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, it is easily read by him who sees, whereas is the advantage of letter at all? The canker do not read the lesson of life: it is the function of the true artist whom we take to be the humorist, to spirit the moral, and we say that by the manner in which he does so he shows his skill.

But what is humor? Do define it now almost impossible. It is as 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 had 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 as versatile and multiformal, appearing in as many postures, as many gowns, so variously donned by several eyes and judgements, that it seamseth no less hard..."
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 gently surprising unconstrained in conceit or expression doth affect and amuse our fancy, eliciting it to some wonder and inspiring 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 wake-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 men.

The faculties of wit and humor are generally supposed to be natural talents, which cannot 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 new 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 regard 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 'sun-monarch' of all summer air, stalking down Elmt suddenly slips upon a banana skin and measures his length upon the sidewalk. 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 fellow brother, and will assist him to regain, if possible, his former dignity.

Someone has well said, that the primary source of the pleasure there, is not the right 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 Kane'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 remarkably well illustrated by the writings of Mark Twain and Jack Billings. The humor of the Yankee mile which we are all familiar is of this sort.

Another form is the humor arising from disorder and not of infrequent occurrence. This, of course, implies sudden transitions, and must be such that the joke may be discovered at once; for all sense of the ludicrous is lost if it requires 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 slight and airy
nothing in our busy lives? Hazlitt says:
"Humor is the salt of conversation and not the
food." If this is true of conversation, why
not of literature, and also of life 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 there would surely not be
worth living. Henry Reed says: A thought-
ful essayist of our day has said, "If ever a
people required to be amused it is we sad-
hearted Anglo-Saxons: (the phrase includes
our working Americans)." Henry says
(rapidly must be substituted for weight)
hard thinkers often grew up to a peculiar
melancholy of our own, with a climate that
for months together would froze away
mirth if it could, many of us with very
gloomy thoughts about our hereafter, if ever
these win a people who should avoid mini-
izing their dulness 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. But is a ministering angel — as it were — and ministrant daily to our every day life. The flashes and gleams lighten our daily labor 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 jocose 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 depressing 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, made the pleasant twice, 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 units of English literature have done such writing 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 most typical humorists. In tracing the humorous through English literature, it is indeed, interesting to note the different manner in which it appeared, 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 rhyme
And was the first of poets that ever broke
Into the Muse's musings 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, quaint style, simple and pure, and to me 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 subdued her husband: a continuous jest, with the result here with genius.
And when that I had gotten unto me
By maistrice all the company,
And that he sayd, min owen trued wif,
To the list, the terme of all thy lyf,
Keep thine honour, and keepe the new estat.
After that day vs never had debat.

The next author of note who put any
Humour into his writings was Sir Thomas
More, and it is said of him, that, "He
Looked upon literature without humour, as
A banquet without sauce; and even in
Contending himself, conceiving it better to tell
His mind sincerely than more solemnly
to preach." And not only in his literature,
But in his conversation and letter writing
He practised what he preached. The
Following though not really a typical
Illustration of his works, is some of his
Juvenile Poetry:

The old better became a cather
I never shall grow a police.
And an old boot, that can God not,
Nothing, keepes the cup,
With her phisick, will keep me rite,
Dill she has sourd 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 a notable excellence with Shakespearean work, and as the greatest dramatist of the age, he was the greatest humorist, as at this true 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, Gower, Canterbury and Buckullin men authors who gave to their work touches of humor. Following are extracts from each:

Amaryllis I did woo,
And I courted Phillis too,
Saphirue for her love I chose,
Chloris, for that damask rose.
In her cheek, I held so dear;
Yea, a thousand let's will mean;
And, mio love with all together,
Dears the enemy each other;
Ours to be if we choose!
Bar's the hope of all thereet. "(Mother). 

That mild renown rose from buckling
lay never him excelling as a lively picture,

"Her feet breathe her petticoat,
like little niece, stole in and out,
as if they fear'd the light;

But oh! she danced such a way,
no one upon an Easter day
is half so fine a night!"

From那儿 we had the following,

"Gather the rose hips, 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 lamy.

"That "Rare Ben Johnson" failed to character
by a special vein 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 insipid literature,
Judith, showing 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 so tedious to read. *Hudibras* moralizes on low as follows:

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

Hence it is apparent that, what course
Lower we take to your answers,
Thought by the rudestest way,
Do us injustice nor foul play;
And that you ought to take that course.
As we take you, for bitter or worse,
And gravely submit to those,
One you, before another, chose.

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

Sir Richard Steele, Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift were two of satirists who
nonte early in the eighteenth century. Steele was the first example of the humorist of
the reign of Queen Anne. Most of his writings were published in the *Spectator*, *Guardian*,
and *Tatler*, which were daily or twice-weekly penny papers that had for their special
purpose an attempt to cater to so-called polite society. Steele sets forth the aim of
the *Spectator* in these words: 'I shall
endeavor to cull from 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 papers accomplished the purpose to a
considerable extent, by sending out witty,
attractive essays, touching upon all the
practices of society, and assisting in bringing
about a much needed reform.

The writings of the historian Hume are
conspicuous with a vein of the most sweet,
yet trenchant and ribald humor.

That wonderful trio of novelists, Thackeray,
Dickens and George Eliot, mingled with their
unruly humor of the true type. Thackeray's
*Vanity Fair* is spoken of, as one of the
masterpieces of humor, with him the comic
the 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 Lowell, the author of the Bigelow Papers. Theirs are works containing the true, rare, 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.

Today the humorists is the jenny scan, 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 letters 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 grave of his ancestor Adam.

The tomb of Adam! How touching it was, to see a hand 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—also did not live to see him.