

Humor in English Literature,
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Humor in Literature.

It has been written that; "Intention is necessary to art; that if life be a lesson so easily read by him that runs, wherein is the advantage of letters at all? The careless do not read the lesson of life: it is the function of the true artist whom we take to be the humorist, to point the moral, and we say that by the manner in which he does so he shows his skill."

But what is humor? To define it proves almost impossible. It is a something which has to do with the most subtle workings of our intellect and emotions. Everyone knows how difficult it is to explain a bit of humor, for in the attempt to analyze, all the spice is lost.

It has been described not defined by that eminent divine of the seventeenth century, Dr. Barrow, as; "That which we all see and know; anyone apprehends what it is by acquaintance, better than I can inform him by description. It is, indeed, a thing so versatile and multifarious, appearing in so many postures, so many garbs, so variously apprehended by several eyes and judgements, that it seemeth no less hard to

settle a clear and certain notion thereof, than to make a portrait of Proteus, or to define the figure of a fleeting air." He then proceeds to tell of the different forms wit and humor may take, and the various ways in which they may be produced, then sums up the whole in these words; "It is, in short, a manner of speaking out of the simple and plain way, (such as reasoning teacheth and proveth things by,) which by a pretty surprising uncountness in conceit or expression doth affect and amuse our fancy, stirring it to some wonder and breeding some delight thereto."

The sense of the ridiculous is one possessed by all, both civilized and savage. For what other purpose does the barbarian torture his captive, but to see and enjoy the contortions produced by the pain. This satisfies something in his make-up, which to be sure is characteristic with his education or rather, lack of it — and corresponds closely to the sense of humor in civilized man.

The faculties of wit and humor are generally supposed to be natural talents, which can not be acquired; but some noted personage has

expressed his ideas upon the subject in this manner; that it is a something which may be acquired, just as a knowledge of mathematics may be, but, it is necessary to go to work in a manner similar to the one of mastering the science of chemistry. Various degrees of proficiency would be reached in this new study - as it may be called - as in all others; by different individuals. If such is true, there is a chance for all of us to become humorists; perhaps not of world wide fame, but we can at least lighten the tasks and brighten the lives of those, with whom we are associated, by scattering about us bits of humor.

But let us turn our attention to the manner in which these 'ludicrous effects' may be produced. The ways are many and varied, perhaps the most frequent incidents are those occurring through ignorance. These occur most frequently among people who began life with nothing, and have no education to speak of, but have accumulated a fortune. Some of course are conscious of the mistakes they are liable to make, and endeavor to improve

their intellectual condition. While it is toward the ones who are inclined to think they know it all, that the laugh is most often turned. Such was the case of the woman, who in order to keep up with the aristocracy, was going to have her bonnet trimmed with real "oyster feathers".

Any decided incongruity, or a sudden contrast, will at once provoke a laugh. This is well illustrated when the pompous individual with the "I'm-monarch-of-all-I-survy" air, strolling down street suddenly slips upon a banana-skin and measures his length upon the side-walk. But in such cases after the first instantaneous laugh, a feeling of pity is awakened, and we are ready to go to the rescue of our fallen brother, and will assist him to regain, if possible, his former dignity. Someone has well said; that the "Primary source of the pleasure then, is not in the sight of suffering but in a particular kind of contrast. Take away all malice and laughter is still awakened."

The parody, which was one of the earliest forms of comic literature is still a very

popular form for humorous writings. The rhetorical form known as the anti-climax has been likened by Henry Reed to Kame's definition of laughter, which is, "an emotion arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing".

Satire is humor which bears a note of scorn, and is often made use of in political writings.

Exaggeration is the principal element of American humor of to-day, and is remarkably well illustrated by the writings of Mark Twain and Josh Billings. The humor of the Yankee with which we are all familiar is of this sort.

Another form is the humor arising from disorder is not of infrequent occurrence, this, of course, implies sudden transitions, and must be such that the joke may be discerned at once; for all sense of the ludicrous is lost if it becomes necessary to search for the point.

But while much of this much of this humor is caused by disorder and incongruities, it must needs have a semblance of order, and it has been said our "Nonsense must have an air of sense."

What place does humor occupy in literature? Of what use are these light and airy nothings in our busy lives? Hazlitt says, "It is the salt of conversation and not the food." If this is true of conversation, why not of literature, and also our lives as a whole. It is the humorous incidents of this world that make life cheerful and pleasant. If all humor was taken out of our lives they would indeed be mournful and sad, and then would surely not be worth living. Henry Reed, says; "A thoughtful essayist of our day has said, 'If ever a people required to be amused it is we sad-hearted Anglo-Saxons' (the phrase includes us ever working Americans.) 'Heavy eaters' (rapidly must be substituted for weight,)" Hard thinkers often give up to a peculiar melancholy of our own, with a climate that for months together would frown away mirth if it could, many of us with very gloomy thoughts about our hereafter, if ever there were a people who should avoid increasing their dullness by all work and no play, we are that people."

We all possess this sense of the ridiculous

and if it is not guided and disciplined, these powers will run riot and mischief will be the result. The healthful kind of wit should be cultivated or there will be a wicked kind which will fascinate and poison men. Wit is a ministering angel - as it were - and ministers daily to our every day life. The flashes and gleams lighten our daily labors much more than we realize. If we did not need this brightening which humor gives, why is it that at some time in their lives nearly all our greatest writers and thinkers have evolved something of a jovial nature? Cowper wrote that rollicking poem, John Gilpin, after having been told the story the evening before by Miss Austin. She having related it to him in hopes to dispel the gloom which was oppressing him at the time.

It surely is the wit and humor of this world which gives spice to our lives, for as Cowper, says: "Variety is the very spice of life,
That gives it all its flavor."

To me it seems as though we have had no humorists who wrote nothing but humor, until the present time, and

these writings are sometimes the most tedious to read - a little of them goes a long way - as they show the effort to be funny, and are labeled such, while this very fact often steals away much of the spice. It is almost impossible to find a grain of sense in these productions, such are the writings of Bill Nye, Josh Billings and a host of others.

The little humorous incidents which intermingle with more serious things, are the ones which make the deep article, interesting and attractive, while it detracts nothing from the more serious thought. It is this witty vein which is found in many writings, that is humor of the highest type; Lowell, Irving, and Holmes are excellent examples of such authors. Most of the successful wits of English literature have been such writers as have simply mixed with their more serious thoughts, something bright and witty to enliven their articles.

In literature we find that humor does not have the distinct place which other phases do. But each literary period does have a characteristic style of humor, with generally

one or perhaps more typical humorists. In tracing the humorous through English literature, it is indeed, interesting to note the different manner in which it appears, even though there is no distinct and regular development.

The first period, the 'Age of Chaucer' had as a central figure that talented man of whom these words have been said:

"That noble Chaucer, in those former times
Who first enriched our English with his rhymes
And was the first of ours that ever broke
Into the Muse's treasures and first spoke
In mighty numbers: delving in the mine
Of perfect knowledge."

He was the one who gave to our language a permanent place in literature, and he also raised a standard in composition, which has long been followed. His humor is of a quaint, surly style, simple and pure, and to us has an added quaintness from being written in old English. The following extract from the Canterbury Tales, is an illustration. One of the pilgrims, a wife of Bath, tells how she subdues her husband a continuous tempest, with the result here with given;

"And whan that I had gotten unto me
 By maistrie all the soveranitee,
 And that he sayd, mine owne browe wif,
 So as the list, the terme of all thy lif,
 Kepe thine honour, and kepe eke mine estat,
 After that day we never had debat."

The next author of note who put any humor into his writings was Sir Thomas More, and it is said of him, that, "He looked upon literature without humor, as a banquet without sauce; and even in combating heresy, concurred it better to tell his mind merrily than more solemnly to preach." And not only in his literature, but in his conversation and letter writing he practiced what he preached. The following though not really a typical illustration of his work, is some of his juvenile poetry:

The old butler became a cutler
 I wene shall prove a fole.
 And an old trot, that can God not,
 Nothing ^{but} keys the cup,
 With her physicke will kepe one sicke,
 Till she has soused him up.

With the rise of the drama came many humorous productions, the first comedy, Ralph Roister Doister (1557) was full of rollicking humor. The drama reached excellence with Shakespeare's work, and as the greatest dramatist of the age, he was the greatest humorist, as at this time humor and the drama were walking hand-in-hand. He excelled in all branches of literature as well as in wit and humor. As a whole his humor was much less refined than that of Chaucer, but this was due to the immorality of society during his life.

The group of love poets, Spenser, Carew, Herrick and Suckling were authors who gave to their work touches of humor.

Following are extracts from each;

Amaryllis I did woo,
 And I courted Phillis too;
 Sappho for her love I chose,
 Chloris, for that damask rose
 In her cheek, I held so dear,
 Yea, a thousand lit's I well near;
 And, in love with all together,
 Feared the enjoying either;
 Caused to be of one possessor's,

Barr'd the hope of all the rest." (Mithras).

That well known verse from Luchling
 Has never been excelled as a lively picture.

"Her feet beneath her petticoat,
 Like little mice, stole in and out,
 As if they fear'd the light;
 But oh! she dances such a way,
 No sun upon an Easter-day
 Is half so quick a sight!"

From Herrick we have the following,
 Gather the rose-buds, while ye may,
 Old time is still a-flying,
 And this same flower that smiles to-day,
 To-morrow will be dying.

"Then be not coy, but use your time,
 And while ye may, go marry;
 For, having lost but once your prime,
 You may forever tarry."

That "Rare Ben Jonson" paints characters
 by a special bias of humor. The three
 dramatists, whose work closed the life of the
 drama, for a time, at least, Beaumont,
 Fletcher, and Massinger, wrote in the
 prevailing style, which had degenerated
 into a low, coarse almost infuse literature,

but, should the condition of society at that time.

Butler's *Hudibras* came next, it was a political satire from beginning to end, and like all such extreme productions is tedious to read. *Hudibras* moralizes our love as follows:

"For women first were made for men,
Not men for them: It follows, then,
That men have right to every one,
And they no freedom of their own;
And therefore men have power to choose,
But they no charter to refuse.

Hence 'tis apparent that, what course
So'er we take to your amours,

I though by the indirectest way,
'Tis no injustice nor foul play;
And that you ought to take that course
As we take you, for better or worse,
And gratefully submit to those

Who you, before another, chose."

With the exception of a group of dramatists of inferior rank, Isaac Walton's *Complete Angler* was the next humorous production in literature.

Sir Richard Steele, Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift were a trio of satirists who

wrote early in the eighteenth century. Steele was the best example of the humorist of the time of Queen Anne. Most of his writings were published in the Spectator, Guardian, and Tatler, which were daily or tri-weekly penny papers that had for their especial purpose an attempt to better so-called polite society. Steele sets forth the aim of the Spectator in these words; "I shall endeavor to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality, that my readers, may, if possible, both ways find their account in the speculation of the day. The paper accomplished the purpose to a considerable extent, by sending out witty, attractive essays, touching upon all the practices of society, and assisted in bringing about a much needed reform.

The writings of the historian Hume are impregnated with a vein of the most quiet, yet truest and richest humor.

That wonderful trio of novelists, Thackeray, Dickens and George Eliot mingled with their writings humor of the true type. Thackeray's Vanity Fair is spoken of, as one of the masterpieces of humor, with him the comic

often drops into caricature. And all have enjoyed a laugh at Pickwick who was one of Charles Dickens' inventions. The "Essays of Elia" are rare reservoirs of wit and humor, and it is of an entertaining sort.

The beginning of the nineteenth century brought with it that trio of American humorists: Irving, the author of the Knickerbocker sketches; Holmes, who wrote the Breakfast Table series; and Courll, the author of the Bigelow Papers. Their works contained the true, fun, elevating sort of humor, which is seldom produced; and in which behind all the fun, is to be found some good practical thoughts, that are profitable for all.

To-day the humorist is the funny-man, or such he tries to be, his writings are simply wild exaggerations, and are written to make you, while the purpose is so evident, that they often fail altogether. Such are the letters of Bill Nye and the writings of Mark Twain. Their works are not such as will stand as living monuments to their memory, but more probably will soon be forgotten. The following will well serve as an illustration from Mark Twain, when

He is mourning over the ^{supposed} grave of his ancestor Adam.

"The tomb of Adam! How touching it was, here in a land of strangers, far away from home and friends! True he was a blood relation; though a distant one, still a relation! The fountain of my filial affection was stirred to its profoundest depths, and I gave way to tumultuous emotions. Noble old man—he did not live to see his child; and I—alas did not live to see him."