Humour analysis

What is the context of the humour?

* Teller – who is the source of the humour? (writer, comedian, character in films or shows, ...)
* Tellee – who are the receivers of the humour? (reader, audience, viewers, specific groups, ...)
* Situation – where and when is the humour communicated? (book, article, show, film, ...)
  + Do we have the same context or does the humour need extra information in order to be understood?
  + Are there boundaries of time, place or social groups that have to be crossed?

Who or what is the butt of the humour?

* The teller (self-deprecating humour)
* An element of everyday life (observational humour)
* A specific person (the superiority theory - satire)
* A group of people (the superiority theory)
  + Nationalities
  + Races
  + Social groups
  + Religious groups
  + Women in general
  + Men in general
  + Groups of women
  + Groups of men
  + Sexualities
  + et cetera...

What is the intension of the humour?

* Stance – the teller’s attitude towards the butt of the humour
  + Positive – is the teller obviously fond of the butt?
    - Is the teller part of the group that is the butt? (self-deprecating humour)
  + Neutral – no particular attitude.
  + Negative – is the teller obviously criticising the butt?
    - Satire – criticising a supposed superior target
    - Is the butt presented as posing a threat – perhaps because they (are presented to) shake the teller’s and the tellee’s security in themselves?
* Intention
  + To entertain – to poke a little good-natured fun at somebody or something
  + To point out – to draw attention to something or someone
  + To criticise – to draw attention to something that the teller thinks is wrong, perhaps to incite people to change that thing. So, what is the message?
* Tone of voice
  + Parody
    - An imitation of something or somebody where the aim is to poke fun at the original by exaggerating certain traits
  + Irony
    - Verbal irony – saying the opposite of what you mean. Usually the speaker will use a specific tone of voice to indicate that the statement is irony.
    - Dramatic irony – when a character’s words or actions indicate that he or she is unaware of something that the audience or readers are aware of.
    - Situational irony – when the actual result of an action is contrary to the desired result.
  + Sarcasm
    - A cruel kind of (mostly verbal) irony. It is most often a sharp or cutting remark directed at somebody with the intention of hurting or putting the target down.

How is the humour created?

**1. The Incongruity Theory**

*When we realize that there is a gap between what we are presented with and the (real) world we expect to see, we are surprised, which causes us to laugh.*

* Double meaning
  + plays on words/puns
    - homonyms (same spelling)
    - homophones (sounds alike)
    - schwa
  + syntax (sentence structure)
    - compound words (e.g. cat drink)
    - stress and intonation
    - run-together language (e.g. some others vs. some mothers)
    - idioms (groups of words that you have to understand as a single unit)
    - prepositions
    - multi-word verbs (e.g. turn into a garage)
* Not honouring the expectations of the given situation
  + Situation and register
  + Situation and expected behaviour
  + Expectations in discourse
  + Relevance
* Removed from reality
  + Absurd situations
  + The surreal
  + Non-sense

**2. The Superiority Theory**

* Aimed at people we feel are below us.

*By laughing at the idiots of the world, we avoid feeling like idiots ourselves.*

* + Mostly aimed at groups of people, because laughing at a specific inferior person would most likely be considered cruel, and therefore not funny.

* Aimed at people we feel are above us.

*We regain some of our power by imagining that we are better than those who make us feel powerless.*

* + Satire – mostly aimed at specific individuals like celebrities, royalty and politicians, but also sometimes aimed at groups like lawyers.

**3. The Relief Theory**

*Laughing at the things that we feel shameful about (taboos) releases nervous energy and distances us from it, so that we can stay in control.*

* Sex
* Excreta (the products of bodily functions)
* Death
* Disease
* Religion

And sometimes also

* Taboo words
  + Non-medical words for sex and the associated body parts.
  + Non-medical words for excreta.
  + Derogative terms for groups of people (racist, sexist, religious, etc.)
* Racist ideas
* Terrorism
* Sexist ideas
* et cetera...

The relief theory could perhaps also explain why we laugh at awkward situations...