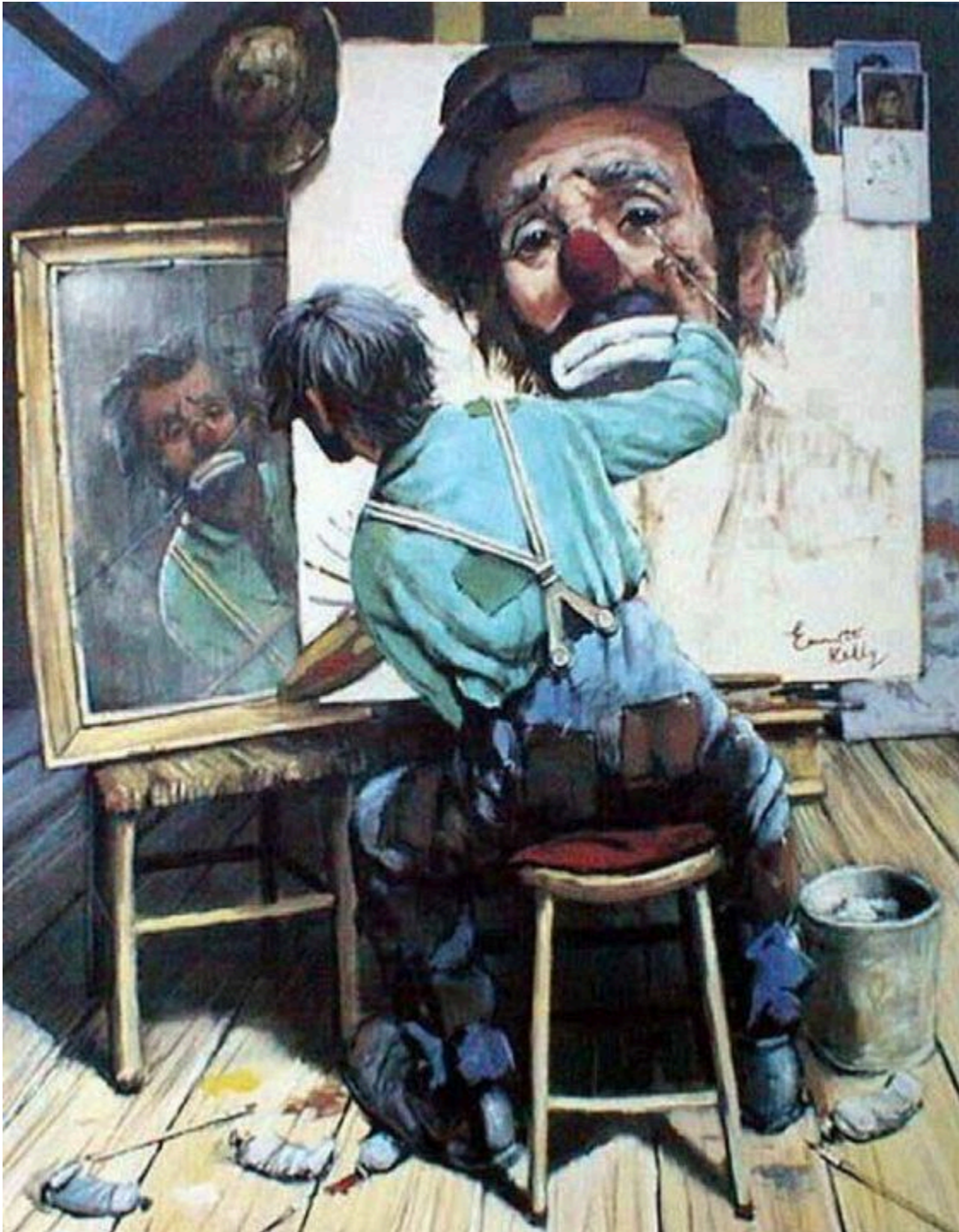
Don't you love farce?
My fault, I fear
I thought that you'd want what I want
Sorry, my dear!
But where are the clowns?
Send in the clowns
Don't bother, they're here

Isn't it rich?
Isn't it queer?
Losing my timing this late in my career
But where are the clowns?
There ought to be clowns
Well, maybe next year

Round 3

“Self Portrait” (of Emmett Kelly)

Leighton Jones



Round 4

Why are we so scared of clowns?

Here's what we've discovered

Published: March 6, 2023 7:11am EST

Are you scared of clowns? You are not alone. Coulrophobia, or the fear of clowns, is a widely acknowledged phenomenon. Studies indicate this fear is present among both adults and children in many different cultures. Yet it is not well understood due to a lack of focused research.

While numerous possible explanations of the phobia had been put forward in academic literature, no studies had specifically investigated its origins. So we set out to discover the reasons people are frightened by clowns, and to understand the psychology behind this. We also wanted to explore how common the fear of clowns is in adults and to look at the severity of the fear in those who reported it.

To do this, we devised a psychometric questionnaire to assess the prevalence and severity of coulrophobia. The Fear of Clowns Questionnaire was completed by an international sample of 987 people aged between 18 and 77.

More than half the respondents (53.5%) said they were scared of clowns at least to some degree, with 5% saying they were "extremely afraid" of them. Interestingly, this percentage reporting an extreme fear of clowns is slightly higher than those reported for many other phobias, such as animals (3.8%), blood/injection/injuries (3.0%), heights (2.8%), still water or weather events (2.3%), closed spaces (2.2%), and flying (1.3%).

We also found that women are more afraid of clowns than men. The reason for this difference is not clear, but it echoes research findings on other phobias such as the fear of snakes and spiders. We also discovered coulrophobia decreases with age, which again matches up with research into other fears.

Origins of this fear

Our next step was to explore the origins of people's fear of clowns. A follow-up questionnaire was given to the 53.5% who had reported at least some degree of clown fear. This new set of questions related to eight plausible explanations for the origins of this fear, as follows:

1. An eerie or unsettling feeling due to clowns' makeup making them look not-quite-human. A similar response is sometimes seen with dolls or mannequins.
2. Clowns' exaggerated facial features convey a direct sense of threat.
3. Clown makeup hides emotional signals and creates uncertainty.
4. The colour of clown makeup reminds us of death, infection or blood injury, and evokes disgust or avoidance.
5. Clowns' unpredictable behaviour makes us uncomfortable.

6. Fear of clowns has been learned from family members.
7. Negative portrayals of clowns in popular culture.
8. A frightening experience with a clown.

Intriguingly, we found the final explanation, of having had a scary personal experience with a clown, had the lowest level of agreement. This indicates that life experience alone is not a sufficient explanation for why people are afraid of them.

In contrast, negative portrayals of clowns in popular culture was a much stronger contributing factor towards coulrophobia. This is understandable since some of the most prominent clowns in books and films are designed to be scary – such as Pennywise, the creepy clown from Stephen King’s 1986 novel *It*. (This character most recently featured in two films in 2017 and 2019, with Bill Skarsgård in the starring role.)

However, some people are afraid of Ronald McDonald, the fast food chain mascot, and he is not meant to scare you. This suggests there might be something more fundamental about the way clowns look that unsettles people.

In fact the strongest factor we identified was hidden emotional signals, suggesting that for many people, a fear of clowns stems from not being able to see their facial expressions due to their make-up. We cannot see their “true” faces and therefore cannot understand their emotional intent. So, for example, we don’t know whether they have a frown or a furrowed brow, which would indicate anger. Not being able to detect what a clown is thinking or what they might do next makes some of us on edge when we are around them.

This research has provided some new insights into why people are afraid of clowns – yet more questions remain. For instance, if makeup which masks emotions causes fear, do people who have their faces painted as animals also create the same kind of effect? Or is there something more particular about the makeup of clowns that drives this fear? This is now the focus of our continued research.

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