

RIDDLE

Riddle is a term commonly used to describe humorous texts in a question and answer format that exploit conceptual or linguistic ambiguity. In folklore research, the term denotes a traditional genre of verbal art, while in literature it implies a literary trope. In linguistics and humor research, riddling is often considered a discourse type establishing a link between two scripts. It is assumed that riddling is an aspect of the oral and/or literary traditions of all cultures, and can be traced back to the ancient civilizations of India and Greece. Etymologically, the word ‘riddle’ comes from the Old English *raedels* or *raedelse*, meaning ‘counsel, opinion, conjecture’. This entry defines riddle, presents a brief overview of traditional and contemporary riddle forms—with special attention to the devices of ambiguity and humor—and touches upon the significance of riddles in the development of children’s sense of humor.

Definiton and Forms

A riddle is composed of two parts: a question (or image) and an answer connected by a cognitive link, based on a metaphor, lexical or grammatical ambiguity, or some other “block element” making the riddle more difficult to solve. A riddling occasion presumes at least two participants: a riddler posing a question, and a riddlee who is challenged to find the question’s answer. This means riddling is always competitive, and the relationship between the two parties is hierarchic: the riddler (to whom the answer is known) is in a superior position, until the riddlee correctly comes to the solution.

In traditional societies riddles are part of the verbal art of adults, and play an important role in rites of passage such as initiation ceremonies, courtship, weddings and wakes.

However, many individuals may organize riddle contests or engage in leisure-time riddling. The function of riddles is complex, but inevitably they provide amusement, and fulfill the cognitive function of reaffirming the common values in a community.

Traditional riddles are usually fix-phrased, involving formulated or archaic language. Objects, characters, and topics included in the riddle text are drawn from an environment familiar to both the riddler and riddlee. *True riddles* are descriptive texts that, as Archer Taylor states, compare an object to an entirely different object (e.g., in the riddle, “Thirty white horses on a red hill. Now they dance, now they prance, now they stand still.” The solution is, “teeth”).

Following true riddles, the most significant riddle subgenres are: *joking questions*, wherein puns shift the frame of reference; *wisdom questions*, requiring specific knowledge; *neck riddles*, based on odd, personal experience presented in a narrative frame of saving one’s life; and *parody riddles*, intended to confuse the riddlee by using and frustrating conventional riddle patterns. Visual and literary riddles also have a long and continuing history.

Classic riddles attached to the traditional, rural lifestyle have now reached the state of static folklore or become children’s lore. Riddling, as a type of discourse, is still widely used, especially by young adults. Contemporary riddle forms exploit the question and answer format as a base for wordplay and improvisation. Punning riddles or *conundrums* mainly involve linguistic triggers, coupling similarity of form with difference in meaning (e.g., “What is black and white and red all over? A newspaper”). A *doodle* is a visual form of conundrum. It is a simple drawing claimed to represent an unexpectedly complex situation (for example, a horizontal line described as an old lady dragging a goat, yet only the rope can be seen).

Riddle jokes, on the other hand, are more firmly connected to context. They usually come in waves, comment on current events in a humorous form, and follow a formulaic

construction. In these riddles, the question sets up the punch-line, usually provided by the riddler; riddle jokes are basically jokes presented in the form of a riddle. Most riddle jokes are topical, reflecting up-to-date, local or global news, usually of a tragic nature. They comment on accidents and catastrophes, politics, and the situation of ethnic minorities, and are popular as long as they are topical. They are a way of speaking the unspeakable, and questioning contemporary values and norms.

Riddling in the development of children's sense of humor

A number of studies have shown that riddling plays an important part in the early development of a child's sense of humor (roughly between the ages of 4 and 8). Initially, riddles are simply questions with arbitrary answers, but children quickly become capable of understanding and following the rules related to riddling as a form of social interaction (being a riddler means possessing [limited] authority, and laughter should follow when a riddle or joke is delivered). At around the age of six, (lexical) ambiguity is incorporated into simple descriptive routines. And, by the age of eight, riddles of all sorts are performed properly and enjoyed, even if the child cannot explain why they are funny.

Riddles take objects from a familiar environment and combine them in an unexpected way, following basic rules that children gradually acquire. It is a form of verbal play involving the language and culture they are growing up in. Therefore, this process plays an important part not only in the development of linguistic and cognitive skills, but also in the course of socialization.

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See also Ambiguity; Children's Humor Stages; Joke Cycles; Puns; Speech Play; Verbal Humor

FURTHER READINGS

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